COMMENTARY

Looking Back, Moving Forward

A Vision for Instructional Capacity in California



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PUBLISHED: November 21, 2024

After ending my fourth term as president of the California State Board of Education in 2019, I have begun to reflect, in my sixth decade of education policy, about what I did right and what I should have done differently. In my time on the board, we organized many policies around and integrated them with the state standards in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science. California made significant progress toward creating coherent and aligned state policies aimed at helping local districts implement the Common Core State Standards. We coupled these policies with a new, more equitable funding system—the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)—and a multiple measures accountability system.

Looking back, it was naïve to believe that these policy reforms alone would be enough to achieve the desired impact. We successfully corrected for some of the failures of prior attempts to generate educational improvement by over-focusing on accountability (embodied by policies like No Child Left Behind). I failed, however, to realize the extent to which accountability-focused approaches of the past had underinvested in building the system capacity necessary to support educators in developing the knowledge and skills that would enable them to teach successfully in the new ways that the new standards demanded. Our policies did not do enough to overcome this deficit.

With support from the Learning Policy Institute (LPI), I wrote the October 2024 report *Standards-Based Education Reforms: Looking Back to Look Forward*, which analyzes the evolution of standards-based reforms in the United States. This analysis explores the role of state governments in implementing systemic reforms aimed at aligning educational components (e.g., rigorous standards, curriculum, professional learning, instruction) to advance student outcomes. From my reflections on my tenure in California policy leadership as well as my extensive research for this report, I have learned that well-intentioned state reforms focused on aligning teaching, student learning goals, and assessments are not enough on their own. Schools are only as effective as their educators' ability to deliver high-quality instruction that meets the learning needs of their students. For California to fully achieve the goals of standards-based reforms, the state must prioritize expanding the capacity of our education system to support teachers and principals to deliver quality standards-aligned instruction.

State policies mostly affect the turtle shell, not the living being underneath, with all its complicated and interdependent moving parts. In education, efforts to improve instruction at scale must influence the crucial interior operations of district central offices, where strategies are developed and systems are organized, as well as encompass every aspect of the school—the most critical level of the system, where the real work of teaching and learning occurs. Under the policy reforms our board passed, teachers and administrators were being asked to teach more challenging curricula to all students and to teach in new and different ways. Currently, the responsibility for building teachers' skills rests with their schools and districts. But I now realize that, to meet the professional development needs of California's 9,700 principals and 319,000 teachers so they can achieve the goals we set in policy, the state cannot rely on the idiosyncratic efforts of individual districts. Supporting teachers requires a more comprehensive vision and strategy at scale, something I now recognize we lack.

Rethinking the State Role in Building Instructional Capacity

California has made significant investments, funded by the state and/or private foundations, in capacity-building projects.The Instructional Leadership Corps (ILC) and the California Subject Matter Project (CSMP) serve as examples of how targeted professional development can successfully bring district teaching practices into alignment with standards. However, efforts like these have created "islands" of high-capacity teachers surrounded by wide "deserts" of schools and districts lacking system capacity to provide consistently engaging, standards-aligned instruction. Bridges to share the capacity of these islands and extend it across the state remain unbuilt. Given California's enormous and diverse population as well as its vast geographic span, the challenge of building infrastructure to intensively deliver high-quality professional development statewide is uniquely daunting.

A Call to Action: Developing a Roadmap to Build Instructional Capacity in All California Classrooms

California needs a strategic and tactical roadmap to improve instructional capacity in classrooms statewide. This roadmap would not be a return to reliance on state categorical programs; rather, it would integrate and transcend current programs that are demonstrably effective. One initial state goal could be to reach 80 percent of teachers statewide with high-quality professional development as was achieved in the province of Ontario, Canada (more than twice as vast if less than half as populous). The commitment would be costly, but the alternative is to repeat past cycles that have brought California only unevenly toward its aim to deliver instruction that helps students meet learning goals.

The roadmap I am proposing would account for the many moving parts that must be understood and integrated to achieve high-quality instruction for all California students. State leaders would need to map and coordinate the full range of educational organizations currently involved in instructional capacity development as well as their relationships to one another. The list of these organizations would include not only county offices of education (COEs) and districts but also key suppliers of technical assistance, resources, and products (e.g., California Education Partners, curriculum publishers); and local school systems that employ teachers, teacher aides, coaches, curriculum developers, administrators, and support staff. It is likely that such an undertaking would unveil a pressing need to bring disparate efforts together under a unified strategy. California already has resources and organizations that are seeking to improve subject matter teaching now—for example, there are nearly 12 state-funded reading initiatives—but the lack of coordination among and across them means that resources may be underutilized, redundancies may occur, and overall impacts on teaching quality may be diluted.

I offer four recommendations in support of this urgent call to action.

1. RETURN THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE) TO ITS FORMER ROLE: PROVIDING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE ON HOW TO IMPLEMENT SUBJECT MATTER STANDARDS.

In the 1980s, the California Department of Education (CDE) was a source of expertise about discipline-specific high-quality instruction, for instance with respect to mathematics reform. While the CDE still offers information via, for example, webinars, it no longer provides instructional guidance. In many other US states, education leaders provide clear direction and high-level technical assistance to support local education agencies in meeting rigorous subject matter standards. Mississippi, for example, long considered one of the poorest performing states in education, has become a notable example of how strategic, state-level efforts can lead to substantive improvements in student outcomes. The state's steady progress, particularly in literacy, reflects a well-coordinated commitment to evidence-based approaches and policy reforms; recent data shows that student scores on Mississippi's English Language Arts assessment have fully recovered from the pandemic. While the CDE may not be accustomed to filling such a leadership role, if California is to fully implement the Common Core State Standards, it will need to increase its expertise and use that knowledge to provide clearer direction for COEs and districts.

2. STRENGTHEN COUNTY OFFICES OF EDUCATION FOR EFFECTIVE CAPACITY BUILDING.

To improve instructional capacity in classrooms across California, we must take a well-defined regional approach, beginning with COEs. Funded at least in part to act as the state's regional support mechanisms for continuous improvement, these offices are essential for bridging the gap between statewide goals and the unique local needs of districts and schools. A roadmap focused on developing instructional capacity could position COEs as central hubs for professional development that are tailored to the specific contexts of their districts. A strong accountability framework would be required to ensure that COEs effectively execute their expanded responsibilities and that their efforts directly contribute to improved teaching and learning outcomes—not simply meet approval of district Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs). Such a regional model would ensure that capacity-building efforts are responsive to local needs while maintaining alignment with California's overarching educational standards and priorities.

3. REORIENT THE DISTRICT ROLE TO FOCUS ON INSTRUCTIONAL CAPACITY.

Rethinking the role of school districts is essential to creating an ecosystem in which teachers receive steady, integrated support for aligning their instructional practices with state standards. Districts must prioritize developing the internal knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to build teaching capacity, reducing dependency on outside professional development vendors whose support can be inconsistent or unsustainable due to changes in funding or district leadership. This shift would require restructuring both staffing and organizational priorities to make teacher collaboration on instruction a regular part of each educator's contract day and fostering an environment where professional learning is continuous and collaborative.

An essential organizational shift in districts must be to move curriculum and instruction out of its typically siloed position in the central office to make instructional support the primary focus of the entire district. Curriculum and instruction is often positioned as an isolated department among many others; instead, districts should center their operations around instructional support. For example, district supervision of principals should support their instructional leadership; collective bargaining should focus on ensuring adequate time for professional learning to be embedded in teachers' workday. School boards should focus on long-term organizational improvement, aligning their goals with instructional quality and sustainable teaching support. Success stories from Napa Valley and San Jose illustrate how a dedicated board focused on instruction can create conditions for deep systemic improvement.

Additionally, districts should actively build partnerships with local business, political, and community leaders to develop a broad base of grassroots support for standards-aligned instruction, securing community buy-in for consistent, high-quality instructional practices. This comprehensive approach would empower districts to foster sustainable, internally driven growth in instructional capacity, ensuring lasting impacts on classroom teaching and learning. Research on how to center instruction in the district office role already exists.

4. DESIGN THE ROADMAP FOR TARGETED DISTRICT SUPPORT.

A critical first step is to assemble a capacity-building planning group to determine how to help districts with diverse characteristics operating in various contexts. Districts could be sorted into four categories with regard to their willingness and ability to build instructional capacity.[1] The roadmap would offer funding for tailored approaches and tactics to build capacity in each category of districts:

1. For *willing and able* districts, the focus might be on scaling successful practices and providing additional resources to further strengthen ongoing efforts.
2. In *willing but not able* districts, the roadmap would prioritize targeted support and training, ensuring the presence of tools and expertise needed to effectively implement standards.
3. For *able but not willing* districts, strategies could include fostering buy-in through collaborative planning and showcasing the positive impact of standards-based reforms.
4. In districts that are *neither willing nor able*, the roadmap would address foundational challenges by building leadership capacity, offering intensive support, and creating accountability structures that encourage gradual adoption of the new practices.

By differentiating support in this way, the roadmap would lead us to advancing standards-based instruction across California's vast and varied districts.

With California rolling out the new mathematics framework adopted in July 2023, there is a need to act swiftly to avoid repeating the inadequate implementation of past reforms. I encourage you to review the full report, which provides a comprehensive understanding of this complex issue.

Suggested citation

Kirst, M. W. (2024, November). *Looking back, moving forward: A vision for instructional capacity in California* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/looking-back-moving-forward

1 My thanks to Matt Navo, executive director of the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), for proposing these four district categories.

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