PRESS RELEASE

PACE Research Helps Shape Historic California Education Governance Reform

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

California enacts landmark education governance reforms reflecting PACE recommendations to modernize state leadership and strengthen the state's independent evaluation function.

STANFORD, Calif. — California has enacted one of the most significant education governance reforms in state history, adopting legislation through the 2026–27 state budget that reflects three central recommendations from the Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) report *TK–12 Education Governance in California: Past, Present, and Future*.

The law places administration of the California Department of Education under an Education Commissioner appointed by the Governor, confirmed by the Senate, and serving under the authority of the State Board of Education. The Governor is encouraged to appoint an Education Commissioner with demonstrated organizational leadership in public education. The Education Commissioner would be expected to lead the next phase of system redesign, developing a comprehensive restructuring plan by October 2027.

The law also begins to redefine the role of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) as the independently elected, nonpartisan voice for the public interest in California's education system, including fostering statewide policy alignment, reporting on the condition of education, and ensuring independent evaluation of education laws and programs as directed by the Legislature. This change creates clearer executive leadership and strengthens statewide capacity and coherence across policymaking, funding, implementation, and independent evaluation. Collectively, these reforms strengthen California's ability not only to implement education policy more effectively but also to learn from and continuously improve its investments over time.

The new law builds upon recommendations from PACE's December 2025 report, authored by Jeannie Myung, Heather J. Hough, and Julie A. Marsh, which concluded that California's longstanding governance structure diffuses authority across multiple entities, creating overlapping responsibilities, fragmented

implementation, and unclear accountability. The report recommended realigning the state's education governance system around clearer domains of responsibility for greater coherence and accountability.

"This represents one of the most significant education governance reforms in California's history," said PACE Executive Director Lupita Cortez Alcalá. "This law recognizes that improving education requires more than bold investments—it requires clear leadership, rigorous evaluation, and a commitment to continuous learning. By modernizing governance and strengthening California's capacity for independent evaluation as part of a more coherent education governance system, California is building a stronger foundation for better policy, better implementation, and better outcomes for students."

The governance reforms come at a pivotal moment as California continues implementing major statewide initiatives, including universal transitional kindergarten, community schools, literacy and mathematics initiatives, expanded learning opportunities, and college and career pathways. Together, these investments represent billions of dollars in public funding and will now be accompanied by stronger statewide structures for leadership, implementation, and learning.

The PACE report found that unclear lines of responsibility within California's governance structure have contributed to fragmented implementation. The new law responds to these challenges by modernizing executive leadership of the California Department of Education, better aligning policymaking with implementation, and strengthening the state's capacity to support local educational agencies. PACE authors and faculty directors emphasized that the reforms reflect longstanding research on the need for clearer roles, stronger implementation capacity, and a more coherent statewide governance system:

"For decades, California's disjointed governance structure has divided responsibility for policymaking, implementation, and accountability," said Julie A. Marsh, professor of education policy at the USC Rossier School of Education and PACE faculty director. "These long-overdue reforms create clearer roles and a more coherent governance structure, strengthening the connection between policies adopted at the state level and implementation on the ground and enabling the education system to operate more effectively on behalf of California's students."

"Our research found that fragmented governance structures can make it difficult to translate statewide policy into coherent implementation," said Jeannie Myung, PACE director of policy research and lead author of the report. "California voters have repeatedly affirmed the importance of an independently elected, nonpartisan advocate for public schools. This reform would preserve that role for the SPI while assigning responsibility for administering the state education department to an expert administrator who has the professional experience to run a state education agency."

"California's students deserve a governance system designed for the challenges of the twenty-first century," said Professor Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, chair of the Department of Education, UCLA School of Education and

Information Studies, and PACE faculty director. "When governance is clear and responsibilities are aligned, the state is better positioned to advance educational opportunities, respond to the needs of diverse communities, and improve outcomes for every student."

"California has studied education governance reform for decades," said Stanford University Professor Emeritus Michael W. Kirst, former president of the California State Board of Education and PACE co-founder and advisor. "This law represents the culmination of longstanding recommendations to modernize a governance structure that has remained largely unchanged while California's education system has grown dramatically in size, complexity, and responsibility. It marks an important milestone in aligning California's education governance with the needs of today's students, educators, and schools."

"Changing the governance structure was the first step," said report coauthor Heather J. Hough, former PACE executive director, and independent education policy consultant. "Now comes the important work of redesigning how California supports schools and districts and strengthening the state's capacity to learn from implementation so every student has the opportunity to succeed. This is our moment to build a more coherent, aligned, and responsive statewide education system."

Beyond governance reform, the new law strengthens California's commitment to independent evaluation by directing recommendations to refine the state's governance structure and prioritize the SPI's role in ensuring independent evaluation of existing educational laws and programs as directed by the Legislature. PACE faculty directors emphasized that making evaluation a standing part of governance would help California turn major public investments into sustained learning and improvement:

"Large public investments should generate large public learning," said Associate Professor Benjamin W. Domingue, Stanford Graduate School of Education and PACE faculty director. "California has made tremendous progress in building high-quality education data systems. The next step is ensuring those data—through rigorous, independent evaluation—are used to understand what works, for whom, and under what conditions, so policymakers and educators can continuously strengthen their investments."

"California possesses extraordinary research capacity across its universities and educational institutions," said PACE Faculty Director Michal Kurlaender, Chancellor's Leadership Professor of Education Policy at the UC Davis School of Education. "Embedding independent evaluation into major education initiatives creates an enduring connection between research, policymaking, and practice, allowing the state to make better decisions based on evidence rather than assumptions."

"Strong governance is about more than organizational charts," said Professor Michelle D. Young, dean of the UC Berkeley School of Education and PACE faculty director. "It requires institutions that use evidence to improve decision-making and adapt over time. By strengthening the role of independent evaluation within California's education governance system, this law builds the state's capacity to better serve every student."

By modernizing statewide leadership and strengthening the role of independent evaluation within California's education governance framework, the state has established a stronger foundation for greater coherence, accountability, continuous improvement, and better outcomes for students.

Founded more than four decades ago, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is a nonpartisan research center that bridges research, policy, and practice to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for California's students. PACE is a partnership among Stanford University, the University of California, Berkeley, the University of California, Davis, the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Southern California.

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