

Convening Summary of the PACE Policy Research Panel on Continuous Improvement and Support Systems in California

October 15-16, 2019
Sacramento, California

Introduction

Over the past 10 years, California has made significant changes to its educational systems, including adopting new academic standards, transforming its approaches to funding and accountability, and shifting toward a more decentralized system of governance and finance. These shifts have been implemented with continuous improvement as the vision for California’s approach to advancing experiences and outcomes for students. Given these recent significant shifts, PACE saw the need to take stock of what we know about the implementation of these policies and what we still need to know to continue moving policy and practice in a positive direction. To this end, on October 15-16, 2019, PACE hosted a meeting of key actors in policy, practice, and research to assess the current status of the implementation of continuous improvement in schools in California and to develop a research agenda to better understand and strengthen California’s continuous school improvement and support systems. Together, we will discussed the latest research on the systems to support continuous improvement in the state, surfaced knowledge needs, and co-develop strategies for developing research to equip policymakers and practitioners to advance outcomes for students.

This convening summary captures key issues and questions that arose over the course of the convening. These ideas will inform a research agenda to advance continuous improvement and supports systems in California. To identify knowledge needs, participants at the convening first heard presentations on recent research on the current status of continuous improvement and support systems.

The topics covered in researcher presentations included the following:

Researcher Presentations on Local Control and Continuous Improvement at the Local Level in California:

- [*An overview of LCFF implementation*](#), Julia Koppich, J. Koppich & Associates
- [*Stakeholder engagement under LCFF*](#), Julie Marsh, University of Southern California
- [*The distribution and use of LCFF funds*](#), Julien Lafortune, PPIC

- [LCFF and English Learners](#), Magaly Lavadenz, Loyola Marymount University
- [Dashboard awareness and utilization](#), Morgan Polikoff, University of Southern California

Researcher Presentations on the State/County Structures for Support of Continuous Improvement at the Local Level:

- [California's theory of action and alignment for improvement](#), Santiago Rincón-Gallardo, Michael Fullan Enterprises
- *Building capacity in geographic leads within the System of Support*, Jason Willis and Kelsey Krausen, WestEd
- [The role of counties in the System of Support](#), Jennifer O'Day, AIR, and Dan Humphrey, independent consultant

Following the research presentations, small working groups consisting of researchers, policy makers, and practitioners addressed three questions regarding the implementation of continuous improvement and support systems in California schools:

1. What is going well?
2. What needs to be improved?
3. What more do we need to know?

A synthesis of the key ideas and points of discussion that arose in the small group conversations is presented below.

What is Going Well?

Local Control Funding Formula

- The distribution of funds is more equitable.
- There is wide buy-in of local control and equitable funding and no appetite for returning to the previous system of categorical funding.
- Achieving meaningful stakeholder engagement is an important component of the LCFF.
- There is some evidence of improvement in student outcomes since LCFF was enacted.

Dashboard

- The Dashboard has shone a light on the performance of subgroups, especially students with disabilities (SWDs).
- Using multiple indicators represents a substantial improvement over the API which looked only at test scores.

System of Support

- County offices of education (COEs) are breaking down internal silos.
- COEs are embracing their new support role.
- COEs are adapting their support to local context.
- There is an increase in the use of data to guide improvement efforts.
- There is a statewide shift from compliance to support.
- COEs are employing continuous improvement (CI) principles internally.
- There is evidence of CI principles being used by districts.
- Some COEs are moving to help all districts, not just those identified for differentiated assistance (DA).

What needs to be improved?

Resources

- California's education system still lacks adequate funding.
- More funding is needed, but the state needs to clarify how much more is needed.
- There needs to be more transparency about needs at the local level compared to the resources and support districts currently receive.
- The funding system for SWDs needs to be more equitable and adequate.
- The state needs to address unfunded liabilities (pensions, health care, etc.).
- Strategic planning is a problem for small districts and they need more assistance.
- DA needs a more realistic timeline, not just year to year, and resources need to match identified needs.
- COE funding for SoS is too low, often resulting in COEs being able to offer just a "light touch" of support to most districts.

LCFF

- Districts and COEs need to improve their approaches to meaningful stakeholder engagement.
- The Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) needs to be simplified; then the state needs to stop changing the template every year.
- The state needs to reduce the number of state priorities.
- There may be too much local control and not enough accountability.
- Districts need to expand/deepen the engagement of unions, school boards, and businesses.
- Positive labor-management relations are key to continuous improvement but are not always present in districts.
- There is a need to collect and report spending data and connect spending to outcomes, especially for the target subgroups.

Dashboard

- Local indicators need to be more prominent on the Dashboard.
- There needs to be a stronger connection between how the LCAP and the Dashboard are used by districts.
- California's measure of change needs to more accurately measure student and school growth.
- The Dashboard needs to allow for comparisons between schools' performance.
- The Dashboard needs to better represent the challenges facing small districts.
- The release of the Dashboard needs to come sooner so as to avoid truncating and complicating DA and planning efforts.
- Districts' identification for DA needs to be less volatile. That is, annual identification contributes to a lack of focus on specific improvement priorities.

System of Support

- The state, COEs, and districts need to better communicate the goals and activities of the SoS.
- The role of state agencies, especially the California Collaborative for Excellent Education (CCEE), needs to be more clearly defined, especially in how they differentiate their roles/responsibilities.
- There needs to be more clarity about what continuous improvement methodology is and what is needed (resources, staffing, skills) in order to effectively use it.
- COEs and districts acknowledge the limitations of the System of Support (SoS). Teachers and administrators need more time and focus to address the multiple and daily demands placed on schools.
- The SoS needs more focus on learning at the classroom level.
- While some progress is evident, COEs and districts need to make stronger efforts to break down silos between general education and special education.
- There is a need to build expertise and capacity to address needs of SWDs at all levels of the system.
- COEs and districts need examples of effective improvement practices in the SoS.
- COEs should support all districts, not just Tier 2.
- More attention and work is needed to change educators' mindsets to realize continuous improvement at all levels of the system.
- The SoS is hampered by a deep and historical culture of compliance.
- The relationship between large school districts (and some not so large districts) and their COEs can be a barrier, as there are different needs for support, expertise, and capacity that COEs are not necessarily equipped to address.
- The state should explicitly create strategies that tap into the full complement of expertise beyond the COEs (district, non-profit, IHEs) to make the SoS more robust.

3. What more do we need to know?

- Continuous Improvement
 - How do we know we are on the right track in the CI process?
 - What incentivizes practitioners to engage in CI?
 - How can we better engage and support schools directly in improvement efforts?
 - How does the turnover of education leaders impact CI implementation and sustainability?
- Resources and Skills Needed for Continuous Improvement
 - How do other states support their lowest performing districts?
 - What is the expected minimum expertise of the COEs and what is required to ensure their efficacy?
 - What are the support needs that Districts are identifying? How do districts perceive the effectiveness of COE support?
 - What are the supports from COEs for districts in DA that are resulting in improvement?
 - What resources are COEs using to support districts in DA? What more do they need?
 - How can the state better communicate what works?
 - What would be a better growth model for the Dashboard?
 - What are the best practices in CA and elsewhere in collecting data on spending and implementation?
- Differentiated CI Roles and Responsibilities
 - What are the goals of the SoS and how can it be realized at each level of support, i.e. school, district, county, state?
 - What is the understanding of districts on how to access support?
 - How can geographic and content leads be most effective?
 - How are content leads and geo leads working together?
 - What supports are Tier 1 districts receiving?
 - What is Tier 3?
 - How can CCEE's role be strengthened and clarified?
- Focus and Clarity
 - How can the state reduce the number of requirements they place on districts and COEs?
- Engagement
 - How is labor engaged in DA and CI?
 - What are the barriers to engagement in CI for COEs and districts?
 - How do you engage/organize the community to support equity goals?
 - What is preventing more meaningful engagement of parents and communities in the SoS?
- Students with Disabilities
 - How is the DA process supporting the needs of diverse SWDs?

- What are the most effective supports to improve the outcomes of diverse SWDs?

Conclusion

When a diverse group of researchers, policy makers, and practitioners gather, it is not surprising that their various lenses result in a laundry list of things that are working well, need improvement, and deserve further research. Despite the various perspectives, the PACE convening resulted in a remarkable consensus about key issues that warrant investigation. As California continues on its efforts to make its public education system better, this convening charted out the top priorities for the state, the philanthropic community, advocates, and researchers for informing policy.

The following top ten research questions include most, if not all, of the issues identified by participants in the PACE convening.

1. What improvements to the System of Support could be made to ensure that differentiated assistance emphasizes support and does not become a compliance activity?
2. What would make the System of Support more robust and effective?
3. How can the LCAP template be improved?
4. What are exemplary cases of and practices used for meaningful engagement by districts and their constituents and school boards?
5. How can the Dashboard be improved to more accurately provide more timely information to the districts?
6. What changes to state policy are necessary to enable districts to better meet the needs of students with disabilities?
7. How might the state track the progress of current English learners needing additional resources and appropriately allocate those resources?
8. What level of resources is actually needed and how should the resource allocation process be structured?
9. How can local indicators have elevated importance in the accountability system?
10. What is the appropriate role of unions in this process? How can that role be productively encouraged?