

Fostering Parent Engagement: Removing Barriers to Data Accessibility

Benjamin W. Cottingham



This policy brief identifies three key principles Local Education Agencies (LEAs) can take to increase parental engagement through better data-use practices. While California identifies parental engagement as one of 10 priority areas under the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and provides access to school data through the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) process and the California School Dashboard, these structures do not provide adequate or equitable support for parents in all communities to access, interpret, and engage with data effectively. The shift to distance learning in response to COVID-19 has further highlighted barriers to data accessibility for both parents and students. These principles underscore available scaffolds for improving data accessibility so that parents can support student learning and consistently engage in local education decision-making.

September 2020

Introduction

Parental engagement has been shown to be a key lever for improving outcomes for all students. Research has shown that parental engagement can positively influence grades, test scores, and graduation rates for all students.¹ Increased engagement is shown to improve the outcomes of underserved student populations, positively affecting low-income, Black, and Latinx students in both primary and secondary settings.² Parental engagement has also been found to be a critical support in blended and distance learning environments.³ California state policy prioritizes parent engagement as one of 10 priority areas identified under the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and as a key component of districts' annual Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs), which are intended to share school and district data with parents and community members so that they can make informed decisions about individual students and actively participate in district decision-making.

However, the current policies and tools for parental engagement—the importance of which has been further highlighted by the onset of COVID-19 and shifts to distance learning—fail to provide the scaffolding parents need to support student learning or participate in local education decision-making. The California statute only requires Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to express their intent—without evidence of completion—to administer at least one “local survey to parents/guardians” or use “other local measures” to satisfy the requirements for parental engagement in their LCAP.⁴ Districts will need to communicate more frequently than once a year to develop effective distance learning plans that meet student and family needs. The state also established the publicly available California School Dashboard to provide annual reporting on LEAs and inform parents, but awareness of this tool is lowest in the state's communities with the highest needs.⁵ In order to realize the state's vision for local control and to support student learning throughout the COVID-19 crisis, both the state and LEAs must improve data accessibility and build the capacity of parents and community stakeholders to engage productively in data-centered conversations about their schools.

This brief⁶ identifies three key principles LEAs can use to build parental capacity for data use to drive the improvement of student outcomes and increase parental involvement in district decision-making.

- 1. Make data easily accessible so that parents and other stakeholders can engage with the information-sharing process.**
- 2. Structure data sharing so parents start with a broad view that can then be focused to better understand information relevant to their child(ren).**
- 3. Include parents in consistent and transparent data-sharing conversations to build relational trust, improve data literacy, and utilize parents' abilities to share and process information with peers.**

The following pages expand on these three key principles, providing examples of actions taken by the state and exemplar LEAs to increase parental and community engagement through better data-use practices.

Key Principle 1: Make Data Easily Accessible So That Parents and Other Stakeholders Can Engage With the Information-Sharing Process

The way leaders present data can make the data more or less accessible and inviting to people with a broad range of comfort and familiarity with data. Our research revealed two common-sense strategies for data presentation that can make it easier for the general public to engage with data.

Present data in a way that is easy to find and comprehend so parents and community stakeholders know where and how to access the data. Accessibility of data means that parents can easily comprehend data and know where and how to access the information. The current LCAP and Dashboard are neither easily accessible nor comprehensible for parents. LCAP documents in many districts are hundreds of pages long, making them unwieldy and the expectation for the general public to interpret them unreasonable.⁷ The Dashboard was remodeled in 2018 and provides clearer snapshots on individual schools that reduce the chance for parents to miss important information. However, many parents are still unaware of the Dashboard or how to access it. The annual PACE/USC Rossier Poll found that only 63 percent of parents reported awareness of the Dashboard in 2019, a slight decrease from 66 percent in 2018. The numbers were even lower for parents in households earning less than \$35,000 annually, with only 30 percent aware of the Dashboard and only 6 percent of these parents accessing the Dashboard, compared to 30 percent of parents with incomes over \$250,000.⁸ This leaves the voices of many families and students underrepresented in district and school decision-making processes. Additional steps need to be taken at the state and local levels to increase data accessibility for all parents and stakeholders—especially those living in and serving low-income communities across the state.

Parents and community stakeholders are most comfortable interpreting familiar rating systems and should receive data in a variety of formats. Research shows that individuals are most comfortable interpreting data using scales that they have interacted with before (e.g., A–F scores, 100-point scales, and color gradient ratings).⁹ The use of red to blue gauges instead of pie pieces on the Dashboard is an example of using familiar data scales to convey information and an improvement from the initial Dashboard release. Making data easily accessible to individuals in familiar formats reduces barriers to understanding new information. Additionally, data should be shared in a variety of modes (e.g., electronically, in hard copy, via information sessions, through text messaging), languages, and settings (e.g., parent–teacher conferences, community events, district

training sessions). Such strategies can accelerate knowledge sharing and strengthen parent and stakeholder trust in the LEA because they lower barriers to access for parents and stakeholders.

Key Principle 2: Structure Data Sharing So Parents Start With a Broad View That Can Then Be Focused to Better Understand Information Relevant to Their Child(ren)

Parents often have access to generalized data about their schools and districts to inform their decision-making. However, research suggests that providing parents with data relevant to their individual child(ren) is more likely to result in increased parent confidence and subsequent action.

Parents and other stakeholders are more confident in their interpretation of data and subsequent decision-making when they are provided with more information.

When provided more “comprehensive” information about school performance (e.g., student subgroup performance, available specialized school resources, longitudinal trends, etc.) individuals are more confident assessing school quality compared to when they are provided simple snapshots of generalized school data.¹⁰ Parents generally want to know all of the relevant information that will affect the success of their own child(ren) as well as how similar students are performing and being served. However, there are limitations to the amount of information that individuals can reasonably be expected to interpret.¹¹ Parents should receive sufficient information to understand what is occurring with their child(ren), but not so much that they are unable to digest everything provided.

Data for parents and stakeholders should be “progressively disclosed”; providing digestible amounts of general information regarding student progress with the option to explore specifics if they desire. While parents’ confidence assessing school quality increases with more comprehensive data, all available information should not be provided at once. Individuals can only engage with a certain amount of data and sharing too much information can lead to misinterpretation.¹² Additionally, findings from a study on school choice found that parents were just as likely to change their school choice preference for their child(ren) when given a 2–3-page summary of district information as they were when presented with all relevant information about schools in their district at once.¹³ This suggests that providing the right information to parents and stakeholders is more important than how much information is provided. LEAs should prioritize sharing general information concisely while still providing access to more extensive data for those wanting additional information. This information should be accompanied with a roadmap highlighting key actions that address areas of needed improvement and should anticipate frequently asked questions. Packaging data in this way has a positive impact on the ability of individuals to interpret and their likelihood to act upon relevant data, particularly for

parents of underserved students.¹⁴ Scaffolding data sharing with parents from generalized information to more individualized student data builds parents' confidence and ensures parents have relevant information about their child(ren).

Parents are more likely to act when provided data that is relevant to their child(ren). Studies have found that parents receiving a report with individualized student data were more likely to take action compared to those who only received general information about the school (e.g., applying to a school producing better outcomes in areas where their child struggled).¹⁵ The current format of the Dashboard allows for comparison of schools within a single district. However, it does not allow comparison across multiple districts or the option for users to compare school performance across student subgroups (e.g., ethnicity, gender, English learner or disability status, etc.). Parents want information about students who are similar to their own child(ren).¹⁶ Some LEAs are working to meet this demand and have developed data-sharing systems that provide parents with individualized data about their particular child(ren).

Long Beach Unified School District uses College-Career Readiness reports to indicate where students are on their path to high school graduation and college readiness. These reports first provide an overall snapshot of a student's level of preparedness and an explanation of the measures used as well as where the data is coming from, and then provide more in-depth information around each readiness indicator. These reports conclude with a list of individualized action steps—based on the student's interests, high school graduation and college requirements, and their current academic standing—the student and parents can take in order to be college and career ready. Progressively disclosing access to more student-specific data better informs parental decision-making in a way that builds parent confidence in understanding data and can increase the likelihood of parental engagement in support of student learning.

Key Principle 3: Include Parents in Consistent and Transparent Data-Sharing Conversations to Build Relational Trust, Improve Data Literacy, and Utilize Parents' Abilities to Share and Process Information With Peers

Engaging parents in decision-making processes requires inviting parents into honest data-sharing conversations with regularity in order to build relational trust between the community and LEA. Making space for parents to participate must also be accompanied by capacity-building efforts centered around data literacy so that parents have the knowledge and ability to engage in these important conversations. Our research found several examples of California LEAs strategically making spaces for parents to learn and contribute, building parents' data capacity, and empowering parents to inform and educate one another to drive sustained parental engagement in district decision-making.

Parents should be included in data-sharing conversations to build relational trust with Local Education Agencies. Transparent sharing of data affects the way in which parents and stakeholders interpret data. Data processes and systems that invite feedback from users build greater levels of trust and buy-in with data users and can be used to drive stakeholder engagement. One such example is the Palmdale Elementary School District (Palmdale) strategic plan, developed in response to the LCFF: the Palmdale PROMISE. The plan emphasizes engagement with “diverse families and communities in powerful learning and collaboration” using several strategies including (a) districtwide engagement trainings, meetings, and feedback sessions; (b) increased transparency around activities such as the sharing of positive and negative data; and (c) focusing efforts with all subgroups around the goal of all students succeeding together.¹⁷ Explicitly naming the value of parent and stakeholder voices in the district plan showed the district wanted community voices to be heard. More importantly, Palmdale took additional steps to provide training for both school and community stakeholders around how to interpret and share data respectfully, and created spaces for parents to regularly participate in district planning processes, backing up the Palmdale PROMISE with scaffolds to support increased parental engagement.

Accurate data must be shared regularly with parents and stakeholders to build trust and credibility in the data provided. Sharing data consistently increases the likelihood that parents know all relevant information, expect and demand data, and come to value the sharing of information. When parents—or any data users—value shared data it legitimizes the information being shared and helps to establish the credibility of the data system.¹⁸ LEAs can build credibility among the communities they serve by regularly sharing data and also regularly soliciting feedback from parents and other stakeholders. As stated earlier, consistent and accurate sharing of data increases user confidence in the data received. Increased user confidence can positively affect parents’ perception of their schools and districts, thus strengthening relational trust and lending further credibility to the data system.¹⁹ Consistently sharing data reduces information gaps and builds trust between parents and LEAs, thus increasing parental involvement in local decision-making.

The opposite is also true—a lack of transparency and accuracy can erode relational trust. If data is not shared transparently or if systems lack desired information, users can become disillusioned with the data provided and lose trust in the organization sharing the information.²⁰ Data users can perceive missing information, inconsistent updates of desired information, or continually changing the goals for users as a lack of transparency.²¹ For example, some parents were frustrated by the inconsistent communication regarding expectations for distance learning in the spring of 2020 and expressed a need for regular sharing of information on instructional shifts and feedback on student outcomes going forward.²² Not only should data be reliable and tied to desired outcomes but also users should be able to see clearly how data is leading them to those outcomes.

Local Education Agencies must take time to build parents' capacity to engage with available data so that they can actively participate in local planning efforts. The state should increase visibility of the Dashboard and other relevant data tools, particularly in low-income communities across the state where awareness is shown to be lower, in order to improve parental engagement.²³ Schools can support this process by taking time to increase the capacity of parents, stakeholders, and staff to engage in data conversations and to accurately interpret data.²⁴ The shift to distance learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic proved painful for many parents and made apparent the need for better district outreach processes. Parents felt that they lacked access to the support and information they needed to support their children in distance learning. For example, a survey of California parents found that 91 percent thought technical assistance for distance learning would be helpful, but only 29 percent reported that their school provided such support.²⁵ In response, LEAs like Pajaro Valley Unified School District have conducted significant outreach to identify areas of need for families, coordinate available resources, and ultimately inform plans for the return to school in the fall of 2020 that best prepare parents to support student learning and develop systems that regularly share expectations for and outcomes of student work.²⁶ LEAs must continue to expand data-sharing structures that are accompanied by scaffolds that empower parents as active participants in student learning as well as district decision-making processes.

Improving data literacy empowers parents to confidently share information with their peers and drive community learning. In a randomized controlled trial, one group of parents were given general information about school performance while another group were given a more comprehensive data set. Both groups answered a series of questions using the data provided about the schools. These two groups were then given time to speak with one another about the schools they reviewed before being surveyed again. After speaking with one another, the "cross talk" between the two groups resulted in more accurate and confident answers to a range of school quality questions even on the part of parents who received the less detailed data.²⁷ Sharing of information among parents has been critically important in low-income and predominantly non-English-speaking communities during the transition to distance learning, and LEAs should help parents share accurate information with one another.²⁸ Taking time to educate parents how to interpret data and understand what is being shared with them increases the number of parents who are data literate and facilitates greater sharing of accurate information.²⁹ Improving the data capacity of parents and stakeholders enhances communication across social networks, greatly increasing the uptake and sharing of information across a community.

Some California school districts have adopted such strategies to build the capacity of parents to engage in data conversations and then empower those same parents to teach others. In Anaheim Union High School District, parents can participate in—and now facilitate—a Parent Leadership Academy to build their capacity to engage in district

decision-making processes with training around California’s educational system, curricula, and data interpretation. As a result, hundreds of parents and community stakeholders attend LCAP planning meetings.³⁰ Riverside Unified School District in coordination with the Riverside County Office of Education have similarly developed a Parent Engagement Leadership Institute to prepare stakeholders and parents to engage in district decision-making processes and subsequently train other parents.³¹ Ensuring parent and community engagement requires building the capacity for parents and community members to share their learning with one another. Community social networks are able to share information about school and student performance including data that are difficult to capture in displays (e.g., the quality of the data provided, the perceived effectiveness of proposed interventions, or explanations of how a data system may work). Helping parents to engage effectively with schools through data conversations means improving the data literacy of parents who in turn can educate other parents and community stakeholders.

Conclusion

California’s adoption of a local control model for education funding requires consistent input from parents and community members for district and school plans to reflect the needs of the communities they serve. This need has only increased as COVID-19 outbreaks have forced schools to adopt blended and distance learning models that will likely continue to be in place throughout at least the 2020–21 school year and will require consistent parental engagement in order to succeed. A critical component of parent and community engagement is ensuring data is accessible to all stakeholders so that these individuals can actively support student learning and participate in district decision-making processes. LEAs can facilitate this type of engagement if they go beyond what is currently required in statute by clearly sharing data consistently with parents and providing parents with access to data that can be focused on information relevant to their individual child(ren). Providing parents with information relevant to their child(ren), schools, and districts helps to build relational trust that must be maintained by transparently and consistently sharing data with the community. Districts and schools can further support engagement by providing opportunities for parents to learn about data use and teach one another to increase the number of informed and engaged stakeholders. Providing data to parents and community members through the Dashboard and LCAPs is helpful but will not garner the necessary parental engagement in California’s most high-needs communities nor will it adequately support equitable distance learning. Ensuring that all parents are informed, are able to support student learning, and can participate in local education decision-making is a key lever that can improve student outcomes and further the state’s vision for local control.

Endnotes

- ¹ Belway, S., Durán, M., & Spielberg, L. (2010). *State laws on family engagement in education: National PTA reference guide*. The National Parent Teacher Association. s3.amazonaws.com/rdcms-pta/files/production/public/State_Laws_Report.pdf; London, R. A. (2016, June). *Family engagement practices in California schools* [Report]. Public Policy Institute of California. ppic.org/publication/family-engagement-practices-in-california-schools/; Mapp, K. L., & Kuttner, P. J. (2014). *Partners in education: A dual capacity-building framework for family–school partnerships*. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. sedl.org/pubs/catalog/items/family132.html
- ² Jaynes, W. H. (2003). A meta-analysis: The effects of parental involvement on minority children’s academic achievement. *Education and Urban Society*, 35(2), 202–218. doi.org/10.1177/0013124502239392; Lee, J.- S., & Bowen, N. K. (2006). Parent involvement, cultural capital, and the achievement gap among elementary school children. *American Educational Research Journal*, 43(2), 193–218. doi.org/10.3102/00028312043002193
- ³ Chingos, M. M., & Schwerdt, G. (2014). *Virtual schooling and student learning: Evidence from the Florida virtual school* (Program on Education Policy and Governance Working Papers Series 14-02). Harvard Kennedy School; Gill, B., Walsh, L., Smither Wulsin, C., Matulewicz, H., Severn, V., Grau, E., Lee, A., & Kerwin, T. (2015, October). *Inside online charter schools* [Report]. Mathematica Policy Research. mathematica.org/news/online-charter-schools-struggle-to-engage-their-students; Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative. (2020). *Culturally responsive-sustaining family engagement in the time of COVID-19 and remote learning, and always*. NYU Steinhardt Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools. static1.squarespace.com/static/5bc5da7c3560c36b7dab1922/t/5e84aac1e21ae556868a53a8/1585752769220/Culturally+responsive+family+engagement+.pdf
- ⁴ California Department of Education. (2018, September). *Local performance indicator quick guide*. cde.gov/ta/ac/cm/documents/localindquickref2018.docx
- ⁵ Polikoff, M. (2019, February). *Gauging the revised California School Dashboard: Evidence from the 2019 PACE/USC Rossier voter poll* [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education. edpolicyinca.org/publications/gauging-revised-california-school-dashboard
- ⁶ A version of this brief was originally produced to support the CORE–PACE Research Partnership in response to a request from the CORE Districts (which include Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento City, San Francisco, and Santa Ana unified school districts) to better understand how student data could be communicated to families within the CORE improvement communities. The present brief has been reframed for a more general audience.
- ⁷ Humphrey, D. C., Koppich, J. E., Esch, C., Marsh, J. A., Hall, M., Campbell, A., ... & Imazeki, J. (2014, November). *Toward a grand vision: Early implementation of California’s Local Control Funding Formula* [Report]. Stuart Foundation.
- ⁸ Polikoff, 2019.
- ⁹ Jacobsen, R., Saultz, A., & Snyder, J. W. (2013). When accountability strategies collide: Do policy changes that raise accountability standards also erode public satisfaction? *Educational Policy*, 27(2), 360–389. doi.org/10.1177/0895904813475712
- ¹⁰ Schneider, J., Jacobsen, R., White, R. S., & Gelbach, H. (2018). The (mis)measure of schools: How data affect stakeholder knowledge and perceptions of quality. *Teachers College Record*, 120(5), 1–40. tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=21842
- ¹¹ Valant, J. (2014). *Better data, better decisions: Informing school choosers to improve education markets*. American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.
- ¹² Valant, 2014.
- ¹³ Hastings, J. S., & Weinstein, J. M. (2008, February). Information, school choice, and academic achievement: Evidence from two experiments (National Bureau of Economic Research working paper 13623). nber.org/papers/w13623
- ¹⁴ Hastings & Weinstein, 2008; London, 2016; Nellum, C. J., & Voight, M. (2019). *Data for the people: Prioritizing equity in California’s state longitudinal data system*. The Education Trust–West. s3-us-east-2.amazonaws.com/edtrustmain/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2017/11/01004510/Data-for-the-People-Brief-May-2019-Ed-Trust-West-PDF.pdf
- ¹⁵ Hastings & Weinstein, 2008; Valant, 2014.
- ¹⁶ Polikoff, 2019.
- ¹⁷ Humphrey, D., Koppich, J., Lavadenz, M., Marsh, J., O’Day, J., Plank, D., Stokes, L., & Hall, M. (2018, February). *How stakeholder engagement fuels improvement efforts in three California school districts* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. edpolicyinca.org/publications/how-stakeholder-engagement-fuels-improvement-efforts-three-california-school-districts. Quotation on p. 17.

- ¹⁸ Jacobsen, R., Snyder, J. W., & Saultz, A. (2014). Informing or shaping public opinion? The influence of school accountability data format on public perceptions of school quality. *American Journal of Education*, 121(1), 1–27. doi.org/10.1086/678136; Matheus, R., Janssen, M., & Maheshwari, D. (2018). Data science empowering the public: Data-driven dashboards for transparent and accountable decision-making in smart cities. *Government Information Quarterly*. Advance online publication. doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2018.01.006
- ¹⁹ Mapp & Kuttner, 2014; Schneider et al., 2018.
- ²⁰ Matheus et al., 2018; Phillips, M., Reber, S., & Rothstein, J. (2018, September). *Getting down to facts II: Making California data more useful for educational improvement* [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education. edpolicyinca.org/publications/making-california-data-more-useful-educational-improvement
- ²¹ Hough, H. J., Byun, E., & Steen Mulfing, L. (2018, September). *Getting down to facts II: Using data for improvement: Learning from the CORE data collaborative* [Technical report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. edpolicyinca.org/publications/using-data-improvement; Jacobsen et al., 2013.
- ²² Cottingham, B., Gallagher, A., Gee, K., Myung, J., Gong, A., Kimner, H., Witte, J., & Hough, H. (2020, July). *Supporting Learning in the COVID-19 Context: A Summary Brief*. Policy Analysis for California Education. edpolicyinca.org/publications/supporting-learning-covid-19-context
- ²³ Polikoff, 2019.
- ²⁴ Hough et al., 2018; London, 2016; Phillips et al., 2018; Schneider et al., 2018.
- ²⁵ The Education Trust–West. (2020, April 24). *California parent poll: COVID-19 and school closures*. west.edtrust.org/ca-parent-poll-covid-19-and-school-closures/
- ²⁶ Kaura, P., & Melnicoe, H. (2020, May). *COVID-19 crisis response in Pajaro Valley started with listening to families* [Practice brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education. edpolicyinca.org/publications/covid-19-crisis-response-pajaro-valley-started-listening-families
- ²⁷ Schneider et al., 2018.
- ²⁸ Staveland, Z. (2020, August 28). Low-income parents turn to neighbors, family for help with distance learning. *EdSource*. edsources.org/2020/low-income-parents-turn-to-neighborhood-networks-for-help-with-distance-learning/639061
- ²⁹ Hough et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2018
- ³⁰ Humphrey et al., 2018.
- ³¹ London, 2016.

Author Biography

Benjamin Cottingham is Associate Director of Strategic Partnerships at PACE, focusing on the creation of organizational conditions that support the continual improvement of student outcomes across California’s education system.

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Improving education policy and practice and advancing equity through evidence

PACE is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. Founded in 1983, PACE bridges the gap between research, policy, and practice, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local decision makers to achieve improvement in performance and more equitable outcomes at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. We do this through:

- 1 bringing evidence to bear on the most critical issues facing our state;
- 2 making research evidence accessible; and
- 3 leveraging partnership and collaboration to drive system improvement.

Related Publications

Hough, H. J., Byun, E., & Steen Mulfinger, L. (2018, September). **Getting down to facts II: Using data for improvement: Learning from the CORE data collaborative** [Technical report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Humphrey, D. C., Koppich, J., Lavadenz, M., Marsh, J., O'Day, J., Plank, D., Stokes, L., & Hall, M. (2018, February). **How stakeholder engagement fuels improvement efforts in three California school**

districts [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Kaura, P., & Melnicoe, H. (2020, May). **COVID-19 crisis response in Pajaro Valley started with listening to families** [Practice brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Polikoff, M. (2019, February). **Gauging the revised California School Dashboard: Evidence from the 2019 PACE/USC Rossier voter poll** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.



CORE-PACE RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

Stanford Graduate School of Education
243 Panama Street
Redwood Hall, Suite G3
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: (650) 724-2832 • Fax: (650) 723-9931

edpolicyinca.org