

# A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE: THE CASE OF CALIFORNIA

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**Abstract**

Governance is widely believed to be an important determinant of the effectiveness of educational systems. Yet there are few systematic evaluations of the linkages between educational governance and student outcomes, or cogent frameworks for evaluating the effectiveness of governance arrangements in a way that can guide potential policy changes. In this article, we attempt to provide such a framework by identifying indicators of effective educational governance systems drawn from previous research and more than forty interviews with stakeholders at all levels in California, the nation's biggest system. The exploratory research presented here is intended to help inform future studies of educational governance.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: DEFINING EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE

When you ask a parent what he or she thinks is the most important factor that affects school quality, you are likely to elicit responses such as class size, teacher quality, student peers, curriculum materials, school safety, or the school principal. It is unlikely that governance is mentioned, either specific governance institutions such as school districts or school boards, factors such as state regulations or the state education code, or influencers such as teacher unions. However, whether the teacher is qualified, the students have books and computers, or the classroom has air conditioning are all the results of decisions made in the school's governance structure.

Educational governance is the interface between schools and the political system. It is "the act of transforming the needs, wishes, and desires of the community into policies that direct the community's schools" (California School Boards Association 2007). Broadly interpreted, "governance" includes the institutions that are part of the educational decision making and delivery system, the constituencies that interact with these institutions, and how the parts of the system interact with each other. "Governance arrangements establish the rules of the game. They determine through statutes, collective bargaining, legal agreements, regulations and court rulings who is responsible and accountable for what in the system" (Education Commission of the States 1999, p. 9).

Educational governance in the United States is complex, encompassing many organizational entities such as schools, school districts, and county, state, and federal agencies, as well as millions of individuals from state legislators to superintendents, principals, and teachers. It is multidimensional, characterized by bodies that have overlapping responsibilities across executive, legislative, and judicial jurisdictions. The governance system develops over time according to the desires, needs, and actions of those who are able to influence the system and in response to outside pressures and trends; development is "geological rather than logical" (Hill 2003, p. 2).

Educational governance does not "cause" student outcomes, but it can be an important contributor to the overall effectiveness of a school system (Danzberger, Kirst, and Usdan 1992; Timar 2002; National Association of State Boards of Education 1996). Governance is best thought of as an "enabler" that can support other critical elements, such as effective resource utilization, parental engagement, and so on. However, there is little empirical evidence on how different governance arrangements are associated with different outcomes (Campbell and Mazzone 1976; Augustine et al. 2005). There are only a handful of rigorous research studies that try to systematically evaluate the contribution of governance to school improvement, and few provide much direct evidence (examples include Downes 1996 and Ranson et al. 2005). The consensus view is that governance is an important determinant of an

education system's effectiveness in meeting its goals, but research does not provide support for a particular form of educational governance.

This article presents selected findings from a comprehensive study (conducted between October 2005 and December 2006) designed to create a framework for describing and evaluating educational governance in California. The ultimate purpose was to aid policy makers and others in understanding educational governance.

- First, we conducted a comprehensive review of the research literature on governance in general as well as specific elements of educational governance.
- Second, we reviewed documents pertaining to the development of California's educational governance institutions, including written histories, previous commission reports, legislative testimony, newspaper accounts, and so on.<sup>1</sup>
- Third, we analyzed information gathered through Internet research, telephone interviews, in-person review of archival material in Sacramento, and the collection of primary documentation from other sources. Examples included (1) examination of the California Education Code for 2005 and selected years for every decade going back to 1943; (2) analyses of legislative activity pertaining to education; (3) examination of the development of state legislative committees pertaining to education; (4) documentation of the California Department of Education personnel, funding, and structure going back to 1943; (5) examination of membership and meeting agendas of the State Board of Education; and (6) analyses of collective bargaining agreements for a sample of school districts.
- Fourth, we conducted a set of interviews with ten leading academics across the nation to clarify important aspects of governance, understand what frameworks had been used in the past, and delineate criteria for judging good governance.
- Fifth, we conducted thirty semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in California at all levels of the governance system to understand how the governance structure works, how it does not, and why, from the perspective of key stakeholders within the system. Interviewees included state policy makers at the California Department of Education and State

1. See, for example, *Report and Recommendations of the California Commission on School Governance and Management* (CCSGM 1985); the Legislative Analyst's Office's *A K-12 Master Plan*, released in May 1999 (Hill 1999); the Joint Committee to Develop a Master Plan for Education's report *The California Master Plan for Education* (JCDMPE 2002); and Thomas Timar's report, "You Can't Always Get What You Want: School Governance In California," part of the Williams Watch Series, prepared for the UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (Timar 2002).

Board of Education, representatives of major associations (school boards, superintendents, etc.), and county and district superintendents.

Full details of the study's methods, including interview protocols, can be found in Brewer and Smith (2007).

## 2. DESCRIBING EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE

Mapping the many organizations and individuals that constitute the educational governance structure is the starting point to determine what the structure is designed to do—in other words, what are the goals of the education system? Governance can be described using three intersecting dimensions. The first dimension, the “what,” is the set of *functions* that require organization. The key question is, what are the functions to be accomplished? For example, how will schools and school districts be organized? How will resources be generated and allocated? The second important dimension is the *institution*, the “who” that fulfills each of the functions. This includes various organizations and stakeholders at the state, district, county, and local school levels. The third dimension, the “how,” specifies the way the functions get carried out by each level, that is, by what *mechanism*? This can include regulations and incentives. This schema is shown in figure 1.

This framework is useful as a simple descriptive tool; it is static rather than dynamic. The framework does not give us guidance on *how* to answer these questions—for example, what the goals *should* be or, given the goal, what the “best” institution is for carrying out that goal. We are skeptical that such questions can be answered without reference to a normative set of value judgments. Instead, we sought to map California's educational governance structure to this framework as a starting point for evaluating the system's effectiveness.

The state's system has developed in an ad hoc manner over the past 150 years, resulting in a hierarchy from the state level down to schools, with decision making at the state or district level being transmitted to the level below. The essential “who” building blocks of the California educational governance system are shown in figure 2.

At the state level, there are a multitude of bodies: the governor and secretary of education, the legislature, the State Board of Education (SBE), the Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI), the California Department of Education (CDE), the California Teacher Credentialing Commission (CTC), and various other agencies and commissions. Responsibility for delivering most educational services is designated to school districts that are governed (typically) by elected school boards and managed by a superintendent and associated central

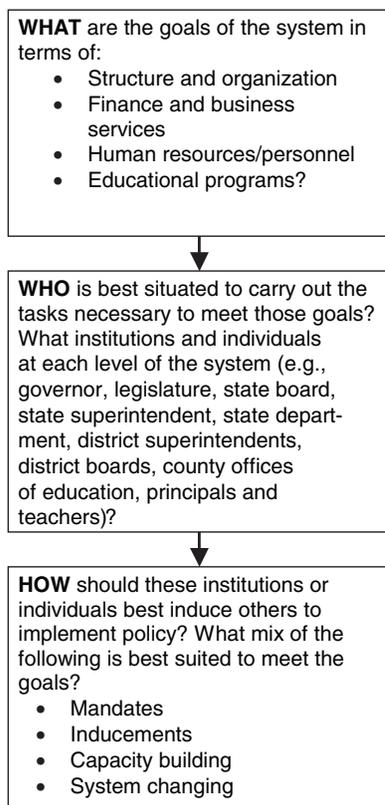


Figure 1. Three-Dimensional Schema of Educational Governance

office staff. In addition, a range of services and oversight are conducted by the County Offices of Education with elected or appointed school boards and superintendents. A number of other players are part of the governance structure, too, including employee unions, state associations representing different constituencies, philanthropy, various business interests, parents, students, and others.

One way to view this structure is as the product of a continuous struggle over which institution should lead educational decision making. Although the state “holds the legal cards” in the sense that it has constitutional authority to organize the system as it wishes, the initial organic growth of local school systems, and suspicion of central authority, meant that a significant degree of autonomy was ceded to school districts. Over time, as the state’s population has grown and become more mobile, the role of the federal government has increased, and as economic and technological forces have increased the imperatives for common standards, the state has gradually become the dominant force. In particular, since the state is now responsible (due to court decisions

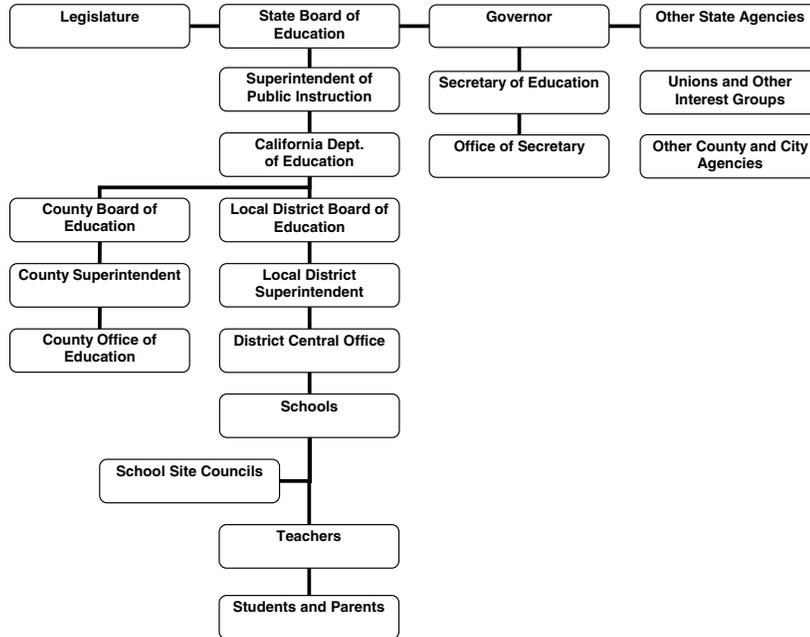


Figure 2. Major Institutions in California's Educational Governance System

and ballot propositions) for most revenue generation, it seeks to control how those resources are spent (Burr et al. 2000, p. 81).

We examined how decisions were made in California in several key areas: structure and organization, finance and business services, personnel, and educational programs. We reached two conclusions from this exercise. First, there are considerable differences in the distribution of authority by function and by level. Some, such as resource generation, are dominated by a single level, while in others there is shared control. Our analysis suggests that the state has the most, or at least equal, authority in every function.

Second, the distribution of authority has changed markedly over time. Since 1965 there has been a growing role of the state and erosion of authority at the district level. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and state accountability legislation hold districts responsible for continual improvements in student achievement and have resulted in the growing use of district-wide curriculum programs. The state has turned increasingly to categorical funding streams that give districts and schools relatively little flexibility. District-wide collective bargaining contracts typically give little flexibility over hiring and staff allocations at the school site level, other than through savvy manipulation of contracts and other rules. Counties have seen incremental growth; their ability to grant charters and their oversight of districts' fiscal soundness gives them some continuing important functions in the system.

**Table 1.** Commonly Used Governance Instruments

<b>Level</b>	<b>Type of Instrument</b>
<b>Federal</b>	Federal laws
	Federal court orders
	Department of Education reporting regulations
	Department of Education funding regulations
	Other department (e.g., labor, environment) regulations
<b>State</b>	State constitution
	Ballot propositions
	Laws
	State board policies
	State department reporting regulations
	Financial regulations/programs/bonds
	State court orders
	Other state departments/commission regulations
<b>Local</b>	School board policies
	Collectively bargained labor agreements
	District office policies/procedures
	Ballot measures including bonds
<b>Other (e.g., unions, foundations)</b>	Collectively bargained labor agreements
	Grant money for reform programs/strategies

The third dimension of educational governance, the “how,” reflects the idea that policy makers can govern in different ways. For example, the state can require that certain actions are taken through mandates and regulation. However, there are other instruments that are also widely used (see McDonnell and Elmore 1987). In particular, the state may induce institutions and individuals to act in particular ways through a system of incentives. Some of the commonly used instruments are listed in table 1.

Many of the regulatory provisions from different sources are combined into the California Education Code, made up of voter-approved ballot propositions as well as state statutes. Our analysis of the Education Code suggests that much of it is superfluous, the result of narrow interests that over time accumulate, which adds up to a significant burden on schools and districts. Because of the need to check adherence to the code, it generates over time a “compliance mindset.”

Districts, in turn, have their own set of policies and procedures that their schools must follow. Districts do have some flexibility in the allocation of resources, in that general fund revenues are by far the bulk of the resources

districts receive. Most of these funds pay district labor costs, the largest category of which is for teaching staff. Because the state has established a legal framework that requires collective bargaining, the level of salaries and accompanying benefits, workload, and other staffing procedures are established through a process of negotiation between school boards and employee unions. These lengthy and complex labor contracts tie up 70 percent or more of all dollars available to districts. Over time, as the scope of these bargained agreements has expanded, they have encroached more and more on a range of organizational decisions that significantly affect the ability of district and school management to allocate resources.

### 3. EVALUATING EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE

How can a particular educational governance structure be evaluated? In a policy climate that emphasizes student achievement on standardized assessments, a tempting way to judge governance would be to examine such outcome measures. For example, a look at California's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results, either over time or in comparison with other states, suggests that the state is performing poorly. However, it is not feasible to link achievement in a compelling way to a particular set of governance arrangements. A second-best solution is to determine if there are commonly agreed-upon features of good governance. Using previous research literature and our interviews with academic experts and stakeholders in California, we distinguished five characteristics associated with effective educational governance (see table 2). For each, we discuss our findings for California.

#### **Stability**

A stable system is one in which policy is made and implemented in a way that is known as far in advance as possible, enabling a planned approach to decisions and long-term investments in capacity. Stability can be detected by looking at revenue fluctuations, continuity, and changes in policy and in the tenure of leaders in all parts of the system. On this criterion, California does not rate highly. First, because a large fraction of total school spending derives from general fund revenues, it is subject to cyclical economic trends. Even though Proposition 98 (which guarantees public education in California a minimum of 34 percent of the state's revenue) was designed to increase stability, this has not been the case. The combination of *Serrano v. Priest* (1971) and Propositions 13 and 98 means that California has more equitable school spending, but also overall lower levels and greater fluctuation from year to year. The uncertainty in revenues, lateness of the state budget, and complex administration of the finance system combine to constrain local districts. A

**Table 2.** Five Characteristics of Good Governance

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Definition and Rationale</b>
<b>Stability</b>	A stable governance structure is one in which policy is made and implemented in a way that is known as far in advance as possible. Revenue is known in advance for planning. Policies are given an opportunity to work before changes are made. There are few major changes of direction or new initiatives introduced suddenly. Leaders have tenures that allow for knowledge development and on-the-job learning. Stability enables actors in the system to act in a rational and planned way, helping the development of expertise and long-term investments in capacity.
<b>Accountability</b>	A governance structure with strong accountability is one in which there are clear lines of authority between the various parts of the system, with limited duplication of functions, so that it is possible to identify the source of decisions. There are consequences for good/bad behavior and outcomes. Actors understand their roles. Accountability gives the right incentives for actors within the system to accomplish their goals. There is alignment between decisions to raise revenue and decisions to spend revenue.
<b>Innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness</b>	An innovative, flexible, and responsive governance structure is one that is adaptable to changing context and able to respond appropriately to new short- and long-term external demands upon it. New approaches are encouraged; many ideas are generated and spread throughout the system. Innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness are essential for a system to adapt to changing needs and ensure that cutting-edge knowledge is used.
<b>Transparency and openness</b>	A transparent and open system is one in which it is clear to the public and all stakeholders how decisions are made and who makes them; participation is encouraged at every level. Transparency allows for the exchange of information between the different levels of the governance system. An open and transparent system is less likely to be subject to “capture” by special interests, less likely to have corruption and bribery, and most likely to encourage public engagement and support of schools. There is an open flow of information, monitoring and evaluation of data, and mechanisms to communicate performance to citizens.
<b>Simplicity and efficiency</b>	A simple and efficient governance structure is one that ensures decisions are made in a timely manner and with minimal overlap or confusion among entities. Decision making is located where knowledge is greatest. Policy is coherent and decisions across multiple domains and levels are coordinated so that there is minimal duplication and waste. The decision making and implementation structure is not burdensome on stakeholders in the system. Costs are minimized.

large amount of time and effort is expended trying to make sure funds are used within a budget year. Since school boards no longer have the ability to raise revenue through local taxes, their ability to “smooth” funding over time is greatly reduced; several superintendents we interviewed considered this a major challenge to improving schools. Revenue fluctuations at the district level have been compounded by the state’s proclivity for adding and taking away categorical program funding that can be used only for a specific purpose, often regardless of whether the district itself needs those funds or the specific materials or services being purchased.

Second, policy fluctuations are frequent, particularly in student assessment and curriculum. For example, California's student assessment program included the California Assessment Program (CAP) tests from 1972–92, followed by the California Learning Assessment System (CLAS) from 1993–94, a period in which there were no state tests (1995–97), and the current Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. Curriculum issues have been as controversial over the same period. Carlos and Kirst (1997) document in detail swings in curriculum policy, tracing shifts in policy to the power struggles between the SBE, the CDE, the governor, and the legislature. The most obvious change was from a language arts framework that emphasized a “whole language” approach to one that stressed “phonetically based” instruction. Our interviews found that curriculum instability has created a high level of frustration among stakeholders at all levels in the California system. As one superintendent stated, “I think the current governance system allows for a lot of political influences to direct which direction we go, and allows us to continue to change programs right in the middle before we see the results of the program we just previously started.”

Another factor impeding stability is the volume and prescriptivism of legislation, which has increased in the past two decades. Revenue fluctuations that have occurred because of economic conditions have helped drive some of the policy shifts, but they are also the result of a state-level infrastructure that does not support long-term policy development and planning. Term limits and staffing reductions at the CDE, the Legislative Analyst's Office, and the Senate Office of Research, plus the demise of the Assembly Office of Research, minimize the likelihood of expertise and continuity in drafting legislation and increase reliance on special interests and lobbyists in proposing and drafting legislation. The presence of multiple bodies serving different masters fragments the policy process and results in tussles for control among the bodies. The proposition process further increases the possibility of shifts. The lack of a good student-level data system or a “culture” of using data to evaluate program effects reinforces a short-term perspective and swings in policy.

Finally, instability is reflected in part in turnover of officials at all levels of the system. Legislative term limits force changes in state assembly and senate members. The SBE has seen an increase in turnover in recent years, with 85 percent of members serving one term or less. In addition, there is significant concern about district-level personnel stability; over half of local school board members have tenures of fewer than six years. Changes in school board composition may affect continuity of district policies, as well as relationships among board members and the superintendent and his or her staff. New board members are less likely to have a working knowledge of state finance

or curriculum and testing requirements and are also more likely to have their own “hot-button” issues on which they seek to make a difference early in their tenures on the board. Admittedly there is little hard data on the effects of turnover across the state’s governance structure, but the perception is that this adds to the revenue and policy instability.

### **Accountability**

“Accountability” in public K–12 education has come to mean federal and state requirements that school districts meet student academic achievement targets. For governance purposes, however, the meaning is broader. A governance structure with strong accountability is one in which there are clear lines of authority between the various parts of the system, with limited duplication of functions, so that it is possible to identify the source of decisions and there are consequences for good or bad behavior and outcomes. Effectiveness of educational accountability is hard to measure with objective indicators, but this characteristic is the one in which our interviewees suggested California is most lacking.

Few, if any, felt that the lines of authority were apparent. As one district superintendent pointedly said, “California’s governance system is not only the worst that I’ve ever seen, it is absolutely the worst I can imagine. What you have is a series of entities which all have a piece of the governance pie, and you really have no one that has ultimate responsibility to be held accountable.” Another district superintendent stated that “it’s very difficult to be able to put your finger on who is in charge.” A county superintendent echoed these sentiments by saying, “I think there’s a lot of disagreement across the state in what the lines of authority are.” Our impression, gleaned from numerous interviews, was that many within the system do not have a clear idea of who is responsible for what, and a surprising number seemed unable to elucidate clearly their own roles.

Fragmentation contributes to a perceived lack of accountability. California is a large and diverse state, and educational governance institutions are numerous. There are over a thousand districts, fifty-eight county offices, and multiple state-level bodies. As the functions of schools have become more complex, as revenue generation and allocation have shifted to the state level, and as education policy has become more political in its profile in both gubernatorial and legislative elections, who is responsible for what has become less clear. As the state’s role has increased, stakeholders view decisions as being made further away from those most affected (i.e., students in classrooms). A 2002 study argued that “efforts to improve accountability in public education are complicated by overlapping responsibilities among local, regional, and state entities and by a lack of alignment between the responsibilities assigned to

various entities and the authority they have been provided to carry out those responsibilities” (JCDMPE 2002, p. 77). Our interviewees agreed: “There’s no question that the multiplicity of actors . . . is an enormous problem in the California case. There are just too many . . . and that makes it very hard to know what’s going on and for what purpose.” Another said, “It’s a remarkably crazy quilt of interacting authorities that are not aligned, for purposes of accountability or action.”

Several states have reexamined their institutional configurations in recent years. Often in conjunction with standards-based accountability, they have eliminated elected state commissioners in favor of clearer lines of authority to the governor, created integrated K–20 systems, and reduced the role of the State Department. In the California case, there was no consensus on who ultimately should be responsible for education. It is clearly much easier for stakeholders to agree that the current system lacks clear accountability than it is to devise a different set of institutional arrangements that all agree would be superior.

#### **Innovation, Flexibility, and Responsiveness**

Innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness are essential for an education system to adapt to changing needs. An innovative, flexible, and responsive governance structure is one that is adaptable to changing context and able to respond appropriately to new short- and long-term external demands upon it; new approaches are encouraged, and ideas are generated and spread throughout the system. Interestingly, our stakeholder interviews did not reveal much about this aspect of governance. Whether this is indicative of a lack of creativity, a sense of helplessness about any individual’s ability to effect change, or an acceptance of the status quo is hard to discern. Interviewees commented on the high degree of system bureaucratization and the compliance mentality exhibited by the state. The most telling quote may have been from one county superintendent, who said that “the Education Code kind of restricts the ability to be creative unless you become a charter school, and you shouldn’t have to seek a waiver to be innovative.” The CDE along with County Offices of Education has a role in supporting innovation and spreading best practice, but with tight resources and staffing cutbacks, these agencies’ ability to provide much support is certainly limited (Timar 2002).

An examination of California legislation seems to suggest that the state legislature prefers “one size fits all” solutions, rather than presenting lower-level units with an array of options. This is inherent in the many categorical funding programs that the state uses, as well as in broader testing and curriculum policies. Class size reduction (CSR) is a good example of such an approach. The CSR program was put into place by the legislature after relatively little debate

at the suggestion of Governor Pete Wilson, who had a temporary windfall of tax revenue that had to be spent on education. Given that the governor did not want the collective bargaining process to “capture” these additional funds, the CSR program was created to reduce class size to twenty students per teacher in grades K–3. The program was nominally voluntary, but it was so popular with teachers and parents, and the funding was substantial enough, that it induced almost all of California’s school districts to adopt it. Unfortunately, the uniform policy of 20:1 statewide resulted in a mammoth implementation challenge in which districts were forced to dramatically ramp up teacher hiring and to find sufficient space for the new classes that were created (see, for example, Bohrnstedt and Stecher 2002).

It is worth asking what it was about California’s educational governance system that produced this outcome—a last-minute single educational improvement strategy that was poorly designed and implemented and that costs the state around \$2 billion annually. Part of the answer lies in the particular configuration of individuals and the political context. But several features of the system at least helped. For example, the centralization of school finance at the state level and common use of categorical funding made the strategy possible. In a state where local districts controlled more funding, it would be harder to introduce such a massive new program. In addition, the legal and political framework for strong collective bargaining clearly contributed to policy makers’ fears that extra no-strings-attached resources for schools would be bargained away by local school boards in salary negotiations. The strong popularity of class size reductions made them palatable politically to multiple legislators, and the dearth of legislative analytic support that could have resulted in better written legislation, as well as a lack of planning infrastructure that could have meant better implementation, contributed to the problems.

Innovation is likely to be more forthcoming when lower-level units have autonomy to try new strategies. One mechanism California has used to promote innovation from the state policy level has been in the area of charter schools. California’s charter school law was passed in 1992, and there were 575 of these state-financed but independently operated schools throughout the state during the 2005–6 school year; one in twenty schools in California is now a charter school, and one in fifty students attend a charter school. California’s charter law is currently ranked as an “A” by the Center for Education Reform (2006), indicating that it is relatively permissive. One potential weakness, however, is that California has limited authorizers compared with some states with university and other “nontraditional” authorizers. Although the SBE and counties may grant charters, most are granted by school districts.

### **Transparency**

An educational governance system that is transparent and open is one in which it is clear to the public and all stakeholders how decisions are made and who makes them. Openness encourages participation at every level and means that institutions are less subject to capture by special interests, corruption, and bribery. The education system operates within a larger structure of laws that govern everything from who can run for office to conflicts of interest for government officials to requirements for public meetings. Procurement processes are subject to rules designed to ensure fairness. In addition, institutions are arrayed in a comprehensive checks and balances structure with significant oversight, auditing, and compliance checks in terms of finance and operations.

Relative to many developing countries, it would be reasonable to conclude that California has a reasonably successful system in terms of transparency. There are no systematic data on incidents of corruption, but none of the stakeholders we spoke with suggested any concerns. Newspaper reports and the odd scholarly work have uncovered incidents of outright fraud and malfeasance, but there is no way of knowing how widespread this is (Segal 2004). Occasionally our interviewees noted cases of nepotism at the local level in hiring staff and contractors, but there is no way of knowing whether this is widespread either (Strauss et al. 2000).

Our stakeholder interviews revealed one major area of concern in terms of openness: the role of “special interests.” According to a county superintendent, “The governance at the state level is largely a product of special interest groups.” No interviewee named any specific special interest groups of particular concern, with the exception of employee unions. Many expressed the view that the unions, and particularly the teachers’ unions, hold “too much” power. A district superintendent stated bluntly that “the union is very powerful in California.” A state administrator echoed this sentiment: “I have consistently been concerned that we have union special interests.” One perception was of a significant influence at the state level in terms of access to legislators and involvement in state-level election campaign funding and organization. A second was the role of the union at the local level in the bargaining process over contract wages and working conditions. More significant was the view, expressed by several superintendents, that unions were able to “buy school board seats” through their involvement in elections. However, it is hard to know how widespread this phenomenon is or its impact, since there is little systematic information about the involvement of special interests in local school board elections.

Participation in the educational governance system can be measured in a number of ways. For example, overall voter turnout in statewide elections for

SPI and in local school board races is one. Another is the degree to which school board races are competitive, that is, they attract candidates to run for positions. Overall public engagement can also be gauged through polling data and parental involvement in school activities (e.g., volunteering, attending school functions, and fundraising). Systematic data on these phenomena are hard to come by, although there is little evidence to suggest that California does any worse or better on this score than other states or that it has changed over time. The only data point from our interviews was some suggestion that the public had “lost faith” in public schools, and in particular had shown little willingness to approve increased resources for schools, indicating a general dissatisfaction with the system.

### **Simplicity and Efficiency**

A simple and efficient educational governance system is one in which decisions are coherent, coordinated across domains and levels, and made in a timely manner. We have noted in the preceding discussion the widespread perceptions that California’s educational governance system is complex and fragmented and that policy is often incoherent. As one superintendent said, “The fact is that we have a Secretary of Education, a State Board of Education, a California Department of Education, we have county offices, we have districts, and we have schools, and the question that I ask my class that I teach on school governance is, ‘Who’s in charge?’ ”

Several district superintendents we interviewed felt that state policies make it very difficult for them to do their jobs well. One district superintendent quite candidly stated, “What is screwing this whole puppy up is the legislators who are creating these incredible bills that continue to make the workings of this pretty effective... structure almost impossible to work in.” Another would like to see a return to “the old days when the state stays the hell out of our business and lets us do our thing, but I don’t think that’s gonna be accepted anymore.” The bottom line for those at the district level is that they feel they should be given more control so that they may, in their opinion, more effectively deliver educational services to students.

Another theme to emerge from our interviews was the notion that complying with the state’s regulations was burdensome and wasteful. For example, one county superintendent pointed out the time demands imposed by poor planning from the state level. Another suggested that the mindset at the state level was more punitive than productive: “It’s not that I want them to be soft on us, it’s just that this looking down the nose and coming through and using this white glove test to test for dust in all corners is not... productive, it’s burdensome, and it doesn’t foster relationships, and it should be more focused on training, and less on ‘gotcha.’ ”

In principle, efficiency would mean that schools could not produce more with the same level of resources they currently have, or alternatively that they could not produce the same with fewer resources. This relatively straightforward concept is hard to translate to the school setting because of the multiple outputs schools are expected to produce, most of which are not formally

**Table 3.** Evaluation Summary of Educational Governance in California

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Findings for California</b>
<b>Stability</b>	<p>Funding (unstable):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funds fluctuate according to economic trends.</li> <li>• Lower levels of overall funding, increased reliance on categorical funding, lateness of budget, and inability of local fundraising lead to unpredictable financial planning.</li> </ul> <p>Policy (unstable):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy fluctuations are frequent.</li> <li>• Frequent adjustments in the areas of student assessment and curriculum lead to premature changes in requirements and implementation.</li> </ul> <p>State-level decision making (unstable):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduction of staff in state-level agencies and shorter term limits reduce long-term knowledge and expertise.</li> <li>• Multiple agencies serving different bosses hinder cohesive decision making.</li> <li>• Lack of student data system obstructs effective decision making.</li> </ul> <p>Leadership (unstable):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turnover of state officials, school boards, and superintendents is high.</li> <li>• High turnover leads to lack of continuity and stability of programs.</li> </ul>
<b>Accountability</b>	<p>Lines of authority (unclear):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Few interviewees knew who was in charge of different aspects of the system and who was responsible for what tasks.</li> </ul> <p>Fragmentation (high):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Numerous local, regional, and state-level entities with overlapping responsibilities.</li> <li>• Unclear understanding of the responsibilities of each stakeholder in the system.</li> </ul>
<b>Innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness</b>	<p>Innovation (weak):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense from stakeholders that the system is highly bureaucratic and concerned with compliance with regulations over innovation.</li> <li>• State decision makers have preferred one-size-fits-all solutions, such as class size reduction.</li> <li>• Local entities do not have autonomy to make decisions or attempt innovative strategies.</li> <li>• Charter schools are one example of a relatively successful attempt at local autonomy and innovation.</li> </ul>

Table 3. Continued

Characteristic	Findings for California
<b>Transparency and openness</b>	<p>Transparency (relatively successful):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little concern among interviewees; no widespread evidence of unethical actions or corruption.</li> <li>• No evidence that California is any worse than other states in public participation and voter turnout.</li> </ul> <p>Special interests (high concern):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviewees showed great concern over the role of special interests in state-level decisions.</li> <li>• Particular concern was directed toward employee unions and their influence on system decisions.</li> </ul>
<b>Simplicity and efficiency</b>	<p>Simplicity (weak):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instability, confusing lines of authority, and unclear responsibilities lead to an overly complex system.</li> </ul> <p>Efficiency (weak):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rigid, prescriptive state legislation leads to wasted effort to comply with multitude of mandates.</li> <li>• Need for more local authority and flexibility in resource allocation.</li> </ul>

measured. Outcomes are cumulative as well, potentially reflecting the influence of many resources (including the labor, materials, and facilities used for schooling as well as student, family, and community characteristics) over a long period of time. Although determining efficiency is difficult, it is more likely when there is flexibility over resource reallocation decisions. In other words, the easier it is to move funding from one purpose to another and the easier it is to hire, fire, and assign staff, the more likely it is that optimal decisions will be made. Another reasonable assertion is that since the outcomes of concern are produced in classrooms and schools, the greater the level of resources that are used and are manipulatable in these settings the better.

In this regard, California does not stack up well. As we have seen, the considerable volume of state-level prescription of use of funds and programmatic design significantly reduces the flexibility of lower-level decision makers to allocate resources in a manner best suited to their local needs. Districts, in turn, further inhibit the flexibility of resource use at the school level because district-wide collective bargaining ties up the vast majority of resources, both because salaries are a large fraction of the total budget and because contracts typically contain restrictions on the use of labor. This environment adds up to one of considerable rigidity rather than flexibility.

We summarize how California rates on the five characteristics of effective governance in table 3.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have provided a framework for describing and evaluating educational governance and have illustrated its application to the California case. This is a challenging task given how complex and expansive the system is, consisting of many interrelated institutions and many thousands of individuals who work together in different formal and informal ways. We have drawn on previous analyses of California's governance structures, new analyses of primary source documentation, and more than forty stakeholder interviews. Even so, our description of the educational governance system is far from complete. For example, we do not discuss the perceptions of school-level administrators or teachers, nor have we analyzed the federal or court roles in any detail.

Our starting point was that governance *can* matter. How the state decides to organize its educational decision making and delivery structures can have a significant impact on the quality of students' experiences in classrooms. The research literature and our interviewees generally support this notion. However, the same sources also confirm how difficult it is to derive meaningful guidance as to what an effective governance structure might be. We suggest that one approach for helping policy makers understand educational governance is to first decide what it is you are trying to do. Given a set of broad goals, what are the functions that need to be accomplished? Second, consider the best form of the institutions that can accomplish those tasks. Should they be public or private, centralized or decentralized, hierarchically organized, tightly linked, or some other configuration? And third, consider how those institutions should carry out their work. Should they use rules and regulations, market-driven incentives, or some other tools to ensure the desired outcomes?

Applying this simple approach to California is revealing. For example, in describing that state's educational governance system as it operates today, it is very hard to present the description in terms of functions; it is much easier to talk about the institutions. Most discussions of governance focus on a particular entity, as if these institutions were themselves the ends to be accomplished. Similarly, the balance of types of instruments used to operate traditional K–12 public education systems—particularly in California—is primarily one of regulation with reporting and checking to ensure compliance. Although the rhetoric of accountability is commonplace, with outcome standards defined, the state continues to describe the configuration of inputs schools are expected to use. Even if the state itself does not tie the hands of the lowest-level delivery units, districts' collectively bargained contracts impose a layer of rigidity that impedes local-level flexibility. Further, the incoherence of the governance structure as a whole, developed over time in piecemeal fashion, results in very mixed incentives for the actors in the system.

One of the goals of our study was to present a picture of the kinds of traits that a good system might have. The five characteristics we focused on were stability, accountability, innovation, transparency, and efficiency. We have begun in this article to develop these five criteria and operationalize their measurement. We hope other researchers will use and further refine this schema in other settings. The ultimate goal should be a well-understood set of indicators for each of the key evaluative dimensions of governance. If this were forthcoming, policy decisions could be guided by how they stack up on the basis of their effect on these measures.

Applying the framework to California suggests a picture of weak accountability, efficiency, and stability and only moderate transparency and innovation. It certainly seems likely that the state can do better. Although it is clear that there is no proven “magic formula” that a state can adopt that will guarantee good governance, our interviews, examination of previous reports, and the actions of other states provide some indication of governance changes that are needed. First, stakeholders almost universally agreed that there was a need to simplify and clarify the role of the state and specific institutions at the state level, particularly in light of accountability. The state could also do more in terms of capacity building throughout the system. Second, there was a strong desire to reinforce local control and give districts greater authority over more decisions than they currently have. California has overlaid outcome-based accountability on an education system built on input-based regulatory compliance but has not given lower-level institutions the ability to fully manipulate resources to attain the outcomes expected of them. This clearly needs some attention. In fact, California has a good opportunity to consider ways to “create a new tight-loose structure: tight on outcomes but loose on methods that autonomous schools choose to use” (Koehler et al. 2003, p. 24). We echo the view of the National Association of State Boards of Education (1996), which suggests creating “an organizing principle of granting as much autonomy as possible to the lowest possible level, as long as essential governance responsibilities are maintained through reliable methods of accountability” (p. iii). We interpret this to mean that an effective governance structure supports the appropriate roles for each level and provides flexibility and authority commensurate with those roles. This may require more flexible funding streams that reach schools directly and creative changes to how collective bargaining affects the way those dollars can be used.

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