TK–12 Education Governance in California:

Past, Present, and Future

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This report is dedicated to the memory of former PACE Faculty Director Christopher Edley, Jr., whose unwavering commitment to equity continues to inspire PACE's work.

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Contents

Executive Summary

Governance is the foundation for successful policy development and implementation as well as effective district- and school-level practices. Numerous efforts throughout California's history have sought to address systemic incoherence and fragmentation in governance. While these reforms have brought progress in areas such as increasing attention to equity and local control, they have also exposed persistent structural issues, including overlapping roles and unclear lines of accountability. This report situates ongoing education challenges within a broader historical context, drawing attention to the enduring need for governance reform in the state.

California's current governance system is complex, comprising multiple overlapping entities at state, regional, and local levels (see Figure 2). This web of relationships and decision-making pathways can enable collaboration and open diverse opportunities for support but can also introduce inefficiencies and conflicting priorities. To analyze the effectiveness of the state's education governance system, this report uses a framework that deconstructs governance into six critical dimensions: 1. Strategic thinking; 2. Accountability; 3. Capacity; 4. Knowledge governance; 5. Stakeholder involvement; and 6. Whole-of-system perspective. Findings from interviews with education policy experts indicate that despite strengths in California's commitment to equity and continuous improvement, fragmentation of authority remains a pervasive issue, contributing to inadequate capacity and ineffective policy implementation. Weak accountability systems and limited use of data impede efforts to monitor outcomes and evaluate the success of reforms. Interviewees also highlighted that while stakeholder engagement occurs consistently under the Local Control Funding Formula, it often lacks depth and impact in practice.

The report concludes with recommendations for strengthening California's education governance that draw on discussion and insights from the expert convening facilitated by Policy Analysis for California Education. Central to these recommendations is the need to clarify the roles and responsibilities of state education agencies to address long-standing fragmentation and enhance coherence. We propose that these roles be structured around three core functions of governance: 1. Policy and funding, led by the governor; 2. Implementation and capacity development, overseen by the California Department of Education under a director appointed by the State Board of Education; and 3. Evaluation and system accountability, for which the state superintendent of public instruction would be responsible. A governance realignment of this nature would require legislative action but not a constitutional amendment. Such a shift would clarify lines of authority, reduce redundancy, and strengthen the overall effectiveness and coherence of California's education governance system.

Introduction

When a single school district in California persistently struggles, the challenges may be attributable to unique local issues, such as the municipality's socioeconomic factors, community-specific dynamics, or operational inefficiencies. However, when districts across the state face similar challenges—such as chronic absenteeism (Chang et al., 2025), staffing shortages (Mathews et al., 2024), learning disparities (Gallagher, 2025), fiscal uncertainty (Roza & Cicco, 2024), or difficulty implementing new state policies (Jones, 2024)—that signals a deeper, systemic problem. Modest improvements in student outcomes in recent years (California Department of Education, 2025) signal progress but are not enough to counter the persistent systemic issues facing districts statewide.

The statewide prevalence of such challenges across school districts calls for stepping back to reflect on the extent to which state-level structures, policies, and supports are effectively addressing these shared obstacles. Pervasive, widespread challenges are rarely local failures alone and may indicate state-level governance gaps that require coordinated, strategic solutions or may suggest broader systemic problems that could be more effectively addressed through region- or state-level solutions.

Broadly defined, *governance* refers to the process by which formal institutions and actors wield power and make decisions that influence the conditions under which people live in society (Manna & McGuinn, 2013, p. 9). Education governance encompasses the mechanisms through which decisions are made, responsibilities are distributed, and accountability is maintained within the public education system. Governance has a profound influence on every aspect of a student's educational experience, as Timar (2004) explains:

> Governance defines the kinds of educational opportunities children have; which kinds of resources are available to them; who teaches, what is taught, and what is tested; and the values the education system conveys to students, parents, teachers, administrators, and communities. (p. 2058)

Education governance is worth understanding and improving because "without good governance, good schools are the exception, not the rule" (Education Commission of the States, 1999, p. 9). Effective education governance can enable a cohesive system that empowers local leaders and educators with the guidance, capacity, and autonomy they need to ensure that California schools can deliver the high-quality opportunities and outcomes all students deserve.

This report examines the evolving landscape of education governance in California, with a focus on understanding current complexities and identifying both successes and systemic challenges. The primary aim is to shed light on the factors that influence governance effectiveness and their impact on educational outcomes. The specific objectives are to:

- Focus on the critical role of governance by illustrating the nested nature of challenges within the education system. This report highlights governance, policy, and practice as interconnected layers in the problem-solving ecosystem, underscoring how governance reforms can drive more effective policy implementation and support school-level practices.
- Examine the historical evolution of governance issues in California, paying particular attention to previous analyses of the state's education system. These efforts reveal that the need for governance reform is not new but has persisted through decades of debate, policy reform, and study.
- Present a map of California's current system of education governance, outlining the roles, responsibilities, and relationships among key entities at the state, regional, and local levels. This visualization highlights the interconnected yet fragmented nature of the governance structure, illustrating the distribution of authority across entities and their pathways of influence.
- Introduce a comprehensive framework that deconstructs the broad concept of education governance into distinct dimensions, providing a structure for focused discussion and meaningful analysis of education governance systems.
- Present findings from interviews conducted with a set of experts on education policy, focusing on their perspectives on strengths and challenges as framed by these dimensions.
- Analyze key structural barriers to effective governance based on recurring themes that emerged from the interviews.
- Present recommendations derived from a February 2025 expert convening at which participants from the fields of research, practice, and policy proposed bold ideas for the path forward.

A further aim is to lay the groundwork for a shared understanding of the complexities and strengths of California's education governance system, along with the challenges it faces. By providing historical context, analytical frameworks, and insights and ideas from experts, the report seeks to lay a foundation for informed future discussions. Subsequent conversations will be critical for envisioning a governance model that can address persistent barriers, adapt to evolving needs, and support equitable, effective education for all of California's students.

We recognize the importance of exploring deeper alignment across early childhood, transitional kindergarten (TK) through Grade 12, and higher education systems to support greater coherence and continuity. While this report focuses specifically on governance within the TK–12 system, we acknowledge the need for a more integrated P–20 governance model that connects systems across the full educational trajectory. Future work should more fully examine connections from preschool through postsecondary education.

At the time this project was launched, the federal role in education—while often debated—was broadly accepted as a permanent feature of the U.S. education system. Since then, the Trump administration has attempted to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education through executive order, shifting responsibilities to other agencies and proposing cuts to its authority and budget, though Congress has not authorized any fundamental restructuring or elimination (Binkley & Ma, 2025). In this moment of uncertainty, the purpose of this report has become more urgent: to strengthen California's capacity to govern its TK–12 education system effectively, equitably, and coherently, ensuring that students' rights to quality education are protected across the state regardless of shifts at the federal level. This is a pivotal moment for California to step into a national leadership role and demonstrate how a large, diverse state can build a governance system that not only addresses widespread challenges but also advances equity and excellence for all students.

Distinguishing Problems of Governance From Problems of Practice and Policy

The first step in addressing current issues in schools is to understand the different levels of problems facing California's education system in order to target the most appropriate and effective solutions. The nested nature of challenges in education can be understood through a three-level framework—problems of governance, problems of policy, and problems of practice—each with their own distinct origins and solutions (Figure 1). For example, unclear decision-making roles among state leaders in Sacramento—a governance issue—can lead to delayed, confusing, or duplicative policy, which in turn affects the day-to-day instructional practices of teachers statewide. When practitioners attempt to address problems of practice that are rooted in policy or governance issues, their efforts are often frustratingly unproductive.

Figure 1. Nested Problems in Education: Governance, Policy, and Practice

Problems of Goverance

- Arise from structures and processes that determine how decisions are made
- Require changes in how systems are structured or managed
- Relate to system coherence and capacity

Problems of Policy

- Arise from the flawed design or absence of rules, regulations, and laws
- Require legislative or administrative action
- Have widespread impact across districts

Problems of Practice

- Arise from practical, day-to-day challenges
- Require adjustments by educators and local leaders
- Are specific and contextual

Problems of practice typically involve immediate, day-to-day classroom operations and necessitate practical, on-the-ground interventions (Bryk et al., 2015). These problems are specific, actionable issues that educators can directly address to improve student outcomes or well-being. One example of a problem of practice may be: "Students in Grades 4 and 5 have limited opportunities to apply their math skills in real-world settings, which leads to challenges in meeting the expectations of state standards and tests" (State Support Network, 2020). Although problems of practice are local, they often manifest how system factors enable or hinder effective practice.

Efforts to address problems of practice often unveil deeper problems of policy. Problems of policy relate to the broader rules, laws, or incentives that decision makers establish to regulate educational practices. Lasting solutions to problems of policy require action from policymakers at the local, state, or federal level. Problems of policy can manifest in two general ways: the absence of necessary policy in critical areas and the presence of ineffective, poorly designed, duplicative, or incoherent policy. When critical areas lack clear policies to guide implementation, significant gaps emerge within the education system, creating inconsistencies in resource allocation, capacity, accountability, and support. As an example, California's ambitious investment in Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) exemplifies how the absence of clear implementation policies dilutes the potential impact of major public investments intended to provide equitable, high-quality educational experiences for students. Although the state has committed to expanding UTK access to all 4-year-olds by 2025–26, variations in district readiness, staffing shortages, and unclear guidance on curriculum and teacher credentialing have created significant disparities. Without a coherent statewide strategy to address these challenges, some districts have struggled to hire qualified educators, secure adequate classroom space, and align UTK with existing early learning programs, ultimately affecting the equity and effectiveness of the initiative (Gallagher, 2023). Policy gaps such as these often result in unequal access to quality education, particularly for underserved and vulnerable populations.

At the same time, existing policies can be ineffective because they are outdated, overly burdensome, redundant, based on flawed assumptions, or not adequately responsive to the needs of schools and students. California's special education policy system, for example, was left largely untouched by the sweeping reforms of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in 2013. Special education funding is largely based on historical attendance rather than current student populations, which creates challenges in resource distribution, while compliance requirements and service-delivery structures add unnecessary complexity for educators and families (Doutre et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2020). Outdated policies can create obstacles rather than resolve them.

Addressing problems of policy requires both advocating for new, well-informed policies where gaps exist and critically evaluating, revising, or phasing out current policies to ensure that they serve their intended purposes and adapt to the evolving landscape of education.

Problems of governance pertain to issues in the structures and processes that determine how decisions are made, how roles are determined, and how accountability is maintained within the education system. The etymology of the word *governance*, per the *Oxford English Dictionary*, originates in the ancient Greek *kybernân*, meaning "to steer, guide, or direct," as in piloting a ship on its course towards a particular destination. The education governance system can be understood to include the entities that are part of the education decision-making and delivery system, the constituencies that interact with these entities, and the ways the system components act in relation to one another (Brewer & Smith, 2007). These entities, constituencies, and interactions constitute a governance system within which decisions are made about goals and roles, and processes for achieving those goals are determined.

Problems of governance give rise to problems of policy, which in turn lead to problems of practice. These three sets of problems, furthermore, sit within a larger political and contextual landscape shaped by forces such as shifting societal values, evolving political priorities, demographic changes, and economic conditions. These factors influence not only the resources and authority available to educators and policymakers but also the public's trust in the system.

Since its inception, California has faced the persistent challenge of designing an education governance system capable of effectively serving its rapidly growing and increasingly diverse population. Governance reforms have sought to address tensions between state-level oversight and local autonomy, inequities in resource distribution, and inefficiencies stemming from fragmented authority. For more than a century, legislative reports and expert analyses (described in more detail later in this report) have underscored the complexity and fragmentation of this governance system, which limits the coherence and effectiveness of education policy and practice. Repeated evaluations have consistently called for reform, echoing the need for streamlining and aligning California's education governance structure. LCFF, implemented in 2013, sought to mitigate some of these challenges by shifting significant authority from the state to the local level, empowering districts to make decisions tailored to their communities' needs. Research has shown that this policy shift has led to positive effects on academic achievement in math and reading (Johnson, 2023; Lafortune et al., 2023), and districts report using new strategies to encourage more stakeholder involvement (Hall et al., 2023). However, LCFF did not resolve long-standing fragmentation at the state level, where problems of governance—such as overlapping roles and unclear responsibilities—continue to create challenges that affect districts and schools. In fact, LCFF's attempt to localize governance may have resulted in an even more fragmented system.

The following section reviews key historical efforts aimed at improving governance, shedding light on the foundational challenges that have shaped California's current education landscape.

Early Efforts to Inform Improvements to California's Education Governance: 1849–1970

The right to education is guaranteed in the Constitution of the State of California under Article IX, Sections 1 and 5. Governance challenges in California's education system, however, also trace back to the state's founding document.[1] In 1849, California's first constitution established the office of the superintendent of public instruction (SPI), stipulating that the SPI would be *elected*:

> Sec. 1. The Legislature shall provide for the election, by the people, of a superintendent of public instruction, who shall hold his office for three years, and whose duties shall be prescribed by law, and who shall receive such compensation as the Legislature may direct.

Notably, this excerpt on education from California's constitution was copied verbatim from Iowa's state constitution, which had been passed 3 years prior; the only change made was substituting "Legislature" for Iowa's "General Assembly" (Assembly Legislative Reference Service, 1963, p. 4). California is one of only twelve states whose chief state school officer is elected by voters (Education Commission of the States, 2022). In fact, Iowa has since changed how it selects its chief state school officer, who is now appointed by the governor.

The California State Board of Education (SBE) was established in 1852 but played a relatively minor role until 1912, when California's constitution was amended to establish the modern SBE. A controversy over authority to select textbooks precipitated a constitutional amendment that granted the governor the authority to appoint seven members to the SBE, aligning their terms with the governor's. The SPI was designated as the SBE's secretary, tasked with enforcing the policies and regulations established by the SBE. With the governor now controlling the SBE, the legislature debated whether the board's members should be elected or appointed. At the time, the SPI argued that the system was intentionally designed to balance power, with the elected SPI and appointed SBE serving as checks on each other. However, a report of the California Legislature Special Committee on Education (1920), known as the "Jones Report," highlighted the inherent tension between the SBE—accountable to the governor and the legislature—and the SPI—independently elected and unaligned with these entities: Such an arrangement "contains elements that could easily produce discord and destroy its efficiency" (p. 30). The Jones Report cautioned that the "double-headed system" of competing authorities, characterized by overlapping roles and conflicting lines of accountability, was untenable and in need of reform: "The present California educational organization must be regarded as temporary and transitional, and dangerous for the future, and it should be superseded at the earliest opportunity by a more rational form of state educational organization" (p. 20).

[1] For a more detailed account of the history of California's education governance system, see *A Double-Headed System: A History of K–12 Governance in California and Options for Restructuring* by Murray J. Haberman (1999).

A conclusion of the 1920 report was that the elected office of state SPI should be abolished by constitutional amendment and that education governance should be unified under a commissioner of education, appointed by and responsible to the SBE. Despite multiple efforts, no proposal to eliminate the elected SPI position has succeeded. Instead, in 1921, the legislature established the California Department of Education (CDE) under the leadership of the SPI in an effort to centralize and professionalize education governance. The SPI, an elected official, became the head of the CDE, but the SBE retained policy-setting authority and the CDE became the administrative body responsible for implementing policies and managing day-to-day operations.

In 1926, the risk of a double-headed governance structure, described as "dangerous" in the Jones Report, was made evident when the newly elected, fiscally conservative Governor Friend William Richardson claimed that "extravagance in educational matters has run riot during the past few years" (Assembly Legislative Reference Service, 1963, p. 9). Clashes between the governor and SPI over fiscal priorities and administrative authority, including appointments to key positions, exemplified the inefficiencies and conflicts inherent in a system with competing centers of authority undermining cohesive education leadership. The first constitutional amendment seeking to abolish the elected SPI was placed on the ballot in 1928 and failed, with subsequent measures in 1934, 1958, and 1968 also rejected by California voters.

The importance of defining the roles and responsibilities of those tasked with governing TK–12 education in California has been repeatedly emphasized in subsequent reports commissioned by the legislature, including the Mills Report (J. N. Mills & Co., 1944), which found that "there is a general looseness of the management structure within the Department and a lack of well-defined lines of functions and authority, largely arising from confusion of statutory and constitutional assignments of authority" (p. 2). The Mills Report also found capacity in the state Department of Education to be inadequate: "The Department of Education is greatly understaffed. There is a serious lack of administrative and subordinate administrative personnel" (p. 2). In 1945, the Strayer Report (California State Reconstruction and Reemployment Commission, 1945) followed up by proposing centralizing education authority under a single appointed SPI to streamline decision-making and accountability. The Strayer Report further recommended empowering the SBE to set professional requirements for anyone seeking candidacy for county superintendent and moving away from popular election, instead having county boards of education appoint them. Twenty years later, the Little Reports and Reappraisal (1963–67) identified significant inefficiencies and inequities in California's education system, emphasizing the need for more effective state-level governance and coordination to address disparities in funding and quality across districts, ultimately recommending that the SPI be appointed by and fully responsible to the SBE (Arthur D. Little, Inc., 1967). In 1963, the California Attorney General observed the following:

> The ultimate governing and policy-making body for the department and its officers and employees … is the State Board of Education. Without ultimate control over the conduct of the officers and employees of the Department of Education, the State Board of Education cannot insure the implementation of its policies…This analysis of the respective powers and duties of the State Board of Education and the Superintendent of Public Instruction once again underscores the long-recognized problem existing in this area. It would be fruitless here to discourse upon the difficulty of requiring a policy-making board appointed by the Governor to have its policies carried out by and through an individual who is elected by the people. (California Attorney General, 1963, as quoted in *State Board of Education v. Honig*, 1993, p. 739)

Numerous documents and initiatives have brought to light California's long-fragmented education governance system, and many analysts and advocates have collectively called for reforms to create a more streamlined, accountable, and equitable structure for K–12 education leadership. Yet despite California's education governance challenges, the state arose during the mid-20th century as a national model for public education, achieving what many refer to as the "golden age" of public schooling from the 1950s to the 1970s (Birdsall, 1998). This period was marked by robust local funding in many districts, fueled by growing populations and expanding property ownership. However, beneath this growth lay systemic inequalities among districts and unequal access to quality education across different regions and demographics. Data limitations of the era further obscured these inequalities, which were precursors to opportunity and achievement gaps that would later shape efforts to reform education in California.

Shifts in California's Education Governance: From the 1970s to Today

Starting in the 1970s, the state began implementing significant changes in response to evolving social, economic, and political pressures. This section explores these developments, tracing key reforms from the *Serrano v. Priest* decision and Proposition 13 to more recent efforts, such as LCFF, that have redefined governance and accountability in California's TK–12 education landscape.

Prior to the 1970s, California's education governance was largely decentralized, with individual school districts wielding substantial autonomy and relying significantly on local property taxes for funding (Chambers & Levin, 2006). Districts with greater assessed property value could generate more revenue for schools, resulting in stark disparities in resources and opportunities across districts. California made limited efforts in recognition of these funding disparities through equalization aid, categorical programs, and a few early legislative proposals. However, these measures were insufficient to overcome the inequities created by heavy reliance on local property taxes, leaving significant gaps in resources between wealthy and poor districts (Timar, 2004).

Serrano v. Priest. The *Serrano v. Priest* ruling by the California Supreme Court in 1971 altered California's education governance by challenging the school funding system's heavy reliance on local property taxes. Plaintiffs argued that this system created significant disparities in educational resources between wealthy and poor districts, violating the Equal Protection Clauses of both the state and the U.S. constitutions. The court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, declaring the funding system unconstitutional because it discriminated against students in low-wealth districts by denying them equal educational opportunities.

The *Serrano v. Priest* ruling catalyzed significant changes in California's education finance system in the form of Assembly Bill (AB) 65, which was signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown in 1977. This legislation introduced the revenue-limit system, which capped the amount of funding districts could generate locally. Under this system, each district had a set per-pupil maximum for base funding—its revenue limit—which was based on historical funding levels adjusted for factors such as cost-of-living changes and student enrollment. If a district's local property tax revenues were insufficient to meet its revenue limit, the state provided additional funding through the General Fund to fill the gap. The revenue-limit amount applied only to base funding and excluded state and federal categorical support (i.e., money from state or federal government allocated to districts for special programs and specific subgroups that must be used only for the intended purpose.) Thus, tax revenues were redistributed more equitably across districts to comply with the ruling. AB 65 sought to equalize funding across districts; however, a very few high-wealth districts (known as "basic aid" districts) were allowed to exceed funding requirements without state aid, leaving their funding advantages intact (Hahnel et al., 2025).

Proposition 13. In 1978, only 1 year after the passage of AB 65, California voters approved Prop 13, a ballot initiative that capped property taxes at 1 percent of assessed property value, rolled back assessed values to their 1975–76 levels, limited annual increases to 2 percent on unsold properties, and required a two-thirds majority vote for future tax increases. An analysis of Prop 13 highlights the remarkable extent of its reach and implications:

> No state had ever approved such a far-reaching constitutional limitation of the power to tax. And Californians did not just approve it; they embraced it, rejecting dire warnings of doomsday from the state's political, business, and academic leaders. Voter turnout was the highest recorded for any off-year election in the history of California and the tax cut won in a landslide, with 65 percent of the vote. (Citrin & Martin, 2009)

Support for Prop 13 was fueled by general dissatisfaction with inflation and growth in property taxes associated with rising property values. The extent to which AB 65 directly influenced the passage of Prop 13 is unclear, but it likely contributed to a broader climate of dissatisfaction with state taxation and funding policies, especially among wealthier property

owners (Fischel, 2008). While Prop 13 provided immediate tax relief, the measure significantly reduced local governments' ability to raise revenue through property taxes, constraining the original intent and implementation of AB 65.

After Prop 13, local property tax revenues—which had historically been the primary source of school funding—could no longer keep up with rising per-student costs. Consequently, school districts' reliance on state funding increased. In addition, districts lost their ability to set property tax rates independently to raise funds for their general operations. This shift caused districts to increase their reliance on the state's General Fund, which is primarily derived from income, sales, and corporate taxes rather than property taxes. School budgets became more unpredictable because income tax revenues—the largest portion of state tax revenue—vary significantly with economic cycles. This volatility is largely driven by high-income earners, whose taxes are heavily influenced by capital gains that rise and fall with the economy. This made school funding more vulnerable to the volatility of California's economy (Hahnel, 2020). In addition, K–12 education had to compete for priority for the state's General Fund dollars, which also support other critical budget areas, including health care, public safety, transportation, and higher education. This left K–12 education funding vulnerable to cuts during economic downturns or shifts in political priorities.

Proposition 98. During the early 1980s, economic downturns and the fiscal limitations imposed by Prop 13 stunted growth in education funding in California. This coincided with an intensification of the Cold War, a period when national concerns about global competitiveness increased public scrutiny of education, as exemplified by the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), which warned of "a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (p. 6). Driven by concerns over geopolitical competition with the Soviet Union and growing economic competition with Japan, public attention increasingly focused on the academic performance of U.S. students compared to their peers in other nations.

In 1988, the California Teachers Association (CTA) led the campaign for Prop 98, which aimed to establish a minimum guaranteed level of funding for K–12 local educational agencies (LEAs) and community colleges in California. Passage of Prop 98 secured a guaranteed portion of the state's tax revenue for K–12 LEAs; however, Prop 98 funding was determined by complex formulas tied to economic growth, which still left the education budget sensitive to economic volatility.

Assembly Bill 1200. Until the 1990s, County Offices of Education (COEs) primarily provided administrative support and specialized instructional programs to districts, and had limited authority over school district finances. AB 1200 was passed in 1991 in response to several district financial crises, including the bankruptcy of Richmond Unified School District, which exposed weaknesses in fiscal oversight. The law strengthened financial accountability by

requiring ongoing district fiscal monitoring, multiyear projections, and intervention authority for COEs and the state. AB 1200 created a tiered oversight system in statute, reshaping governance for school finance. COEs gained new authority and funding to monitor and intervene in district finances. AB 1200 also established the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) to provide financial expertise, conduct assessments, and assist districts and COEs in preventing and addressing fiscal distress. When a school district becomes insolvent, AB 1200 requires its COE to intervene with technical assistance or corrective action and, if insolvency persists, to escalate the case to the SPI and CDE. The legislature may then authorize an emergency loan, which, as a condition, places district governance in the hands of a state-appointed administrator chosen by the SPI, with FCMAT providing support and monitoring until the district regains solvency. Since 1990, the California Legislature has issued ten emergency loans to school districts due to fiscal distress (California Department of Education, n.d.-a).

Williams v. State of California. During the early 2000s, K–12 education governance in California became more centralized in light of heightened awareness of resource disparities across districts. The class action *Williams v. State of California* case, filed in 2000 and settled in 2004, highlighted systemic inequities among California's public schools, where students in low-income communities lacked access to the fundamental conditions necessary for education, such as qualified teachers, safe and clean facilities, and adequate instructional materials. The settlement reshaped California's education governance by mandating greater state oversight to ensure minimum standards, requiring inspections, compliance monitoring by COEs, and increased transparency in schools.

No Child Left Behind. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 2001 and signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002, further centralized education governance during the 2000s. NCLB established requirements for teacher qualifications, resource equity, and school-improvement plans. Schools were also required to meet state-determined benchmarks. Those that failed to achieve adequate yearly progress were subject to a series of escalating consequences designed to hold schools and districts accountable for student performance and to prompt improvements, including redirection of funding, staff reassignment, and forced restructuring. This era of heightened test-based consequential accountability emphasized student performance on standardized tests as a key measure of the success of schools and teachers, which often placed less focus on other aspects of education, such as critical thinking, the arts, and social-emotional development (Berliner, 2011). While California had already been using categorical funding programs, NCLB reinforced the focus on program-specific resource allocation, limiting local flexibility.

Local Control Funding Formula. The rigid, restrictive funding and accountability system under NCLB led to growing dissatisfaction and a push towards a more equitable system that prioritized local decision-making. Foundational research, including the first *Getting Down to Facts* project, published in 2007 (Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis, n.d.), and the

influential Bersin, Kirst, and Liu paper (2008), helped catalyze the policy shift by demonstrating the inefficiencies of the old system and making a compelling case for local flexibility and greater equity. Within this context, LCFF was signed into law in 2013 under the leadership of Governor Jerry Brown, whose early years of training to become a Jesuit priest had a lasting influence on his worldview and political approach, shaping both his theories and the policies he championed.

Brown premised LCFF on the long-standing Catholic principle of "subsidiarity," which he described as "the idea that a central authority should only perform those tasks which cannot be performed at a more immediate or local level" (Brown, 2013). LCFF decentralized education governance in funding decisions. It replaced California's previously complex categorical funding system with a more straightforward formula that allocated resources more equitably, providing more funding to school districts serving high-need students: low-income students, students learning English, and youth in foster care. It also overhauled the state's system of governance to provide greater authority and flexibility to local districts to engage with their stakeholders in determining how best to meet the needs of their school communities. This empowerment of local decision makers was a hallmark of LCFF. In his 2016 State of the State address, Brown said:

> I am proud of how California has led the country in the way it is returning control to local school districts. For the last two decades, there has been a national movement to micromanage teachers from afar, through increasingly minute and prescriptive state and federal regulations. California successfully fought that movement and has now changed its overly intrusive, test-heavy state control to a true system of local accountability.

Under LCFF, a key tool for accountability is the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), in which districts describe how they will use LCFF funds to meet education goals and improve student outcomes, particularly for high-need students. In contrast to NCLB, which primarily used standardized test scores in reading and math as accountability measures, LCAPs must include goals and measurable outcomes aligned with eight state priority areas: student achievement, student engagement, school climate, parental involvement, basic services, implementation of academic standards, course access, and other student outcomes. Community members are meant to play a critical role in holding districts accountable through their participation in developing and reviewing LCAPs. Historically, COEs functioned primarily as fiscal arbiters, ensuring compliance with financial regulations and overseeing district budgets. With the implementation of LCFF, COEs were tasked with providing technical assistance and supporting the continuous improvement of teaching and learning across districts. This new role included not only reviewing and approving LCAPs but also identifying areas of need and offering targeted interventions to districts that required additional support.

LCFF is generally seen as an improvement in many respects over California's prior approach to governance, particularly in the flexibility it grants LEAs, its emphasis on equity, and its multifaceted measures of school success (Koppich & Humphrey, 2018; Marsh et al., 2018). While LCFF granted greater discretion over funding to local school districts, newly introduced governance and accountability measures—such as LCAPs, requirements for stakeholder engagement, and expanded roles for COEs—added new layers of governance, roles and responsibilities, and reporting requirements. The CDE assumed a new responsibility in publishing the California School Dashboard, which provides performance data for LEAs and schools across six state indicators and five local indicators, disaggregated by student groups. LCFF also established the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), a state-level education agency in addition to and separate from the CDE that is tasked with providing guidance and technical assistance to LEAs, supporting continuous improvement, and building capacity to help LEAs achieve their LCAP goals.

In addition, LCFF introduced the Statewide System of Support (SSoS), a collaborative approach to district capacity development that involves state and regional entities. The SSoS offers resources and tiered assistance to LEAs based on their performance on the Dashboard. The SSoS is organized into seven geographic regions, each served by a geographic lead agency: five geographic regions are led by an individual COE serving as a Geo Lead, while two regions are supported by pairs of COEs in the region serving jointly as a Geo Lead. In addition, lead agencies and special initiatives are specialized entities focused on content areas or key initiatives. The work of these lead agencies and initiatives is coordinated through collaboration among three state entities: the CDE, the CCEE, and the SBE.

These LCFF reforms have shifted emphasis from test-based accountability to continuous improvement across multiple measures in California schools (Furger et al., 2019) but have also made California's education governance more complex with multiple new requirements and agencies, creating challenges in ensuring coherence and alignment across the system.

Brown championed LCFF to decentralize decision-making, giving local districts greater autonomy to address their unique needs. Nevertheless, the constitutional authority to govern public education rests in the state government per the Tenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which states that powers not delegated to the federal government are reserved for the states. This authority is further codified in Article IX, Section 5 of the California Constitution, which states, "The Legislature shall provide for a system of common schools by which a free school shall be kept up and supported in each district at least six months in every year, after the first year in which a school has been established." Furthermore, the California Supreme Court has ruled that "the State itself bears the ultimate authority and responsibility to ensure that its district-based system of common schools provides basic equality of educational opportunity" (*Butt v. State of California*, 1992).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis it induced in California's education system called into question the appropriate role of the state (Hough et al., 2020). As the result of widespread declines in learning for low-income students and students of color, the *Cayla J. v. California* settlement (Public Counsel, 2023) acknowledged that the state was responsible for the academic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the settlement reaffirmed that education is a fundamental right in California and that the state is constitutionally responsible for ensuring that all students have equal access to a quality education. This includes providing proper oversight and reducing structural barriers, such as disparities in resource allocation, inadequate teacher preparation and training, and insufficient educational-intervention programs.

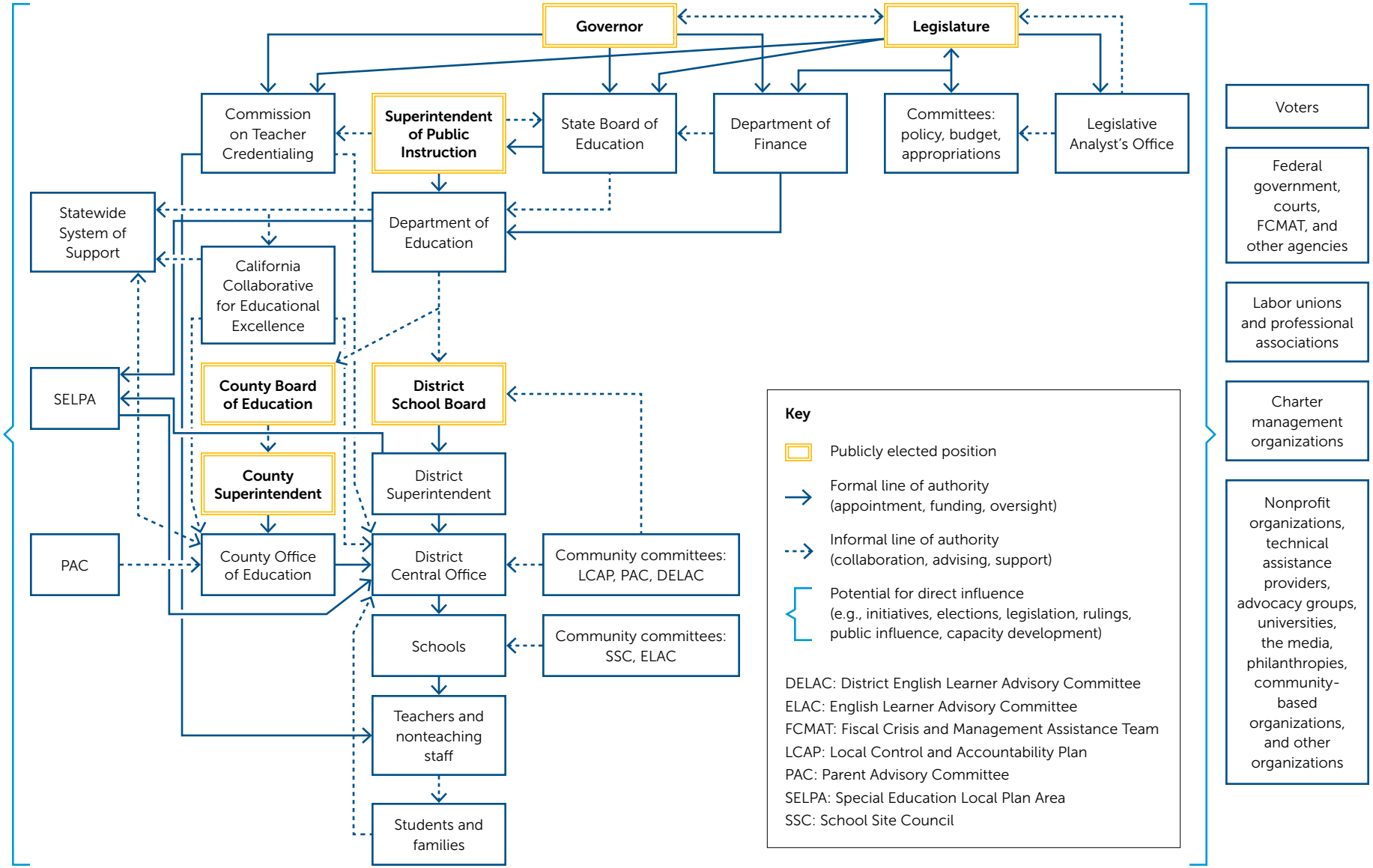
To meet its responsibility for public education, California has delegated authority for school operations to local districts yet is still constitutionally responsible for ensuring that the education system provides equal opportunities to all students. Given the state's constitutional responsibility, it is essential to examine the organization and functions of California's education governance system to understand how authority is structured and exercised.

Mapping California's Education Governance System

California's education governance system is a complex network of agencies and entities designed to serve the most diverse and expansive TK–12 population in the United States. This system incorporates state, regional, and local levels of authority, each tasked with specific responsibilities and oversight. At its core, the structure seeks to balance statewide education goals with local control and accountability. However, its complexity often results in overlapping responsibilities, fragmented authority, and challenges in ensuring streamlined decision-making.

In 2007, Dominic Brewer and Joanna Smith published *Evaluating the "Crazy Quilt": Educational Governance in California*, which examined the complex system that LCFF aimed to simplify 6 years later. LCFF restructured California's education governance by decentralizing authority from the state to LEAs; required districts to engage families and community stakeholders in decision-making; and replaced top-down compliance with a system focused on local planning, transparency, and continuous improvement. The resulting governance structure is marked by additional layers and new overlaps in roles, further complicating the governance "quilt" that Brewer and Smith originally described. The map presented in Figure 2 provides a high-level visual representation of the key entities in California's current education governance system, highlighting publicly elected positions and pathways of influence.

Figure 2. Map of California's TK–12 Education Governance System



Key Entities in California Education Governance

California's education governance system is a highly intricate structure with interconnected roles and responsibilities spanning state, regional, and local levels. Designed to balance statewide priorities with local control, this decentralized approach is intended to foster both continuous improvement and responsiveness. However, the system's complexity can result in overlapping responsibilities, diffuse accountability, and challenges in achieving coherence and alignment. The interactions between elected and appointed roles, along with collaborative and administrative entities, underscore the system's multifaceted nature as it strives to balance democratic representation with efficient implementation and capacity development across many levels and vast geography.

Rather than showing every entity within the education governance system, Figure 2 depicts a general representation of the relationships, roles, and structures that shape public education in the state. This diagram reflects the interplay among key elected officials, appointed bodies, and administrative agencies, revealing the decentralized and interconnected nature of California education governance. Authority and collaboration flow across multiple layers, from state government to local schools, highlighting how these interactions affect decision-making, accountability, and implementation of education policies. This complexity is a defining feature of California's education system, where efforts to address diverse needs and challenges have often led to governance structures that resemble "Rube Goldberg–like arrangements" with overlapping roles and jurisdictions (Moffitt et al., 2023). It was observed in 2004 that California's education governance made it "impossible to know just who the 'state' is. The diffusion of responsibility among various state actors and the lack of coordination among them make oversight both everyone's and no one's responsibility" (Timar, 2004, p. 2074). This characterization continues to resonate today.

State-level entities. The governor plays a key role in shaping education policy through advocacy, budgetary priorities, and appointments, with a prominent platform to set the agenda for education, advocate for specific policies, and influence public opinion. The governor also has significant control over California's budget and can use it as a policy tool to shape education priorities by tying funding to specific initiatives (e.g., community schools, teacher-workforce investments, UTK). Working closely with the Department of Finance (DOF), the governor sets fiscal priorities through the budget proposal, May Revision, and final negotiations, leveraging line-item veto power and conditional funding to direct policy implementation. Trailer bills—legislation passed alongside the state budget that make statutory changes needed to implement the budget—further expand executive influence via substantive policy changes that bypass the traditional legislative process. These bills allow the governor to advance major new education programs and funding conditions swiftly. As an example, LCFF was enacted in 2013 through the education budget trailer bill (AB 97, 2013) rather than as a standalone policy bill; because it

was part of the budget package, LCFF was approved under majority vote rather than requiring a two-thirds vote. The use of trailer bills strengthens power in the executive branch, allowing the governor to drive education reforms without relying solely on legislation; the CDE, COEs, and districts are expected to adjust their strategies to align with state policy and funding mandates.

The legislature, through its various committees, is responsible for passing laws, reviewing and amending the governor's budget, allocating funding, and conducting oversight. It receives analysis and guidance from the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO), which evaluates the fiscal and operational impacts of proposed policies. Together, the governor and legislature form the foundation of state-level policymaking, directing resources and shaping the framework within which other entities operate.

The SBE, an 11-member body appointed by the governor and confirmed by the senate, is California's primary policymaking body for TK–12 public education. It provides policy direction and oversight, establishing frameworks and standards for curriculum, assessment, and accountability. The governor's authority to appoint SBE members allows the governor to shape the strategic direction of the state's education system and policy priorities.

While the SBE plays a critical role in shaping education policy and administrative regulations in California, its scope is circumscribed. For example, it does not oversee early childhood education, nor does it have jurisdiction over higher education. This fragmentation highlights a feature of California's education system: There is no single entity or individual with the role or authority to coordinate education policy from early childhood through higher education. Moreover, even within TK–12, the SBE has limited authority to ensure that its policies are carried out in practice: oversight of implementation lies largely with the CDE, COEs, and local districts.

The SPI is a nonpartisan, publicly elected official who serves as the chief administrator of the CDE. The position of the SPI does not have independent policymaking authority; its statutory responsibilities are centered on overseeing the CDE and carrying out laws and policies established by the governor, legislature, and SBE. The SPI also serves as the SBE's executive officer and secretary as a nonvoting member.

The CDE implements policy and ensures compliance with state and federal education laws. It also provides technical support to school districts and gathers, analyzes, and shares data on the state's education system. The CDE, like other state-level agencies, falls outside the Prop 98 funding framework. Led by the independently elected SPI, the CDE operates outside the governor's direct executive control and is not subject to the legislature's direct administrative oversight, though both strongly influence its mandates, funding, and priorities.

The Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) is an independent commission that plays a critical role in California's education governance system through oversight of educators' preparation, licensing, and professional standards. It consists of 15 voting members, 14 of whom are appointed by the governor, with the SPI serving as an ex officio voting member. The CTC's responsibilities directly affect the quality of teaching and leadership in TK–12 schools by setting and enforcing requirements for teacher, administrator, and service credentials: LEAs must employ individuals with the proper credentials as defined by the CTC. It collaborates with the CDE and SBE but functions independently of them to manage the credentialing process for educators.

The CCEE is a state-level entity established through the LCFF reforms of 2013. Operating independently under its own governing board, the CCEE's mandate is to provide technical assistance and support to districts and COEs, build local capacity for continuous improvement, and support alignment with the goals identified in LCAPs. Although the CCEE is a state-level entity, its operations are funded by Prop 98 dollars that flow through its fiscal agent, the Marin COE (California Department of Education, 2022).

The SSoS is a collaborative system of agencies, organizations, and levels of governance working together to provide support and capacity building to LEAs in California. It was a cornerstone component of California's approach to school accountability and support through LCFF. The SSoS does not have a single individual or agency head; instead, it operates as a collaborative system of leadership shared across the CCEE, CDE, SBE, and COEs, each playing distinct roles within the system. These entities work together to provide coordinated support to LEAs.

Regional-level entities. Fifty-eight California COEs form an intermediate layer of regional governance, connecting the state with local school districts. In addition to running county-wide educational programs, COEs provide essential support to districts, particularly smaller or rural ones, by conducting financial oversight, professional development, and technical assistance.

A county superintendent oversees each COE; in all but five counties, these superintendents are publicly elected. The superintendent manages the day-to-day operations of the COE and serves as a key adviser to local districts. County boards of education, which are also publicly elected, establish policies and budgets for COEs. This dual structure at the county level ensures a mix of administrative leadership and public accountability.

Post-LCFF, COEs play a pivotal dual role in California's education system—serving both as accountability agencies and as partners in improvement for school districts. In addition to monitoring their districts' fiscal outcomes and performance along with reviewing and approving

LCAPs, COEs receive state funding to serve as the first line of support to any districts in their jurisdiction identified for Differentiated Assistance (DA) based on Dashboard results.[2]

Some COEs also serve as geographic lead agencies and special initiative lead agencies, executing key functions in the SSoS. Geographic lead agencies are charged with "building the capacity of county offices of education (COEs) to ensure that counties are equipped to build the capacity of their local educational agencies (LEAs) to support the continuous improvement of student performance within the state priorities … and address the gaps in achievement between student groups" (California Department of Education, n.d.-d, para. 1).

Along with the seven geographic lead agencies, the SSoS has approximately 70 special initiatives, most with at least one COE lead agency (California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, n.d.). One example of a SSoS special initiative is equity in California education. Equity leads (Kings COE, Los Angeles COE, and Sonoma COE) "are primarily responsible for leading the identification of opportunities, actions, and services to meet the needs of all pupils in California" (California Department of Education, n.d.-b). Other special initiative leads include the Orange County Department of Education for the Multi-Tiered System of Supports and Alameda COE for the California Community Schools Partnership Program.

Under LCFF, many COEs are expected to provide specialized expertise, technical assistance, and professional development to LEAs beyond their own jurisdictions. This broader scope positions COEs not only as regional hubs but also as statewide hubs of support, tasked with elevating instructional quality and systemwide effectiveness across California.

SELPA regions in California serve as regional governance entities dedicated specifically to the coordination and oversight of special education services. They operate under the CDE's fiscal and compliance oversight, serving as intermediaries between member LEAs and the state's policy and funding structures. SELPAs are governed by the superintendents of their member LEAs or their designees. Each SELPA develops a local plan that outlines how special education services, funding allocation, compliance monitoring, and regional coordination will be organized and implemented. SELPAs administer state and federal special education funds for their region, provide regional technical assistance and professional development, and ensure compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the California Education Code.

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[2] A district qualifies for DA if, for two consecutive years, one or more student groups in the district do not meet performance standards on one or more of the state's priority areas as shown on the California School Dashboard. Funding for DA is provided directly to each COE based on the number of districts identified and the size of those districts. Districts may, with COE agreement, voluntarily contract for technical assistance from another COE or a different provider but with their own funds.

Historically, targeted support was exclusively provided through COE-led DA. In the 2025–26 school year, two new targeted support mechanisms have been introduced: CalPADs DA, through which CDE supports districts struggling to submit high-quality student data on time, and GeoLead DA, through which the geographic lead agency in a region provides support to districts who have demonstrated academic performance issues with multiple subgroups over time.

Local-level entities. For the 937 California school districts, local school district boards play a central role in shaping education priorities and policies within their communities. These publicly elected boards oversee district budgets, policies, and educational programs. They also appoint and oversee local superintendents, who manage the local district central offices and implement board decisions. Districts operate with significant autonomy under LCFF, which allows them to allocate resources based on local needs and priorities, as outlined in their LCAPs. Districts also engage directly with their communities, including parents, students, teachers, unions, and other stakeholders, in developing their LCAPs. A district's LCAP is intended to serve as a roadmap for addressing education goals, with a focus on equity and improving outcomes for high-need students. Stakeholder groups include the LCAP committee, the Parent Advisory Committee (PAC), and the District English Learner Advisory Committee (DELAC). Schools involve committee members in various groups, including the school site council (SSC) and the English Learner Advisory Committee (ELAC).

Beyond formal district governance structures, collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) between districts and labor unions play a significant role in shaping governance at the local level. CBAs establish agreements on key aspects of district operations, such as salaries, working conditions, instructional time, evaluation processes, and professional development. While CBAs are primarily seen as labor contracts, they also create governance structures, such as committees and procedures, that influence decision-making at the district and school levels.

Alongside district-run public schools, California's education system includes approximately 1,300 charter schools, which operate with more flexibility than traditional public schools but remain publicly funded. Charter schools are authorized by local school districts, while appeals of denied petitions may be reviewed by COEs and, in certain cases, by the SBE. They are held accountable to their authorizing agencies for the goals outlined in their charter agreements. Charter schools must develop their own LCAPs and engage in stakeholder consultation, similar to traditional public schools. However, their degree of community involvement and governance structures can vary widely depending on their authorizers and operational models.

Other agencies and interest groups. Also shown in Figure 2 are entities that do not hold formal authority in the education governance system at the state level but contribute to and influence education governance and capacity. These groups and organizations play a critical role in shaping policies, advocating for specific interests, and supporting implementation efforts.

Voters play a foundational role in California's education governance system through ballot initiatives, school board elections, and the selection of state-level officials, including the governor and the state SPI. Voters are uniquely empowered in California to influence state policy directly through mechanisms that are unavailable in many other states. California voters can bypass the state legislature by placing proposed statutes and constitutional amendments on the ballot. Voters can also approve or repeal acts of the legislature. To qualify an initiative for the ballot, California requires signatures equivalent to 5 percent of the votes cast in the most recent

gubernatorial election for statutory amendments, and 8 percent for constitutional amendments. These measures often result in significant changes and take effect the day after the election unless otherwise specified (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2025). These mechanisms give the public significant influence over education policy yet can hamper cohesive governance by introducing policies that lack alignment with broader education objectives.

The federal government, the courts, and state-level agencies also shape education governance in important ways. The federal level has historically influenced state priorities through funding and compliance requirements, particularly under laws such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (enacted in 1965 and last reauthorized in 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA]) and IDEA (originally enacted as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 and last reauthorized in 2004). The courts—both state and federal—have long played a role in defining educational rights, funding equity, and access. FCMAT provides oversight and capacity building in areas of financial and operational management, and while it does not create policy, its recommendations and interventions often catalyze significant district-level changes.

Labor unions representing teachers and classified employees as well as professional associations—including membership organizations representing district administrators, school board members, and county superintendents—play influential roles in the governance ecosystem. These entities advocate for their members' rights, influence legislative decisions, provide professional development, and negotiate implementation of state policy at the local level. As organized interest groups with deep roots in California's education system as well as sizable financial resources and statewide influence, they not only shape compensation and working conditions but also exert influence on elections, including for the governor and state SPI.

Charter schools and the California Charter School Association have a distinct and complex role in California's education governance landscape. Publicly funded but independently operated, charter schools exist at the intersection of public education and private governance. Most are organized as nonprofit public benefit corporations and governed by appointed (rather than elected) boards, placing these schools outside traditional local governance structures. While charter schools are not themselves special interest groups, the charter sector is supported by a network of advocacy organizations, charter management organizations, and philanthropic funders that actively shape policy through lobbying, litigation, and electoral engagement. These actors frequently advocate for regulatory flexibility, expanded charter authorization, and funding parity—sometimes in tension with other segments of the public school system.

Nonprofit organizations, advocacy groups, the media, philanthropies, and community-based organizations contribute critical support and public pressure to the policy process. These actors build capacity, facilitate implementation, amplify the voices of historically underserved communities, and influence public discourse. Nongovernmental technical assistance providers also play a role in building the capacity of governmental agencies and actors to achieve their

goals. While they are not always formal decision makers, these entities are essential participants in shaping both the vision and the practical realities of education improvements in California.

Incentives and Authority

Education governance in California reflects a complex interplay of incentives and authority, where accountability mechanisms and decision-making structures shape both the responsiveness of the system and its capacity for coherence. Elected and appointed leaders operate under distinct pressures—some directly accountable to voters and others to the entities that appoint them—creating varying incentives that influence how policies are prioritized, communicated, and enacted. At the same time, authority is diffused across multiple layers of government—including state, regional, and local levels—leading to overlapping responsibilities and shared decision-making. This decentralization can foster innovation and responsiveness to local needs, but it also increases the risk of misalignment, policy fragmentation, and unclear lines of accountability. Understanding these intersecting dynamics is essential to explaining how governance arrangements affect the coherence of California's education system.

Incentives. Understanding whether an education governance entity is led by publicly elected or appointed officials is critical in issues of governance as it directly influences to whom the entity is accountable. In Figure 2, positions that are publicly elected are in bold yellow textboxes. Publicly elected officials are directly accountable to voters, in theory aligning their actions with the interests and priorities of their constituencies. However, elected officials may also be motivated by the potential for reelection or election to a subsequent position, or influenced by the moneyed interests that fund their campaigns, which may require attention to political strategy or catering to special interests over the broader public need. The goal in democratic representation is that leaders in elected roles—such as the governor, legislators, SPI, county boards of education, county superintendents, and local school boards—are representative of voters' interests, but policy decisions by elected leaders can at times be politically motivated.

In contrast, appointed officials—such as members of the SBE—are accountable to the individuals or bodies that appoint them, in addition to the public more broadly. In theory, this structure can enable a more coherent alignment of policies, such as between the SBE and the governor's broader vision for education. But individuals in appointed positions may lack independence, making it difficult for them to serve as effective checks and balances or to challenge the appointing entity when policy decisions do not align with the best interests of students. The interplay between appointed and elected roles can create a dynamic where some entities are more insulated from public pressure, potentially allowing for long-term policy planning, while others are more immediately responsive to community concerns.

With multiple layers of decision-making spanning state, regional, and local levels, accountability lines can become blurred. For example, while the governor and SPI are both publicly elected, their overlapping responsibilities can lead to tensions in setting and implementing

education policy. Similarly, local school boards and county superintendents are elected to represent the priorities of their communities, which may potentially clash with state-mandated policies. Ultimately, recognizing whether education leaders are elected or appointed helps clarify the accountability frameworks under which they operate and sheds light on the differing incentives and pressures that shape California's education policies.

Authority. In many governance structures, authority flows hierarchically, with higher levels dictating policy and lower levels implementing it; however, California's education system reflects more of a federalist approach, where authority is decentralized and shared among state, regional, and local entities, creating interdependence rather than a strict hierarchy. While this allows for local innovation and responsive decision-making, it also leads to overlapping responsibilities and challenges in achieving alignment and accountability across the system.

Figure 2 uses solid and dashed lines to roughly depict two distinct kinds of relationships between governance entities. Solid lines connecting entities signify direct authority and responsibility, representing formal authority relationships that cover the power of appointment, funding, and statutory oversight. These connections ensure enforceable directives, accountability, and well-defined roles, such as the governor's appointments, legislative funding allocations, and local school boards' oversight of superintendents. These formalized relationships, in theory, work to ensure that policies, funding, and directions are carried out in alignment with stated goals.

In contrast, dashed lines depict collaboration, guidance, or indirect influence, where formal authority relationships are absent but support and consultation play a critical role. For instance, entities like the CCEE offer technical assistance to districts and COEs, working alongside them to build capacity without the power to enforce compliance. Similarly, the SSoS operates through partnerships rather than mandates, relying on cooperative strategies to improve district outcomes. These dashed lines reflect the collaborative ethos of California's decentralized governance model, where indirect relationships help bridge gaps in capacity and expertise yet can result in less clarity or coherence compared to lines of direct authority.

Methods: Framework, Interviews, Analysis, and Expert Convening

This report draws on reviews of existing literature, interviews, qualitative analysis, and an expert convening to analyze California's education governance system. First, we conducted a comprehensive review of the literature to identify a framework that is well suited to inform and guide our analysis within the California context. This review led us to the Strategic Education Governance Organisational Framework (2019) from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This framework,

which builds on the conceptual and empirical work of OECD's Governing Complex Education Systems (GCES) project, provided a conceptual map for analyzing effective education governance that has been applied in practice to assess education governance efforts around the world. We leveraged the OECD framework for this report to inform our analysis of key components that are essential for well-functioning governance systems.

Given California's size, population diversity, and constitutional authority over education, we determined that the OECD framework, though typically applied at a national level, could offer valuable insights when adapted to the state's governance structure. California's education system shares many of the complexities that are found in national education systems, such as balancing local autonomy with state-level oversight, managing policy coherence across multiple levels of government, and addressing the needs of a highly diverse student population. Thus, our research team believed that applying this framework within the California context not only would be appropriate but also could offer a unique perspective on how state-level governance operates in a setting with significant similarities to national governance structures. This approach enabled us to assess both the strengths and the limitations of California's education governance system through a research-based framework, situating our study within the broader literature on education governance. We approached our research with an openness to discovering that certain elements of the OECD framework might not resonate as relevant or prove valuable within California's unique education context. During our study, we identified areas where the framework could be adapted or refined and revised it to reflect the insights and needs expressed by those working within the state's education system. This approach allowed us to incorporate the framework thoughtfully—as a tool, rather than accepting it wholesale—and to tailor it based on grounded, real-world feedback from our research.

Next, we applied a purposive sampling approach to select 16 leaders in California policy and practice who all have extensive knowledge of California's education governance and policy history. Participants were selected based on their demonstrated expertise, professional experience, and recognized standing within the field. This group of interview participants consisted of researchers, policymakers, and education leaders who were identified as having broad, system-level expertise on California's education governance. Interviewees included scholars of education governance as well as former and current actors in California's education system, representing a range of state agencies, a leading labor organization, and membership organizations. All participants agreed to take part under conditions of confidentiality, speaking in their individual capacities rather than as representatives of their organizations, with identifying details withheld in reporting. The interviews took place between December 2023 and June 2024.

Through our interview protocol, we asked these experts to assess the effectiveness of California's education governance using the dimensions of the OECD framework, rating each dimension on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = fair, 4 = good, and 5 = excellent). We intended to use the ratings not as a valid measure of effectiveness but as a point of reference for reflecting on the OECD dimensions of governance as each expert elaborated on the reasoning behind their ratings. We coded interviewee responses using qualitative analysis to identify common themes and factors that shaped how participants viewed the effectiveness of California's education governance system. This analysis helped refine and deepen our understanding of the system's strengths and challenges.

After preparing a summary of the findings that emerged from our literature review and interviews, we assembled a group of 30 experts in education governance for a facilitated convening in Sacramento in February 2025 to review the findings and discuss recommendations for how to improve upon the issues identified in the interviews. Participants at this meeting represented LEA leaders, advocacy groups, research institutions, and former policymakers. Each participant received a draft version of the findings from the interviews. Following their review of the draft, participants engaged in a daylong deliberative convening consisting of a series of discussions about the current state of education governance in California aimed at encouraging informed reflection on opportunities for improvement. Through this process, the participants identified recommendations that they believed should be prioritized by policy leaders for consideration and potential action. These ideas serve as the basis for the recommendations at the conclusion of this report. While the recommendations in this report were shaped by conversations at the convening, they reflect the major themes and salient ideas that surfaced in discussions rather than a formal consensus of participants.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of our methodology in preparing this report. Purposive sampling is a nonprobability sampling strategy in which participants are selected to provide perspectives based on their specific knowledge and backgrounds. However, with a relatively small sample size, the perspectives gathered cannot fully capture the diversity of views across California's education landscape. Nor was this analysis intended to be a comprehensive review of recent policy shifts in California, such as LCFF. Instead, our research undertook a focused exploration of key themes related to governance as identified by our interviewees and convening participants. Rather than offering definitive conclusions or prescribing solutions, this report aims to present ideas that stimulate further reflection and analysis. Our goal is to provoke thoughtful exploration and to invite policymakers, researchers, practitioners, families, community members, and students from across the state to use our work to deepen their understanding of and drive additional inquiry into California's education governance.

Deconstructing the Functions of Education Governance

There is a common adage in improvement science that "every system is perfectly designed to achieve the results that it gets" (Institute for Healthcare Improvement, 2015). This concept underscores the deep connection between the structure of California's education governance and the outcomes it achieves. Through the ways governance shapes decision-making, policies, and implementation, California's education governance system influences the results that California schools are currently attaining—including persistent achievement gaps and uneven access to resources and opportunities. Improving outcomes for schools and students requires critical evaluation of the governance system's design.

As Figure 2 visualizes, California's education governance system is characterized by a complex web of roles, responsibilities, and levels of authority. While each of these entities plays a part in overseeing and shaping education governance, a fundamental question remains: What is this education governance system supposed to achieve, and how would we know if it is effective? This section of the report describes the OECD framework we adapted as a means of better understanding the key elements of effective governance in California. Rooted in research on governing complex education systems, the framework emphasizes adaptability, coherence, and collaboration.[3]

The OECD framework defines six interrelated dimensions that encompass the core governance functions necessary to support effective and adaptive education systems in complex environments, with each dimension aligned to the system's goals for students. The six dimensions offer a valuable lens through which to examine governance in California's decentralized and diverse education landscape—a lens with the potential to identify both strengths and areas for improvement. The framework serves as a starting point for analyzing governance practices in a U.S. state that operates at the scale of many national systems. In fact, the total number of K–12 public school students in California—5,806,221 (California Department of Education, n.d.-c)—is greater than comparable student enrollments of public schools in the countries of Australia, Singapore, Finland, and Chile combined.[4]

[3] According to OECD authors (2019), the framework builds on conceptual and empirical work carried out between 2011 and 2016 in the OECD Governing Complex Education Systems project: "The framework brings together the analytical lens of the complexity paradigm established in previous work—systems are interconnected, exhibiting properties unpredictable for constituent parts—with practical considerations to maximize the ability to guide improvement efforts. It comprises six interrelated domains each identifying aspirational goals for effective governance" (p. 2).

[4] Australia enrolled 2,619,513 students in primary and secondary government schools in 2024 (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d.). Singapore enrolled 395,048 students in primary and secondary schools in 2024 (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2025). Finland enrolled 1,016,465 students in comprehensive education, general upper secondary education, and vocational education in 2023 (Statistics Finland, 2025). Chile enrolled 1,112,784 students in K–12 municipal schools in 2023 (Centro de Estudios, 2023).

The framework's six dimensions reflect critical components of effective education governance:

1. **Strategic thinking** centers on creating and upholding a clear vision for long-term improvement of education while addressing immediate challenges and short-term needs in alignment with that vision.
2. **Accountability** focuses on establishing transparent mechanisms that hold system actors responsible for performing their roles effectively, achieving goals, and fostering continuous improvement.
3. **Capacity** focuses on equipping individuals and entities at all levels with the resources, training, and infrastructure needed to perform their roles effectively.
4. **Knowledge governance** emphasizes producing, disseminating, and supporting the productive use of data and research to inform policy decisions, fostering a culture of learning where evidence guides decision-making at all levels.
5. **Stakeholder[5] involvement** emphasizes engaging diverse voices throughout the policymaking process to create inclusive, responsive governance that reflects community needs, fosters transparency, and builds trust and support for policy implementation.
6. **Whole-of-system perspective** emphasizes coordinating efforts across sectors and levels of the education system to achieve shared goals, promoting coherent strategies and fruitful collaboration that align state initiatives with local needs.

Aligning each of the six governance dimensions with a clear vision for student success is crucial to building a coherent and effective education system that serves all learners. This framework presents a deconstruction of critical components of education governance and represents an education governance system in which each governance dimension is in alignment with the other dimensions in service of shared goals for students.

Assessing the Effectiveness of California's Education Governance

To understand California's performance across the six dimensions outlined in the governance framework, we conducted interviews with education policy experts with deep knowledge of the state's unique context. These experts provided valuable perspectives on how the governance system supports or hinders efforts to achieve equitable, effective outcomes for students. Their insights offer a nuanced view of California's strengths and challenges within each dimension, highlighting areas of progress as well as opportunities for improvement. By analyzing these findings, we aim to provide a clearer picture of how California's education governance system is functioning and where targeted reforms may help drive better outcomes for all students.

[5] We use the term *stakeholder* in this report for clarity and consistency with the terminology used in the LCFF's original design and the OECD's Framework for Effective Education Governance. The term is intended inclusively to refer to all individuals and groups with interest in or responsibility for the education system.

When interviewees were asked to assess the effectiveness of California's education governance in each dimension on a scale of 1–5, their average rating was 2.8—a general perception of performance between "poor" and "fair." Interviewees ranked California's effectiveness in each of the dimensions in the following order (from lowest to highest ranking): knowledge governance, accountability, capacity, strategic thinking, stakeholder involvement, and whole-of-system perspective. Given our small sample size and the limitations of our approach, we present these results with caution but share them to reflect the generally low ratings that each dimension received, which suggest some strengths in governance dimensions as well as substantial opportunities for improvement.

In the following subsections, we present findings from our analysis of extant literature and qualitative interviews with leaders in education policy, practice, and research across California, focusing on the state's effectiveness in each of the education governance dimensions.

1. Strategic Thinking

Strategic thinking in education governance is essential for creating a clear, long-term vision that aligns policies with overarching goals. Effective strategic thinking ensures that education policies are driven by a shared vision of the system's purpose and desired outcomes as well as by a shared theory of change for how to achieve that vision. This approach requires balancing the immediate needs of the education system with the pursuit of long-term objectives and aligning diverse stakeholder perspectives to foster coherence and inclusivity.

In California's large, decentralized system, the importance of strategic thinking cannot be overstated, as a system is fundamentally "a network of interdependent components that work together to try to accomplish the aim of the system" (Deming, 1994, p. 50). To function as a true system, an effective governance system in California would establish a shared aim that integrates flexibility and responsiveness within evolving contexts, ensuring that policies remain adaptive while advancing towards equitable, effective outcomes for all students.

The following key themes on California's strategic thinking in education governance emerged from our interviews.

(a) Lack of clarity on the vision. Several interviewees highlighted that the absence of a well-defined vision limited the state's strategic thinking. A clear vision for students, interviewees argued, could provide common direction for policy and practice, promoting alignment across different levels of the education system, ensuring coherence in policy implementation, and providing a stable foundation for decision-making. However, as one interviewee remarked:

> *We don't have a lot of clarity around what the goal is—What is the mark we're trying to achieve? What is the descriptor of success? We're not starting with the end in mind, we start with projects, and then we try to figure out what the end goal is.*

In the words of another interviewee:

> *I don't think that we have agreement on what the strategic priorities of our systems are. I think that you ask anybody and they can name you a hundred different things. But I don't think that there's actually a coherent strategic thing that our systems are driving towards.*

Although the state has various frameworks, priorities, and goals addressing different aspects of education, the absence of a cohesive, student-centered vision limits California's ability to engage in effective strategic thinking. The absence of strategic thinking at the state level has made it challenging for local districts and schools to lead strategically and implement coherent systems. Some interviewees argued that California education policy is susceptible to "fads" and unrealistic expectations. One interviewee pointed out that, in the absence of a clear vision, practitioners are continuously inundated with new directives:

> *"Listen, do something about student engagement and learning loss. Implement a community school. But while you're doing that, add a whole new grade, prekindergarten, to your school system." There's volatility in the sense of policy directions change but also in the sense that as new priorities emerge, old priorities recede.*

Another interviewee reflected on the difficulties many local leaders face because of a lack of clarity from the state:

> *I think that because state policy drives so much of what has to be done, and because it's often going in multiple directions at once, we make it extra hard for local leaders to think strategically. The districts I've seen which seem to maintain that kind of vision are those that come up with a strong coherent framework for improvement, with a lot of buy-in from their communities and staff. They can then fit state initiatives into that framework and make it all move towards the same goals. But I think that this is very challenging to do. We're expecting them to think strategically but then giving them 18 new things to do each year.*

According to many interviewees, the lack of clarity in California's goals for students and schools has resulted in a cacophony of programs and a lack of coherence. Rather than having a clear vision and priorities for how to improve student outcomes, one interviewee described what California does as the following:

> *There are so many new shiny things that have incredible potential, but it feels a little like we are throwing spaghetti against the wall. We have community schools, expanded learning, teacher workforce initiatives, and all these things happening that have transformative potential. We have to think about: "What does it look like to implement them and learn to improve?"*

(b) Fiscally driven priorities. Another common critique of the state's strategic thinking from interviewees was that California is guided less by long-term strategy and more by the fiscal constraints of the given year. California's education funding is heavily influenced by revenue volatility, which often leads to short-term, budget-driven decision-making. With one of the largest economies in the world, California allocates a substantial portion of its budget to education; however, the state's reliance on tax revenues that vary annually leads to considerable fluctuations in funding availability for education from year to year (Hahnel, 2020). One interviewee, a state policy leader, said:

> *Where I sit in Sacramento, it can be very challenging in our job to balance short-term and long-term priorities, largely because everything is so fiscally driven—we can only do what we can afford as a state. And often that dictates the policies we set, be they programs or just funding apportionment for school districts.*

Another interviewee expressed how the state's prioritization of budget allocations over students' needs results in inadequate support for those who need it most:

> *As a state, decisions are made based on the amount of money that is willing to be allocated, rather than what students need. And we tell practitioners: "Students should get what they need." And yet, as a state, we don't do that. We're not able to isolate who needs the most and get them what they need.*

Interviewees argued that year-to-year financial uncertainty in California's education policy results in inadequate attention to implementation, continuous improvement, and sustainability. This reactive approach to priority setting often leads to various short-term solutions that fail to address systemic, chronic issues within the education system because, an interviewee stated, "It's the new programs that get funded, not long-term implementation." Constantly adapting to fluctuating budgets and new policy directives means that schools struggle to maintain a sustained, coherent focus. As one interviewee explained, "The volatility of our tax structure influences our focus on short-term grant programs to do transformative change; it doesn't feel right."

This instability in funding, interviewees argued, undermines districts' ability to plan effectively, too, ultimately affecting the quality of education that students receive. The fluctuation in funding has been particularly acute in recent years because of the influx of funds related to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, as one interviewee stated:

We've used all these additional resources for short-term grant programs, and we hope that if we're planting the seeds, the long-term impact will be that locals will take them up and benefit. But the state hasn't invested in building out the capacity of local leaders to understand and utilize their resources for some of these really promising practices.

As a different interviewee observed regarding the recent influxes:

Some schools are flourishing, they're doing amazing stuff with career and technical education, with community schools, etc., because they already have the capacity and some good idea of how to make the dollars translate into student wellbeing. But that's not the majority of them… It's like flooding a desert overnight. You pour in all the water, expecting that things will flourish, and they don't because there isn't the capacity of the districts to actually know how to use this money strategically to produce better student learning and wellbeing.

In summary, interviewees believed that California's strategic thinking in education is constrained by its fiscally driven priorities and reliance on volatile income tax revenue, leading to short-term solutions that hinder long-term transformative change.

(c) Ambiguity in the players and process of strategic thinking. Many interviewees noted a lack of clarity around who holds responsibility for strategic thinking at the state level in California. "What is the division of responsibility for strategic thinking in California?" asked one interviewee. "How much of it is CDE? And how much of it is the Board? The governor? It's unclear." One interviewee remarked that fundamental questions remain unanswered:

There are changing questions that we haven't agreed upon, such as what our systems are about and which systems we're talking about. We're having these incredibly incoherent conversations. And then we're getting pissed off at each other because it's not yielding anything.

These interviewees observed that responsibilities for strategic thinking about education at the state level have shifted over time. Previous governors had appointed a secretary of education in the Office of the Governor to advise the governor on education strategy and policy development. Brown removed this position and relied on the president of the SBE as his primary education adviser. As an interviewee explained, "Governor Jerry Brown changed that more because he was into reducing his staff, and Newsom continued that." Currently, under Governor Gavin Newsom's administration, as another interviewee described, "the State Board is the governor's representative for the system that is tasked with the policy and implementation side of things"; however, it is the SPI and the CDE who are formally responsible for implementing and administering education policy—reflecting the persistent ambiguity and overlap in state governance roles.

Furthermore, in the absence of a clear strategic direction for education policy, individual legislators often step in to fill the void, resulting in a proliferation of bill proposals. Without a cohesive, long-term vision guiding decision-making, lawmakers—each with their own priorities, interests, and constituencies—introduce policies that may not align with a broader, evidence-based approach to improving the system. In 2023 alone, 106 bills affecting TK–12 education were signed into law to take effect in 2024 (California School Boards Association, 2024). This dynamic can lead to fragmented policymaking, when legislative proposals can be driven more by political considerations or specific interests than by comprehensive, deliberate strategies for student success. In the words of one interviewee:

> *Whenever there's a competition between politics and policy, politics wins. A lot of times, members start with a political objective and then assemble the evidence in support of their political goal to get the policy that they want implemented. More than people realize, politics drives decision-making. I think there's a perception that interest groups are bringing proposals, and a lot of times, it's not. It's often individual members who have a narrow interest in something that they want to turn into policy for six million kids.*

As one interviewee remarked, the legislature has become a "bill machine," regularly passing a high volume of new legislation each year—often with limited resistance, inconsistent grounding in evidence, and few plans for evaluating the long-term impact of enacted policies.

Interviewees were in broad agreement that the lack of clarity surrounding the state's long-term education goals combined with state-prescribed processes for local strategic planning and priority setting hinder local strategic thinking and weaken districts' capacity to maintain long-term strategic objectives. An interviewee explained: "Hundreds of change management models tell you, 'Don't set too many goals, have a small set of goals. Have audacious expectations and focus every single day, every single action on delivering on that small set of goals.'" In California, however:

> *The way we structured LCFF and the LCAP led to this situation where you need to do some things in all the state priority areas. That says you're required to work on at least eight priorities and then you start going to all the subindicators. You suddenly end up with 50 goals. And it's just hard to pay attention to 50 goals over a multiyear period. And so people lose track of it all. We set way too many goals, we don't track them over time in a way that anybody's really paying attention to. So we don't know if it's working, and they're not really held accountable if they don't meet any of their goals.*

The absence of strong strategic thinking at the state level undermines districts' abilities to sustain focused, long-term objectives, resulting in a proliferation of an overwhelming number of policies and goals for districts and schools that are difficult to track and achieve.

2. Accountability

Accountability in education governance defines who reports to whom and for what, and creates incentives and disincentives for behavior (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2019). An effective statewide accountability system would ensure that all actors in the system understand their roles and are answerable for producing outcomes, and that there are consequences for achieving or failing to achieve specific outcomes. The concept of accountability has come to have negative connotations among education practitioners due to its blunt application in reform efforts such as NCLB; nevertheless, interviewees indicated the need for greater commitment to accountability in California. "For all the good LCFF has done," said one interviewee, "it basically got rid of accountability."

Interviewees expressed uncertainty about the current meaning and function of accountability in California's education system. Many acknowledged flaws in the previous system but also recognized that the current system lacks clarity about how the state addresses ongoing failures, raising concerns about how accountability operates when schools or districts consistently fail to meet students' needs, improve teaching and learning, or advance student learning outcomes. One interviewee reflected:

> *I'm actually not sure what we mean by accountability anymore. The prior system was terribly, terribly flawed, and I would never want to go back to those days, but at least it was clear that there would be increased state involvement where there was persistent underperformance. Now I'm not really sure what happens if a system is consistently failing kids.*

The following three subsections summarize problems in California's approach to accountability at the state level discussed by interviewees.

(a) The system lacks clear lines of authority and responsibility. Multiple state and regional organizations and agencies have responsibility for TK–12 education in California, but no single entity has the authority to enforce changes or ensure coherence statewide. The overlapping roles of various agencies can result in confusion about where authority and accountability lie. In the words of one interviewee: "Given all these different structures and other levels in the system, it gives folks the opportunity to weaken their own personal and organizational accountability and point to somebody else." This ambiguity in decision-making creates a system where responsibility is diffuse and no person or agency can be held accountable. One interviewee remarked:

> *Who is ultimately responsible for the outcomes of kids and public education? Where do you point the finger? Is it the local governing board? Is it the legislature? Is it the administration? Is it the State Superintendent of Public Instruction? Who is responsible for those outcomes? And I think if you ask each of those entities, they would probably give you a different answer. I'm not sure what a local governing*

board would say—they might say: "Yeah, we're responsible for our kids. But those people up in Sacramento, they keep telling us what to do and making our jobs really hard."

Because most local board members and county superintendents as well as the SPI are elected officials with their own campaign platforms, constituencies, and priorities, political incentives and differing interests can complicate unified policy execution and may lessen officials' willingness to assume responsibility for decisions that could be unpopular. Accountability can be seen as optional: "The SPI can either accept accountability or easily push it aside with no consequence," explained one interviewee. Another said, "If you are elected in a position, you are unable to do the job unless you're willing to be unelected," reflecting the tension elected leaders face between making necessary but potentially unpopular decisions and the political risks of losing reelection, implying that the responsibilities of leadership cannot be fully carried out if the overriding concern is remaining in office.

Lack of clear lines of authority at the state level results in a perception that state leaders have a diluted sense of responsibility for outcomes and opportunities at the local level. One interviewee described how local control can lead to a lack of accountability and responsibility at the state (central) level:

I think part of the problem with decentralization is that it leaves the people in the center feeling little responsibility for what happens. So if we believe in local control and decentralization, then figuring out how to be helpful to all these instructional leaders all over the state seems almost optional: "I'm not accountable for their success. They're accountable for their success." If kids in Stockton are doing poorly, there is nobody at CDE who feels that they are accountable for Stockton's results, and indeed they're not really held accountable for whether or not they are trying to help Stockton. It is Stockton's problem because we have local control. And if [a school district] is doing something stupid, something that researchers, for example, know doesn't work, whose problem is that? The answer is, it's [the district's] problem.

California's decentralized education system diffuses authority across multiple agencies and levels of governance, leading to confusion, weakened accountability, and conflicting interests.

(b) LCFF rests on a theory of equitable resource allocation that is unmonitored. LCFF was designed to ensure that additional resources were directed towards students with the greatest needs, specifically low-income students, English learners, and youth in foster care. The intention was to create a more equitable education system by acknowledging the challenges that come with higher concentrations of students with greater needs in a school and providing these students with the support they require to achieve academic success. However, the state does not track funds to ensure they are deployed in service of high-needs students. On this lack of accounting for how supplemental and concentration dollars are spent, an interviewee said:

> *The theoretical model behind LCFF was that we're going to add additional resources for students who need more, but the fact that we're not able to account for how dollars are being used to support or invest in marginalized communities makes it really difficult because we don't understand what the current behaviors are. And that was a fundamental principle of this entire undertaking of LCFF. And we still don't have that information.*

Several interviewees remarked that this lack of transparency undermines the equity goals of LCFF since stakeholders, including parents and community members, cannot hold districts accountable for the effective and equitable use of resources. Without clear reporting, it is challenging to assess whether additional funds are making a meaningful impact on reducing education disparities. As one interviewee stated, it is "a shocking indictment of an equitable distribution of resources that we can't track this money. We can't tell that it's actually helping students to close achievement gaps."

(c) Districts face no meaningful incentives or disincentives from the state for producing outcomes. Under NCLB, consequences in the accountability system were stringent and heavy-handed. Now, under LCFF, and consistent with the principles reinforced by ESSA, California has shifted in the opposite direction, focusing more on support than accountability. However, the state is struggling to provide the necessary support for continuous improvement that it aims to deliver. One interviewee described the shift towards greater accountability as it was enacted under NCLB as one extreme, but California is swinging away from accountability and towards another extreme under LCFF:

> *Everyone agreed that LCFF was way better. NCLB was problematic in a lot of different ways, and it changed behavior in some really negative ways. And everyone was kind of miserable in that framework. And so it felt to me like to some extent LCFF was designed in reaction to NCLB. I was so happy to see that we weren't just beating ourselves up all the time, and we got rid of the incentives to do things that I hated, like focusing on kids on the bubble [investing more time and attention on students just below the proficiency cutoff, whose improvement could boost a school's overall rating], and all the kinds of behaviors that weren't good for kids that came out of all that pressure and high-stakes accountability. I was happy to see that shift to support. I have this image in my head of the pendulum swinging. When it is over on one side, we all think it's bad. And then it gradually starts to move in this good direction, and you're like, "Oh, this is great!" And then you're like, after a certain point, "Wait, what are we doing?"*

As another interviewee stated, "The idea behind local control is that districts are given flexibility and autonomy over inputs—how they allocate resources and implement programs—as long as they are held accountable for achieving desired outcomes." Together, the LCAP,

the Dashboard, and the SSoS form the state's approach to accountability and continuous improvement in education. "On paper, California's accountability system looks good," said an interviewee. "It is actually the best concept for an accountability system that I think is out there," said another.

However, if there is no mechanism to hold districts accountable for their outcomes, the justification for not monitoring inputs, such as expenditures, falls apart. Without accountability for results, the state lacks a way to ensure that local control is leading to intended improvements in student performance and equity. Indeed, interviewees consistently observed that California lacks strong mechanisms to enforce accountability for ensuring that districts that need help get the support they need. As one interviewee said:

> *We punted to say ultimately, it is the LEAs who are accountable to their community. I think the state is not recognizing its role in ensuring that they have the capacity, skills, knowledge, and strategy to be able to do that.*

In the absence of clearly defined accountability mechanisms for failed implementation—particularly at the state level—litigation and special interest group advocacy have increasingly stepped in as de facto tools for holding the system accountable. Litigation frequently serves as a formal mechanism to compel compliance or challenge the adequacy of implementation. "We don't have strong systems for accountability in our state, which is part of the reason why it's so litigious," said one interviewee, noting that when formal systems of accountability fail, students and families must rely on the courts or other adversarial processes to secure the protections and opportunities they are owed. Several interviewees noted that the courts or adversarial processes often play outsized roles in enforcing policy, at times in ways that further fragment the system.

(d) Accountability is bureaucratic and shallow. LCFF was intended to improve education outcomes and promote equity, but interviewees reflected that accountability under LCFF lacks depth and relies heavily on compliance. In the words of another interviewee:

> *So think about LCAP, it's a bureaucratic nightmare to fill in the 400-page document for the sake of compliance. It becomes anything but a really useful strategic plan to guide action. It becomes a very heavy process that takes a lot of time. And the multiple measures on the Dashboard, which in the beginning, in principle, sounded good, now just seem to have siloed problems so that you identify districts for technical assistance in this one particular measure that ends up dividing our attention in very unproductive ways.*

Although California embraces the notion of continuous improvement, "there's a lot of knowledge about the cycles of continuous improvement that I don't see embedded in the LCAP process at all," said another interviewee, continuing:

> *The process doesn't include the routines, protocols, and structures that allow you to change the plan as you go. Even if it's a good plan, it will be imperfect at the beginning, and what you need to do is to make sure you refine over time as you learn from implementation.*

The Dashboard is a core component of California's accountability apparatus, intended to "provide parents and educators with meaningful information on school and district progress so they can participate in decisions to improve student learning," as stated on the Dashboard's website (caschooldashboard.org). Yet as one interviewee explained, the data in the Dashboard are not useful to local practitioners or decision makers:

> *We have our eight state priorities and we have our Dashboard—those are the goals for the state but they're not how districts set goals, they're lagging indicators. So when those indicators come out and the state wants practitioners to use them, they've already made decisions about what they're going to be doing based on their local indicators … they're not using the Dashboard to guide their decision-making.*

Regarding the overabundance of district performance information on state priorities and subpriorities, another interviewee stated, "If this was the dashboard of my car, it would crash every time. It's just too much." One interviewee shared a similar thought about how the Dashboard doesn't provide the right level of information to be useful in the right ways to the right stakeholders:

> *The state has these reports on the Dashboard, but the state shouldn't just say: "Here's 79 data points, take a look and see how your school is doing!" Maybe the way to sum this up is we went from one extreme, two numbers at the state level, failing or not failing at the federal level, to the other extreme. How about we split the difference? How about the state says, okay, we're not going to two numbers. But maybe we're going to do five or six, or we're going to call out a few key areas much more assertively. Because right now, a district might get publicity, someone might sue them, someone might speak out, but there's no real understandable accountability. It's so complicated.*

Furthermore, some interviewees noted, the SSoS (which is intended to provide resources and support for struggling districts) is not consistently used, nor is it consistently useful: "It was charged with being support for struggling schools, but it's always been a bit of a mystery. It's not a system, nobody really understands it." Participation in the SSoS, moreover, is not seen as mandatory—even for struggling districts:[6]

[6] According to statue EC § 52071(e), districts are required to participate in technical assistance provided under DA by their COE. However, because of misconception or the lack of formal sanctions for nonparticipation, DA is often perceived by districts as voluntary (Krausen et al., 2022).

> *It's mostly a voluntary system as to whether you even engage with your County Office, listen to their advice, or do anything. And so those districts that are probably struggling the most are least likely to take advantage of that in-depth sort of support. So it's like, "We're here to help." I think that voluntary nature is part of LCFF's shift away from it being a punishment. It's only a good thing where districts have enough capacity to be willing to take the risk to improve themselves.*

The SSoS was a promising idea developed in response to the punitive approach to improvement under NCLB. Fragile beginnings, political compromises, and increasing fragmentation have limited its impact, as one interviewee pointed out:

> *The System of Support was an experiment like, "Here's what we think might work," but I don't know that anybody knew that it would or had strong models to show that this was going to get the results that people wanted. And then, for political reasons, as it has evolved over time, it's gotten so fractured, atomized, and messy. I think it's starting to undermine itself in the same way that categorical programs used to. I don't know that anyone had strong confidence that all County Offices, for example, could serve the role that they're supposed to serve in the system—that there was capacity, expertise, or the relationships or the structure in place to make that work. It was just a theory that CDE didn't have that capacity and wouldn't ever get the capacity to serve that role. So who else was going to do it?*

The question "Who is responsible to whom, and for what?" remains unresolved in California's education governance system, resulting in blurred lines of responsibility and difficulty making systemic improvement.

3. Capacity

The third dimension of effective state governance is capacity, which focuses on ensuring that each entity and individual at every level of the system is equipped with the skills, knowledge, and resources needed to fulfill their responsibilities. Effective state-level governance actively invests in building the capacities necessary for success throughout the system, which involves identifying the knowledge and skills required to perform core functions, detecting strengths and limitations among those responsible for core functions, and deploying targeted approaches to building capacity where needed. In a state as vast and complex as California, the state level might engage horizontal or collaborative approaches to building adequate capacity, but the state retains the primary responsibility of oversight to ensure that these efforts are effective.

LCFF was developed based on the premise that LEAs, given their proximity to and understanding of their communities, were best positioned to drive improvements in teaching and learning. However, the success of this decentralized approach hinges on the capacity of

local districts to allocate resources effectively, build instructional and leadership capacity, and engage communities in ways that advance equitable student outcomes. In addition to adequate resources, this requires stable and strategic leadership; the availability of skilled, well-supported educators to deliver high-quality instruction; the infrastructure necessary to address diverse student needs; and the ability to build and sustain trust among community members. Without these enabling conditions, the potential of LCFF to transform education outcomes remains unrealized. The absence of a coherent system to support and scale improvement was a recurring theme among interviewees. As one interviewee remarked, "California has no role, capacity, entity, or governance system for building capacity at scale. … Everybody is working incredibly hard, and doing everything they can, and it's not enough. There are systems and structures that aren't working to support them."

The following subsections summarize key themes from interviews regarding capacity development within California's education governance system.

(a) Lack of educator and administrative capacity for instructional improvement within districts. Our interviewees widely acknowledged the immense challenges facing teachers and administrators, particularly those who are working with students who struggle the most academically. Teaching was described as exceptionally difficult and unsustainable because "the state isn't doing enough to ensure adequate staff and resources." Unrealistic expectations are placed on teachers to address academic, behavioral, and even personal needs of students, often without appropriate resources or support. "School sites are all understaffed for what we expect them to do," said one interviewee. Burdened by overwhelming day-to-day demands, educators, interviewees stated, have little time for reflection, collaboration, or professional growth. Teaching under these conditions is exceptionally arduous, and "we assume that there are far more people who are competent at it and who enjoy doing it than actually exist." As another interviewee remarked, recruiting and retaining teachers in the postpandemic context is challenging, particularly while adhering to the traditional industrial model of teaching. An interviewee observed that, despite major state investments in the educator workforce (Carver-Thomas et al., 2024), persistent shortages and structural constraints continue to undermine capacity:

> *Even with more resources to bring in more qualified educators, we are still struggling with shortages, which really cuts into the capacity of the system. We're still struggling with teacher retention postpandemic when we have people trying to deal with the factory model that is not working at this point.*

Similarly, for school and district leaders, "there are districts that really are struggling in terms of capacity, because they have a revolving door of leaders and superintendents." Another interviewee concurred:

> *The short tenure of superintendents, who we look to to lead us, is problematic when they only spend 2 and a half years in an organization and then leave. We start all over, first going through an interim period, then beginning again with someone else who introduces a whole different perspective, like focusing on reading at grade level by the end of Grade 3, and launching a whole new program that costs millions of dollars. And then they're gone before we even get it fully implemented, right?*

Building educator capacity is essential to the success of any policy change or improvement effort. When teachers and administrators have the stability, support, and professional growth they need, schools are far better equipped to implement changes that advance student outcomes. Addressing these challenges requires not just more resources but also rethinking structures, supports, and expectations to create conditions in which teachers and administrators can thrive and lead sustained improvement.

(b) Inadequately prepared school board members. Local school boards in California are arguably the most influential entities in the TK–12 education governance system under the LCFF framework. Board members volunteer their time and energy to represent their communities and advocate for students' success, receiving in most cases only a modest stipend (Gallegos & Seshadri, 2025). Serving on a school board often requires a substantial commitment, such as 20 hours a week (Marsh et al., 2025). School board members play a pivotal role in setting policy, hiring and overseeing their district superintendent, engaging community members, and ensuring accountability for quality and equity in education. LCFF granted significant decision-making authority to school boards on the principle that local decision makers understand the challenges and assets within a district better than any centralized government official could and are therefore able to take a more responsive and flexible approach to meeting students' needs. However, recent reporting shows that many school board seats across California go uncontested due to a shortage of candidates willing to run, raising concerns about representation and governance capacity at the local level (Education News, 2025).

One interviewee was skeptical of the notion that school boards could realistically serve as the primary locus of accountability under LCFF:

> *Under local control, the accountability should rest, obviously, locally, and that then inherently goes to the school board, being the locus of accountability in terms of elections and public and all that kind of stuff. Intellectually, I'm like, "Okay, I guess that can make sense." But then practically, it's kind of a silly concept, just because local school boards may not have this capacity. And we know how that tends to play out. It's a very odd dynamic.*

Local school board members in California are selected through democratic elections.[7] Generally, the only requirements to run for a school board are that candidates must reside within the boundaries of the school district and be registered to vote. Some interviewees questioned the adequacy of school board members' preparation to govern, especially considering their outsized role in education governance: "We could talk about school district board members and the training they receive or, frankly, don't receive. Ethics training is every other year for 2 hours at a time. But that's very narrow, like ethics is a part of it. What about your job?"[8] Another interviewee described the type of preparation that school board members could benefit from:

> *I think the capacity of school boards is incredibly important right now, in ways that I don't think we've understood. For a lot of board members, they need the basics, but for a lot of folks, it's … How do you make this really hard decision, like around closing a school? How do you think about enrollment numbers and budget numbers? Or how do you, in some instances, call out your superintendent because they're illegally putting away money in places where it's not supposed to be? It's incredibly hard to be a board member.*

> *I do think we need to think about some new ways of building local school board capacity that will actually make governance more effective and less of a rubber stamp. It can be much more than a platform for somebody's political or ideological agenda. We have the most board members of any state. We have a lot of capacity and infrastructure, but I do think we could be utilizing boards more strategically.*

LCFF placed substantial responsibility on school boards without consistently providing the training, resources, or support necessary to equip members for this complex role. This is especially true as school board elections have become highly politicized in many locales, as one interviewee noted of some school board members:

> *We've got a lot of people running on a very individualistic platform saying, "What I'm going to do, me me me," not even understanding what governance means and that you are one of five votes. So how do we educate communities on what good boardsmanship looks like before you even decide to run? And then what is the mandated training that you have to get? And maybe what is the mandated training that you have to get before you're eligible to run for a second term?*

[7] When school board vacancies arise midterm, such as through resignation, or if no candidates run for an open seat, state law allows governing boards to appoint a replacement to serve until the next scheduled election or to call a special election. If the seat is not filled within a 60-day period, the county superintendent is required to call the election.

[8] At the time of this report's publication, two bills had been enacted but not yet implemented to advance school board member capacity: AB 640, which mandates 4 hours of training for district, county, and charter board members in school finance and accountability laws, and AB 1390, which increases allowable board compensation to reflect expanded responsibilities.

In the absence of state requirements for training and continuing education to equip local school board members for their roles and responsibilities, the California School Boards Association has served as the main source of training and professional development for school board members, although participation is voluntary (Marsh et al., 2025).

Many interviewees questioned the effectiveness of local school boards as the central mechanism for accountability in California's education system. One raised the issue of the state's role to intervene when persistent challenges arise at the local level:

> *This whole concept of local school boards, I still feel like we haven't really figured that out very well yet. Yet we constantly point to that as the locus of accountability. I don't know if we ever can figure that out. But when we have consistent, persistent issues occurring, I think the state has a responsibility to get involved, whatever that means.*

Insufficient preparation and continuing education for school board members can undermine effectiveness for both schools and board members: schools may receive less effective support, while board members struggle to engage meaningfully without adequate guidance and training.

(c) Low funding and low capacity in the CDE. Interviewees widely agreed that the CDE does not have the capacity to support schools and districts adequately given increasing demands. One interviewee said:

> *Look at the growth and education requirements over the last 50 years. Why is it that the CDE is not that much larger than it was 50 years ago? Compare that to the Department of Health Services, Social Services, or Corrections. The state level is not putting the same capacity into education that we do into other areas.*

Another interviewee explained:

> *We do not have a very high capacity CDE, and it's got a lot of turnover. And you know, quite often you have people trying to manage things and make decisions who don't have much access to knowledge, and there's not a system to help them.*

A third interviewee said, "I don't know how you make any of the needed changes without a strong state department."

However, capacity in the CDE is low for several reasons. "We really depleted the state's capacity during the budget cuts of the 2000s, and we're still rebuilding it," explained one interviewee. And indeed, the cuts have resulted in chronic underfunding that limits resources and staffing levels. Most funding for the CDE comes from federal sources; consequently, most of its efforts are focused on tasks related to monitoring compliance with federal program requirements:

> *CDE is doing the job that they're funded to do. That's just not the job that people want them to do. Historically, people wanted them to help schools serve kids better, but what they're funded to do and what they do with that money, appropriately, is monitor the use of child nutrition funding, monitor special education compliance, and monitor other federal programs—there's just a huge amount of that stuff. So I think people's hope of the role that the CDE could play and what they're funded to do is not aligned.*

Indeed, more than half of the CDE's operating budget is funded through federal dollars tied to the administration and oversight of federal education programs. An LAO review of the CDE's budget for fiscal year 2013–14 (Taylor, 2014) indicated that federal funds accounted for about 68 percent of the budget. A more recent estimate shows that 54 percent of the CDE's operating budget for the 2024 fiscal year was federally funded to support the administration and oversight of federal programs.[9]

Table 1. California Department of Education State Operation Budget for the 2024–25 Fiscal Year, by Funding Source

Funding source	Amount (in $)	Percentage of total
Adjusted non–Prop 98 General Fund	128,908,000	34.9
Federal funds	199,731,000	54.0
Reimbursements	27,516,000	7.4
Other	13,564,000	3.7
Total CDE state operations	**369,719,000**	**100**

Note. This estimate excludes Prop 98 and non–Prop 98 General Fund monies for state special schools.

[9] This analysis uses public budget data from the 2025–26 Enacted Budget (California Department of Finance, 2025) and figures for the 2024–25 fiscal year, as appropriated in the 2024 Budget Act (AB 107). We are grateful to Rob Manwaring and Edgar Cabral for generously contributing their expertise and analytical work, which informed this analysis.

One interviewee commented that when federal compliance becomes most of the work of the CDE, "it becomes like this negative cycle or downward spiral where they don't have the capacity to lead state-level work, so they don't get the funds in the state budget because they're not trusted to do a good job."

After federal funding, the next largest share of the CDE's operating budget is from the state's General Fund, the allotment of the state's budget that is determined by the governor and legislature during the annual budget process along with all other state priorities. One interviewee highlighted the unique budgetary dynamics within California's education governance, particularly how Prop 98 funding is perceived by other state agencies and the constraints it imposes on allocating resources for state education agencies in California:

> *It's like the other state agencies say: "Oh my God, you guys have Prop 98, you're so protected. You get more money, you get the sweetheart deal." But those Prop 98 dollars can't go to state agencies. So those are all taken off the table for state agencies. So then when it comes time to talk about what dollars do go to state agencies, they're like, "Man, education already got most of the money! What are we going to do, send them more General Fund dollars?" Because CDE and the State Board, for instance, are funded with the General Fund dollar as a gov ops [government operations] function, that's a fungible dollar that could also go to Health and Human Services, Caltrans, or Veterans Affairs.*

High turnover rates and inadequate professional development were frequently mentioned as factors that were exacerbating the issue of low capacity in the CDE: "The agency has been starved for years and years and years, but it's also losing capacity because people are not finding it a good place to work. So they're leaving." Frequent leadership changes and political pressures lead to shifting priorities, according to interviewees, which complicates long-term planning and stability.

With the CDE weakened over many decades, districts in California must rely on recent structures developed within the SSoS, which constitute an assortment of COEs, the CCEE, and third-party support providers, causing variability in the availability and quality of assistance across the state. This decentralized system leaves many districts, particularly those serving the most vulnerable students, without the robust state-level guidance and resources needed to achieve systemic improvements.[10]

(d) Compensation constraints. In addition to low levels of funding, inflexible state salary structures limit the CDE's ability to attract and retain staff to build organizational capacity and support a coherent statewide education system. As a state agency, the CDE operates within the

[10] For a more in-depth examination of the CDE, see Moffitt et al., 2023, pp. 172–182.

California Civil Service Pay Scales that govern compensation across all state departments. These standardized pay scales are not calibrated to specialized skill sets nor are they as competitive as salaries offered by districts, counties, or nonprofits. This constraint limits the CDE's ability to attract and retain the kind of experienced, high-capacity professionals at the level needed to provide strategic leadership at scale and lead long-term reforms. Faced with these constraints, the CDE has often resorted to "creative but often inefficient workaround strategies," as one interviewee described:

> *In the past, some of the top CDE deputies were actually people who were funded as "residents," where essentially, the state would contract with a COE or a district to "loan" the person. And that way, they continued to be able to get paid at their LEA rates. So those individuals did great work, still under their district-level salary.*

Such exceptions are fragile and are often viewed skeptically within state systems because "systems don't love exceptions," the interviewee commented, also adding that burnout and turnover were common outcomes among those in such roles.

Without the ability to offer competitive compensation, the CDE has struggled to attract a broad pool of qualified candidates and to retain staff over time, as one interviewee stated:

> *You either have to get people who don't need to make money anymore—who can do it as just a service—or they are early in their careers and you catch them early and they go on to other things elsewhere.*

These constraints ultimately reduce the CDE's institutional capacity and long-term effectiveness. As a result, the state often leans on external entities, including the CCEE, COEs, or contracted service providers, to fulfill roles that the department itself cannot support internally. While these partnerships can be valuable, they also reflect systemic limitations in the state's governance infrastructure that hinder the ability to build and retain stable leadership within the agency responsible for administering and implementing education policy in the state.

(e) Uneven capacity across counties and their loosely coupled relationship with the state. Prior to LCFF, COEs were primarily responsible for monitoring district compliance with state mandates as well as maintaining special education and alternative education programming. The 2013 adoption of LCFF introduced dramatic changes in the roles and responsibilities that COEs were expected to fulfill in California's education system: "What we're asking of County Offices of Ed is just monumentally different from what was expected 10 years ago," said one interviewee. With the passage of LCFF, and with it new responsibilities in reviewing LCAPs and providing services in the SSoS, the COE transformed into the cornerstone entity for the support and continuous improvement of California's school districts. In addition to providing direct assistance and oversight for the districts within their counties, some COEs are designated as geographic or subject matter

leads, making them responsible for coordinating support efforts across multiple counties. More than ten years after the passage of LCFF, interviewees believe that, systemwide, county capacity falls short of the vision for their roles. In the words of one interviewee:

> *I think we've set up County Offices of Education to be the lead to the System of Support, but we set them up to fail out of the gate. COEs were not designed to be mini California Departments of Education, but we're essentially asking them to govern, support, provide guidance, and manage accountability for LCAPs. And simultaneously, oh, and by the way, you're a geographic lead or you're an initiative lead for the state, which is just kind of bizarre. It's just a very unrealistic expectation to put on COEs to have this vision and strategic thinking, to do that on top of everything else. I just think, inherently, it's really problematic to have mostly COEs as your System of Support and to expect them to know how to work together as well, in a coherent fashion; it is just kind of a dangerous assumption.*

LCFF granted counties new responsibilities; however, COEs did not consistently garner trust among districts for having the expertise needed to help them. According to an interviewee, districts leaders still question the value of COEs: "Are you a credible support? Do you actually know as much or more than I do?" Some counties have the capacity to do what is asked of them, but this capacity is uneven, as one interview described: "Some counties are fantastic in terms of how they're structured and what they have and their capacity and their people and all these things. Some counties do not have all that."

In addition, most of California's county superintendents are popularly elected, and most COEs are governed by popularly elected county boards of education. As one interviewee pointed out: "California relies on the counties, but that is a governance structure that is not linked to the state—they have their own selection procedures. The state has no command and control over them." COEs function under the jurisdiction of state laws and regulations, and they receive state funding to implement state education policies; ultimately, however, county superintendents are accountable to their constituents and not to the state. "The way that they're structured," explained an interviewee, "there's not much accountability at the county level. So if they're not doing it, then what happens?"

(f) CCEE not empowered to drive capacity building at scale. When LCFF was developed, state leaders recognized that the overhaul of California's accountability and finance system would require new types of capacity at the local level as well as new models of support for LEAs and schools to enable them to leverage local control effectively to address inequalities in student opportunities and outcomes. A group of state and LEA leaders visited the province of Ontario, Canada, in 2013, where they drew inspiration from the Ontario Ministry of Education's approach to supporting LEAs and met with Michael Fullan, a key architect of Ontario's education improvement strategy (Fensterwald, 2013). Members of this delegation were impressed with what they saw in Ontario and advocated for a similar structure within the CDE to provide sustained

support to LEAs. However, rather than placing this new capacity within the CDE and funding it to build its authority and capability to support LEAs, the legislature and governor created the CCEE to provide guidance, resources, and technical assistance to LEAs to meet the requirements and goals of the new accountability and finance system.

Reflecting on the decision to found a new state education agency instead of relying on the CDE, interviewees noted that the CCEE was created because the CDE was thought to lack the capacity to meet needs under the new system. As one interviewee involved in the design of LCFF at the time stated, "We realized that we had to contract it out because the state department was so weak." The CCEE has since struggled with clarity and authority within the system, as one interviewee noted: "CCEE is supposed to help coordinate systems of support, but they don't really have authority per se." Another interviewee commented on the ambiguity of the CCEE's role:

> *I think CCEE is trying hard to break their role down, they have been for the last couple of years, but breaking that down when you're not the sole provider, when it's up to the 58 counties' interpretations, is difficult, no matter how good a job you do.*

Notably, as described previously, Prop 98 dollars are constitutionally restricted to funding LEAs and cannot be used to directly fund state-level education agencies. To navigate this restriction, policy designers created a workaround to fund the CCEE. Although it is a state-level entity with a mandate to provide technical assistance and support to LEAs across the state, the CCEE's fiscal agent is the Marin COE, which is allowed to receive Prop 98 dollars as an LEA. This structure provides the CCEE with greater flexibility in how it allocates resources, including offering compensation that is often more competitive than what state agencies can provide.

4. Knowledge Governance

The knowledge governance dimension focuses on the stimulation and production of relevant, reliable, and timely knowledge as well as the promotion of its use in decision-making for improving education. A state with an effective knowledge governance system would promote the production of adequate, accurate evidence; mobilize this evidence for convenient use by decision makers; stimulate a culture of evidence use; and foster evidence use throughout the system. Comprehensive, timely, and reliable data are crucial for strategic thinking on policy development. At the local level, research and evaluation equip decision makers to understand current challenges, assess the effectiveness of existing strategies, and anticipate future needs. At the state level, research and evaluation help ensure that resources are effectively allocated and to identify best practices and areas for improvement. Without robust systems for knowledge management, policymakers struggle to identify the most pressing issues and effective solutions, leading to decisions that may not fully address the needs of students and educators across different regions.

The following key themes capture the issues that interviewees raised regarding California's approach to knowledge governance at the state level.

(a) Need for more effective evaluation of programs and policies. Responsible stewardship of education funding requires thorough evaluation of its use. Robust evaluation of programs and policies enhances accountability, informs decision-making, and fosters the spread of knowledge. Evaluation is necessary to identify not only where funds are not being applied appropriately but also where policies are working well. Despite significant investments by the state aimed at improving student outcomes, there is a lack of comprehensive assessment to determine which initiatives are truly effective. One interviewee asked, "When things are working, where's the examination, and scaling? And where's the sharing, which is hard to do, district by district. The state should be saying: 'Look at this, this works. How can we help you do this?'"

Moreover, California's lack of effective monitoring, evaluation, and data systems leads to uninformed conclusions and wasted efforts at both state and local levels, as one interviewee stated:

> *I think that the state doesn't really know what is working and what isn't, and so we can't do a good job promoting good practices locally. Because we don't do a good job monitoring implementation or evaluating policies—and because we don't have a good data system yet—we draw uninformed conclusions about success or failure and move on to the next shiny idea. This results in wasted effort at the local level, and it breeds fatigue and cynicism. We need a lot more investment in this. Other states have at least a small number of staff whose sole job is to evaluate state investments.*

Even when policies are based on promising research, without systematic evaluation there is no clear evidence of impact. The state's underinvestment in evaluation leaves costly programs without evidence of impact or return on investment. States are advised to allocate 1 percent of program budgets to research and evaluation (Results for America, 2024), however, California appears to fall well short of this benchmark. For example, under this guideline, the $4 billion California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) would warrant about $40 million for evaluation. Although CCSPP initiative leads are responsible for tracking and evaluating their work, only $2.16 million has been allocated for third-party, external evaluation of the program (California Department of Education, 2023)—about 5 percent of what would be expected for a state committed to building evidence and assessing the impact of its investments.

Regarding recent examples of programmatic investments with inadequate mechanisms for evaluation and learning, an interviewee said:

> *I think the biggest concerns would be around community schools, expanded learning, and transitional kindergarten. We have three massive initiatives, each costing billions of dollars. We're not collecting any data. We're not. It wasn't even thought about as the policies were being struck. I guess there are some behind-the-scenes conversations going on around expanded learning, and starting to collect some data, but we're spending billions every year on that—like, really? No evaluation whatsoever? I'm sure research organizations are going to have to try and put together something a couple of years from now, to try and figure out if any of this money worked for these things, but we didn't set it up ahead of time. So you know, when you have a massive new initiative, you should set up a process to evaluate it.*

Development of such large-scale initiatives is often informed by research-based best practices, but without evaluation frameworks embedded in policies and programs, the state has little systematic understanding of either implementation or impact. Consequently, the education system misses the opportunity to learn lessons from early implementation efforts that could support continuous improvement. In the longer term, resources may continue to be spent on initiatives that do not deliver the expected results while potentially more effective strategies remain underutilized. The absence of planning for evaluation also prevents identifying and scaling successful programs, resulting in lost opportunities to spread effective practice. In the words of one interviewee:

> *We've invested a lot of money in programs and strategies that research tells us should improve opportunity and outcomes, but we are not in any sort of comprehensive way really assessing their effectiveness or how to improve them. I think in large part, we just don't want to know.*

This reluctance to conduct thorough evaluations may stem from a concern about cost as well as uncovering negative outcomes, which could reflect poorly on leadership. When funds are limited, policymakers may choose to invest in implementation over evaluation. However, as one interviewee stated, "Strategic thinking is impaired if you don't do enough research and evaluation. We need clearer pictures of what's happening in a state this size."

(b) Need for more guidance and support for program implementation. When the state rolls out new programs or directives, local implementation largely hinges on existing staff's interpretation of policy as well as existing resources and expertise to execute on the policy. Interviewees indicated that districts could benefit from greater scaffolding and support from the state for implementation. One interviewee said:

> *I think because with a lot of the investments we've made, particularly during COVID, we've left a lot of it up to local control. And it sounds great. But what that has meant practically, I think, is there haven't been a lot of supports that come with the funding or new programs. And so we just say: "Go and do it, you know, you wanted the local flexibility. Here you go."*

While the principle of local control allows districts the flexibility to implement programs that best meet their unique needs, local control can also exacerbate inequalities between districts that have the local capacity and expertise to implement new programs successfully and those that don't. An interviewee noted, "Capacity and knowledge governance are very closely related, and they should be very closely related—a lot of the capacity comes from having a sufficient amount of knowledge management."

Some districts, particularly those with greater financial resources and more experienced staff, can effectively take policy directives and design, implement, and sustain new educational programs and practices in response. These districts often have access to better professional development, stronger community partnerships, and more stable leadership. In addition, these districts may also be located in counties where the COE has particular expertise or well-developed support systems, further strengthening district capacity to implement policies effectively. As a result, they can adopt and adapt new initiatives seamlessly and see positive outcomes. Conversely, districts with fewer resources and less access to support often struggle to implement new programs effectively. These districts may lack the financial means to invest in necessary training, support, and infrastructure. Without adequate guidance, they may face difficulties in adapting new initiatives to their specific contexts, leading to weak implementation or failure. One interviewee described this:

> *For a lot of folks, for example, maybe they've never run comprehensive afterschool programs. Or maybe they don't have a strong basis for doing community engagement to find out what their community wants, or in what format. And so they just do something. And it may be a mismatch. And so they don't get a lot of kids to participate, and everyone's scratching their heads, like why isn't this working? So the money may be there, and we've established a program. But we also haven't provided necessarily the professional development or training, or just resources to say: "This is how you ask the community what they want, within the confines that we've created, what's allowable, what's not, and where you have flexibility." I mean, CDE has done some of that. But I think we all could have done, in hindsight, a much better job of setting up those programs for success, because some districts love it. And they've run with it, and I think are running stellar programs. But a lot of districts will be the first to say that they're struggling to implement for a lot of those reasons.*

All districts in California, even the highest functioning, would benefit from better knowledge governance for program implementation. "There ought to be ways to develop and share intellectual capital rather than expecting that there will be the people, time, and resources to reinvent the wheel," said one interviewee. The state could play a stronger role by providing clear guidelines, best-practice frameworks, progress monitoring, and support for continuous improvement to navigate the challenges of implementing new programs successfully. In the words of one interviewee: "I think one thing that the legislature and the governor could do better, rather than just providing money, is investing in what is evidence-based good practice and policy to go along with it." Despite significant investments in programs, leaving much implementation to local control has resulted in many districts struggling with execution due to insufficient professional development, training, and resources for effective program management or community engagement.

(c) Lack of access to timely and useful data to conduct research or inform decisions. Researchers studying California's TK–12 education system face significant challenges because of a lack of timely, actionable data to conduct meaningful research. The California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) is a robust statewide system that collects comprehensive student-level data to support funding, accountability, and program oversight. This information is publicly reported only in aggregate form, at the school, district, county, or state level, through platforms like DataQuest and the California School Dashboard. Over time, CALPADS has become more timely, with stronger data validation and improved reporting tools for LEAs. While CALPADS' aggregated reporting serves transparency and compliance purposes, it provides limited support for the timely, granular decision-making that system leaders require or the deeper analyses that researchers seek to conduct. While the CDE's stringent data-security measures are designed to protect student privacy, in practice they can make underlying data particularly difficult for researchers to access, constraining the timeliness and scope of research and knowledge generation.

Access to more comprehensive data on the education system would enable researchers to provide the evidence-based insights that help policymakers scale successful programs and discontinue ineffective ones, leading to more efficient resource allocation and improved student outcomes. Making quality data promptly accessible would also enhance transparency and accountability, promoting equity by ensuring that resources are directed towards supporting the state's most vulnerable students. Instead, in terms of data access for research, an interviewee explained that the reasons for difficulty in accessing CDE data for research can feel opaque and dependent on personal connections: "It's all informal right now. It's who you know. It's whether or not you know the right person over at CDE."

This data management problem is compounded by the CDE's limited capacity to collect, manage, and report meaningful data. As some interviewees noted, California has struggled for years to update basic data—such as teacher demographics—which has left researchers without

critical information on key topics like workforce diversity and teacher shortages. While there is hope that the state's upcoming Cradle-to-Career (C2C) Data System may improve access to useful data, there are concerns about whether this system will align with the needs of both researchers and practitioners.

Several interviewees expressed optimism about the C2C Data System under development as a step towards more equitable, evidence-informed policymaking. By linking longitudinal data across education, workforce, health care, and social services, the system has potential to transform how the state understands student trajectories, identifies barriers, and supports lifelong success—from early childhood through college and into career. As its infrastructure matures, this system could come to serve as a cornerstone for more responsive policy and continuous improvement. Yet some interviewees expressed skepticism about the timeline and the extent to which the data system "will ever be able to actually begin to paint pictures of the pipeline and of the system and how it's serving students." Although they remained hopeful, interviewees raised concerns about the quality and accessibility of data, the commitment of agencies to share data, and the likelihood that the C2C system will fulfill its transformative promise.

5. Stakeholder Involvement

Effective governance involves stakeholders throughout the policy process, from priority setting and policymaking to implementing and evaluating. Stakeholders help ensure that decisions are inclusive, responsive, and relevant to the diverse communities that policies are intended to serve. Stakeholder involvement is a vital aspect of governance because it increases the relevance and applicability of policy for the public while bolstering transparency and trust in the process.

California's LCFF redefined how school districts engage stakeholders in developing their LCAPs. Districts must consult a broad range of stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and students, and establish advisory committees for input from parents and English learners. To ensure transparency and accountability, districts must hold public meetings, document outreach efforts, and explain how stakeholder feedback influenced the final plan. The LCAP and related materials must be accessible to all stakeholders, including through translations and user-friendly formats.

By embedding these requirements into the LCAP-development process, LCFF sought to create a process where planning and decision-making in California's schools were inclusive, transparent, and responsive to the needs of the entire community. Such stakeholder engagement is crucial for creating equitable, effective education strategies that benefit all students. Yet meaningful stakeholder engagement is difficult to achieve, demanding time, trust, and systems that allow diverse voices to genuinely shape decisions (Marsh et al., 2018).

Several interviewees remarked on the significant progress that California has made in its emphasis on stakeholder involvement; for example, one interviewee noted: "When I talk to people in other states, they may have accountability indicators, but there's no requirement that anybody be involved in shaping the things that happen at the local level."

Several other interviewees expressed skepticism about the extent to which stakeholder involvement is meaningful in school governance. One interviewee observed that while the state makes efforts to engage stakeholders in state-level governance, their involvement at the state level is minimally effective:

> *The folks we see show up in a hearing in Sacramento, for the most part, we don't see average Joe and Jane citizen or parent show up there unless they're anti-this or anti-that. So most of that happens locally. The real heart and soul of stakeholder involvement is local.*

Indeed, LCFF is largely focused on stakeholder engagement in local policy setting. The concept of local control in education governance is often framed as a means to promote responsiveness to the unique priorities of local communities and ensure that local voices shape decisions affecting schools. However, one interviewee raised critical questions about the authenticity and effectiveness of this influence:

> *Local control was intended to lead to democratization and to communities that were more engaged, that felt they could influence how schools are run. The question is, is there influence? Is it real influence over the right things? And is it influence that is actually effective for improving student outcomes? Is it real or is it just imagined? "I showed up at the school board meeting and I got my 3 minutes at the microphone." Well, is that real influence, real democratic accountability, or have I just been handled and manipulated?*

Another interviewee called stakeholder involvement in the LCAP process "faux stakeholder involvement" and went on to say that "even in the LCAP process, they're given so little authority, there's such a small fraction of the budget at stake. It's political theater."

Interviewees noted that stakeholders may feel that their contributions are undervalued or that decisions are predetermined, reducing the overall effectiveness and inclusivity of the LCAP process. As one interviewee described, California has aspired to engage stakeholders in local school governance but hasn't provided support to districts for how to do it well:

> *We've as a state paid lip service to stakeholder engagement. Like in the LCAP, we say: "Engage with your stakeholders." But we've never really said: "This is what it really should look like." I think that we fake this in a lot of ways.*

During the LCAP process, stakeholders face several barriers to full, meaningful participation. Research has found that without deliberate attention to racial power dynamics and privilege, the implementation of community-engagement policies can reinforce racism in practice, underscoring the importance of culturally responsive approaches to engagement (Daramola et al., 2022). Furthermore, community members may not have a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of school funding and the implications of different budgeting decisions. In addition, there may be time, communication, and cultural barriers that discourage full participation in the process. As one interviewee described: "In the LCAP process it's so hard for civilians to wrap their heads around the challenge of budget trade-offs, and to have a broad enough perspective." Another interviewee noted: "We're also in the middle of the culture wars. There are a lot of places where we've got a lot of stakeholder involvement and a lot of voice, but you're not accessing knowledge in the process." Consequently, stakeholder involvement can be more symbolic than impactful.

According to one interviewee, the audacious goal for stakeholder engagement in local school governance across California has devolved into cumbersome bureaucratic paperwork:

> *What started as a very bold vision of what the future of California stakeholder involvement could be became very heavy machinery that gets in the way rather than really supporting what you want to accomplish with these new funds.*

Stakeholder involvement under LCFF has created new avenues for community voice in local decision-making, but its impact has been uneven and often more symbolic than substantive. Limited capacity, structural barriers, and lack of clear guidance have often reduced involvement to compliance exercises. For stakeholder engagement to fulfill its promise, it must move beyond procedural requirements towards authentic, supported participation that strengthens democratic engagement and accountability.

6. Whole-of-System Perspective

Whole-of-system perspective pertains to adopting viewpoints that reach beyond individual silos of responsibility to coordinate across decision makers, governance levels, and policies. This dimension takes into account all relevant entities within the system, including their relationships and interactions, as well as the cascading consequences that must be anticipated when decision-makers are choosing among options. With whole-of-system perspective, the state level considers and addresses the interconnectedness of the system's elements and marshals connections across levels and traditional silos to ensure that programs and policies are equipped with the resources and support they need to succeed.

Whole-of-system perspective involves aligning policies across state-level agencies as well as across different levels—state, district, and school—to ensure consistent, equitable educational opportunities. By focusing on collaboration and interconnectedness, whole-of-system perspective

helps address complex challenges and fosters innovation, ultimately enhancing the quality and effectiveness of education statewide. But when it comes to whole-of-system perspective in California, one interviewee said, "The whole-of-system perspective? I don't think that we have agreement on what systems we're talking about."

"I think that this is where we are weakest," said another interviewee, continuing:

> *We have such a problem with coherence. There is just such strong momentum behind things that make the system more complex, often for very narrow and personal reasons, and we have too few people who are willing to say no. We need more people in positions of authority who act based on a vision of the whole system, who understand that stability and coherence are key to progress.*

The following themes capture interviewees' views on how California's whole-of-system approach functions in education governance.

(a) Supporting students in the TK–12 system requires coordination across many student-serving agencies, but the state lacks intentionality in spanning silos. According to interviewees, California's education policy faces challenges in integrating TK–12 education with other student-serving spaces, such as health care, social services, and community programs. While these sectors are crucial for holistic student development, the state often lacks intentional strategies to bridge these silos. This separation can result in missed opportunities for collaboration and comprehensive support systems. Interviewees discussed that California could do more to address the diverse needs of students by fostering intentional connections between TK–12 education and adjacent services, providing students with a more cohesive educational experience that enhances both academic and personal outcomes:

> *There's the K–12 space, the higher ed space, the workforce space, and everything adjacent to that, which is juvenile justice, child welfare, economic development, business development, etc., etc., etc. We haven't even agreed on what the "whole of system" is like. What exactly are we talking about? We could imagine any number of systems that can be within scope or outside of scope.*

The separation between TK–12 education and other student-serving sectors at the state level reflects the challenges California faces in creating cohesive systems of support for students and families. Bridging these silos would require intentional cross-sector collaboration. As one interviewee noted: "The various areas of policymaking affecting families could work together to create integrated policy to support families." This observation underscores the potential benefits of a more interconnected approach, where policies are better aligned to address the complex, overlapping needs of students, families, and communities.

(b) The TK–12 system is not itself internally coherent. Significant progress has been made in recent decades to refine and align California's education standards, assessments, and instructional practices. This work has involved multiple layers of policy reform, professional development, and instructional shifts, ultimately shaping how educators engage with curriculum and student learning (Finkelstein & Moffitt, 2018). Nevertheless, California's TK–12 system still struggles with internal coherence, which poses significant challenges to delivering consistent, effective education. Variations in curriculum standards, resource allocation, technical assistance providers, and instructional materials across districts contribute to disparities in student outcomes. This lack of alignment makes it difficult to implement statewide policies effectively across contexts, hindering efforts to address inequities. Several interviewees noted the need for more coherence across entities in the TK–12 system to ensure that all students receive high-quality education, regardless of their location or background:

> *We have one of the most fragmented governance systems in the country. And of course, our country tends to have fragmented governance relative to other countries. We have the CTC that does teacher credentialing; we have the CCEE, which does a whole lot of school improvement stuff; we have the CDE, which is really separate from the SPI, because they have an elected superintendent, so they have an autonomous way of working. And then we have the State Board with the Governor's Office, which is also engaged in this; then we have a higher ed sector, which is not connected to any of that. And they're not connected to each other. We don't have cross-sector governance for higher ed or for higher ed with K–12 or preK. So all of these things are affected by that.*

This fragmented, disjointed structure reflects the complexity of California's TK–12 system, where multiple entities operate independently, often with overlapping responsibilities. These dynamics reveal the challenges of achieving one coherent system aligned in its efforts to provide equitable, high-quality education statewide.

(c) Community schools as a strategy to bridge silos are a promising concept but are insufficient. Several interviewees pointed to California's investment in community schools as "a step in the right direction," signaling a shift towards a more integrated, whole child approach that seeks to address not just the academic needs but also the health, social, and emotional well-being of students by bringing educational, health care, and social services into schools. However, others noted that while the CCSPP initiative marks a sign of progress, it is insufficient on its own to tackle the deep-rooted, systemic challenges that persist in California's education system.

One interviewee expressed frustration with the lack of cross-agency collaboration at the state level in general and particularly in the context of supporting community schools:

> *We don't have a good mechanism for working across the silos. The one thing that I'm most frustrated about with CCSPP is the fact that at the state level, we haven't engaged the rest of the state silos to think about: Could we make community school implementation easier at the local level? You have county mental health, you have the whole CalWORKs systems; we haven't changed anything outside of education to make it easier for community schools to be effective at the local level. Basically, we said, "Here's a bunch of extra money so that you can go play nice with other people," but we've only given it to the school side of the world.*

Integration of health, social, and educational services requires robust partnerships across sectors, including health care, social services, and local governments. These partnerships are best coordinated at the state and local levels to ensure that schools have the capacity and infrastructure to deliver these services effectively. At present, the responsibility for building these collaborations often falls to individual schools or districts, leading to inconsistencies in service delivery and access.

As a counterpoint to the skepticism about the state's ability to engage in whole-of-system perspective, one interviewee cited California's Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI), launched in July 2021, as a potentially promising model that aligns multiple sectors and funding streams towards a more integrated behavioral health system for children and youth. Although it still unfolding, CYBHI offers the potential to show that whole-of-system approaches can be sustained and scaled in practice.

Summary of Key Findings

The interviews conducted for this study reveal a series of challenges and tensions in California's education governance system that can be categorized into three overarching themes: incentives, capacity, and funding. These themes shed light on how governance structures shape the effectiveness of state policy, the roles in and relationships among institutions, and the degree to which schools and districts can deliver on ambitious, equitable learning goals for students. Despite these governance hurdles, California has enacted bold policies aimed at advancing student equity and whole child approaches, such as LCFF, CCSPP, the California English Learner Roadmap, and UTK. Moreover, there is growing awareness of the limitations within current governance structures and increasing interest among policymakers and system leaders in improving coherence, capacity, and support across the system.

Incentives: Governance Structures and Misaligned Accountability

One of the most salient findings from our interviews is that California's governance structure—particularly the system of elected offices and appointments—results in incentives that can be in tension with responsibilities, which undermines coherent, effective policy

implementation. These dynamics may complicate efforts for sustained implementation of long-term education goals, as state and local leaders often face pressures associated with electoral cycles, such as short-term political pressures or demands from interest groups. As a result, even well-intentioned policies may fall short in implementation, not because of their design but because the governance system lacks the coherence and accountability mechanisms needed to carry them out effectively.

Elected leadership creates competing pressures. The SPI is elected independently of the governor, which at times throughout California's history has led to institutional misalignment between the CDE—which is under the direction of the SPI—and the SBE—which is under the direction of the governor. Several interviewees noted that rather than operating with a unified vision, agencies can face conflicting directives, which is an underlying source of incoherence between policy and implementation. At the same time, interviewees acknowledged that these tensions are not necessarily the product of ill intent; rather, the political nature of the SPI role can create incentives for leaders to elevate actions that raise visibility and public profile, whether to advance their reelection prospects or to position themselves for future opportunities. This can shift the focus away from the sustained, long-term implementation of policies passed by the governor, legislature, or SBE—work that is more "behind the scenes"—and towards high-visibility initiatives or positions that align with potential campaign narratives. Elected county superintendents, who play a critical role in supporting districts under LCFF, face similar political pressures. Guided by their commitment to serve communities within their counties, county superintendents' priorities may at times conflict with broader state goals for coherence, complicating their effectiveness in implementing state initiatives.

Short-term political gains shape legislative action. Interviewees noted that many state education policies developed and passed in the legislative process tend to be shaped by short-term priorities and public visibility rather than by long-term planning or implementation readiness. As a result, initiatives are sometimes introduced without clear alignment to existing efforts or sufficient attention to evidence, evaluation, and systemwide coherence. This has contributed to a wide array of policies that, while often well intentioned, lack the coordinated oversight needed to support sustained improvement. Consequently, schools and districts are left to navigate a complex policy landscape in which initiatives sometimes overlap or compete, with limited support for integration or prioritization in ways that advance coherent student-learning experiences.

Shallow accountability undermines equity goals. Interviewees agreed that accountability in California's education system is diffuse, compliance driven, and shallow. While LCFF was designed to improve outcomes and promote equity, the system lacks clear lines of authority, transparency in resource use, and meaningful incentives for improvement, leaving gaps in responsibility and reliance on litigation to protect students' rights.

Capacity: Mismatches Between Responsibilities and Capabilities

Capacity constraints emerged across multiple governance levels, with interviewees highlighting a disconnect between the expectations placed on institutions and their ability to meet those expectations. At all levels of the system, agencies and governing bodies are often tasked with implementing complex reforms, supporting continuous improvement, and addressing persistent equity gaps—all while operating with limited staffing, expertise, and infrastructure as well as with insufficient authority.

Districts feel overwhelmed. Interviewees convey that the accumulation of state initiatives—ranging from TK and ethnic studies requirements to community schools and expanded learning—can exceed districts' capacity to implement them with quality. This challenge is compounded by frequent turnover in both district leadership and the educator workforce, which further disrupts continuity. Without adequate support, the constant flow and rapid pace of policy directives can lead districts to focus on meeting surface-level requirements rather than investing in the deeper, sustained improvement efforts that reforms are intended to support.

School boards vary in capacity, with some members lacking needed training and expertise. Local school boards are charged with major decisions related to budgeting, stakeholder engagement, and instructional priorities, yet interviewees repeatedly flagged a gap between these responsibilities and board members' preparation or capacity to govern effectively. In some cases, political dynamics further limit opportunities for strategic governance.

The role of COEs is expanding, but capacity remains uneven. COEs are playing an increasingly central role in supporting district capacity for continuous improvement—particularly under the SSoS structure established by LCFF. Interviewees, however, highlighted substantial variation in COE capacity. While some COEs have developed strong systems to support continuous improvement, others are still in the process of building that capacity, resulting in uneven support across the state. This unevenness in COE capacity results in disparities in the quality and consistency of support available to districts and schools, reinforcing unequal access to high-quality resources and support across the state. Furthermore, under the SSoS, COEs have a responsibility to improve student outcomes within the LEAs they serve, yet their formal authority is limited in practice and they may not be viewed as a meaningful source of support by districts.

The state lacks mechanisms for intervention. Despite retaining constitutional responsibility for education, the state lacks an effective infrastructure to provide timely, targeted support or to require specific actions that would improve student outcomes in persistently underperforming districts. Interviewees expressed concern that when districts continually underperform, there are few meaningful consequences for support or accountability—short of litigation or financial takeover in cases of insolvency.

Funding: Structural Constraints and Volatility

Even the most well-conceived reform efforts struggle to gain traction in a fiscal environment defined by instability, reactivity, and rigidity. Interviewees consistently emphasized that without a more reliable and responsive funding model, California's governance system will remain constrained in its ability to deliver sustained, equity-driven improvements. The following structural features of the system illustrate how volatility, short-term thinking, and funding silos continue to pose challenges to coherent governance and long-term improvement.

Prop 13 limits stable revenue. The 1978 passage of Prop 13 severely curtailed the property tax base that once supported local school funding. This has made the state heavily reliant on personal income taxes, which fluctuate significantly with the economy. Interviewees pointed to this volatility as a major barrier to long-term planning and sustained improvement.

One-time funds dominate the landscape. Due to the boom–bust cycles of California's tax revenue, in surplus years large sums of education funding are provided through one-time grants. Interviewees noted that while these funds are largely welcome, they rarely support the kind of sustained investment needed to build capacity or scale effective practices.

Prop 98 funding is limited to LEAs. Prop 98 guarantees a minimum level of funding, but these funds flow only to LEAs—namely, districts, charter schools, and COEs—restricting the state's ability to fund statewide agencies directly. This has complicated efforts to strengthen the role of state agencies.

The civil service pay scale limits state capacity. Compensation levels for state employees are often below those offered by LEAs, making it challenging for the state to remain competitive in attracting and retaining talent. While the scale is designed to ensure fairness and consistency across agencies statewide, limiting pay makes it difficult for the state to recruit and retain staff with the specialized expertise required to oversee large-scale reforms and provide technical assistance to LEAs. As a result, the state struggles to build and sustain the internal capacity needed to support local systems effectively.

These findings suggest that any meaningful reform of California's education governance must address not just programs and policy but also the incentives, capacity constraints, and fiscal architecture that shape how programs and policy are developed and implemented. A strategic approach to coherent governance would clarify roles, align incentives with responsibilities, and build essential capacity across all levels of the system.

Recommendations

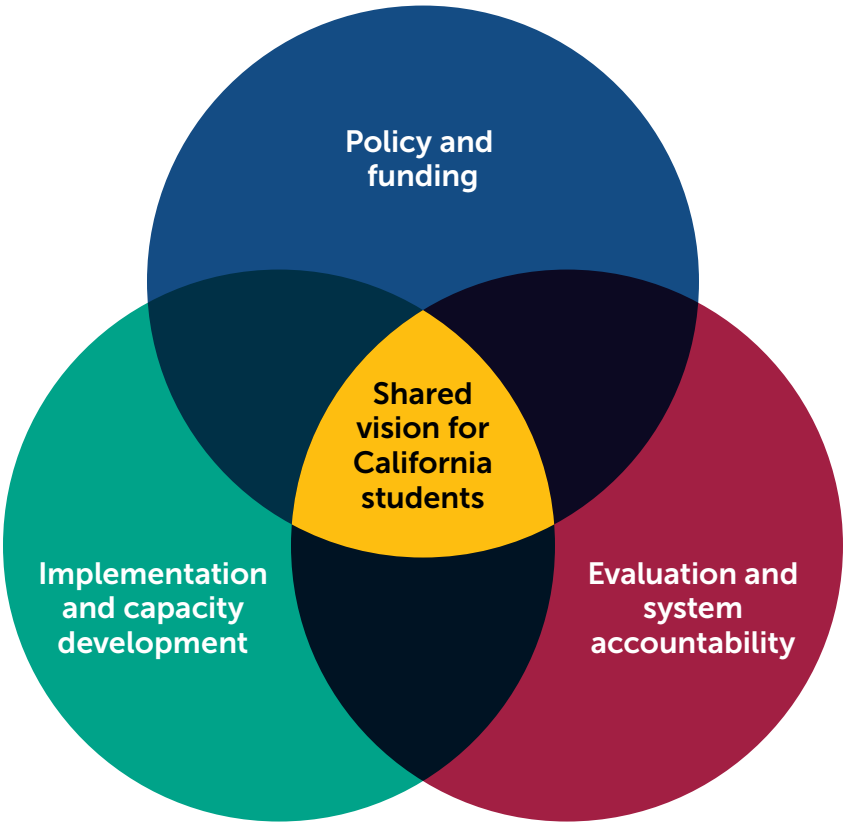
In February 2025, PACE convened a group of 30 of the nation's leading experts on California education governance for a discussion on improving the state's approach to policymaking and system coherence. Representing universities, district and county leadership, policy organizations, and research institutions, these participants came to the daylong convening having reviewed the key findings presented in this report thus far. Their discussions focused on how California's education governance structures might be reimagined to support student success more effectively. The goal of this convening was to move beyond diagnosing the state's governance challenges to develop concrete, actionable strategies that could improve coherence, accountability, and effectiveness across the system.

Discussions centered on the key challenges identified in this report, including fragmented decision-making, insufficient mechanisms for evaluating whether policies are achieving their intended outcomes, and a need for stronger support systems to ensure effective local implementation of state priorities. Participants considered models from other states and international contexts, examined past governance mechanisms in California that are no longer in place, and drew from their own experiences in policy development, research, school and district leadership, and advocacy to pinpoint the most pressing governance gaps in California alongside potential ways to fill those gaps. The convening participants generated high-level recommendations aimed at streamlining governance, aligning capacity and accountability, and increasing coherence to ensure that policy decisions are more responsive to student needs. While the convening did not include formal consensus-building processes, it surfaced a range of insightful and actionable ideas that inform these recommendations. These recommendations are not intended as critiques of any one agency or individual currently serving in education leadership roles or as a blueprint for change. Rather, they reflect a framework for rethinking how roles, responsibilities, and incentives can be realigned to support a more coherent and effective governance system that advances a shared vision for student success across the state.

A New Framework for Education Governance in California

As part of our research, we asked interview participants to analyze California's structures using the OECD framework for effective governance. The framework's six dimensions provided a useful lens for analyzing governance functions and helped participants see that there are key related but separate governance functions that should be clearly delineated within California's complex education system. However, in response to feedback that the six-dimension framework was overly complex, we refined and consolidated the model. As we further engaged with the OECD dimensions, we determined that California's education system would be better served by conceptualizing governance within a three-domain framework, presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Domains of Education Governance Responsibilities in California



This new framework incorporates three interrelated domains of governance responsibilities, each fundamentally aligned around a shared vision for California's students. Together, these domains serve as the foundation for a more coherent and functional governance system:

- **The policy and funding domain** sets statewide priorities, develops education policy, enacts legislation, and allocates resources.
- **The implementation and capacity-building domain** translates policy into practice across state, regional, and local levels, encompassing technical assistance, professional development, support for collaborative networks, and coordination of expertise.
- **The evaluation and system accountability domain** monitors policy development, implementation, and impact while holding entities accountable for promoting continuous learning and improvement at all levels.

A well-articulated shared vision can create alignment across these three domains, ensuring that districts and schools have the autonomy to innovate while remaining connected to a shared set of student-centered goals.

Identifying a Governance Leverage Point for System Flexibility and Coherence

Strengthening California's education governance system begins with clarifying roles and responsibilities to better align decision-making authority with accountability. This means clarifying the respective functions of the Office of the Governor, the state SPI, the SBE, the CDE, and other key entities to reduce redundancy and improve coordination.

A core issue at the heart of California's problems of education governance is not simply that the SPI is elected but also that the SPI's responsibilities are insufficiently defined and often overlap or conflict with the governor's authority. Although the California Constitution has defined the SPI as an elected position since the state's founding, subsequent statutes and policies have produced today's education governance structure, in which the elected SPI leads the CDE—the agency responsible for implementing the policies set by the governor, SBE, and legislature. This arrangement can work when an elected SPI is skilled at leading a large state department and where there is alignment and collaboration among leadership entities. However, the arrangement can also result in ambiguities in decision-making, overlapping responsibilities, and conflict or competition over authority. Instead of addressing the underlying challenges in California's dual-headed education system, state leaders have layered new roles and policies on top of an already fractured structure. This has produced an increasingly complex, multilayered governance apparatus, with overlapping leadership roles and responsibilities that various entities must navigate, often compounding rather than resolving problems of governance (see Figure 2). In this way, California's education governance system could be characterized as a *kludgeocracy* (Teles, 2013): a patchwork of overlapping policies, agencies, and initiatives that have been layered over time without cohesive coordination, often resulting in inefficiencies and confusion.

For decades, policymakers, researchers, and education leaders have raised concerns about the dual-headed nature of California's education governance system, citing its structural inefficiencies, unclear lines of authority, and potential for conflict (see the previous section of this report "Early Efforts to Inform Improvements to California Education Governance: 1849–1970"). More recently, in 2002, California's Master Plan for Education stated that "The structure of California's state-level governance of K-12 public education is one that has no clear lines of accountability due to multiple entities having overlapping responsibilities" (Joint Committee to Develop a Master Plan for Education—Kindergarten through University, 2002, p. 50). The report went on to recommend that "authority over the operations of California's PreK–12 public education system at large, and ultimate responsibility for the delivery of education to California's PreK–12 public education students in particular, should both reside within the Office of the Governor" (p. 128).

One argument in favor of the structural independence of the SPI from other state leaders is that this independence serves as an essential check and balance within California's education governance system. Undergirding this argument is the idea that separation could

mitigate the consolidation of power in a single office and ensure that education policy remains aligned with the needs of voters. However, critics contend that the current structure of the governance system leads to inefficiencies, ambiguities in roles and responsibilities, and obstacles to effective policy implementation, ultimately impeding the state's capacity to achieve sustained improvements in education. Many have argued that this fragmented system hinders coherent decision-making and policy implementation, which has led to repeated calls for reform. However, attempts to reform this structure—particularly through constitutional amendments to transition the SPI from an elected to an appointed position—have repeatedly encountered substantial political and procedural obstacles, including as recently as 2023 with Assembly Constitutional Amendment 9 (Lambert, 2023), which failed to advance despite support from key education stakeholders.

Our analysis offers a different perspective and a vision for a path forward that can strengthen pathways that build capacity and accountability to better support schools and improve instruction, ensuring more effective policy implementation and student learning: While the SPI's status as an elected official is constitutionally mandated, the specific responsibilities and authority of the SPI are determined by statute.[11] This distinction presents an opportunity for governance reform that would not require a constitutional amendment. Rather than seeking to change the elected nature of the SPI, a more pragmatic approach is to redefine the statutory responsibilities of the role, which in turn necessitates a broader reimagining of the education governance system as well as the roles and responsibilities of key entities. Such a restructuring is intended to bring greater coherence to the system by aligning responsibilities and authority with appropriate incentives and accountability, enabling each component to contribute more effectively towards advancing California's goals for students while retaining the checks and balances that an elected SPI provides. The recommendations that follow explore pathways to achieving this goal.

Realigning Governance Pathways with Domains of Responsibility

California delegates the provision and management of TK–12 education to districts. Nevertheless, the state retains constitutional responsibility for ensuring that the system functions effectively and equitably. To that end, California's education governance infrastructure should systematically align policy design with resource allocation, ensure the necessary capacity for policy implementation, and establish mechanisms to evaluate policy effectiveness while informing targeted adjustments to local support and continuous policy refinement. Such a redesign would require both structural and functional realignments of the status quo as well as clarifying entities' roles and relationships to strengthen alignment with and coherence across each of the three domains of responsibility.

[11] For example, California Education Code § 33302 states: "The Department of Education shall be conducted under the control of an executive officer known as the Director of Education." California Education Code § 33303 specifies that the SPI is ex officio Director of Education.

We propose three governance pathways for California's education system, each aligned with a distinct domain of responsibility as depicted in Figure 3. The following recommendations begin to outline, at a high level, the agencies and interagency relationships necessary for each pathway to carry out effectively the functions within each domain. Taken together, the three pathways constitute our recommendation for a restructured education governance system for California.

While these changes do not require amending the state constitution, they do demand a significant overhaul of current systems along with sustained commitment from state leaders. Importantly, there is growing will for change and widespread recognition that the current system is not serving students, families, or educators as it could—a recent survey found that fewer than half of likely voters believe California's TK–12 public education system is currently headed in the right direction (Baldassare et al., 2025). This sense of urgency for change was also evident in our interviews and at our convening. The proposals that follow are not intended as rigid solutions but rather as ideas to catalyze discussion and critical reflection on how California could develop a more coherent and effective governance structure.

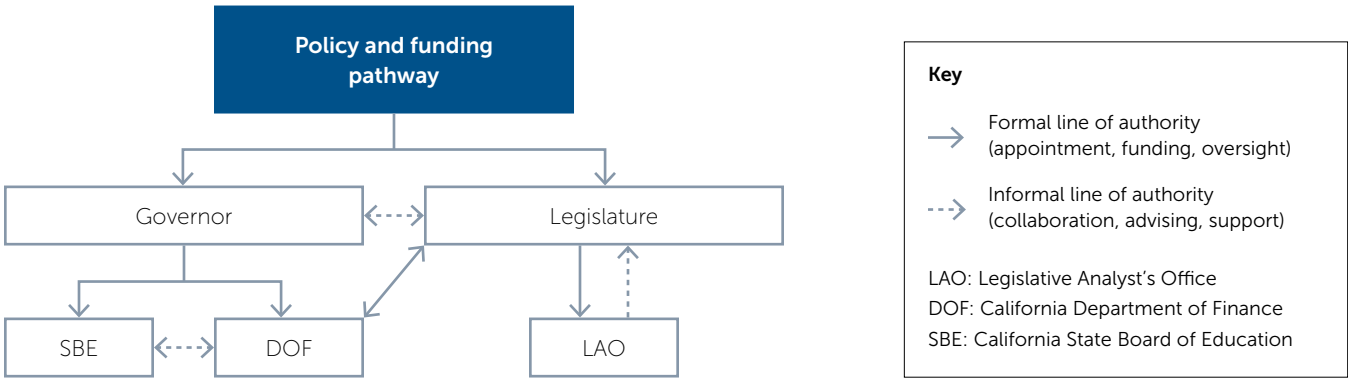
Recommendation 1

Reimagining Governance for Policy and Funding

The first domain of governance responsibilities in California's education system is policy and funding, which ensures that the state develops coherent policies aligned with budgets to advance its long-term vision for student success. Figure 4 illustrates how key state entities interact in shaping education policy and funding in California. The governor plays a central role by proposing the state budget and advancing policy priorities, supported by fiscal analysis from the California Department of Finance (DOF). The legislature develops and negotiates policy and appropriations, often informed by nonpartisan analysis from the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO). Once budget and policy decisions are reached through negotiation between the governor and legislature, the SBE provides policy direction and adopts regulations and standards to guide implementation across the state. Together, these entities form the pathway through which education priorities are translated into funding and policy at the state level.

This pathway is like the existing structure, with the governor, legislature, SBE, and DOF responsible for making policy and allocating resources. However, the restructuring of the other governance responsibilities would position the governor as the chief architect and steward responsible for aligning and advancing California's education system.

Figure 4. Reimagined Policy and Funding Pathway



As shown in Figure 3, all three domains of governance are aligned around a shared vision for California's students. Under the proposed policy and funding pathway, the governor would be responsible for leading efforts to establish, in collaboration with legislators and working with the SBE, the overarching vision for education in California to guide priorities across the state, regional, and local levels. In addition, the governor would be responsible for working with the DOF to intentionally craft budgets that support the vision—as well as the long-term strategy for making the vision a reality—proposing the budgets, and signing legislation aligned with the vision. The legislature, informed by the LAO, would continue to play its essential role by debating, refining, and approving policy and appropriations; authoring legislation in support of the shared vision for education; and ensuring democratic oversight and transparency in decision-making.

Advantages of a reimagined policy and funding pathway. This redesigned pathway would create a more coherent, accountable, and stable system for policymaking, funding, and implementation with several key benefits.

- **Leadership for setting a bold, coherent vision for education:** This pathway would position the governor as a key figure in shaping education priorities and would empower the governor to engage stakeholders in developing a shared vision for California's students—an aspirational goal to guide policy, implementation, and continuous improvement. Such a vision would align efforts across the system, ensuring coherence and a clear focus on advancing equitable student outcomes.
- **Reduced confusion and increased coherence:** Having a single, clearly identified education leader would reduce persistent confusion about who is responsible for California's education system. The current double-headed structure slows statewide response and can lead to fragmented or conflicting guidance; a unified leadership model would enable more coordinated action.

- **Aligned strategic direction and budgets:** With authority to set an overarching vision and strategy for education in California—and to align the budget with their priorities—the governor could develop long-term plans and use the budget as a strategic lever to advance them. The legislature would refine and approve the budget, but its deliberations would start from a coherent, strategy-aligned proposal.

Key considerations. While this reimagined structure offers opportunities for coherence and clarity, it also presents practical and political challenges that must be carefully navigated. These include long-standing tensions around the SPI's role, structural and statutory hurdles to shifting responsibilities, and fiscal reforms needed to support long-term planning. The following are key areas of resistance and complexity that policymakers should anticipate and address.

- **Risk of politicization and instability:** Consolidating policy and funding authority under the governor may heighten the risk of political dynamics influencing long-term priorities for education. Education agendas could shift abruptly with changing gubernatorial administrations, potentially undermining the continuity needed for sustained reforms and coherent implementation.
- **Local–state coordination challenges:** A stronger role at the state level may create tension with the principle of local control. LEAs may be wary of increased state direction, especially if it is perceived as limiting local flexibility or increasing compliance burdens. Effective stakeholder engagement and clear communication about the role of state strategy versus local decision-making will be essential.
- **Support for the SPI's appropriate influence in policymaking:** Although the SPI has never had legislative authority under statute, historically, their legislative and campaign backgrounds have encouraged SPIs to push beyond their statutory role and seek to shape education policy despite lacking direct authority to do so. Under the new governance model, it is likely that elected SPIs will continue to assert a policy role, reinforcing the importance of a strong and collaborative partnership between the SPI and the governor.

Recommended priorities for this new pathway. Initial priorities in the areas of policy and funding may include the following:

- **Establish the North Star for TK–12 education.** One of the governor's first priorities for education could be to establish a focused set of high-leverage goals that clearly articulate what California's education system aims to deliver for all students. These goals must reflect a commitment to equity and opportunity, and serve as a North Star for policy, funding, and implementation. While the process to develop this vision should be inclusive and statewide—engaging students, families, educators, communities, and the legislature—the governor must also lead with conviction, synthesizing input into a clear and actionable vision that drives coherence and

sustained progress across the system. To realize this vision, the governor should enact legislation and make strategic investments that advance this vision and ensure meaningful progress towards these goals.

- **Stabilize year-to-year funding for education.** Another priority could be to explore transitioning to a multiyear budgeting model for TK–12 education. Even though California's LEAs are required to develop 3-year financial projections through the LCAP process, the state itself operates on an annual budget cycle. Although the state provides nonbinding multiyear budget forecasts, budget and appropriation decisions are made annually, which can introduce year-to-year instability in education funding, especially considering the volatility of tax revenue given California's reliance on income taxes. A shift from one-time funds for programs to multiyear budgeting at the state level—where the governor and legislature commit to multiyear education appropriations—could provide greater fiscal stability and predictability for districts to plan staffing, programs, and long-term investments with more confidence. Multiyear state budgeting would strengthen alignment between funding and long-term policy goals, enabling strategic initiatives to be resourced in a sustained, reliable manner. Prioritizing multiyear budgeting in the interests of fiscal stability would involve navigating both technical and political challenges, potentially including revisiting Prop 98 reserve restrictions or exploring funding guarantees based on multiyear averages. While these steps could help insulate districts from funding volatility, they would require sustained political will and cross-agency coordination to balance long-term stability with the need for flexibility during inevitable economic downturns.
- **Improve and streamline Education Code and reporting requirements.** California's Education Code is exceedingly lengthy, complex, and fragmented, which creates significant challenges for school districts trying to navigate it and comply with state requirements. Districts are often required to produce numerous reports—many of which are duplicative, misaligned, or disconnected from meaningful improvement efforts—resulting in inefficiencies that consume valuable time and resources. Streamlining the Education Code, aligning reporting requirements, and reforming compliance processes would allow districts to focus more on what matters most: teaching and learning.

Recommendation 2

Reimagining Governance for Implementation and Capacity Development

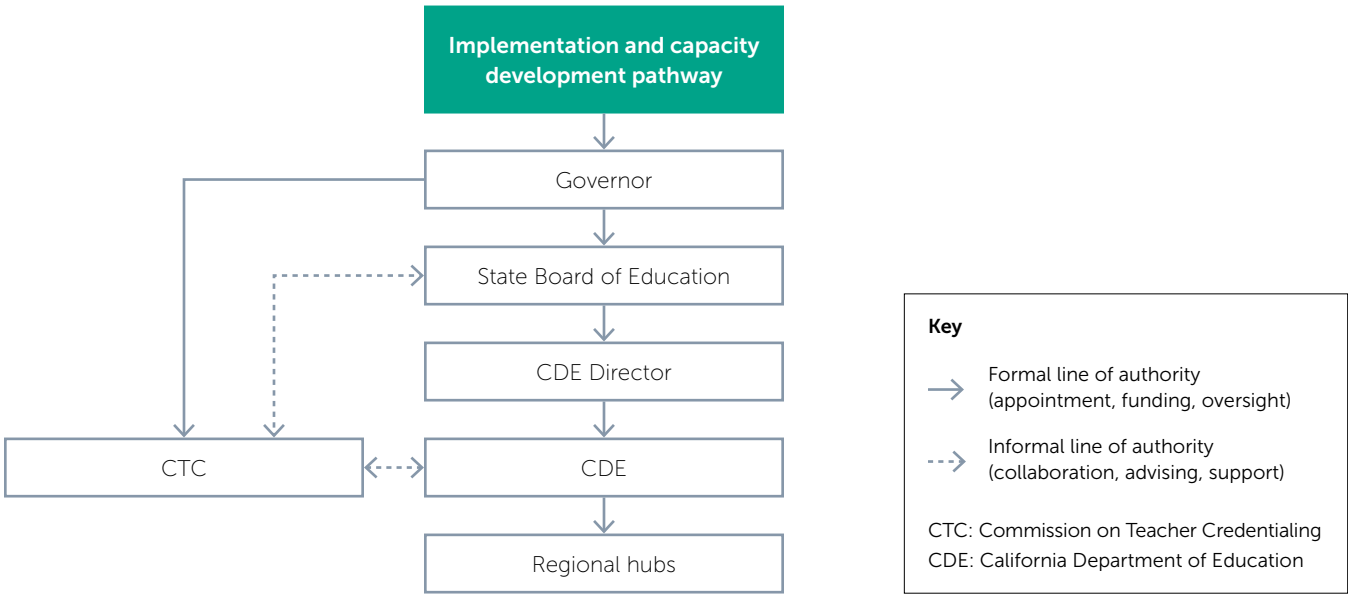
Responsibility for policy implementation and capacity development in California's education system is currently fragmented across multiple agencies, COEs, and external organizations, resulting in gaps in support, duplication of efforts, and inconsistencies in guidance for districts. The CDE, COEs, CCEE, CTC, FCMAT, SELPAs, SSoS—with its broad array of statewide lead agencies—and various nonprofit and research organizations all play roles in providing

technical assistance, professional development, and implementation support. However, there is no centralized mechanism for coordinating across these entities, resulting in overlapping initiatives, conflicting guidance, and inefficiencies in delivering support to districts and schools. Furthermore, these entities are charged with implementing specific programs and initiatives, leaving districts without support if their needs do not fit neatly into prescribed service areas.

With LCFF, California moved away from a paradigm centered on high-stakes accountability towards one focused on continuous improvement. In a restructured system, the recommended implementation and capacity development domain could be operationalized through a pathway designed to ensure coherent policy implementation and to build local capacity for continuous improvement. This reimagined pathway operates on the belief that school leaders are motivated to improve while acknowledging that they often face significant barriers—for example, insufficient resources or a lack of enabling conditions—that make it difficult to do so. While our current SSoS strives to provide the support for schools to continuously improve and represents a well-intentioned shift away from high-stakes, test-based accountability, in practice it still follows the same logic as NCLB: When districts and schools are identified for low performance, the burden to improve largely falls on them, even when they lack the capacity, resources, or flexibility to succeed. Instead of labeling and punishing schools for falling short or expecting them to navigate improvement alone, this pathway approaches improvement as a collective responsibility where all levels of the system come together to identify what is needed, remove barriers, and provide the targeted, coherent scaffolds of support necessary to help districts and schools succeed.

A primary goal of this pathway is to shift from a system of support that reacts to district failure towards a system that proactively provides scaffolds for success, offering the resources LEAs need to implement and sustain improvement. Achieving this shift will require cultivating a sense of shared responsibility for student outcomes, from the state level to the classroom, and clarifying where accountability for the success of the TK–12 education system resides. This includes establishing a clear feedback loop between schools, districts, and state-level entities so that local implementation challenges and barriers can be surfaced and addressed at the appropriate level of the system. As shown in Figure 5, the proposed governance realignment aims to clarify roles, enhance responsiveness, and define responsibilities for policy implementation and capacity development, with the governor playing a key leadership role.

Figure 5. Reimagined State-Level Implementation and Capacity Development Pathway



Under this framework:

- The governor serves as the authority for setting direction for education policy and ensuring that the system has the capacity to implement policies effectively.
- The governor appoints SBE members, who are education policy experts and leaders responsible for overseeing policy implementation at the state level.
- The SBE appoints a CDE director to serve as the chief administrator of the CDE, and the appointment may require confirmation by the State Senate. The director is responsible for ensuring effective policy implementation in accordance with policy intent as well as for building necessary capacity at the local level to translate policy into practice.
- The CDE works in partnership with the CTC to build the teacher workforce and strengthen teacher capacity across both pre-service preparation and in-service professional development to ensure coherence and continuity in the development of teachers throughout their careers, creating a teacher workforce with the skills and knowledge to support student learning effectively (Kirst, 2025). The CTC continues to operate independently but is politically and strategically aligned with the governor's education priorities and must coordinate with the SBE to ensure coherence between educator standards and TK–12 policy.
- The CDE establishes regional hubs for implementation support and capacity development that would operate under the CDE with clear lines of communication, resources, authority, and accountability flowing from the state. The divisions and

personnel within COEs and other agencies (e.g., CCEE) that currently support district and school improvement could be repurposed to serve within this new structure—either at the CDE or within regional hubs housed at COEs or existing geographic lead agencies.

If California were to adopt a model in which the State Board appoints the CDE director, it would align with the plurality of states that follow this governance approach. Currently, in 20 states, including Massachusetts, New York, Florida, and Mississippi, state boards of education directly appoint their chief state school officers. By contrast, only 12 states, including California, select their chief state school officer through direct election (Education Commission of the States, 2022). The State Senate could confirm the CDE director's appointment, providing democratic accountability and a check on executive authority consistent with other major state appointments.

This pathway realignment would enhance coherence by positioning the governor and SBE as the entities responsible for oversight of policy implementation while ensuring that the CDE operates under a clear, direct line of accountability to the SBE, under the governor. The reimagined structure could also statutorily align regional support with the constitutional responsibility of the state. The CDE's regional hubs could provide targeted implementation scaffolding and support to districts, counties, superintendents, local school boards, and school leadership, fostering consistent policy application, reducing fragmentation across regions, and sustaining local improvement efforts—while also attending to regional and local variation, and providing quicker feedback loops between state leadership and local needs.

This model draws on lessons from other states, including Tennessee,[12] North Carolina,[13] and Massachusetts,[14] where state education agencies staff regional hubs to provide comprehensive support to districts. Another model can be found in Ohio, in which State Support Teams (SSTs) function as state-directed regional hubs housed within regional LEAs. The Ohio Department of Education & Workforce (ODEW) funds and directs SSTs through performance agreements, while the host regional LEA serves as the SST's fiscal and administrative agent.[15] This arrangement

[12] The Tennessee Department of Education provides support to its 146 districts through its Centers of Regional Excellence (CORE), a network of eight regional offices that offer targeted academic support. Each CORE office is staffed with the following positions: math consultant, English language arts consultant, data analyst, interventionist, school nutrition consultant, career and technical education consultant, team evaluation coach, and administrative secretary (Tennessee Department of Education, 2023, pp. 134–136).
[13] North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction operates regional support teams, which embed state personnel in eight regions of the state to facilitate the design, implementation, and evaluation of all services and school improvement practices for North Carolina districts and schools (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2024).
[14] The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education staffs regional assistance teams that provide leadership, guidance, and systems to support districts in reaching their goals for improved student outcomes (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2025).
[15] Not every regional LEA (Educational Service Center, or ESC) hosts a State Support Team (SST); Ohio has 51 regional LEAs and 16 SSTs, with each SST responsible for a region that encompasses multiple ESCs and the districts they serve (Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, n.d.).

creates a hybrid governance structure in which regional LEAs provide local infrastructure, and SSTs support the local implementation of state-defined priorities—such as mathematics and literacy instruction, reducing chronic absenteeism, and support for students with disabilities—delivering consistent statewide technical assistance through locally governed agencies, at no cost to districts or schools. Similarly, the CDE's regional hubs could be tasked with providing districts the targeted scaffolding and support needed to improve student learning and with intervening directly when a school or district requires additional assistance.

Advantages of a reimagined implementation and capacity pathway. By shifting to a model where the SBE oversees policy implementation and the CDE operates under direct oversight from the SBE, this framework would:

- **Ensure expertise in education leadership and administration:** Currently, the CDE is led by a publicly elected official whose selection depends on the effectiveness of their electoral campaign. Since 1993, the position has primarily been held by individuals with legislative backgrounds rather than extensive experience in managing large education agencies. The tendency for the position to be held by politicians rather than experienced education system administrators constrains CDE leadership's understanding of how education systems and schools operate, thereby undermining coherence in policy implementation. Under this reimagined model, the SBE, composed of appointed experts in education policy, would prioritize candidates for the CDE director position with qualifications and deep experience in education administrative leadership, large-scale policy implementation, and strategic system improvement.
- **Reduce governance confusion:** Under the current system, the CDE is headed by an elected official who operates alongside and independently of the governor, SBE, and legislature, which can lead to unclear decision-making authority. Furthermore, lack of trust in CDE's leadership has prompted legislative workarounds, such as creating the CCEE to oversee school and district improvement, and awarding contracts for state programs to COEs or external providers rather than having them managed by the CDE. The proposed realignment eliminates potential conflicting leadership directives, ensuring that the CDE is administered in alignment with policy intent. With the pressures of reelection removed, an appointed CDE director could concentrate fully on advancing the agency's goals, supporting long-term focus, and maintaining institutional stability.
- **Improve interagency coordination:** A more streamlined governance model could enhance collaboration among the CDE, the SBE, and other student-serving state agencies that are directly overseen by the governor, such as California Health and Human Services, which includes the departments of social services and public health. Aligning these agencies more directly under a shared executive structure could reduce bureaucratic silos, conflicting directives, and duplicative efforts, which can arise when multiple entities operate under separate lines of authority and funding streams.

The proposed structural realignment could improve resource coordination and enable timelier responses to cross-cutting issues, such as student mental health, chronic absenteeism, early childhood education, and support for students experiencing homelessness or the foster system.

- **Increase equity across the system:** A core function of state governance is to guarantee that the quality of support available to districts and schools is not dependent on the county in which they are located or the relative strength of their COE. Every student, regardless of geography, should benefit from a baseline of high-quality regional support. By clarifying state oversight and strengthening statewide coherence, this model helps promote equitable access to resources and expertise.

Key considerations. While shifting to a governance model in which the SBE oversees implementation and the CDE operates under its direct oversight offers potential for greater coherence and alignment, it also raises important concerns and trade-offs. Such a shift would require careful examination of political, operational, and equity implications; the following are key challenges and considerations associated with this proposed governance change.

- **Resistance from existing stakeholders:** Current officeholders, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders may resist a shift in governance structure, particularly if they perceive a loss of influence or a diminished role in the system.
- **Uncertainty in transition:** Restructuring governance could create short-term disruptions in roles and responsibilities as processes and reporting relationships are redefined. Districts and other education stakeholders may struggle with initial uncertainty about new chains of authority, and new roles and responsibilities will need to be defined and revisited as actors within the system adjust to the changes.
- **Doubts about CDE's ability to lead:** Under its current funding and staffing structure, the CDE lacks the necessary capacity to assume this expanded role. After decades of disinvestment and workarounds to circumvent the CDE, structures, roles, and programs at the department will need to be rebuilt—along with the trust necessary to make them effective. Consideration would need to be given to how competitive salaries could be funded.
- **Need for clarification of the current role of COEs:** The establishment of regional capacity-building centers under the CDE would require thoughtful orchestration of a clearly defined framework to delineate roles and responsibilities, ensuring alignment with COEs and minimizing redundancy. The current support contracts across the state for COEs to provide services within the SSoS would need to be realigned. Without careful planning, this structural shift could lead to jurisdictional disputes, resistance from COEs, and uncertainty among districts regarding authority, resource allocation, and service delivery.

Recommended priorities for this new pathway. An initial priority of the implementation and capacity development pathway should be to strengthen and support district capacity, particularly in areas where the principle of subsidiarity has been insufficient to address persistent challenges. While local control remains a cornerstone of California's education system, many districts face structural or resource limitations that constrain their ability to respond effectively to complex governance, workforce, and instructional issues. In such cases, the state should assume a more active, supportive, and coordinated role, especially in districts struggling with performance, leadership, or sustainability. This includes deploying oversight and technical assistance where systemic challenges are widespread and local efforts have proven inadequate. Specifically, the state can take the following actions:

- **Empower existing expertise.** A recommendation for strengthening this pathway is to leverage the expertise already within the system by identifying high-performing counties, districts, and leaders—particularly those with a track record of improving student outcomes and scaling effective practices—to become regional hubs and service providers under this new model. While the SSoS has surfaced valuable local expertise, this proposal introduces greater alignment with the statewide vision, along with clear lines of accountability, authority, and access to resources. By formally connecting regional leadership to the state's strategic goals and equipping regional hubs with the authority and support to drive implementation, they can move beyond providing technical assistance alone to become coordinated drivers of instructional improvement and capacity building across the state.
- **Expand state support for educator-workforce development.** California has already invested in recruitment and retention strategies, such as teacher residencies and Golden State Teacher Grants (Learning Policy Institute, 2025), but further efforts are needed to sustain and bring coherence to these efforts. The state could explore regional workforce planning, targeted technical assistance in workforce recruitment and retention efforts, and pipeline partnerships in hard-to-staff areas (Mathews et al., 2024). Statewide coordination could help align investments, reduce duplication, and ensure that preparation programs meet local needs.
- **Provide guidance and oversight on critical emergent issues.** School districts often face critical challenges that are shared with other districts; the state has an important role to play in helping them navigate widespread complex emergent issues by providing clear, practical guidance and consistent support. School closures are an example of one area in which state guidance is needed, as declining enrollment forces tough local decisions that often face strong community resistance. While California has issued guidance related to school closures (California Department of Education, 2025), convening participants noted that current materials are generally at too high a level to be of practical use. The state could develop clearer protocols, decision-making frameworks, communication strategies, and implementation support to guide districts across the state through school-closure or consolidation processes, including

community-engagement practices that promote transparency and trust. Furthermore, the state could play a direct role in decision-making, such as implementing a process for school closures that takes the decision out of the local context. Incorporating elements such as an independent commission, objective criteria, and a transparent public hearing process could help ensure that these decisions are made fairly and consistently (Hahnel & Marchitello, 2023). Other areas in which districts could use stronger guidance and support for capacity development include early literacy, transitioning to TK, support for English learners, and addressing chronic absenteeism. District leaders would also benefit from guidance on leading amid and responding to political divisiveness.

By taking a more active, strategic role in these high-leverage areas, the state can complement local control with targeted support that scaffolds and builds district capacity in high-need and high-leverage areas, promoting more coherent implementation of statewide equity goals.

Recommendation 3

Reimagining Governance for Evaluation and System Accountability

Creating a new implementation and capacity development pathway in which SBE appoints a director to lead the CDE requires answering a key question: What is the role of the SPI in this reimagined structure? Rather than eliminating or diminishing the SPI's role, this proposed governance redesign presents an opportunity to redefine the office to take advantage of the SPI's structural independence while filling a critical gap in California's system: providing leadership in evaluation of policy and system accountability.

California's education governance system currently lacks a consistent, formal, and systemic mechanism for evaluating whether education policies achieve their intended outcomes. This absence of policy evaluation has led to a proliferation of policies that pass unchecked and unevaluated, resulting in inefficiencies, redundancies, and unintended consequences. Some actors within the system are incentivized to present an overly positive view—emphasizing successes and downplaying challenges—which can obscure when schools are struggling or when policies are falling short of their intended impact. Legislators, for example, tend to gain recognition for passing new bills rather than for ensuring that policies are implemented effectively. This dynamic contributes to the passage of many laws each year that lack adequate funding or plans for evaluation. Governors, particularly those with further political aspirations, may likewise focus on highlighting their accomplishments rather than critically assessing whether their initiatives are achieving desired outcomes. With an elected SPI running the CDE, they too have an incentive to demonstrate success over engaging in rigorous, transparent evaluation of the system's performance.

Within this context, litigation has become the de facto accountability mechanism in TK–12 education. Equity advocates, families, and legal organizations frequently resort to lawsuits as a means of holding the state accountable for failing to provide adequate educational opportunities. However, litigation-based accountability has several significant drawbacks: Judicial decisions are case specific and lack systemwide coherence; and judges and legal advocates may not have deep expertise in education systems or policy design, leading to rulings that attempt to resolve individual grievances without addressing broader structural issues. In addition, legal proceedings are reactive rather than proactive. This makes them slow: By the time an issue reaches the courts, significant harm may have already been done to students and communities. Adversarial approaches are also inefficient mechanisms for systemic change because they respond to crises rather than as part of a structured, data-driven process for continuous improvement. By redefining the SPI's role as one centered on evaluation and system accountability, the state could replace antagonistic or litigation-driven accountability with a proactive, systemwide approach to monitoring and improving equitable implementation of education policy.

Under this new model, the SPI could serve as California's elected chief champion for students, examining the implementation of education policies and offering formative feedback for system improvement. The reimagined SPI role would complement the legislature's oversight role and the State Board's accountability authority. Comparable to the controller—though with an emphasis on education system performance rather than fiscal compliance—and akin to an ombudsman—but with a proactive as well as a reactive approach—the reimagined SPI role could lead efforts to provide independent, nonpartisan evaluation analysis to inform not only policymaking but also the public. Another responsibility of the office would be to surface challenges and guide continuous improvement efforts across the education system. The SPI would have a role in evaluating system effectiveness, highlighting areas where policies are and are not effectively serving students, and leveraging the position's bully pulpit to advocate for improvements in education.

As mentioned previously, one critique often raised against moving greater implementation authority under the governor and SBE is that such a move would concentrate too much power in the executive branch. However, this reimagined role for the SPI would serve as a critical check against unilateral decision-making, reinforcing balance in the governance system. Equally important is the separation of evaluation from implementation: Entrusting the same entity with both executing and assessing policy creates risks of bias and self-validation on the part of the evaluator, and can also undermine trust, making those receiving support for policy implementation less willing to be transparent about their challenges. Maintaining independence in evaluation of policy from policymaking and policy implementation allows for greater objectivity, credibility, and public confidence in the integrity of the findings.

Redefining the SPI's role as statewide evaluation and system accountability. Considering the ongoing dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education and the weakening of federal oversight, California's commitment and leadership in evaluation, accountability, and continuous improvement are more important now than ever. The federal government has historically had a role in enforcing civil rights and setting minimum standards for accountability and transparency. With the dilution of these federal roles, states face more responsibility to uphold equity, transparency, and evidence-based policymaking on their own.[16] California has an opportunity to restructure its education governance system in ways that strengthen the state's capacity for meaningful evaluation—producing information that not only supports learning and continuous improvement but also informs oversight and accountability. By building systems that prioritize coherence, transparency, and the use of evidence, California can model how education evaluation can be embedded within governance to drive both support and responsibility across all levels of the system. California can build and sustain formal, transparent, systemic mechanisms for evaluating whether education policies are achieving their intended outcomes—not only to drive local improvement but also to lead nationally during an era of growing decentralization.

In this proposed governance structure, the SPI would lead the state's efforts to generate meaningful information to drive improvement, increase transparency, and improve coherence across the system as a nonpartisan evaluator of system effectiveness on behalf of students. The SPI would also act as a voice for students' and families' needs and rights. This role would leverage the SPI's statewide elected position to elevate the concerns of voters, drive public discourse, and promote accountability for effective policy implementation through transparency, shared understanding, and responsiveness to the electorate—rather than through administrative control or punitive enforcement.

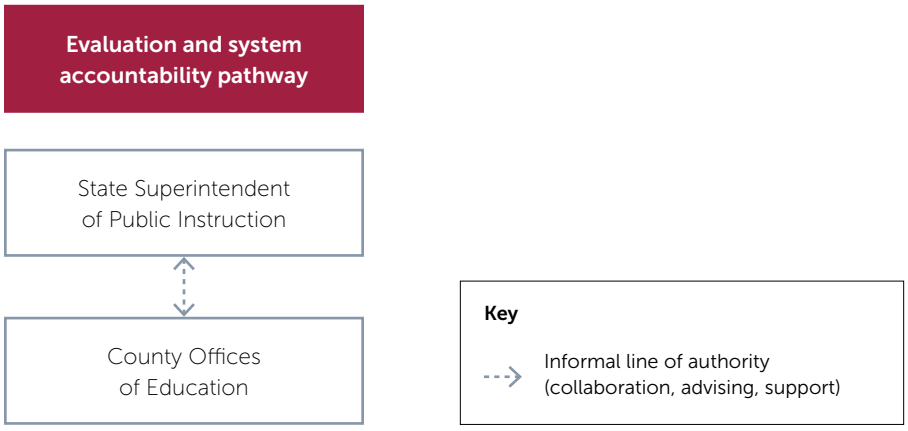
The reimagined office of the SPI would lead independent, data-driven analyses of education policies, funding allocations, and programs in partnership with the LAO, the C2C Data System, the CDE, and, potentially, nonprofits, universities, and research organizations. Analyses would identify gaps, inefficiencies, and unintended consequences in policy implementation, evaluating whether state-level investments and reforms are achieving intended student outcomes. The SPI would regularly publish statewide education reports to highlight successes, challenges, and areas needing reform, in addition to holding public hearings and media briefings to create external pressure for action on inequalities, inefficiencies, or implementation failures. These findings would play a critical role in enhancing the state's capacity-building efforts by surfacing promising practices for broader dissemination, guiding the focus of professional learning, and supplying data that support continuous improvement across the system.

[16] In October 2025, the legislature passed AB 715, a law mandating that schools strengthen protections against antisemitism and other discrimination. Rather than placing the administration of this law under the CDE, this bill established a new Office of Civil Rights under the administration of the Government Operations Agency.

Redefining COEs' role as local evaluation and system accountability. In most counties, COEs are governed by elected county boards and an elected county superintendent, and function as locally oriented regional support for districts. Situated within a broader county ecosystem, COEs operate alongside other county departments that play a role in providing physical, mental, and behavioral health; nutrition; early childhood; child welfare; social and other services to students and families. With the CDE taking the lead on statewide professional development and technical assistance for school improvement in the reimagined model, COEs could focus on the functions they are uniquely positioned to fulfill: ensuring rigorous evaluation of LCAPs and school finances, providing high-quality alternative education, and coordinating and brokering countywide resources to meet students' diverse whole child needs. This shift would allow COEs to leverage their deep local knowledge, relationships, and responsiveness to support districts and communities while ensuring that the responsibility for instructional capacity building and systemwide coherence rests with the state—although some COEs might serve as fiscal agents for one of CDE's regional hubs. As mentioned above, divisions and personnel currently within COEs could be repurposed to serve within regional hubs. As an example, in this model COEs could take a stronger role in advancing community schools by proactively curating and coordinating local and regional support services as well as by leading efforts to blend and braid state and county resources, relieving individual schools of the burden of independently identifying and assembling these supports. By clarifying COEs' role in this way, this proposed restructuring would capitalize on the complementary strengths of state and county governance, creating a more coherent, efficient, and equitable division of responsibilities.

Given the county superintendents' status as publicly elected local officials, COEs would not "report to" the SPI in this reimagined structure but could participate in a network of shared responsibilities and common interests focused on leveraging evaluation and system accountability to meet students' needs. In the visual representation of this structure shown in Figure 6, a dotted line between COEs and the SPI signifies their participation in this network of shared interests.

Figure 6. Reimagined Evaluation and System Accountability Pathway



Advantages of a reimagined evaluation and system accountability pathway. Reimagining the SPI as California's independent evaluator and student advocate offers several benefits that strengthen accountability, equity, and systemwide effectiveness. The resulting evaluation and accountability pathway would:

- **Create a systemic, proactive approach to evaluation and system accountability:** California currently lacks a formal structure for evaluating the impact of education policies. Redefining the SPI's role to focus on independent, continuous, data-driven evaluation fills this gap, establishing leadership over a systemwide feedback loop that supports learning, policy refinement, and ongoing improvement. It also ensures that ineffective or inequitable policies can be adjusted before they cause harm or waste limited resources. The SPI, who is already a statutory member of the governing board for California's C2C Data System, could play a leading role in leveraging the data system to assess whether state education policies and programs are achieving equitable, effective outcomes.
- **Establish checks and balances:** Consolidating more implementation authority under the governor and SBE could increase efficiency and effectiveness in policy implementation and capacity development, but it risks overcentralizing power. An empowered, independent SPI provides a critical check and balance: a nonpartisan elected leader who monitors how policies are implemented and what policies are working, for whom, and under what conditions. This design prevents unilateral decisions and promotes transparency, particularly for historically underserved students.
- **Elevate student and family voices in state decision-making:** California's complex system often lacks accessible pathways for students and families to express concerns or influence state-level decisions. Positioning the SPI as a champion for all students leverages the bully pulpit power of the office to elevate students' and families' voices as well as to strengthen public engagement in education policy. Through public reports, hearings, and a visible media presence, the SPI can amplify grassroots concerns and apply pressure for change where systems are failing.
- **Position California as a national leader in equity-driven education governance:** With the weakening of federal oversight, states must take the lead in upholding equity and effectiveness in education. California can serve as a model by building a transparent, evidence-based structure for system accountability. This reinforces the state's national leadership and commitment to education equity even if the balance of responsibility for oversight shifts away from the federal role toward greater state authority.

Key considerations. Reimagining the SPI as an independent evaluator and advocate for students presents promising opportunities to strengthen systemwide accountability, but it also introduces important trade-offs. The SPI's effectiveness will depend on access to data and the strength of informal levers, interagency cooperation, and sustained investment. The following considerations highlight potential challenges that could limit the role's impact and that must be addressed to ensure the model's success.

- **Limited levers for impact without implementation authority:** Although the SPI could leverage transparency and public accountability to drive system improvement, and also shape priorities through sustained public messaging, without direct authority over policy or budget decisions, the SPI may identify critical gaps but lack the power to enforce changes. This could reduce the role's influence, especially if other entities are unresponsive to findings or public recommendations.
- **Capacity constraints and resource requirements:** To fulfill an expanded evaluative role, the SPI's office would need access to data and real-time analysis. While the federal government has historically invested in research that supports California's education system, recent cuts to federal research infrastructure mean that state-level investment will now be essential to ensure the continued production of high-quality, policy-relevant analysis. Without sustained investment, the office may struggle to conduct rigorous analyses or provide timely, actionable insights. Moreover, if the governor or legislature perceives the SPI's evaluative function as a political threat—especially if it could expose weaknesses in their policy initiatives—they may be disincentivized to allocate sufficient resources to the office, undermining its potential impact.
- **Potential for politicization despite intentions of independence:** The elected nature of the SPI position may still expose it to political pressure. Public trust in evaluations could erode if findings are perceived as politically motivated or if the office becomes entangled in partisan debates.

Recommended priorities for this new pathway. Initial priorities of the evaluation and system accountability pathway include leadership in the following areas:

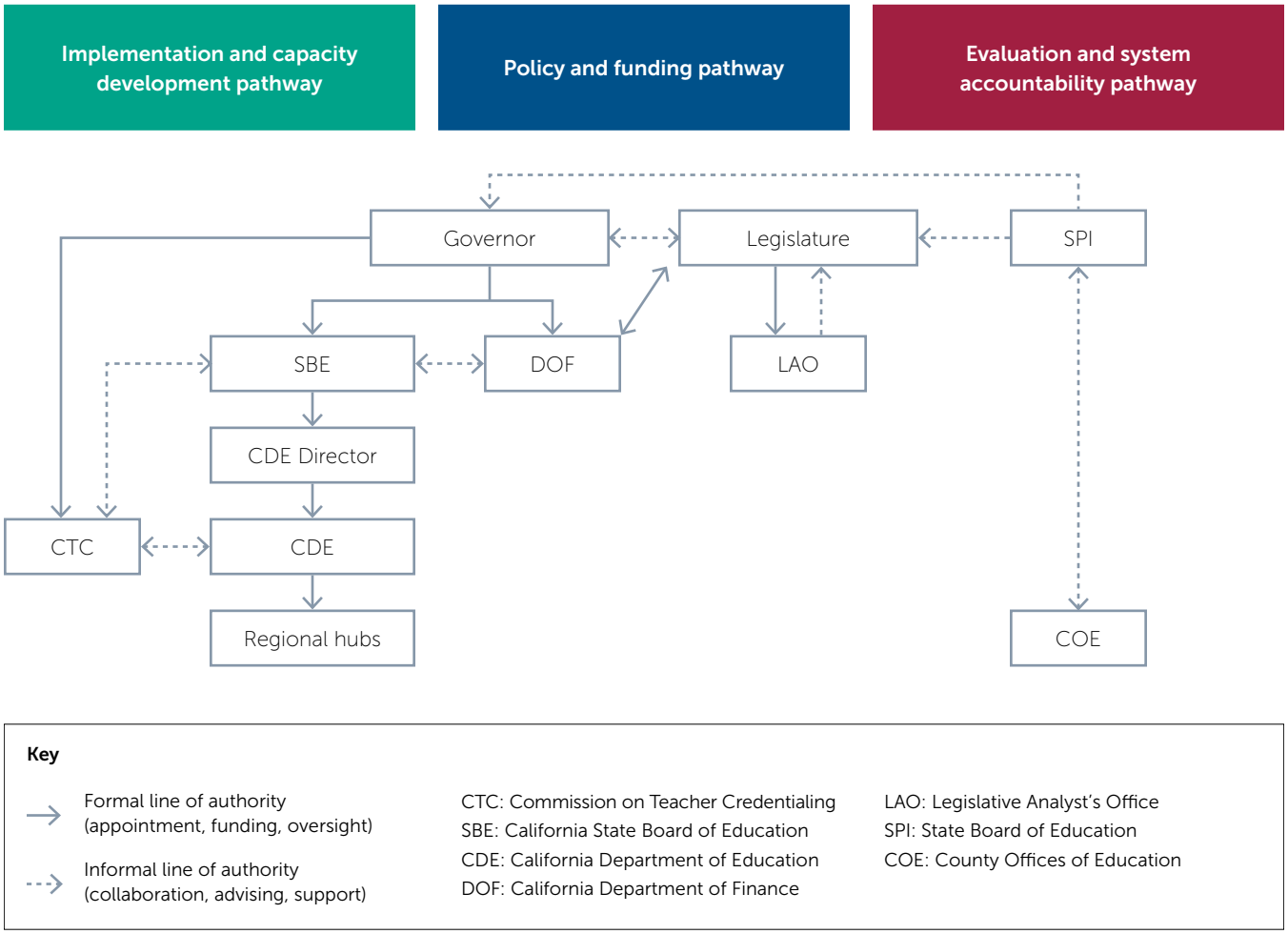
- **Establish a dedicated evaluation office and a policy-impact review process.** To promote a culture of continuous learning, the office of the SPI could institutionalize a structured process for policy-impact reviews, working towards processes that build evaluation timelines into new policies—such as sunset provisions or reauthorization reviews—to assess effectiveness, feasibility, unintended consequences, and alignment with other initiatives (Miller, 2025). This office could coordinate a research hub with external researchers, legislative staff, and state agencies to conduct longitudinal studies, identify best practices, and provide real-time, actionable insights to policymakers. Its work should prioritize system coherence, alignment between policy intent and implementation, and equity—not just easily measurable outcomes.

- **Modernize how data are conceptualized and used, shifting from compliance to learning.** California's data infrastructure must evolve beyond compliance-focused dashboards towards systems that enable continuous learning, transparency, and informed local decision-making. The SPI can take a leadership role in redefining the purpose and use of data by ensuring clarity about what the state aims to achieve, then providing timely, actionable information on both implementation—who was served and what was delivered—and outcomes. Drawing on the full breadth of available data, including the C2C Data System, this approach would support educators, policymakers, researchers, and the public in understanding student experiences across systems and over time, helping inform more effective, equitable policy decisions that are grounded in evidence and aligned to shared goals.
- **Promote reciprocal accountability across the system.** Accountability in a reimagined system must be reciprocal: Just as schools and districts are expected to improve outcomes, the state should be accountable for creating enabling conditions for improvement (Elmore, 2002). The SPI could champion a more balanced model of system accountability that supports learning and capacity building at all levels of the system, shifting from a culture of compliance to one of continuous improvement.

Towards a Coherent System: Aligning Governance Across Pathways

The governance redesign recommended in this report offers a forward-looking framework built around three interdependent pathways—implementation and capacity building, policy and funding, and evaluation and system accountability—each essential to advancing an equitable and coherent public education system (Figure 7).

Figure 7. A Reimagined State-Level Education Governance System



While each pathway addresses a distinct set of state-level governance responsibilities, the effectiveness of the restructured system depends on how well the elements of all three pathways function together. A reimagined policy and funding pathway—led by the governor, legislature, SBE, and DOF—would bring needed coherence to policy development and budget planning while promoting long-term fiscal stability. The implementation and capacity development pathway would ensure that policies are translated into practice through coordinated state, regional, and local support systems that invest in professional learning and technical assistance.

The evaluation and system accountability pathway, anchored by a redefined SPI role, would provide independent, evidence-based feedback on how policies are working in practice, informing continuous improvement across the system.

Together, these pathways establish a structure in which each part of the system has a clear role to play, with mechanisms for collaboration, mutual accountability, and shared purpose. The goal is not simply better alignment but a governance model that supports sustained progress for all of California's students by balancing state leadership with local innovation, incorporating checks and balances across agencies, and elevating the importance of evidence, evaluation, and data-informed practice.

A transformation of this scale would inevitably disrupt existing structures, requiring a careful, system-wide examination of the roles and continued relevance of agencies, intermediaries, and support organizations. California's education system has evolved to become a complex web of entities designed to address discrete challenges; realizing a coherent whole child and equity agenda will demand a whole-of-system perspective—one that redefines and aligns these functions around shared goals and a common theory of improvement. While such change will create short-term turbulence, it also offers an opportunity to align and mobilize the state's substantial latent capacity—its expertise, networks, and institutional infrastructure—in more coherent and productive ways, ultimately strengthening the system's ability to serve all students well.

Conclusion

The need to strengthen California's education governance has never been more urgent. Schools are grappling with deepening inequities, persistent opportunity gaps, and the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning and well-being. At the same time, the federal government's retreat from its traditional role in civil rights enforcement, accountability, research and evaluation, and oversight places even greater responsibility on states to lead. California must take bold and strategic steps now to ensure that its governance systems are not only coherent and efficient but also equity centered, transparent, and responsive to student needs.

This report traces the evolution of California's education governance system, examines its current structure, and incorporates insights from leading experts on its performance and potential. By situating present-day challenges within their historical and structural contexts, we aim to establish a shared understanding of how governance shapes educational opportunity across the state.

The restructuring of California's education governance system proposed in this report creates clearer lines of authority and a more stable foundation for long-term planning and improvement. Importantly, redefining the SPI as an independent evaluator and champion for students adds critical capacity for continuous, data-driven oversight and elevates students' and families' voices in policymaking.

These shifts are not just technical adjustments—they are essential steps towards building an education governance system that can meet the demands and opportunities of this moment. This report offers a starting point for policymakers, educators, researchers, and community members to collaborate on the strategic reforms needed to provide the necessary foundation for equity, excellence, and enduring public trust in the promise of California public education.

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