

A Stronger Education System for California's Students

Getting Down to Facts III Policy Recommendations

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California has invested billions in efforts to improve education, yet too many students are not getting the education they need to thrive—and the state's education system often makes it harder, not easier, for schools to improve. A new brief from PACE draws on evidence from Getting Down to Facts III to identify three areas for strengthening California's education system where state leaders can make the biggest difference. First, California should set a small number of clear priorities for education and align policy and funding around them while reducing compliance burdens. Second, the state should ensure that every district has high-quality support to improve teaching by centralizing accountability, stabilizing funding for ongoing needs, and providing practical guidance for curricula selection. Third, the state should strengthen and make affordable the pathways that prepare new teachers. Together, these actions would reduce fragmentation and help promising reforms reach more classrooms.

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Introduction

California's future depends on its young people. Our schools prepare the next generation of Californians to build strong communities, participate in our democracy, and power one of the world's largest economies. Yet too many students are not getting the education they need to thrive—and the state's education system often makes it harder, not easier, for schools to improve.

California now has an unusually robust body of evidence about why. Getting Down to Facts III offers a comprehensive look at what is working, what is getting in the way, and where state leaders have the greatest opportunity to make a difference. The good news is that California has invested billions of dollars in promising efforts to improve education, from early literacy and community schools to teacher preparation and high school redesign. But too often, good work happens despite a fragmented system and an overwhelming number of disparate initiatives. **New initiatives are unlikely to succeed without parallel work to fix key aspects of the state system.**

The evidence points to three critical areas of focus to strengthen California's education system.

1 Set a Few Clear Goals for Students—And Align the System to Achieve Them

Clear priorities are critical for ensuring that California remains focused on improving outcomes for all students, particularly those who have historically been least well served by its schools. The state currently lacks clear priorities for education. The California School Dashboard (Dashboard) has dozens of indicators and subgroup ratings competing for attention, and the state's highest priorities can be hard to discern. The result can be a system that pulls leaders towards reacting to the latest red flag rather than sustaining attention on a small number of consequential student outcomes.

A focus on compliance compounds the problem. California district administrators spend roughly 20 hours a week—nearly two fifths of their work time—on state and federal compliance activities, including financial reporting, special education, the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), student-support programs, and human resources requirements. Some of that work is necessary, but when reporting requirements proliferate, they consume time and attention that local leaders could otherwise devote to improving schools and student outcomes.

The state should be clearer about the outcomes it expects and organize its policies, funding, accountability, and support around them. Currently, there is an overwhelming number of measures and indicators in California. On the other end of the spectrum, while statewide assessments provide important information, no single test should become synonymous with the

outcome itself. Further, being clearer about prioritized outcomes also does not mean prescribing a single local strategy. The state should provide a clear destination, multiple ways to understand progress, better evidence about how to improve, and sustained help over enough time to get there. Greater clarity would also help parents and caregivers answer a basic question: Is my child—and the school they attend—on track?

What could this look like?

- **A small number of statewide student goals:** Establish a clear state education strategy spanning early childhood through readiness for college, career, and life, and use those goals to discipline new policy and spending. Accountability should use multiple measures of student progress while eliminating burdensome reporting.
- **Accountability that makes the priorities visible:** Streamline planning and reporting over time and revise the Dashboard so the state's highest priority outcomes stand out rather than competing with dozens of signals.
- **Policies and funding that reinforce the same goals over time:** New initiatives should connect to the state's priorities and include the sustained support districts need to implement them well.

Other states demonstrate that a sustained focus around a small number of priorities is possible. Louisiana built a state strategy around a small number of priorities and created a single annual "Super App" that consolidates local funding and planning around them. Mississippi established a "north star" of student outcomes and paired coherent policies with implementation support and a decade-long horizon.

Start here:

Initiate a process led by state and district leaders to set these goals. In the interim, give district leaders immediate relief from burdensome reporting. Use waivers, streamlined guidance, extensions, and other available tools to reduce requirements that consume local leaders' time without helping them plan. That would free time for schools and students while signaling that the state is serious about making the system work better.

Make Sure Every District Can Get the Help It Needs to Improve Teaching

In California's local-control system, districts carry enormous responsibility for the quality of teaching across their schools. But no one entity is responsible for ensuring that every district can get the sustained, high-quality help needed to do that work well. Support is scattered across state agencies, County Offices of Education (COEs), nonprofits, consultants, publishers, and other providers.

The gap is especially visible in teacher learning. Decades of research show that teachers improve through professional learning tied closely to classroom practice, sustained over time, and reinforced through opportunities to practice, receive coaching and feedback, reflect, and collaborate. Yet those opportunities are far from consistently available. For example, there is wide variation in both the availability and quality of math-specific professional learning. One in five districts in a representative sample offered no professional learning in TK–8 mathematics in 2024–25; even among those that did, professional learning was often limited or episodic rather than the sustained, high-quality support that teachers and administrators need. Districts frequently lacked both the time and the instructional expertise to provide that support.

California’s 58 COEs already have crucial required roles in fiscal oversight and LCAP review, and those responsibilities should continue. Some COEs also provide valuable support for teaching and learning, but those services are not required, consistently available, or high quality across the state. District leaders often must pay for the deeper support they need from COEs, vendors, nonprofits, publishers, and consultants—if they can afford it. The result is a system in which access to necessary instructional support depends too much on geography, size, local capacity, and resources.

California needs to make a single entity responsible for ensuring that every district—large or small, urban or rural—can count on high-quality support for teaching and learning. That entity need not provide every service itself; its job should be to ensure that districts can reliably access strong support and that the support meets clear standards for quality.

Funding must follow. California’s districts and the organizations that support them cannot sustain a core responsibility if it is financed primarily through short-term grants. Recent budgets have directed substantial education funding to programs aimed at serving a long list of audiences, and much of that funding is temporary. The state’s funding streams need to be focused and sustained to ensure districts have what they need to continuously improve teaching and learning.

What could this look like?

- **A single point of responsibility:** Designate one statewide entity responsible for ensuring that every district can access high-quality help with improving teaching and learning—and hold it accountable for doing so.
- **A strong regional delivery system:** Build on the best existing expertise in COEs and other organizations rather than assuming every COE must provide every service. The responsible entity should ensure that district leaders have access to effective professional learning for teachers, support for principals as instructional leaders, guidance on choosing and using quality curricula and support to implement them, coaching, and assistance bringing proven approaches into classrooms.

- **Stable funding for work schools need year after year:** Provide ongoing funding that allows regional organizations and districts to build and retain expertise rather than repeatedly staffing up and winding down.

Curriculum adoption in other states illustrates what stronger state and regional support can look like. California provides districts with lengthy lists of state-approved curricular materials but little guidance to distinguish among them, leaving local leaders to do substantial work to determine which options are best suited to their needs—a burden that is especially acute for small and remote districts. Other states, including Louisiana, Alabama, Texas, and Massachusetts, provide clearer information about the quality and strengths of different materials and identify a shorter set of recommended options. California can preserve local choice while giving districts much better information to guide those choices—and more support to implement high-quality materials well.

Start here:

Give districts clearer guidance about the strongest state-approved curricula and practical help with using them well. A shorter, more clearly differentiated list—paired with implementation support—would reduce local burden and help strong materials translate into better classroom instruction.

Make Sure New Teachers Are Ready to Teach

California needs enough teachers for every school and community—and those teachers need to be well prepared. Today, the state struggles on both fronts. Shortages persist in special education, mathematics, science, and bilingual education, and schools serving students with the greatest needs are more likely to rely on interns, emergency permits, waivers, or teachers working outside their credential area.

At the same time, becoming a teacher is expensive. Researchers estimate that, in addition to undergraduate tuition, it costs would-be teachers roughly \$30,000 to become certified to teach in California, compounded by hundreds of hours of required, unpaid student teaching. Those financial barriers make it more difficult to attract and retain a diverse, talented workforce.

California's dominant teacher-preparation model also compresses nearly all preservice professional training into a single postbaccalaureate year. It is unusual in how heavily it relies on a 1-year postbaccalaureate model to prepare its new teachers: Nationally, roughly 55 percent of teacher candidates earn their credentials through undergraduate programs and about 44 percent through postbaccalaureate programs; in California, only 9 percent of teachers in preparation were enrolled in undergraduate programs in 2024–25. The consequences of such compressed preparation are not hard to imagine. For example, district leaders consistently pointed to gaps

in teachers' preparation: Elementary teachers often lack sufficient math content knowledge while middle school math teachers may know the content but lack the pedagogical skills to teach it effectively. It is unrealistic to expect preparation programs to build both deep subject knowledge and strong teaching skills when nearly all professional preparation is compressed into a single year.

What could this look like?

- **More integrated 4-year pathways:** Expand programs in which candidates earn a bachelor's degree and preliminary teaching credential together, weaving subject knowledge, teaching methods, and substantial classroom experience throughout the undergraduate years.
- **Preparation for the classrooms teachers will actually enter:** Ensure that candidates learn how students develop understanding in the subjects they teach, how to select and use strong instructional materials, and how to meet the needs of California's diverse classrooms, including its growing multilingual learner population.
- **A more affordable path into teaching:** Pair improved preparation with continued efforts to reduce tuition costs and compensate candidates for required student teaching, such as the Golden State Teacher Grant Program, so that quality improvements do not make the profession harder to enter.

Start here:

Continue investing in programs that reduce the cost of becoming a teacher, including tuition assistance and paid student teaching, while building towards a stronger 4-year preparation model.

The Opportunity

California is replete with promising ideas and committed educators. It has invested billions in reforms and innovations that have generated real evidence about what can work. The opportunity for state leaders now is to make the system better at turning that promise into lasting improvement: Set a few clear goals for students, make high-quality support for improving teaching available to every district, and prepare new teachers for the classrooms they will lead.

The measure of success should be simple: Does the state make it easier for schools and educators to help California's students thrive?

*This brief is based on insights from *Getting Down to Facts III*, a comprehensive independent review of California's preK–12 system. This new body of research consists of 55 technical reports and 22 research briefs produced by leading education policy researchers from around the country. To explore those insights in more depth, visit the [website](#).*

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Improving education policy and practice and advancing equity through evidence

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

Related Publications

Gallagher, H. A., Arshan, N., Darling-Hammond, L., Gomez, D. M., Grossman, P., Haderlein, S., Ito, A. B., Kaul, M., Klaus, K., Loeb, S., Meloy, B., Polikoff, M. S., Reardon, S., Ripma, T., Santibañez, L., Stipek, D., Towne, L., Trinidad, J. E., Wei, W., . . . Yu, E. J. (2026). **Improving instruction in California: Capacity, coherence, and state support.** Getting Down to Facts.

Gallagher, H. A., Towne, L., Gomez, D. M., & Loeb, S. (2026). **The California state role in supporting district capacity for TK–8 math improvement.** Getting Down to Facts.

Grossman, P., & Kaul, M. (2026, May). **Teacher certification policies: Balancing quality and access in the teaching profession** [Technical report]. Getting Down to Facts.

Loeb, S. (2026, May). **Toward a stronger next generation of California education** [Summary report]. Getting Down to Facts.



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