# Implementing Education Governance Reform in California

## Lessons from Other States

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# Contents

**Executive Summary** . . . . . 2

**Introduction** . . . . . 3

Project Purpose and Methods . . . . . 4

How This Report Is Organized . . . . . 5

**Overview of Assembly Bill 181** . . . . . 6

**Six States' Governance Reforms** . . . . . 7

Comparing California and the Six States . . . . . 8

Florida: A Long Transition and a Partial Consolidation . . . . . 11

New Mexico: Pursuing Executive Accountability and Leadership Stability . . . . . 13

Massachusetts: Coordinating Across Education Sectors Through a Layered Structure . . . . . 15

Oregon: Aligned Leadership and Statewide Goals . . . . . 18

Indiana: Selecting and Preparing a Leader for Unified Authority . . . . . 20

Ohio: The Scope and Limits of Consolidated Authority . . . . . 22

**Cross-State Findings** . . . . . 27

Finding 1: Shared Goals Define What Clearer Authority Is For . . . . . 27

Finding 2: Capable, Credible Leaders and Strong Teams Determine How Well New Authority Works . . . . . 32

Finding 3: Coherence Depends on Clear Responsibilities and Effective Working Relationships . . . . . 37

Finding 4: Stable, Coordinated, and Responsive Support Builds Credibility With Districts . . . . . 41

Finding 5: Local Responsiveness and Public Access Matter More as Authority Shifts to Appointees . . . . . 43

**Nine Recommendations for Implementing AB 181** . . . . . 46

Immediate Priorities . . . . . 46

Priorities for the First 100 Days . . . . . 49

Priorities for the First Year . . . . . 53

**Conclusion** . . . . . 57

**References** . . . . . 58

**Appendix A: Gubernatorial Appointment of State Education Chiefs** . . . . . 63

**Author Biographies** . . . . . 67

## Executive Summary

Beginning in January 2027, Assembly Bill (AB) 181 transfers administrative leadership of the California Department of Education to a governor-appointed, senate-confirmed education commissioner. The State Board of Education retains governing and policymaking authority while the independently elected superintendent of public instruction gains voting seats on state education boards. The reform's impact will depend on how leaders translate these arrangements into coherent direction and dependable local support. Drawing on document review and interviews, this report examines governance transitions in Florida, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Oregon, Indiana, and Ohio to inform California's implementation.

Five findings emerge from other states' governance transitions:

- Shared, measurable goals give clearer authority direction when supported by broad ownership, an actionable strategy, and sufficient capacity.
- Capable leaders and strong teams bring the educational credibility, management skills, political judgment, and institutional knowledge needed to advance improvements.
- Clear distinctions between policymaking and management, explicit working agreements, and regular communication help translate authority into coherent action.
- Coordinated state and regional services, consistent guidance, and timely assistance build credibility with districts.
- Sustained public engagement helps inform decisions and keeps leaders responsive to local conditions.

We make nine recommendations for implementing AB 181, organized around three stages of California's transition. Three immediate leadership and operational decisions should be to define qualifications and ensure timely appointment and confirmation, prepare an effective transition, and clarify roles and coordination. Priorities for the first 100 days should be to build a responsive agency culture, demonstrate early improvements, and measure progress while independently evaluating the transition. Finally, priorities for the first year should be to develop shared goals and an implementation strategy, assess capacity and accountability across the support system, and explore sustainable funding.

AB 181's impact on districts and schools will depend on how California translates clearer authority into shared direction, dependable support, and sustained follow-through. Other states' experiences offer practical lessons that California can now build upon.

## Introduction

In 1920, a California legislative committee warned that the division of authority between the elected superintendent of public instruction (SPI) and the appointed State Board of Education (SBE) could undermine the state's education system. It concluded:

> 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. (California Legislature Special Committee on Education, 1920, p. 20)

More than a century later, California enacted legislation restructuring state-level education authority. In July 2026, during his final year in office, Governor Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill (AB) 181.[1] Under this new law, on January 1, 2027, executive and administrative responsibilities at the California Department of Education (CDE) will transfer to an education commissioner appointed by the governor, subject to senate confirmation. The SPI will remain independently elected, with expanded opportunities for cross-system coordination. The law also directs that recommendations for the second phase of reform refine the SPI's responsibilities around their role as "the independently elected nonpartisan voice for the public interest," including by leveraging the SPI's independence from the executive branch to strengthen the legislature's oversight of the education system. The SPI will also gain voting seats on the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges and, beginning January 15, 2027, on the expanded 13-member SBE while retaining existing seats on the University of California Board of Regents and the California State University Board of Trustees.

This shift comes at a moment of considerable pressure on California's schools. Only 49 percent of students scored proficient or advanced in English language arts and 38 percent did so in mathematics in the 2025–26 school year, modest gains of less than one and about one percentage point, respectively, over the prior year (California Department of Education, 2026). Chronic absence during the 2024–25 school year remained well above prepandemic levels, despite declines from the pandemic peak (Gee & Yu, 2026). Nearly two thirds of districts lost enrollment between 2014–15 and 2024–25, placing many districts under fiscal pressure and forcing difficult decisions about school closures and consolidations that could generate conflict and disrupt community stability (Makori & Noguera, 2026). Districts also face new demands that outpace the system's capacity to provide timely guidance and support. Artificial intelligence, for example, is already widely used by students and educators (Agnew et al., 2026), yet of district leaders surveyed, most report that their districts have not developed broad organizational

[1] Authored by Assemblymembers David Alvarez and Darshana Patel, AB 181 is titled "Education Governance: State Board of Education: Superintendent of Public Instruction: Education Commissioner: State Department of Education: Transfer of Duties." It was signed into law on July 10, 2026 (Chapter 66, Statutes of 2026, leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260AB181).

responses to its use (Ahn & Gallagher, 2026). These challenges emerge within California's sprawling governance system in which authority and responsibility for policy implementation are distributed across nearly 200 autonomous public entities beyond the state education leadership and local districts (Ripma & Loeb, 2026).

California's AB 181 arrives as local educational agencies (LEAs) face increasingly complex demands alongside substantial state investments, including transitional kindergarten (TK), community schools, early literacy, and educator preparation. Together, these demands and investments heighten the importance of coherent guidance and responsive support. Getting Down to Facts III identifies three conditions for translating these investments into stronger opportunities and outcomes for students: accountability and alignment, balance between state guidance and local control, and capacity (Loeb, 2026). AB 181 creates an opportunity to strengthen these conditions, but progress will depend on how state leaders translate changes in authority into coordinated action, responsive support, and the capacity to sustain improvement.

The law clarifies administrative authority over CDE, creating a stronger foundation for the governor, the SBE, and the commissioner to agree on priorities and coordinate their actions, which we refer to as *alignment* among state leaders. Clearer authority does not produce alignment on its own; leaders must also build working relationships and apply their statutory roles consistently in practice. *Coherence*, on the other hand, refers to whether the state's governance system gives districts and schools consistent direction and support, with guidance and policies that mutually reinforce one another rather than competing or inconsistent demands from different agencies and divisions (Fuhrman, 1993). Alignment among state leaders contributes to coherence, but only when shared priorities translate into consistent policies, coordinated guidance, and responsive support for districts and schools.

Other states' experiences offer lessons for navigating California's transition ahead. Over the past several decades, states—including Florida, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Oregon, Indiana, and Ohio—have changed how governors, state boards, elected officials, and appointed education leaders share authority (see Appendix A). While these state reforms differ from California's and from one another's in substantive ways, they offer practical insights into planning a transition, defining roles, building working relationships, and anticipating unintended consequences. The findings and recommendations in this report provide a starting point for California's leaders to plan the transition and learn from implementation.

## Project Purpose and Methods

This report examines how education governance reforms unfolded in six states, emphasizing how major governance shifts were experienced at the state education agency (SEA). The study analyzes how changes in formal authority affected agency leadership, operations, and relationships with other entities and identifies conditions that supported or hindered implementation.

The study combines document review with interviews with 20 education leaders, policymakers, and decision makers from the six comparison states and California, as well as additional perspectives from leaders in other states. We identified interviewees through the document review, organizational analysis, and referrals from earlier interviews. All agreed to participate on a confidential basis and spoke in their individual capacities rather than on behalf of their institutions. Identifying details are withheld in this report.

States were selected for the relevance of their governance reforms to AB 181 rather than for geographic or political similarity or perceived governance effectiveness. Each state implemented reforms that altered how the state education chief is selected or how authority is distributed among state education leaders. For each state, we conducted a document review, which we structured around a common set of guiding questions, including what problem the reform tried to solve, what changes the reform enacted, what the timeline was and who the key actors involved were, what changes the reform made to the SEA's relationships with regional intermediaries and LEAs, what implementation challenges were documented, and what lessons could be learned from those experiences. We compiled sources from state archives of enacted legislation and legislative analyses, journalistic coverage, policy reports from research organizations and think tanks, court decisions, state and public agency documents, and publications from advocacy organizations and labor unions.

As the study progressed, we collected data from several other states that had undergone substantial governance reforms and that shared key features with California. We used this information to guide interviews with leaders and decision makers in our comparison states as well as with current and former state officials and education leaders across the California state-level education system. We compared evidence across states to identify recurring implementation challenges, enabling conditions, and differences relevant to California. The study identifies lessons from selected state experiences; it does not estimate the causal effects of governance reform or represent the full range of stakeholder perspectives.

## How This Report Is Organized

The report proceeds in four parts, beginning with an overview of the changes to California's governance structure, then moving to other states' experiences, cross-state findings, and recommendations for implementation. First, we explain how AB 181 changes the roles of the governor, SBE, commissioner, and SPI. Second, we present six state profiles in chronological order of reform: Florida, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Oregon, Indiana, and Ohio. Each profile describes the state's prior governance structure, the reasons for change, the redistribution of authority, and the implementation experience. Third, we synthesize five cross-state findings: how leaders establish shared goals, select capable leadership teams, clarify working relationships, strengthen support and institutional credibility, and maintain public access and responsiveness. Finally, we offer nine recommendations organized around three stages of California's transition:

immediate leadership and operational decisions; priorities for the first 100 days to strengthen engagement, demonstrate improvements, and establish evaluation; and first-year work to align statewide goals, support-system responsibilities, capacity, and funding.

## Overview of Assembly Bill 181

AB 181 changes who leads CDE and how that leadership is held accountable while requiring a broader review of California's education support system. The law establishes the following roles for four key state actors:

- The **governor** will appoint the education commissioner, subject to senate confirmation, and will have the authority to remove the commissioner, creating a more direct line of gubernatorial responsibility for CDE's administration.
- The **education commissioner** will assume leadership of CDE's administration on January 1, 2027, serve as the SBE's executive officer, and be responsible to both the SBE and the governor for departmental operations. The commissioner will develop and submit recommendations for the next phase of governance reform to the governor and the appropriate policy and fiscal committees of the legislature. Specified SBE staff and administrative functions will transfer to CDE under the commissioner. The law encourages appointment of a commissioner with experience managing a large organization and experience in public education leadership or its equivalent.
- The **SBE** will retain its policy and governing authority, with the commissioner serving as its executive officer. Beginning January 15, 2027, board membership will expand from 11 to 13. The SPI will replace one nonstudent gubernatorial appointee, and the senate president pro tempore and assembly speaker will each appoint one member.
- The **SPI** will remain independently elected but will no longer manage CDE. The law establishes a separate Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. The SPI will gain voting seats on the SBE and the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges while retaining existing seats on the University of California Board of Regents and the California State University Board of Trustees. Recommendations for the office's broader responsibilities will be developed during the next phase of governance reform.

AB 181 does not itself appropriate additional funding, leaving resource needs associated with the transition and future responsibilities to be addressed through the budget process.

Beyond these changes in state leadership, AB 181 requires the commissioner to develop recommendations for "Phase Two" of governance consolidation and streamlining. To inform this work, the commissioner must establish and implement a process to gather input from legislators and their staff, the SPI, and affected stakeholders. This review must identify support entities and programs operating outside CDE, including County Offices of Education (COEs) and their

contracted regional and statewide roles, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), and the Office of Civil Rights within the California Government Operations Agency. The review must evaluate how entities with authority over or statewide support responsibilities for early education and TK–12 programs could be organized more effectively. AB 181 requires that the commissioner lead the development of a report that recommends further consolidation and streamlining; it does not itself reorganize these entities.

Recommendations must also address refining the SPI's responsibilities, emphasizing cross-system coordination, public advocacy and reporting, independent evaluation as directed by the legislature, and support for legislative oversight. A recommended long-term fiscal plan for staffing and resources for the Office of the SPI must be developed in consultation with the SPI and the California Department of Finance. An interim report describing the commissioner's process for gathering input is due by June 30, 2027, followed by a final report containing findings and recommendations by October 1, 2027.

## Six States' Governance Reforms

California joins several other states that have changed how state education chiefs[2] are selected or how authority is distributed among state leaders. Nearly all major state education governance reforms documented since 1983 have shifted at least some authority towards the governor (Education Commission of the States, n.d.). This report profiles six such states—Florida, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Oregon, Indiana, and Ohio—in chronological order of reform, beginning with the earliest. Each state's unique approach to reorganizing authority, redefining leadership roles, and managing implementation offers relevant points of comparison and practical lessons for California's transition.

These lessons must be considered in light of California's size, governance history, and institutional context. California serves substantially more students than any comparison state, across districts with widely varying needs and capacities. Its tradition of local control, school finance constraints, and civil service and collective bargaining frameworks shape how statewide decisions translate into changes in agencies and schools. Compared with other states examined, California relies more heavily on entities outside the state education agency—including COEs, the CCEE, and Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs)—to support districts (Ripma & Loeb, 2026).

[2] This report uses the term chief state school officer or chief to refer to the official who leads a state's education agency and oversees the administration of its public elementary and secondary education system. After AB 181, the education commissioner serves as California's chief state school officer.

California's transition presents additional challenges. A new gubernatorial administration is expected to appoint the first commissioner as implementation begins, leaving limited preparation time. The commissioner will inherit CDE's long-standing staffing constraints (Moffitt et al., 2018), while establishing working relationships with the SBE and elected SPI. These relationships must develop before the SPI's longer-term responsibilities and resources are fully defined. The development of the Phase Two report will also require leaders to assess how responsibilities across the broader support system fit together and where districts encounter duplication or gaps. In addition, the transition presents an opportunity to address historically limited coordination between TK–12 and postsecondary education, with the SPI's cross-system board roles offering one avenue for aligning priorities and supporting students' transitions. Progress will therefore depend on clear responsibilities, effective working relationships, and engagement with career staff, employee representatives, local education leaders, and intermediaries.

## Comparing California and the Six States

Table 1 provides a comparative overview of California's new governance structure and those of the six states profiled in this report. It summarizes how education leaders are selected, how formal authority is distributed, and which aspects of each state's experience are relevant to California's transition. The comparison highlights differences in gubernatorial authority, board responsibilities, and the relationship between policymaking and departmental administration. Appendix A provides a broader inventory of state governance reforms.

The narrative profiles that follow examine how these arrangements developed and how they operate in practice. Presented in chronological order of reform, each profile describes the state's prior governance structure, the problems leaders sought to address with reform, the changes that were adopted, and the political and organizational conditions that shaped implementation of reform. The profiles also examine consequences for state agencies, regional intermediaries, and local education systems. Together, Table 1 and the six state profiles distinguish changes in formal authority from the work required to translate those changes into effective governance and support for each state's districts and schools.

**Table 1.** Selection and Roles of State Education Leaders After Governance Reform

| State and reform | How leaders are selected | Formal lines of authority | Relevance for California |
|---|---|---|---|
| **California**<br>AB 181 (2026) | *Commissioner:* governor appoints, senate confirms<br>*SPI:* elected<br>*SBE (13):* governor appoints nine and a student member, senate confirms; senate president pro tempore and assembly speaker appoint one each; SPI | • The board governs CDE and sets policy.<br>• The commissioner, as the board's executive officer, answers to both the board and the governor; the SPI does not lead CDE. | |
| **Florida**<br>Const. amend. (1998) | *Commissioner:* board appoints<br>*SBE (7):* governor appoints, senate confirms | • The board heads the department and sets policy; the commissioner is its executive director.<br>• The governor appoints the board but has no formal role in selecting the commissioner. | • A 4-year transition, with a task force and a review of department functions, let the legislature rewrite the education code and implement broad reforms.<br>• California's shorter timeline makes early transition planning more important. |
| **New Mexico**<br>Const. amend. (2003) | *Secretary:* governor appoints, senate confirms<br>*Public Education Commission (10):* elected by district | • The secretary leads the department as a cabinet member.<br>• No state board; an elected commission advises the department and authorizes state-chartered charter schools. | • A cabinet secretary clarified accountability, but turnover and policy reversals disrupted continuity.<br>• Shared goals and working agreements can sustain implementation through leadership changes. |
| **Massachusetts**<br>St. 2008, ch. 27 | *Secretary:* governor appoints<br>*Commissioner:* board nominates, secretary approves<br>*SBE (11):* governor appoints nine; secretary; elected student member | • The board sets policy, nominates the commissioner, and may remove them; the commissioner leads the K–12 department.<br>• The secretary approves the commissioner, votes on the board, and coordinates across sectors. | • A cabinet secretary coordinates sectors without running programs, giving education a place in executive decisions.<br>• Commissioners balanced the board's and governor's direction through regular convenings and early working norms. |
| **Oregon**<br>S.B. 552 (2011) | *SPI:* the governor<br>*Deputy:* governor appoints, senate confirms<br>*SBE (9 voting):* governor appoints, senate confirms | • The governor, as superintendent, heads the department through a deputy.<br>• The board sets policy and directs the department. | • Close alignment enabled statewide targets.<br>• California could set a few shared goals, keep its board a venue for deliberation, and measure CDE's service to districts. |

| State and reform | How leaders are selected | Formal lines of authority | Relevance for California |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Indiana**<br>H.B. 1005 (2017, 2019)[a] | *Secretary:* governor appoints<br>*SBE (11):* governor appoints eight; house speaker and senate president pro tempore appoint one each; secretary | • The secretary leads the department and serves at the governor's pleasure.<br>• The board, which includes the secretary, sets policy. | • Selecting a credible leader and preparing them in the governor's office helped the transition; follow-through built legislative trust.<br>• California could name its commissioner early and involve them in transition planning. |
| **Ohio**<br>H.B. 33 (2023) | *Director:* governor appoints, senate confirms<br>*SPI:* board appoints<br>*SBE:* moving to seven members, governor appoints, senate confirms[b] | • The director runs the department and supervises the education system.<br>• The board keeps licensure, educator discipline, and territory transfers; its SPI serves as executive officer. | • Consolidation sharpened focus on priorities such as literacy but made advocacy harder and left capacity gaps.<br>• California will rely on clear roles, working relationships, and staffing and tools matched to authority. |

*Notes.* Relevance entries summarize the state profiles, findings, and recommendations, which draw on documents and interviews. Appendix A describes selection processes in selected states.

*Sources*. California: Cal. Const. art. IX, § 2; Cal. Educ. Code §§ 33000(b), 33000.5, 33301, 33302, 33302.5 (as amended or added by Cal. AB 181, Stats. 2026, ch. 66, operative January 1, 2027). Florida: Fla. Const. art. IX, § 2; Fla. Stat. §§ 20.15(1)–(2), 1001.01(1), 1001.02(1), 1001.10(1) (2026). New Mexico: N.M. Const. art. XII, § 6; N.M. Stat. Ann. §§ 9-24-5(A), 9-24-9, 22-8B-16 (2025). Massachusetts: Mass. Gen. Laws ch. 6A, § 14A; ch. 15, §§ 1E–1F; and ch. 69, § 1B. Oregon: Or. Rev. Stat. §§ 326.021, 326.111(1), 326.300, 326.310(2) (2025). Indiana: Ind. Code §§ 20-19-1-1.1, 20-19-3-4(a)(2), and ch. 20-19-2. Ohio: Ohio Rev. Code §§ 121.02(U), 121.03, 3301.01, 3301.02(C), 3301.07, 3301.08, 3301.111, 3301.13 (§ 3301.13 as enacted by Ohio H.B. 33 [2023]; §§ 3301.01, 3301.02, and 3301.111 as amended by Ohio H.B. 96 [2025] and Ohio H.B. 455 [2026], effective October 9, 2026).

[a] Ind. H.B. 1005 (2017), P.L. 219-2017, created the appointed secretary to begin after January 10, 2025; a separate bill, Ind. H.B. 1005 (2019), P.L. 8-2019, moved the start to after January 10, 2021.

[b] Ohio H.B. 96 (2025) abolished the board's 11 elected seats as terms expire or become vacant; Ohio H.B. 455 (2026), effective October 9, 2026, set the board at seven governor-appointed members. Remaining elected members serve out their terms.

## Florida: A Long Transition and a Partial Consolidation

Before 2003, Florida's constitution required its SBE to consist of the governor and the state's six elected cabinet officers: the secretary of state, attorney general, comptroller, treasurer, commissioner of agriculture, and commissioner of education (Florida CRC, 1998). Although the SBE was a distinct constitutional body, its membership mirrored the cabinet. Each member had an equal vote, including the governor. Education governance thus operated within Florida's broader cabinet-based system in which independently elected officers held responsibility for a wide range of state functions, with education decisions being considered alongside a variety of other matters (Douglass, 1998; Florida CRC, 1998). The commissioner of education was elected statewide to a 4-year term in the same election as the governor and had a constitutional responsibility over the public education system. Unlike the other cabinet officers, however, the commissioner did not formally head any department; by law, the SBE oversaw the Department of Education (Douglass, 1998).

**What changed.** Florida's 1998 constitutional amendment replaced an elected commissioner of education with one appointed by the SBE. As part of this reform, the state board was also reconstituted from its previous composition into a seven-member body appointed by the governor and confirmed by the senate. The period between voter approval in November 1998 and the new structure taking effect in January 2003 gave Florida more than 4 years to prepare for the shift. This extended transition window allowed time to develop implementing legislation, clarify responsibilities, and plan the transfer of functions before the new leadership structure became operational.

During this period, the legislature also attempted to enact a broader K–20 governance structure in 2001. It abolished the Board of Regents, which had governed the state university system, and placed responsibility for public education from prekindergarten through graduate education under the new Florida Board of Education, a transitional board that the restructured SBE replaced in January 2003, while assigning specific authority to boards of trustees at each university (Professional Staff of the Higher Education Appropriations Committee, 2008). The reorganization drew opposition from prominent figures, who argued that eliminating the Board of Regents would make the university system more vulnerable to political influence (Associated Press, 2024). In 2002, voters approved a citizen initiative that created a constitutional Board of Governors to manage the state university system, restoring a distinct statewide governing body for public universities and legally separating university governance from the SBE's K–20 governance structure (Associated Press, 2024; Professional Staff of the Higher Education Appropriations Committee, 2008).

**Context and drivers of reform.** Florida's K–12 education governance reform grew out of a broader effort to modernize the state's executive branch. The 1997–98 Constitution Revision Commission (CRC) proposed a constitutional amendment to strengthen an executive structure

that, since the post-Reconstruction constitution, had divided education authority between the governor and six independently elected cabinet officers (Douglass, 1998; Florida CRC, 1998). A CRC ballot analysis stated that the cabinet structure "diffuses the Governor's power and reduces accountability" (Florida CRC, 1998), and proponents of reform argued that the cabinet's extensive noneducation responsibilities limited the attention its members could devote to education. For instance, Dexter Douglass, who chaired the CRC, noted that cabinet meetings included approving "individual questions and answers on 11th grade tests" and "new public bathrooms in the Capitol building" (Douglass, 1998). Opponents argued that the revision would reduce the number of officials elected by the public and concentrate power in fewer hands (Florida CRC, 1998).

Voters approved the amendment in 1998, with a delayed effective date of 2003. A separate constitutional amendment, also approved in 1998, elevated education to a "paramount duty" of the state, adding language requiring a "high quality system of free public schools." Jeb Bush, who won the governorship that year, then used the intervening period to build a wide-reaching education reform agenda, beginning with the 1999 A+ Plan (Sandham, 1999). The legislature, meanwhile, enacted implementing statutes that reorganized education governance around a K–20 framework, and in 2002 it rewrote the state's education code as the Florida K–20 Education Code.

**Relevance for California.** In 1998, Florida Constitutional Revision 8 gave a governor-appointed SBE the power to appoint the commissioner of education; California AB 181 instead gives the governor authority to appoint the commissioner (although the commissioner is directly responsible to both the SBE and the governor). In practice, interviewees observed that Florida's governor effectively controlled the selection through the SBE, and commissioners have historically implemented the governor's agenda. As a result, it has not always been clear whether the commissioner answers to the SBE or to the governor. When the SBE appointed a new commissioner in 2013, one member pressed her to confirm whom she reported to, to which she answered that she served "many masters," though "ultimately, this board is the boss of the commissioner of education" (O'Connor, 2013a). Legislators have also proposed returning to an elected commissioner, citing both turnover in the position and a structure one senator called confusing (CBS Miami, 2011; O'Connor, 2013b). California's commissioner may face similar questions of whom they answer to and how to navigate that system.

The Florida commissioner position has also experienced persistent turnover. The last three permanent commissioners before Henry Mack, who was appointed in July 2026, each went on to become president of a Florida college or university, the most recent after about a year in office (Goñi-Lessan, 2026). An interviewee who worked in the department described the position as a "way station" and noted that staff understood each new commissioner was unlikely to stay long. Florida's experience suggests that the commissioner's qualifications for managing a complex state education agency, along with conditions that encourage sustained leadership, can shape whether California's new office builds institutional credibility and maintains consistent direction over time.

Florida also had the benefit of a 4-year period between voter approval in November 1998 and the new structure taking effect in January 2003. The legislature used this time to enact significant reorganizations of the state's education system. California's Phase Two report required by AB 181 creates a related opportunity to recommend options for consolidation and streamlining. Treated as a comprehensive review of the state's support infrastructure, Phase Two could help clarify which entities are responsible for supporting districts and reduce duplication among them.

Finally, Florida's reversal of its higher education component of its K–20 consolidation may be instructive to California. The legislature abolished the Board of Regents, which drew opposition and led to voters approving a constitutional amendment that created a separate Board of Governors for the state university system (Professional Staff of the Higher Education Appropriations Committee, 2008). Florida's experience suggests that building strong political and administrative support for proposed consolidations and clarifying how authority would be redistributed can affect the success of such initiatives. The consultation process required by California AB 181 provides an opportunity to examine these questions with affected entities and those they serve before recommending further structural changes.

### New Mexico: Pursuing Executive Accountability and Leadership Stability

Before 2003, New Mexico's constitution established a 15-member SBE. Ten members were elected from districts to staggered 4-year terms, and the remaining five were appointed by the governor, subject to senate confirmation. No more than three of the appointees could come from the same political party. The SBE determined public school and vocational education policy and controlled the management and direction of the public schools, including budget and finance. It also appointed an SPI to run the State Department of Public Education. The governor's formal role was therefore limited to appointing a third of board members (New Mexico Legislative Council Service, 2003).

**What changed.** New Mexico's reform shifted state-level education authority from the SBE to a cabinet secretary appointed by the governor. In September 2003, voters approved a constitutional amendment that reorganized the existing education department as a cabinet-level Public Education Department and replaced the board-appointed SPI with a governor-appointed, senate-confirmed secretary of public education. The secretary is constitutionally required to be a qualified, experienced educator. The amendment also replaced the state board with a ten-member elected Public Education Commission whose powers and duties would be defined by statute.

Unlike the former state board, the Public Education Commission was not granted constitutional authority to determine public school policy. Its statutory responsibilities include advising the department on policy matters and, under subsequent legislation, authorizing and overseeing state-chartered charter schools (Legislative Education Study Committee, 2026; New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee, 2026).

Eight secretaries have led the department since 2003, with tenures ranging from 6 months to 7 years (New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee, 2026). In recent years, advocates and legislators have repeatedly proposed returning to a board-based structure.

**Context and drivers of reform.** Governor Bill Richardson championed New Mexico's governance reform as part of a broader education agenda (Goldstein, 2003) that built on several years of legislative and advocacy work. A legislative task force established in 1999 developed recommendations that informed much of the 2003 education reform package (Galley, 2003). In 2000, Think New Mexico recommended abolishing the state board and giving the governor authority to appoint a cabinet-level education chief, arguing that this would make the governor more accountable for student achievement (Think New Mexico, 2000). During Richardson's first legislative session in 2003, several governance proposals were consolidated into the constitutional amendment submitted to voters, and the broader education reform package passed with bipartisan support (Galley, 2003; New Mexico Legislative Council Service, 2003).

The state board, which had combined elected and appointed members and selected the superintendent, was framed as too large to set coherent policy, too slow to act, and overly prone to conflict with the superintendent (New Mexico Legislative Council Service, 2003). The Legislative Council Service's voter guide "Arguments For" section described the board as "simply too large to create coherent and effective statewide educational policy" and pointed to "the endless struggles between the state board of education and the superintendent." The reform took place in the immediate aftermath of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, and proponents argued that a single decision maker would bring "more direct accountability and responsiveness within the department." The voter guide's "Arguments Against" section raised concerns that concentrating authority in an appointed secretary would weaken voter influence and reduce deliberation while leaving the elected Public Education Commission's role uncertain. The voter guide also warned that leadership changes and reorganizations tied to governors' political priorities could undermine continuity and stability. The former State Department of Public Education warned of "the potential for instability in management and philosophies associated with changes in governors" (New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee, 2003). These arguments about education governance emerged as New Mexico was adopting broader education reforms and responding to NCLB.

**Relevance for California.** New Mexico's 2003 constitutional amendment replaced the state board and its appointed superintendent with a governor-appointed cabinet secretary leading the education department. California retains the SBE's policymaking authority and an independently elected SPI. Both states' reforms strengthen the governor's role in state education leadership.

New Mexico has experienced substantial turnover in agency leadership since the transition. Eight secretaries have led the department since 2003, compared with three superintendents over the preceding four decades (New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee, 2026). Legislative

analysis noted that agency initiatives expanded and contracted around leadership transitions but did not establish that turnover caused these changes, emphasizing the influence of state revenues and executive priorities (New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee, 2026). Interviewees also noted that each new secretary typically brought in a new team of deputy secretaries, affecting staff morale and the continuity of services to districts.

New Mexico's experience highlights the importance of sustaining institutional knowledge and services to districts through leadership transitions. California's elected superintendents have also brought in new senior teams, so turnover is not a new concern. Under AB 181, however, the commissioner will serve at the governor's pleasure rather than for a fixed electoral term, and the governor may appoint up to 16 deputies. This structure does not necessarily imply more frequent turnover, but changes in the commissioner role could be accompanied by changes in senior staff. New Mexico interviewees described how such transitions affected staff morale and continuity of district support. For California, this raises the question of how to preserve expertise, maintain clear responsibilities, and sustain services to districts when agency leaders change.

These concerns about continuity coexist with advantages that interviewees attributed to the appointed model. They noted that legislators know whom to hold responsible for the department's performance and that an appointed secretary can build support for major initiatives tied to the governor's agenda. New Mexico legislators have repeatedly proposed returning to a board-based structure, but key design decisions, such as how board members would be appointed, have been left to future legislation (Legislative Education Study Committee, 2026). Legislative staff also noted that the proposals do not address how an independent chief would work with governors, who generally expect to shape education policy.

California's design under AB 181 establishes a clearer line of gubernatorial responsibility for CDE's performance than under its previous structure, with the commissioner responsible to both the governor and the SBE. The law retains the SBE's policymaking authority, and the commissioner assumes executive and administrative functions. How these leaders will work together and how the SPI's broader responsibilities will be defined remain open questions. Clarifying these arrangements early could strengthen accountability and support continuity through leadership transitions.

### Massachusetts: Coordinating Across Education Sectors Through a Layered Structure

Before 2008, statewide responsibilities for early education, K–12 education, and public higher education in Massachusetts were divided among separately governed entities: the Department of Early Education and Care, the Department of Education, and the Board of Higher Education. Since 1947, the commissioner of education, who led the Department of Education, had been appointed by the SBE, a body composed primarily of gubernatorial appointees (Massachusetts Archives, 2020). The governor influenced the selection of the commissioner

through appointments to the board. Massachusetts had previously pursued cross-sector coordination through cabinet-level leadership, but earlier versions of the secretary's office were subsequently abolished. In 2001, Acting Governor Jane Swift established the Governor's Joint Committee on Educational Policy to provide a forum for coordination while leaving the sectors' separate governance structures intact (Maguire, 2009; Swift, 2001).

**What changed.** In 2008, Massachusetts established a cabinet-level Executive Office of Education, bringing early education and care, elementary and secondary education, and higher education under a secretary appointed by and serving at the pleasure of the governor (Act Reorganizing Certain Education Agencies, 2008). The reform retained each agency's board while giving the secretary an ex officio voting seat on all three boards and the University of Massachusetts Board of Trustees, with authority to approve commissioner appointments. The secretary makes funding recommendations, assists with preparing budget proposals for all three departments, and approves their mission statements and 5-year master plans. The governance-reform legislation expressly limits the secretary to specific statutory powers. The law authorized the secretary to hire staff subject to appropriation. Subsequent amendments added responsibilities for consolidated human resources services across the three departments and the implementation of a longitudinal education data system spanning prekindergarten through higher education.

**Context and drivers of reform.** Massachusetts had twice previously established cabinet-level offices to coordinate education across sectors: the Executive Office of Educational Affairs, authorized in 1969, effective in 1971, and abolished in 1980; and the Executive Office of Education, created in 1992 and abolished in 1996 (Massachusetts Archives, 2020). The first was eliminated in a 1980 budget act and the second in a mid-1990s government streamlining (Massachusetts Archives, 2020; Swift, 2001). Accounts of these earlier arrangements describe budgetary constraints, institutional conflict, and management concerns as factors contributing to their dissolution (Driscoll, 2017; see also Chieppo & Gass, 2009). Paul Reville, who chaired Governor Deval Patrick's 2007 preK–12 task force examining education governance, had opposed an earlier proposal to re-create the education secretariat in 2003, warning that an education secretariat "creates a competing center of power" that could be in conflict with the commissioner (Chieppo & Gass, 2009). The 2008 law gave the secretary defined responsibilities for coordinating cross-sector policy, approving commissioner appointments, and making funding recommendations. Commissioners continued to manage their respective departments under the governance of their boards (Act Reorganizing Certain Education Agencies, 2008).

Prior to 2008, Governor Patrick had publicly voiced frustration with his limited influence over the state's education boards and the lack of coordination among education sectors (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2007; Maguire, 2009; Swift, 2001). Patrick said the reorganization would allow the state to "take swift, synchronized actions" to meet changing economic demands (Robelen, 2009). At the same time, the governor's Readiness Project cited

data on gaps in graduation rates and college readiness as evidence that further improvements were needed across the education system, from prekindergarten through higher education (Patrick, 2007).

Proponents sought a more integrated governance structure that would break down silos and strengthen collaboration across sectors (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2007). Patrick argued that the reorganization would create "a single responsible authority within the coordinated system" (Robelen, 2009). Critics, however, questioned whether the change was necessary. They argued that the state already had the capacity to coordinate across sectors and that the reform traded the SBE's long-standing independence for gubernatorial control (Chieppo & Gass, 2009; Maguire, 2009).

**Relevance for California.** Massachusetts's experience highlights the importance of clarifying leaders' roles and responsibilities, particularly when a new leadership position is added to existing governance structures. How leaders distinguish their responsibilities and establish working relationships can shape whether the arrangement improves coordination or creates competing sources of direction.

The reform created a cabinet-level secretary of education to coordinate separately governed agencies, and the success of this additional layer of coordination depended on keeping the secretary's functions distinct from the commissioner's. According to two former officials, earlier secretaries had sought to expand their authority over programs traditionally administered by the department, including charter schools and professional development funding; the officials described the resulting tensions as contributing to the legislature's decision to abolish the office in the mid-1990s. When the office was reestablished in 2008, its first secretary maintained a small staff and assured the commissioner and other agency leaders that his office would not run programs, leaving program administration to their departments. The secretary focused instead on policy, oversight of the boards, and advising the governor, attributing the office's continuity and effectiveness under governors of both parties to that restraint.

Although Massachusetts's secretary serves the governor and California's SPI holds an independent electoral mandate, in both settings leaders must establish working relationships across distinct sources of authority. Former officials emphasized that the Massachusetts statute defined formal powers but left many aspects of the day-to-day working relationship to the officeholders. The secretary convened the education commissioners and board chairs monthly and created teacher and student advisory panels, inviting the unions to appoint members. These supplemented statutory advisory councils whose membership had to balance business, labor, civic, parental, and professional interests (Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2024). California's commissioner answers to both the governor and the SBE, and as in Massachusetts, much of that relationship is likely to take shape through the operating norms that the commissioner, SPI, and SBE establish early in the transition period.

Beyond the importance of role clarification among leaders, Massachusetts's reform offers a perspective on how California might strengthen coordination across education sectors. The SPI's expanded board memberships under AB 181 provide a starting point for connecting separately governed systems. Massachusetts went further by establishing an office with explicit responsibilities for cross-sector planning and coordination. Its experience suggests that California could build on shared board membership with clearer coordination responsibilities and regular processes for developing and advancing shared priorities across sectors.

### Oregon: Aligned Leadership and Statewide Goals

Oregon's constitution, adopted in 1857, designated the governor as the SPI but authorized the legislature to provide for a separately elected superintendent. The legislature created that office in 1872, with statewide elections beginning in 1874 (Oregon Department of Justice, 1997). From then until 2012, the SPI remained an elected position. The SPI served as the SBE's administrative officer and the executive head of the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), exercising responsibilities under the SBE's direction. The SBE, in turn, was appointed by the governor and confirmed by the senate, with members drawn from each congressional district and the state at large. The SBE held statewide policymaking responsibilities for public K–12 schools and community colleges while the State Board of Higher Education governed the seven public universities in the Oregon University System.

**What changed.** In 2011, Oregon eliminated the separately elected SPI position through Oregon S.B. 552, returning the role's responsibilities to the governor once the incumbent left office in 2012. The governor serves ex officio as the SPI and appoints a deputy superintendent, who must have at least 5 years of experience in elementary or secondary school administration. The deputy superintendent is confirmed by the senate and may be removed by the governor only after consultation with the SBE. The deputy superintendent carries out the governor's delegated duties, including serving as the administrative officer for the SBE, whose members are appointed by the governor to set policy and standards.

A companion bill, Oregon S.B. 909 (2011), established a governor-chaired Oregon Education Investment Board (OEIB) to oversee development of a unified education system from early learning through postsecondary education and directed the OEIB to appoint a chief education officer. In 2012, Oregon S.B. 1581 gave the chief education officer authority to direct the deputy superintendent and the heads of the other sectors. However, these structures were short-lived: The OEIB was dissolved in 2015, and the Chief Education Office was ended in 2019.

**Context and drivers of reform.** Oregon's reform emerged from concerns about the state's education outcomes and workforce preparation, alongside sustained business-led advocacy for restructuring what was seen as a fragmented system (Oregon Business Council, 2018). Supporters of reform argued that decisions about education policy and funding were

divided into "a collection of disconnected institutional silos," which was described as "pitting K–12 against post-secondary education and early learning" (Oregon Business Plan, 2011).

Governor John Kitzhaber, who returned to office in 2011 on a platform that incorporated a number of positions advanced by the Oregon Business Council and other advocacy groups, proposed a broad education overhaul that included unifying the state's education system from early childhood through postsecondary education (Oregon Business Council, 2018; Oregon Education Investment Team, 2011). A lobbyist for one advocacy group argued that "the conditions were right, and the governor pounced" (Jaquiss, 2011), leading to one of the broadest reform agendas in the state's history. The centerpiece of that overhaul was the OEIB, which oversaw a unified system (Jaquiss, 2011; University of Oregon Government and Community Relations, 2012). The legislative package also eliminated the elected superintendent. The reforms passed despite opposition from the state teachers union, which feared that losing an elected superintendent and creating the new board would dilute its influence (Jaquiss, 2011).

Following Kitzhaber's resignation in 2015 amid an unrelated ethics controversy, the legislature dissolved the OEIB and replaced it with the Chief Education Office. The OEIB had faced criticism because it could recommend investments but lacked direct authority over sector budgets. The Chief Education Office was sunsetted in 2019, with its responsibilities transferred to the Governor's Office and other state agencies (Benham, 2017; Gross, 2015; Or. S.B. 215, 2015). The governor's role as superintendent and the appointed deputy superintendent remained in place.

In 2025, Oregon enacted a broad K–12 accountability reform through Oregon S.B. 141. The law directs the SBE to establish statewide targets for seven student-outcome measures named in the law (graduation rate, 5-year completion rate, ninth-grade on-track rate, eighth-grade mathematics proficiency rate, third-grade reading proficiency rate, regular attendance rate, and regular early-grade attendance rate) as well as one locally selected metric from a board-approved list. ODE works with districts to develop local performance growth targets. Districts that repeatedly miss their targets face escalating requirements, ranging from mandatory state coaching to state direction of certain state funds.

**Relevance for California.** Oregon placed education leadership more directly under gubernatorial control than California's AB 181, making the governor SPI while retaining the SBE's policymaking responsibilities. Oregon's arrangement has raised questions about the SBE's influence in practice, particularly when it considers the implementation of rules after major policy decisions have already been made by the governor or legislature. A departing board member described its role as a "rubber stamp," reflecting concerns that the SBE enters the process too late to meaningfully shape policy (Miller, 2026). California's SBE retains its role as the governing and policymaking body, providing a forum for deliberation on major decisions. How the SBE's authority is exercised in practice after AB 181 will depend in part on the working relationship it establishes with the commissioner.

Oregon's recent accountability reform illustrates how governance can align legislative priorities, statewide goals, and district-level expectations within a coherent system. Through S.B. 141, the legislature defined the student outcomes to be measured and set out a framework for establishing performance targets. It then assigned responsibility to the SBE and the ODE for developing those targets and the processes needed to implement them, supported by advisory participation and public rulemaking. This division of roles offers a possible model for California, especially given the greater alignment of authority under gubernatorial leadership established under AB 181.

### Indiana: Selecting and Preparing a Leader for Unified Authority

Indiana's constitution establishes the office of the SPI but leaves the method of selection to the legislature. The office has been filled by election since 1852. Before 2015, the SPI headed the Department of Education, sat on the 11-member SBE, and served by statute as its chair, with the governor appointing the other 10 members. A 2015 law reduced the governor's appointments to eight members, giving one appointment each to the house speaker and senate president pro tempore. The law retained the elected SPI as head of the Department of Education, but once the sitting SPI's term ended, the law required the board to elect its own chair annually (Elliott, 2015). Under this model, the SBE was expected to set policy, and the Department of Education was tasked with carrying it out (Cavazos, 2018b).

**What changed.** In 2017, Indiana enacted legislation to replace its elected SPI with a governor-appointed Secretary of Education, initially scheduled to take effect in 2025. However, 2019 legislation accelerated the transition to January 2021. In addition to leading the Department of Education, the secretary sits on the SBE. While secretaries are not required to chair the board, they have been unanimously elected as chair every year. Under Governor Mike Braun's 2025 cabinet reorganization, the secretary's portfolio expanded to encompass eight state agencies and boards, including the Department of Education and the Commission for Higher Education (Indiana Department of Education, 2025; McCoy, 2025).

**Context and drivers of reform.** Indiana's governance reform followed several years of recurring disputes over education policy and the division of authority among the legislature, the governor, and the separately elected SPI (Cavazos, 2018b; Elliott, 2013). Republicans had long set the state's education agenda, including private school vouchers, charter school expansion, and test-based accountability. In 2012, Democrat Glenda Ritz unseated Republican incumbent Tony Bennett as SPI. Ritz was a former local teachers union president who had helped lead the state teachers association's opposition to vouchers, and she campaigned on a platform that directly challenged several of the Republican Party's priorities (Elliott, 2013). Once in office, she clashed repeatedly with Governor Mike Pence and the SBE he appointed. Pence created a separate agency to staff the board, and in 2015, the legislature removed the guarantee that the SPI would chair it, over the objections of Ritz and Democrats (Elliott, 2013, 2015). Tensions

continued under her Republican successor, Jennifer McCormick, who broke with legislative leaders over vouchers, charter oversight, and A–F grading. McCormick later said she "knew the political environment was toxic between the [education department] and the governor's office" (Cavazos, 2018b). Policymakers questioned whether superintendents who opposed legislative priorities would faithfully implement policies enacted by the governor and legislature (Cavazos, 2018b; Elliott, 2013). Districts, meanwhile, reported being caught between competing state authorities. For example, when the SBE and the Department of Education failed to agree on requirements for a single accountability system in 2018, schools received separate state and federal A–F grades, amid near-annual changes to state tests and letter grades. Educators and accountability experts warned that maintaining two systems would create confusion and administrative burden for schools and districts (Burnette, 2018; Cavazos, 2018a; Elliott, 2013).

Moving to an appointed structure had been debated for years, but state leaders were wary of appearing to disenfranchise voters and debated how to time the change. Governor-elect Eric Holcomb described his 2017 proposal as "about the position and how it can be aligned [with the governor's office] and work truly together" (Cavazos, 2017). A 2017 bill failed in the senate amid substantial Republican opposition, and the version that was ultimately enacted delayed the change to 2025, in part to allow the sitting superintendent to seek a second term (Lindsay, 2019b; McInerny, 2017). Opponents, including most house Democrats, argued that the change concentrated power in the Republican governorship. One Democratic legislator noted that elected superintendents "have been willing to speak out when they think the governor or this General Assembly is going in the wrong direction" (Lindsay, 2019a).

**Relevance for California.** Indiana H.B. 1005 (2017), as accelerated by Indiana H.B. 1005 (2019), and California AB 181 both arose amid concerns that divided authority hindered coherent implementation of education policy. Indiana went further, eliminating the elected SPI and placing the department under a governor-appointed secretary. California likewise transfers departmental leadership to a governor-appointed official and redefines the SPI's role, keeping the elected official independent of the governor.

Indiana's shift from an elected SPI raised concerns about democratic access and public accountability, questions that California's commissioner may also face even with an elected SPI still in office. One Indiana state leader recalled in an interview that this concern "was discussed during the bill" but said they had heard less of it during implementation because the appointed secretary "is out in schools more than her predecessors were. … She's constantly out meeting with folks, being extremely accessible." Interviewees also described her practice of meeting regularly with education group leaders and consulting practitioners before advancing major proposals. For California, the accounts suggest that visible leadership, predictable opportunities for engagement, and responsive follow-through could help build confidence in the commissioner. Retaining an elected SPI provides an additional public voice while making clear communication about each leader's responsibilities especially important.

Indiana's experience suggests that closer alignment among state leaders can clarify expectations and support more consistent policy implementation. Interviewees reported that districts appreciated clarity and consistency of direction. They attributed these improvements to the secretary's relationships with legislative leaders and education committee chairs, which helped align implementation with legislative intent. These accounts suggest that changing the selection of the chief can create opportunities for closer coordination but that realizing those opportunities depends on working relationships and shared expectations.

Finally, interviewees consistently identified the selection of a capable, credible leader as more important than the governance change itself. They commended the selection of someone with practitioner experience, legislative relationships, and a deliberate strategy for engaging the field: "It's a unique person that can understand the policy and political [worlds], but also come from the field to translate," said one interviewee. The governor placed the incoming secretary in his office as senior education adviser about a year and a half before she took charge of the agency, a period one interviewee described as "a training ground" for building relationships. This choice led to a leadership change that was characterized at the time as a "smooth transition" (McCoy, 2020). Indiana's experience points to the value of operational transition planning that begins before the commissioner takes office, in part because the leader and agency can prepare together.

### Ohio: The Scope and Limits of Consolidated Authority

Ohio's SBE was established in 1953 by a constitutional amendment, which required the board to appoint the SPI while leaving the board's composition and both offices' powers to statute. Before 2023, the SBE had 19 voting members, with 11 elected from districts and eight appointed by the governor with senate confirmation. The Department of Education, led by the board-appointed SPI, administered the school funding system, developed academic standards and model curricula, administered state tests, issued district and school report cards, and licensed educators (Hoffmeister et al., 2023a, 2023b). The governor appointed a minority of board members and did not have a formal role in selecting the SPI. Although the SPI sat in the governor's cabinet, the position remained accountable to the SBE (Kasler, 2019). Ohio's workforce initiatives were coordinated separately through the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation (Hoffmeister et al., 2023a).

**What changed.** In 2023, Ohio H.B. 33 reorganized the Department of Education as the Department of Education and Workforce (DEW) and transferred most of the SBE's and the SPI's authority over K–12 education to a governor-appointed, senate-confirmed director of the DEW who serves in the governor's cabinet. The SBE retained responsibility for educator licensure and discipline, school district territory transfers, and other limited functions. It continues to appoint the SPI, who serves as the board's executive officer, but it no longer leads the department nor serves in the governor's cabinet. Subsequent legislation began phasing out the SBE's elected seats as members' terms expire or become vacant. A law that took effect in October 2026 establishes an eventual board of seven governor-appointed, senate-confirmed members.

**Context and drivers of reform.** Ohio's governance reform grew out of a sustained period of friction between the SBE, the legislature, and the governor. Proponents described the 19-member board, split between appointed and elected members, as "a recipe for gridlock, discord, and a lack of accountability" (Aldis, 2022). Supporters of the reform, including the Fordham Institute and Senate President Matt Huffman, argued that the Department of Education answered neither to the governor nor to the legislature (Aldis, 2022; Ingles, 2022). "We have an isolated bureaucracy with no oversight," Huffman said in 2022, "that's the problem. It's not who is on the board. It is the legal makeup of what is happening right now" (Ingles, 2022). Legislative sponsors also criticized the department's responsiveness and that it second-guessed laws passed by the general assembly (Cirino, 2023; Siegel, 2018). One senate cosponsor complained that the department "doesn't answer to the Governor's office" and had "been able to ignore questions from my legislative colleagues" (Cirino, 2023). The SBE had also publicly urged repeal of statutory requirements it was responsible for overseeing (Poiner, 2023). Proponents further argued that the SBE's attention had drifted from academic priorities. A Fordham Institute analysis described the SBE as "consumed with political infighting and controversy," referencing accounts of a board that "spends hours arguing over resolutions that don't directly affect student achievement" (Poiner, 2023). The reform debate unfolded amid concerns about academic recovery and student attendance. The release of 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results showed sharp declines, and the statewide chronic absence rate had nearly doubled, which strengthened proponents' argument of the need for more responsive governance (Churchill, 2022; Hendrickson, 2023; Ohio Attendance Taskforce, 2023).

Governors of both parties had sought greater authority over K–12 education since the 1990s. In 2008, Governor Ted Strickland criticized oversight by "an unwieldy department with splintered accountability" (Kasler, 2019). A broader 2018 proposal would have combined K–12 education, higher education, and workforce functions into a single cabinet agency, but it stalled amid opposition from the SBE and education groups concerned about shifting authority away from elected board members to gubernatorial appointees (Ma, 2018; Siegel, 2018).

Lawmakers pursued a narrower restructuring in 2022 through Ohio S.B. 178, which focused on the governance of the Department of Education. It passed the senate but did not pass the house; a late-session attempt to attach it to a bill containing other contested provisions also failed. Critics questioned the proposal's timing because it was revived 1 week after three union-backed candidates won SBE seats (Aldis, 2022; Ingles, 2022; Wilkinson, 2022). Lawmakers reintroduced the central governance changes in 2023 as Ohio S.B. 1, which passed the senate on a party-line 26–7 vote. Senate Democrats questioned the bill's motives and warned that concentrating authority could weaken public voice and the influence of elected local school boards (Tebben, 2023). Earlier proposals had come from governors of both parties, but the 2023 changes passed under unified Republican control alongside expanded voucher eligibility, with veto-proof majorities in both chambers. The change transferred most of the SBE's K–12 policymaking and administrative authority to a department led by a gubernatorial appointee, reducing the role of elected board members. The reform placed the education department under the governor's direct authority at a time when the governorship and both legislative chambers were held by the same party.

**Relevance for California.** Ohio H.B. 33 (2023) and AB 181 both responded to concerns that divided authority made it difficult to identify who was responsible for implementing state education policy. Ohio transferred most K–12 policymaking and administrative authority from the former Department of Education, the SPI, and the SBE (which then included elected members) to a cabinet-level department led by a governor-appointed director. Ohio retained its SPI with narrower responsibilities, but because the SPI is appointed by the SBE rather than elected, the state's experience does not directly address the dynamics of an independently elected official serving alongside an appointed chief. California instead assigned leadership of CDE to a governor-appointed commissioner while retaining the elected SPI and the SBE's policymaking authority.

Ohio's transition illustrates the importance of public access when authority centralizes. In Ohio, the reform prompted a constitutional challenge from parents, a local school board, and initially, elected SBE members, who argued that H.B. 33 effectively stripped the constitutionally established board of its role. According to one interviewee, a provision requiring the DEW director or a designee to hold a public meeting at least every other month was "one of the compromises that was built into the language" to address concerns about public access. California's transition raises a related question about how the new leadership structure will engage those affected by state decisions. California already provides opportunities for public comment at SBE meetings, but those forums do not necessarily give access to consequential decisions that rest with the commissioner and do not come before a board vote. How stakeholders reach the commissioner, the SPI, and the SBE, along with whether they have predictable opportunities for input, could help stakeholders navigate the new governance structure.

Interviewees supportive of Ohio's reform credited the clearer line of executive authority with strengthening implementation of a defined policy agenda. Policy analysts interviewed described literacy as a clear early priority. Although Ohio had enacted reading reforms in 2012, one interviewee said that the state "kind of muddled along" in implementing them. In the analyst's account, the restructuring enabled the governor to direct the department on implementation and "hold their feet to the fire" on new science-of-reading requirements enacted in 2023.

Critics argued that the change weakened the public's voice by shifting authority away from elected board members (Democracy Forward, 2023; Tebben, 2023). Interviewees in favor of the reform acknowledged that advocates now find it "much harder" to influence education policy. California preserves an SPI, whose role the law describes as "the independently elected nonpartisan voice for the public interest," and distributes authority more widely. AB 181's implementation challenge is therefore to establish clear responsibilities and productive working relationships while maintaining meaningful opportunities for public participation.

Finally, interviewees noted that the governance reform did not necessarily address underlying capacity constraints common to state education agencies regardless of leadership structure. These include limits on the state's ability to secure consistent local implementation and chronic state staffing shortages, which have historically existed independent of the leadership structure. Questions about CDE's implementation capacity and the state's tools for supporting and overseeing implementation are therefore likely to remain after the new structure takes effect.

## What Do We Know About Student Outcomes?

Our analysis of federal data shows that across these six states, graduation rates generally increased during the periods examined, while standardized test performance relative to national averages varied by state, grade, and subject (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], n.d., 2012, 2024, 2026). These patterns do not establish that governance reform caused improvement or decline. Graduation rates also rose nationally (NCES, 2012, 2024, 2026), and in each state the governance change coincided with other policies, investments, and conditions that complicate attributing changes in student outcomes to these reforms. The periods examined also include the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviewees generally described the new structures as creating opportunities to set a focused agenda and sustain it through implementation rather than directly producing better student outcomes; early literacy was frequently cited as a priority. Where interviewees pointed to later gains, as in Indiana, they presented them as evidence of progress on a particular initiative rather than as evidence of the independent effect of the governance reform.

Research also suggests a complex relationship between governance structures and student outcomes. In a study of state governance arrangements, Manna (2013) found that gubernatorial appointment of state chiefs and boards was associated with smaller achievement gaps between economically disadvantaged and other students but showed little consistent relationship with overall achievement. New Mexico's Legislative Education Study Committee (2026) similarly concluded that "there appears to be no cause-and-effect relationship between governance structures and student performance or outcomes." Early evaluations of AB 181 will provide a more informative assessment of progress by examining whether the new structure supports coherent, sustained implementation rather than relying on student outcomes alone.

## Cross-State Findings

Although the six states profiled in this report reorganized education governance in different ways, their experiences reveal common challenges with translating structural change into more coherent leadership and support for districts and schools. Interviewees described opportunities for closer coordination when authority shifted towards gubernatorial appointees, alongside continuing questions about sustaining priorities across administrations, equipping agencies to meet expectations, and preserving meaningful public and local participation. Their accounts suggest that clearer authority can support more focused direction, but its value depends on how leaders use it and the conditions supporting implementation.

In this section, we share five findings that examine those conditions: shared goals that guide state action; capable leaders and teams that support implementation; clear responsibilities and working relationships that enable coordination; responsive support that builds institutional credibility; and sustained engagement that connects statewide priorities to local needs. Together, these findings identify considerations for translating California's new governance structure into more coherent support for districts and schools while addressing the implementation conditions previously described.

### Finding 1: Shared Goals Define What Clearer Authority Is For

Reorganizing education governance brought questions of statewide direction into sharper focus: What would leaders use their clearer authority to accomplish? Interviewees described the period following reform as an opportunity to set the state's goals, define the strategies to meet them, and identify measures to track progress.

California has built an important foundation through the Local Control Funding Formula's state priorities and the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) process, which connect local goals, actions, data, and spending to student needs and engage communities in planning. Building on that work, a small set of concrete, measurable statewide goals and a coordinated strategy for achieving them could give state leaders and agencies a clearer focus for supporting local improvement. We use *goals* to mean the student outcomes that the state commits to improve, with a measurable target and a timeline, such as Indiana's goal of 95 percent of third graders reading proficiently by 2027. We use *strategy* to mean how the state will organize its work to make progress towards those goals: where it directs resources, who is responsible for implementation, what support districts and schools receive, and how progress is measured.

**A small set of shared goals gives reform direction.** Interviewees described governance reform as an opportunity to establish a more focused education agenda. Clearer authority could help leaders organize the system's work; a small number of shared goals and a strategy for meeting them could guide agency decisions and make priorities understandable to educators

and the public. As one Massachusetts leader explained, "It's good to have two or three goals. … You need a clear sense of, 'Here's where we're going to go.'" Other interviewees suggested three to five goals, similarly emphasizing the value of a manageable set of goals.

Oregon illustrates how a coordinated process can help establish shared direction. Following a secretary of state audit that criticized fragmented education reporting and accountability structures, the education department worked with the governor to establish an accountability committee that identified student success goals. The department's research team modeled potential targets using the state's historical performance and trajectory, and the chief brought proposed metrics to the governor for refinement. Subsequent legislation built on this work. The process established a common set of goals among the department, the governor, and the legislature, and the resulting system sets goals that, as one interviewee put it, "holds [the system] accountable in the short term, and keeps us towards a North Star in the long term."

New Mexico's experience highlights that agreement on what needs to change is not enough to produce a shared strategy. The legislature, education department, and advocacy groups who were all associated with an education adequacy lawsuit each developed separate plans for responding to the ruling. Legislative staff found that these plans largely agreed, but the parties continued to operate in parallel without a common implementation strategy. One New Mexico observer noted that even after aligning governance, "without shared priorities and goals, you may end up with the same level of political infighting or splintering that happens anywhere." At the time of the interviews, New Mexico state leaders were exploring a commission to set shared goals and assign responsibility for meeting them.

Interviewees also emphasized the importance of pairing long-term goals with interim milestones that leaders could reach within an administration's term. One state leader described the challenge as "finding the balance between what's aspirational and what's achievable." Long-term goals give the system continuity across administrations, and interim milestones establish expectations for progress that current leaders can be held accountable for meeting.

Clear, consistent communication in plain language helped educators and the public understand these priorities. As one interviewee said, state leaders have to have "zero daylight between what you want to do, what you say you're going to do, and what you actually do." In Ohio, an interviewee described how the department's focus following the governance change had become more identifiable: "It's been literacy, it's been chronic absenteeism, it's been career technical education." These priorities grew over time, as the interviewee observed that with the legislature's recent passage of a math bill, "math has risen on the priority list." Even as the list has grown, this interviewee credited state leaders with communicating the state's priorities clearly.

**The governor sets the agenda, but goals need broader ownership.** Interviewees described gubernatorial leadership as an important source of direction and political support

for the state's education agenda. A closer relationship between the governor and an appointed chief could connect policy priorities to implementation and strengthen the governor's ability to hold the department accountable for carrying them out. One Ohio interviewee observed that governors who were personally invested in education outcomes were more willing to spend political capital supporting the education chief and the department's work. Governors also help determine which proposals could advance, as one interviewee explained:

> *Every governor is going to filter [proposed education policies or priorities] through their political lens. So if you take things that are good for politics and also good for kids, that creates a Venn diagram overlap of what might be achievable.*

Chiefs also shape the agenda by bringing evidence and field experience to the governor. While all interviewees agreed that the governor's support was important, they differed on how closely the governor needed to be involved in setting the agenda, and some said a capable chief should have room to set direction. "It's not a terrible thing," one state leader noted, "if your governor is a little hands-off at first, especially if you get a good commissioner." In Indiana, an interviewee described agency staff developing alternative approaches and working with the governor's office to determine which could move forward. Another state leader said chiefs needed to understand the governor's interests and build support among other influential actors, noting that "you have to know how to navigate the players who are at the table and then bring others to the table." These accounts portrayed agenda setting as an ongoing negotiation in which the chief helped connect education goals with political support.

Where chiefs reported to a state board, agenda setting also required managing the relationship between the board's formal authority and the governor's practical influence. In Massachusetts, one interviewee recalled a commissioner asserting, "I don't work for the governor. I work for the board." Yet the governor retained considerable practical influence through budgets, appointments, and public statements. As a result, interviewees conveyed that formal reporting relationships alone do not guide how to resolve competing directions from the governor and the board. Interviewees also emphasized the importance of the board's investment in the chief's success. As one interviewee explained, "Day by day, in monthly meetings and in committee meetings, you want that board to feel like this is our commissioner … who we picked, and we want her to be successful." Shared ownership required working relationships among the governor, board, and chief, supported by clear expectations for policy direction and oversight.

Gubernatorial backing, however, did not itself establish shared ownership among those responsible for implementation. Interviewees said agency staff, regional intermediaries, and district leaders should have a role in informing goals and strategy: "If they are responsible for implementation or delivering on the priorities, they should have a seat at the table in coming up with the priorities to ensure a degree of buy-in," said one interviewee. An Ohio interviewee likewise recommended early engagement with schools and districts to understand their needs,

observing that this input "should, in some ways, help set the agenda." Such engagement could help leaders identify where a statewide goal calls for changes in local practice and what support those changes would require.

Interviewees also described risks to continuity when policies were closely associated with a single governor and appointee. In New Mexico, one observer described a new governor and secretary who "essentially wiped the slate clean" of the prior administration's school-grading and teacher-evaluation systems, creating what they called a "seesaw effect" in state policy. Observers attributed these reversals to policies that were tied to a single governor and appointee. One state leader similarly observed that gubernatorial involvement could be both enabling and disruptive: "Having a governor really behind education is powerful. It will move policy, but it could also be a very disruptive barrier that could have lasting consequences."

**Early progress builds credibility and support.** Interviewees described "early wins" as opportunities to demonstrate tangible improvements under new governance structures. Starting with manageable initiatives that already had broad support could help leaders build working relationships and establish credibility, including among those who had opposed the governance change. One expert on education governance noted:

> *With a new system, there's going to be a lot of skepticism towards it from people who didn't want this change. So you have to bring them along because you're going to need them later. I really think: what are those issues sitting right there that you could just take care of right away? That would build so much goodwill with everybody.*

These initial efforts could provide a foundation for addressing more difficult issues. Working together on a concrete initiative gives participants experience cooperating and evidence that their collaboration can produce results. As the same expert noted, when harder conversations arose, "everybody's in the room, they at least understand each other, and there's evidence that they were able to work together on some things."

Indiana interviewees described the department's literacy initiative as one such early initiative. Modeled on Mississippi's approach, the initiative drew on research and broad support, and the department communicated its priorities to LEAs early in implementation. Interviewees pointed to improvements in NAEP scores as evidence of progress, which the department used in discussions with the legislature about additional investment.

At the same time, interviewees cautioned against going too fast, which could undermine even capable leaders. One observer warned against "somebody who's just going to come in and wreck the place and put a bunch of stuff in that's really not going to be sustained." Another described an inherent tension between urgency and deliberateness:

*We're not satisfied with where our educational outcomes are right now; we have equity concerns that are long-standing and persistent, and we need to fix these now. But the reality of policy implementation is you can't do it all right now and as fast as you want to do it.*

Instead, as a state leader concluded, "It takes time. If you do not take the time, you will hear a very loud noise, the sound of all the teachers slamming their classroom doors. We want to keep those doors open." State leaders who started with a few manageable initiatives gained momentum while still building capacity and support for more substantial changes.

**Goals need an actionable strategy and sufficient capacity.** Interviewees emphasized that statewide goals need to translate into specific actions and assigned responsibilities across the department and the regional and local organizations involved in implementation. As a Massachusetts leader said, the new commissioner needed a vision paired with "a practical implementation scenario."

The strategy also needed to make clear how statewide priorities would change day-to-day work. One interviewee described alignment as "a function of money being spent differently and behavior changing" and noted that regional and local staff would continue doing what they had always done unless they understood what needed to change.

Clearer authority could support coordination, but governance reform does not itself provide that capacity, and in the short term, it could strain the capacity that agencies already have. Ohio interviewees said the reform changed who directed the agency more than what the agency did, while long-standing staffing and expertise constraints remained unchanged. Transitions could also lead to the loss of key staff. In Indiana, several high-level positions turned over when authority shifted to the appointed secretary. A New Mexico interviewee said that each new administration brought its own deputy secretaries, which affected staff morale and turnover and, with them, the agency's ability to provide technical assistance to schools. Interviewees also described new expectations being added to existing responsibilities, sometimes without corresponding resources or changes in how the agency operated.

Several interviewees underscored the need to assess capacity against the work required by a new reform agenda. As one expert put it, a state that is "reconfiguring authority" also needs to ask how it is "reconfiguring capacity." They recommended assessing the quantity and quality of staff and expertise at the state, regional, and local levels by asking, "What's missing, especially now given these new structures?" and determining how state capacity would complement regional and district capacity. This interviewee added that funding professional development and capacity development for agency staff is rarely politically popular, even when it is crucial to implementation.

Interviewees also noted that an actionable strategy required state leaders to examine how new initiatives fit with existing work. A focused agenda could still add to fragmentation if the state layered new initiatives and requirements on top of those already in place. One interviewee described what often happens to district superintendents and their staff under a new reform: "New priorities on top of old ones. You're not necessarily taking anything off their to-do list; you're just adding more to it." Nor, the interviewee noted, were reforms "adding any more time to their day." State leaders and regional partners therefore needed to consider how new work connected to existing programs and funding as well as what could be consolidated or discontinued. Where consolidation could not free enough capacity, several interviewees said that meeting new demands would require additional funding.

### Finding 2: Capable, Credible Leaders and Strong Teams Determine How Well New Authority Works

Governance transitions place heightened expectations on incoming chiefs, who must advance a new direction while maintaining the agency's ongoing work. They must respond to state leaders, support agency staff, and build confidence among educators and communities, often while establishing new working relationships. Finding and preparing a leadership team with the educational credibility, political judgment, and management skills to meet these demands makes selection both consequential and challenging.

**Selection of the chief shapes capacity and public confidence.** Across states, interviewees consistently emphasized the importance of the capabilities and credibility of the person selected to lead the agency. As one interviewee observed, "The governance structure is important, but when all is said and done, who's sitting in those seats is as important, if not more important." An Indiana interviewee, who recalled participating in several earlier governance changes that had made little difference, said, "The legislature constantly thought that they wanted a different governance structure, but what they really wanted was a different leader." Before the shift to appointment, Indiana leaders tried to manage conflict by rearranging authority around the elected superintendent. The governor created a separate agency that rivaled the department, then dissolved it to restore "harmony and trust" and proposed that his appointees replace the superintendent as SBE chair (Elliott, 2014). Friction continued even after a Republican superintendent succeeded a Democrat, and one interviewee described a view among legislators that elected superintendents had often lacked the skills to run a state agency.

Interviewees noted that the selection process could shape confidence in the new governance system before the chief took office. Massachusetts interviewees warned that an appointment would be perceived as a political reward. As one leader observed, "You'll get a lot of former politicians and people in the legislature, people who are looking for a spot coming forward." Others observed that candidates may be interested in the position as a "political stepping stone." Massachusetts interviewees concluded that the position had to be designed to attract serious, committed leaders rather than reward political allies.

Interviewees described a transparent, public search process as a way to demonstrate that the selection was grounded in qualifications and to give stakeholders a meaningful role. Massachusetts, where the K–12 chief is appointed by the SBE, developed a comprehensive process so that, in the words of a state leader, "people had a sense that they were involved and they had some voice in the process." Massachusetts used public input to shape selection criteria and invited stakeholder panels to interview and evaluate finalists, bringing educators, families, and other constituents directly into its board-led search for a K–12 chief.

Even without such a robust process, interviewees in other states felt that the selection needed to be visibly grounded in competence rather than political allegiance and that whoever was chosen needed to be seen as having been selected for their ability to do the job well. While some states, such as Indiana and Ohio, did not conduct a formal public search, interviewees in those states also held that the choice of candidate had to send a signal about the system's legitimacy.

Interviewees emphasized the importance of selecting a capable chief but cautioned against making the system's effectiveness depend too heavily on one person. As one governance scholar put it, "usually in the American design [of governance systems], we try to design our institutions so that they're sort of independent of the person, and if the wrong person is in, it shouldn't just totally upend everything." Indiana interviewees credited their chief's qualifications and sustained tenure with supporting relationships and consistent implementation. Meanwhile, New Mexico's experience highlighted the vulnerability of that continuity when leadership changes frequently. These accounts raise a broader question of what will sustain the system's direction in California when a chief leaves. In California, the commissioner serves at the governor's pleasure, but the SBE's staggered terms and the SPI's independent elected role offer potential sources of continuity. Whether these arrangements provide continuity will depend partly on whether shared goals, institutional knowledge, and working agreements are maintained across offices, allowing the system to sustain its work through changes in leadership.

**Effective leaders combine field credibility, political fluency, and executive management.** All interviewees emphasized that a chief needed teaching and leadership experience to understand implementation and establish credibility with practitioners, alongside political skill and the capacity to manage a large agency. California's commissioner will face expectations to improve the TK–12 system while ensuring that CDE's essential operations run reliably, including distributing funds on time, administering programs, and providing timely guidance to LEAs. Indiana department staff valued a leader who could connect education experience with an understanding of government. "It's a unique person," one staff member said, "that can understand the policy and political [worlds], but also come from the field to translate … that's been critical."

Leading a state agency draws on the instructional and administrative expertise expected of a district superintendent while demanding additional skills and a different relationship to authority. A district superintendent may be accustomed to substantial discretion in managing the organization and serving as its principal public voice within board-established policy. California's commissioner would lead CDE within a more complex arrangement, accountable to both the SBE and the governor while coordinating with other executive agencies and working with the legislature, which holds independent authority. The commissioner would also work alongside the elected SPI, who holds a voting seat on the SBE and whose redefined role is expected to include examining and publicly commenting on the performance of the state's education system, likely including CDE. Especially because the SPI will have campaigned for an office that carries considerably more authority, that relationship may begin under some strain. As one interviewee noted, navigating these relationships could include carrying out decisions they "probably don't fully support," potentially contributing to resentment of the new arrangement. Interviewees emphasized judgment about when to act, advise, defer, or secure agreement. One suggested that experience as a deputy could help prepare candidates for these responsibilities.

Interviewees described the qualities of an ideal chief state school officer. We drew on their accounts to identify the following attributes to inform California's commissioner search.

- **Executive management:** Has led within a large, complex organization and turned its priorities into feasible plans and measurable progress.
- **Field credibility:** Has worked in classrooms, schools, or districts; understands the implementation problems that educators face; and has earned the respect of local leaders.
- **Presence and judgment:** Inspires confidence among educators and local leaders and stays composed in difficult public and political situations.
- **Political fluency:** Understands how the legislature, the governor's office, and the Department of Finance work and can serve under the SBE and governor while working with the SPI and persuading legislators and peers without direct authority.
- **Translation between policy and practice:** Explains state policy in terms that practitioners can act on and brings what districts experience back into state decisions.
- **Public engagement:** Builds trust with families, students, communities, and advocates and gives them real opportunities to inform state decisions.
- **Strategic focus:** Concentrates effort on a few goals, questions established practice where it falls short, and knows where the department and its partners can add value.
- **Team building:** Recognizes gaps in personal expertise, recruits people who fill them, delegates responsibility, and takes advice.
- **Follow-through:** Understands the demands of the transition, takes on difficult work, keeps commitments, and uses evidence to adjust course.
- **Institutional stewardship:** Values staff expertise and builds routines and capacity that will outlast the commissioner's tenure.

- **Knowledge of California:** Deeply understands the state's diverse students and districts, distinctive funding and accountability systems, and local and regional governance structures.

Interviewees identified a tension between selecting an insider with institutional knowledge and established relationships and an outsider who might bring a fresh perspective. As one governance scholar observed, "If you're trying to break the mold and you're trying to do new things and different things and do them in a different way, then you don't want someone who's too bound by past experience and past operating procedures." Across our cases, interviewees most consistently identified knowledge of how state policy plays out in California's schools and districts, along with credibility with the field, as essential to a state chief's success.

Interviewees cautioned that capable candidates' interest in the role could not be taken for granted. Prospective chiefs need confidence that they can accomplish meaningful work, with clear responsibilities, a compelling mission, and support for implementation. An Indiana interviewee doubted that the secretary "would have wanted the position" under the previous structure, citing siloed work and complex divisions of authority. One state chief described the mission as the main draw—"the freedom to do good work for children"—and emphasized the appeal of a vision with "that kind of clarity and that support."

**Structured preparation strengthens transition.** Interviewees emphasized that even well-qualified chiefs need time and support to learn agency operations, build relationships, and navigate state government. Selecting the chief early allows that preparation to begin before the transfer of formal authority. After taking office, chiefs can continue to learn the department's work, address gaps in their own expertise, and clarify expectations with other state leaders.

In Indiana, department staff attributed a smoother transition in part to the incoming state chief's preparation during roughly a year and a half as the governor's education adviser (Inside INdiana Business, 2019; McCoy, 2020). As one interviewee explained, "All the folks involved with this change knew that they had to get it right," and the adviser role "was basically a training ground and also helped her to build the right relationships, and … see the wheels of government." From their perspective, this period strengthened the incoming chief's relationships with policymakers and agency staff and helped connect the governor's priorities with the department's work. The same interviewee advised identifying the leader early so that the person could "start building the coalitions that they will need."

Preparation also involves understanding the substance and operations of the agency as well as how the system works and where the incoming chief needs to deepen their own expertise. A Massachusetts leader advised new chiefs to examine gaps in their own knowledge, noting that "you have to shore up your weaknesses." For a commissioner with deep classroom experience, that might mean learning about federal requirements, agency management, or

the legislative and budget process. Others similarly advised learning "the mechanics of how all the entities engage with one another" and identifying active policy initiatives and operational bottlenecks. One leader advised chiefs to "understand the rhythm and pace at which things truly move, and need to move," and to be clear about how the governor would be involved.

Florida's legislation made preparation an institutional responsibility extending beyond incoming leaders. The 2000 reorganization act created a transition task force in the Governor's Office of Planning and Budgeting, with an executive director, staff, and funding to recommend how to phase in the new governance arrangements. In 2001, the legislature redirected the task force towards guiding and monitoring implementation, with regular progress reports to state leaders and the public. This approach illustrates how transition preparation can extend beyond individual onboarding to include dedicated capacity for operational planning, coordination, and implementation oversight.

**Strong leadership teams have complementary expertise.** No chief brought every capability the role required. One interviewee cautioned against searching for "the unicorn, that one person who can be all things to all people," and suggested asking instead, "How do you find someone who's got a majority of what you need, and then has a demonstrated willingness and ability to build a team of people they trust around them to fill the gaps in experience and expertise?" As another state leader put it, "I don't think you hire just a leader; you hire a team." Because "the leader is going to have a slice of that expertise," interviewees emphasized the importance of drawing on team members' strengths and giving them responsibility for leadership and implementation.

In Indiana, the incoming secretary built her leadership team to retain institutional knowledge. She deliberately combined state board staff with continuing department staff, bringing together "key folks that know how the system is working," as one interviewee explained, along with staff who knew the history and what was already in motion. SBE staff also moved into the department's offices. As one interviewee explained, "That physical location merger, in addition to policy, operation, and titles, was intentional." This process helped board and department staff work from a shared set of priorities while preserving the expertise needed to maintain operations and guide change. The same interviewee attributed progress to not only finding "the right person" but also building "the right ecosystem and team to make it all work." Team members' local experience and relationships also helped connect state policy with district practice. An Indiana interviewee recalled a retired superintendent on the secretary's leadership team whose district experience and long-standing relationships helped him explain proposed changes to local leaders "in a way where it made sense. It was less threatening."

The chief's role includes creating conditions in which the team can work effectively. A Massachusetts leader described a division of responsibilities where the commissioner "focuses on the politicians, the parents, and the press, while his team focuses on standards and instruction."

In this leader's account, the commissioner "shields his department from political interference, hires excellent people, and lets them do their work." By managing external pressures, the chief can help staff stay focused and apply their expertise to the department's core work.

### Finding 3: Coherence Depends on Clear Responsibilities and Effective Working Relationships

Governance reforms changed how state education agencies related to governors, legislatures, state boards, and other public institutions. As authority shifted, leaders faced questions about how decisions would move through the system and how institutions with distinct responsibilities would work together. Interviewees described the practical work of establishing these relationships.

**Effective implementation requires coordination across state leaders.** Interviewees and contemporaneous documents pointed to persistent disagreements among state education leaders, governors, and legislatures as an important impetus for reform. Because these actors drew on separate sources of authority, they could pursue competing agendas, which made it harder to carry enacted policy into practice. Transferring authority to a gubernatorial appointee was intended to establish clearer responsibility for implementing state policy.

In Indiana, interviewees characterized the governor and legislature as broadly aligned before the reform, while elected superintendents at times pursued a different direction. One insider described superintendents who opposed legislative policies and looked for ways to "undermine those policies and implementation." Ohio interviewees similarly described a perception that the SBE had become an independent actor whose decisions diverged from the priorities of the governor and legislature. In both states, their reforms were framed as responses to contested authority and perceived resistance to implementation. As one Ohio interviewee explained, placing the department under the governor would clarify both direction and responsibility for implementing state policy: "You have to have some sort of chain of command, and it starts with the governor, and the buck stops there in terms of implementation."

Closer alignment between the chief and the governor, however, does not remove political conflict from education governance. Disagreements between the governor and the legislature can continue to affect implementation. New Mexico interviewees described strained relations when a Republican governor faced a Democratic legislature, with the appointed secretary caught in disputes between the two. Relations reportedly improved under a Democratic governor and legislature, but shared party affiliation did not stop legislators from directing frustrations with the governor towards the department.

These accounts suggest that appointing the chief can remove one source of competing authority while leaving other disagreements in place. The chief still has to maintain working relationships with the legislature, communicate about policy intent and implementation, and

navigate disputes involving the governor. Interviewees noted that strained relationships at the state level also affected the department's ability to provide consistent guidance and support to LEAs.

**Cabinet-level placement enables cross-agency coordination.** Interviewees described cabinet-level placement as both a signal of education's importance and a means of connecting education leaders with agencies whose responsibilities intersected with their work. As one Massachusetts leader explained, "By elevating the position to cabinet level, it said, 'This is as important as anything else the governor is doing,' whether it's criminal justice or housing or economic development." Cabinet placement gives education a more direct presence in executive discussions about issues beyond the department's own authority. The experiences of other states suggest that including the commissioner in the cabinet could strengthen education's access to executive decision-making and facilitate coordination with agencies responsible for related areas, such as workforce development and health and human services.

In Ohio, an interviewee observed that the director could "work more closely with other agency heads because they're in the governor's cabinet" and pointed to relationships with the Department of Higher Education and the Department of Children and Youth. The interviewee also described improvements in securing cross-agency data approvals. For example, an evaluation of industry-recognized credentials required linking unemployment insurance wage data with K–12 and postsecondary records. Before the reorganization, approval for this kind of work had been difficult to obtain. In this case, closer ties between the DEW and the Department of Job and Family Services, which was responsible for wage data, made it easier to access the data and evaluate cross-cutting policy that spanned education and employment.

For California, including the commissioner in the governor's cabinet could bring TK–12 implementation needs more directly into executive discussions. One interviewee described the potential benefits of cross-agency work as "economies of scope": accomplishing more by connecting complementary responsibilities and expertise. Because higher education is not represented in the cabinet, coordination with its leaders would require additional arrangements.

**Follow-through builds legislative trust and flexibility.** Interviewees described legislative trust as an important asset that could give departments greater flexibility in implementing policy. Clearer authority established who was responsible for implementation, but legislators' confidence in the department grew through regular communication and a record of follow-through. In Ohio, one interviewee said that the restructuring created "accountability for education-law implementation that did not exist before."

Indiana interviewees described how clearer responsibility, combined with deliberate relationship building, helped rebuild legislative trust. Previously, when legislators disagreed with the department's implementation of policy, they passed additional legislation prescribing agency actions in greater detail, producing what one interviewee called "constant pivots back and forth,

tug-of-wars." The incoming secretary sought to interrupt this cycle by working closely with legislative leaders to resolve disagreements and clarify expectations during policy development, then carrying out the agreed direction. One interviewee reported that, as legislative trust grew, some education bills shrank from more than 20 pages to a few sentences, leaving more discretion about implementation to the department. They described a shift from legislators prescribing implementation details to setting desired outcomes and then "letting the department figure it out." This latitude developed gradually: "There had to be several goals accomplished to build that trust that if you did defer to the department, they will deliver in the way that you expect to be delivered."

Interviewees also linked growing legislative confidence to greater funding flexibility. The department supported its budget requests with evidence of progress and its ability to attract outside investment. Its literacy initiative, for example, combined approximately $26 million in federal relief funds with up to $60 million in philanthropic funding (Smith, 2022). Interviewees described this approach as helping secure discretionary block grants from the legislature. One framed the request as asking whether legislators "would like to strategically invest in proven methods that demonstrate return on investment."

These accounts suggest that legislative trust can support clear expectations for results alongside flexibility in implementation. As one Massachusetts leader explained, "You can create transparency and accountability to drive towards success." For California, this points to the importance of pairing implementation flexibility with accountability grounded in clear goals, regular reporting, and demonstrated follow-through.

**Separating policy from management helps leaders work together.** Interviewees noted that closer alignment among state leaders did not by itself clarify how decisions would be made. Several institutions could contribute to a policy discussion while holding different authority over the resulting decision. Without clear distinctions in authority, coordination could give way to competing directives, leaving agency staff and local leaders uncertain about whose guidance to follow.

In Massachusetts, leaders distinguished the secretary's role from the commissioner's responsibility for departmental operations. The secretary's office would focus on oversight, advising the governor, and coordination across education sectors. One leader recalled the secretary's office telling the commissioner, "We want to work in collaboration with you, but we're not running programs." The arrangement let the secretary shape statewide direction without creating a parallel center of operational authority to the commissioner. The interviewee credited this clarity with the office's longevity, noting that it "has enabled that office to persist up until now."

An Ohio interviewee similarly emphasized the importance of respecting the responsibilities retained by the SBE and its superintendent after most authority was transferred to the department.

The superintendent, the interviewee noted, "came in with the duties defined. … He understood the role. He wasn't trying to empire-build." Clear statutory boundaries were repeatedly identified as useful for building trust and managing the distribution of duties.

California's transition will require similar attention to how the commissioner, SBE, elected SPI, governor, and legislature exercise their distinct responsibilities. Recurring decisions will include setting goals, developing policy proposals, directing departmental work, issuing guidance, and communicating publicly. Working agreements could clarify who initiates each process, whose input is sought, whose approval is required, and how disagreements are resolved. These agreements should also establish how the SPI's public engagement and recommendations inform decisions.

Clear responsibilities also need to be matched with practical tools for implementation. An Ohio analyst noted that laws could assign duties without specifying what the department could do "when a district simply doesn't do it." Ohio H.B. 33 (2023) clarified responses to transportation noncompliance, beginning with corrective action plans and escalating to withholding aid. Oregon S.B. 141 (2025) established escalating support and intervention for districts that repeatedly miss performance targets. These examples suggest that California's Phase Two review could examine whether responsibilities across the support system are matched by sufficient authority, tools, and capacity to support local improvement and address unmet obligations.

**Building support and navigating opposition are part of implementation.** Interviewees described leaders who worked to keep allies engaged and to protect new arrangements from early changes. In Indiana, the first secretary built relationships with education committee chairs and legislative leaders. She also met weekly with the leaders of education associations and consulted them before major proposals advanced. Principal and superintendent associations then helped explain new laws to their members.

Some leaders brought opponents into the work, and others worked around them. In Massachusetts, a former commissioner recalled being "booed, threatened, and burned in effigy" over new reforms. His department then set up committees with teachers to work through ongoing questions. Ohio legislators added the director's public-meeting requirement as a concession to critics. In contrast, an Indiana department leader observed that an alliance with school administrators had "further minimized and marginalized" the state teachers union, noting that labor already had limited influence in the state.

States also took steps to limit conflict with officials whose authority was reduced. Indiana legislators timed their governance change to avoid the appearance of removing an officeholder for partisan reasons. A department leader explained that acting while a Democrat held the office "would look like just the Republicans didn't like that they lost the seat." A former department official similarly recalled that legislators were sensitive to the "perception of disempowering voters."

## Finding 4: Stable, Coordinated, and Responsive Support Builds Credibility With Districts

Governance reforms may reshape relationships among governors, state boards, and education agencies, but local leaders experience these reforms primarily through changes in the guidance and support they receive. States deliver this through their direct engagement with districts and schools and through intermediary organizations that support local implementation.

**Alignment with regional intermediaries strengthens local support.** Interviewees underscored that statewide priorities were perceptible to schools and districts when intermediaries and other organizations working directly with them changed their practices. As one interviewee noted, announcing a priority doesn't clarify how to act on it: "Even if the governor says literacy is a priority, it doesn't mean anyone knows what to do." Regional and local support providers need guidance on what to do differently in schools and districts. Otherwise, the interviewee emphasized, "everyone is just going to keep doing the thing they've been doing because that's the thing they know how to do."

In most of the states we studied, the state agency works with districts through regional intermediaries, such as Ohio's Educational Service Centers (ESCs) and Oregon's Education Service Districts (ESDs). None of the governance reforms we studied substantively restructured these organizations. These intermediaries retained their own responsibilities, resources, and relationships with districts; as an Ohio policy analyst echoed, the state agency "can't simply order" an intermediary to carry out a set of tasks each year.

In Oregon, the department relied on ESDs to extend its capacity. Uncertain about their role under new department leadership, ESD leaders sought clarity and were soon identified as regional partners in a major reform initiative. As one Oregon interviewee observed, "Each ESD is different. They have different strengths, but we definitely see them as a partner" in providing technical assistance to districts, most of which are small and rural. Yet the rules governing ESDs still cast them in district compliance roles rather than regional support (Northwest Comprehensive Center, 2026). Oregon S.B. 141 (2025) then required a third-party review of the standards that districts and ESDs must meet. The review found that the ESD standards were particularly far removed from district and student outcomes and recommended linking each ESD's service plan to accountability outcomes (Northwest Comprehensive Center, 2026).

Ohio offers a different arrangement. Alongside its ESCs, the state funds 16 regional State Support Teams (SSTs), each hosted by an ESC that serves as its fiscal agent (Myung et al., 2025). The department directs SST work through performance contracts specifying expected outcomes, evaluations, and corrective actions. This arrangement provides a regional channel for state-directed support within the existing ESC structure.

Interviewees encouraged California to examine and clarify how its existing regional organizations contribute to statewide priorities. "There needs to be a clear level of alignment from the governor's office to the classroom," one interviewee said. If the COEs were "not all singing off the same song sheet, which I would predict that they're not," that would be a "major issue." A former Massachusetts state education leader similarly advised California to seek to strengthen existing regional organizations before creating new ones: "I do not think you should rush to set up an entirely separate, parallel regional structure if the county system already exists. My instinct is always to try to fix the existing system first." If a county office is weak, the interviewee advised strengthening it "either by supporting them, or by withholding funds if they refuse to cooperate." If that effort failed, the commissioner would then have "the empirical proof you need to go to the governor and the legislature to advocate for a structural change."

Massachusetts illustrates an approach to revising the oversight and coordination of existing regional organizations. It reformed its district-formed education collaboratives rather than replacing them. After state audits identified financial mismanagement at several collaboratives (Massachusetts Office of the State Auditor, 2011), the legislature placed a commissioner appointee on each collaborative's board. It later directed the SBE to organize collaboratives into regions, designate one collaborative in each region to coordinate with the department, and recast the commissioner's appointee as a department liaison.

Alignment among state leaders must translate into coherent guidance and support for districts, which will involve California's constellation of support providers in a shared strategy; otherwise, as one interviewee cautioned, "districts' attention is fragmented just by nature of structure." Interviewees advised beginning with these existing organizations and assessing whether their priorities, budgets, and services align with statewide goals and with one another.

**Districts value clear, consistent direction.** Interviewees reported that local leaders and educators generally paid limited attention to state governance reform because they perceived little direct impact on their daily work. As one state education leader put it, "the vast majority of educators are just trying to do their job day-to-day." What did matter to districts, however, was whether they could rely on the state's guidance to plan and carry out their work.

Before Indiana's reform, guidance was widely considered inconsistent and irregular. Disagreements among state leaders contributed to shifting direction for districts. The department would issue directives "but not in a way that the legislature would want," one interviewee explained, prompting legislators to pass laws redirecting the department. Educators did not necessarily follow these disputes and were often unsure why expectations kept changing. Schools "felt caught in the middle and were frustrated by it," another interviewee noted. In 2018, for example, schools received separate state and federal A–F grades after the SBE and the department failed to agree on a single accountability system (Cavazos, 2018a).

After the transition, district leaders noticed greater consistency in state guidance and that guidance no longer changed months after a law passed. "Even when they disagree with the direction," a department policy expert said, "they at least appreciate that the direction is clear." Such observations were common in the first few years but became less frequent as consistency became an expectation: "It's just assumed that's how it works."

**Regular engagement connects state support to district needs.** Interviewees described ongoing engagement with district leaders as essential to understanding how state policy translates into local practice and what districts need to implement it. One Massachusetts leader recalled a predecessor's saying, "The districts have the kids, so they have the hard job," and added, "The state's responsibility is to support them, not just pontificate about policy." Standing forums and designated staff contacts, school visits, and consultation with practitioners helped state leaders identify where guidance or assistance was needed and assess whether statewide expectations accounted for local conditions.

One state leader described a nearly weekly Friday forum established after the change in federal administration to address questions about emerging federal policies. Districts, she said, needed to know that her team was monitoring developments. The forum brought together district leaders, education service districts, the state school boards association, and other education organizations, giving the department a regular opportunity to hear concerns and share guidance. Membership organizations, such as principal and superintendent associations, offered additional venues to explain policy changes and discuss implementation needs; at the same time, interviewees emphasized the distinct value of engaging directly with educators and local leaders themselves. School visits complemented these exchanges by helping state leaders understand how local conditions could affect implementation. As one interviewee explained, these visits provided context, "so you know that when you're designing that policy, this is not gonna play out in that scenario."

## Finding 5: Local Responsiveness and Public Access Matter More as Authority Shifts to Appointees

Governance reforms that transfer authority from elected to appointed officials can reduce the public's direct role in selecting education leaders. Educators, families, students, and communities consequently depend more on other channels to shape state decisions, including access to state leaders, formal opportunities for input, and agencies responsive to local needs. Interviewees described how states maintained these channels during and after governance transitions and how local leaders assessed whether the new arrangements responded to the people they served.

**Public access requires deliberate attention.** During legislative debate, opponents of these reforms argued that moving from elected to appointed leadership would reduce the public's voice in education governance. Interviewees reported hearing these concerns less often during implementation, attributing this partly to appointed leaders' accessibility and formal opportunities for public engagement.

In Indiana, a former state official recalled that legislators were "very sensitive" to the perception that an appointed chief would disempower voters. A department interviewee said these concerns were "discussed during the bill" but rarely arose during implementation. The interviewee credited the appointed chief, who was "constantly out meeting with folks, being extremely accessible," and advised incoming leaders to establish regular forums with concerned groups. In a state as populous as California, standing forums with regional or affinity-based groups and designated staff contacts could help sustain access beyond the commissioner's personal outreach.

In Ohio, concerns about transferring authority from a partly elected state board to a governor-appointed director led legislators to require public meetings at least once every other month. These meetings provided opportunities to discuss major initiatives and proposed rules, but they did not necessarily preserve stakeholders' influence. A policy analyst whose organization supported the reform acknowledged that some groups would find it "much harder now" to influence policy and described advocacy as shifting from the SBE to the governor's office and legislature. California's SBE meetings provide a public forum for matters within its authority, but a parallel question concerns opportunities for input on commissioner decisions, including guidance and grant decisions that do not come before the board.

Oregon created a mechanism for engagement before formal rulemaking through its Ongoing Rules Community Advisory (ORCA), which the department used to develop rules for Oregon S.B. 141 (2025). Drawing on a network of nearly 200 organizations and individuals, ORCA involves representatives in drafting and reviewing rules before the SBE's first reading. By the time a proposal reaches the board, one senior state leader said, "it's been vetted pretty well." This approach highlights the value of practitioner input while proposals are still taking shape. California's required engagement process for AB 181's Phase Two recommendations could provide a starting point for standing advisory groups that inform subsequent policy development.

Advisory groups can also broaden whose perspectives reach state leaders. A political scientist we interviewed recommended that agency leaders engage citizen advisory committees as a structured way for the public to raise concerns and for agency leaders to learn from those perspectives. Leaders could still make unpopular decisions, they noted, but "it's not because [the agency leaders] didn't know about the concerns of the public." The interviewee added that such committees can build trust by showing "a little humility from the state." In Massachusetts, state leaders saw value in hearing directly from educators and students. One leader described creating

a teacher advisory board for the governor because "the only people the governor was hearing from were the teachers unions," explaining that "we wanted that teacher voice." The union was invited to nominate one to two teachers to the advisory board. A student panel similarly provided an opportunity for students to meet directly with the governor.

California differs from the comparison states because it retains the independently elected SPI and a state board with substantial policymaking authority. These arrangements provide additional channels for public voice and access to state leadership. They could also create confusion about where to raise concerns and who is responsible for addressing them unless the roles of the SPI, commissioner, and SBE are clearly defined and communicated.

**Regular engagement connects policy design with implementation realities.** State leaders we interviewed described regular engagement with district leaders as one of the main ways they learned how reform was working in schools. A former Massachusetts state leader observed that people do not know how a new governance system will operate "until they see how the people who inhabit the rules actually do it." Several state leaders said that district leaders judged the new system by the guidance they received and the extent to which their experiences informed state decisions.

In Indiana, the secretary consulted standing practitioner groups before finalizing major proposals, helping the department anticipate implementation problems. A department interviewee said it does not "move forward any major proposals without key leaders from the field to 'gut check' it." The secretary then used that feedback to explain practical implications to legislators: "We know you're interested in this," she could tell them, "but this is how it would actually practically play out. We should probably not go this direction."

States could also build these channels into their regular work with districts. An education policy scholar we interviewed suggested that states organize districts into networks of comparable peers, grouped by size, location, or student demographics, so that districts can learn from others working in similar conditions. Such networks would give the department a standing way to hear from districts, which could ease districts' concerns about losing access to state decision makers, and the department could collect data on what districts learn, use the data to adjust its support, and share findings with districts in a form they can act on.

## Nine Recommendations for Implementing AB 181

The experiences of other states suggest that structural reform can clarify who leads the education system. Whether it improves that system depends on how leaders translate clearer authority and stronger coordination into coherent guidance and support for schools and districts. AB 181 presents California with two related tasks: establishing new leadership arrangements and determining what further governance changes are needed.

Drawing on comparative state analysis, interviews, and existing research, the nine recommendations given in this section offer California's incoming administration, education leaders, and legislators a framework for both tasks. These recommendations are organized into three suggested time frames:

- As immediate priorities, prepare for the transition and establish early working arrangements.
- During the commissioner's first 100 days, build engagement, demonstrate early improvements in state support, and establish evaluation measures to inform the October 2027 Phase Two report and ongoing implementation.
- During the first year, develop shared statewide goals, assess organizational capacity, and explore sustainable funding.

These time frames provide a flexible guide, recognizing that the work is interconnected, will overlap, and will require sustained effort beyond the periods indicated. Each recommendation includes approaches to consider, which draw on examples from the six comparison states and other states with relevant experience.

### Immediate Priorities

**Recommendation 1: Establish clear qualifications and a timely process for commissioner appointment and confirmation.** Selecting the commissioner is an early opportunity to build the leadership capacity and public confidence needed to implement governance reform. Across states, interviewees emphasized that the person leading the agency was as consequential as the structure itself. Clear selection criteria should identify the expertise and judgment needed to guide CDE through the transition and strengthen support for schools and districts. Relevant qualifications include executive management, credibility with educators, political fluency, and the ability to translate policy into effective implementation (see pages 34–35 for a fuller set of attributes identified by interviewees).

Consultation with SBE leadership during the search could help define these qualifications and establish a foundation for a productive working relationship. Because AB 181 makes the commissioner responsible to both the governor and the SBE, early agreement on goals,

responsibilities, and accountability should inform the selection. This is particularly important as the incoming governor will work with a state board largely appointed by the previous administration, alongside new legislative appointees and the elected SPI. These discussions can support a timely selection while preserving the governor's appointment authority. A timely, substantive senate confirmation process could help deepen public understanding of the nominee's qualifications and leadership plans and support legislative review.

***Approach to consider:*** Ohio's 2023 governance reform pairs limits on interim leadership with education-focused confirmation review. The state's governance statute limits an individual's interim service as state chief to 45 days and requires at least one in-person hearing before the senate committee responsible for primary and secondary education before the full senate's confirmation vote. California's general appointment framework, by comparison, generally permits covered appointees to serve pending confirmation for up to 365 days after they begin performing their duties (Cal. Gov. Code § 1774, 2026), and under Senate Rule 13(i), nominations are referred to the Rules Committee (Cal. S. Res. 4, 2024). California could adapt elements of Ohio's approach through a timely confirmation process that provides a public opportunity for the nominee to convey their education expertise and leadership plans, helping build public confidence.

**Recommendation 2: Support an effective transition with institutional knowledge and complementary expertise.** An effective transition requires preparing the incoming commissioner to lead organizational change while sustaining the department's essential services. Interviewees valued chiefs' familiarity with state government but also emphasized that new leaders need time and resources to learn the agency's operations and institutional context.

The governor-elect could identify a prospective commissioner immediately and involve that individual in transition planning before the new administration takes office. This would provide time to consult with SBE leadership and career staff, learn CDE operations, and prepare for the transfer of responsibilities while reserving formal appointment and decision-making authority for the appropriate time. A designated transition lead could coordinate this work and prepare staffing options and early priorities for the commissioner's consideration.

The SBE is already undertaking substantial transition planning, laying the groundwork for continuity of operations and the incoming commissioner's preparation. SBE staff and CDE career staff, in coordination with the governor's transition team, could help the commissioner learn quickly while preserving institutional knowledge and continuity of services. A structured onboarding and handoff process could then bring the incoming commissioner together with agency leaders and career staff to review major responsibilities, resolve immediate operational questions, and establish clear ownership of decisions and obligations during the transfer.

The complementary expertise of the commissioner's senior team will also be critical during this phase. Combining agency management experience, knowledge of education practice, and fluency in state government in the commissioner's team could help address the role's demands from the outset. For example, a commissioner with limited Sacramento experience could benefit from a chief of staff or senior deputy with legislative, budget, and interagency expertise.

***Approaches to consider:*** Careful operational planning can help translate new governance structures into effective coordination and more responsive services while sustaining essential operations throughout the transition. Florida's 2001 senate staff analysis describes proposed arrangements for turning transition recommendations into assigned responsibilities, timelines, and oversight while keeping operations running. The proposal links organizational change with continuity of staff, resources, and existing responsibilities while involving affected agencies in identifying needed statutory revisions. California could draw from how Florida planned to operationalize its governance transition by developing a transition plan that assigns leads and milestones, preserves continuity in core functions and obligations, and identifies issues requiring later statutory or budget action. Such a plan could include an inventory of major functions, staffing, fiscal and contractual commitments, federal requirements, and key relationships with local agencies.

**Recommendation 3: Clarify decision-making roles and coordination among statewide leaders.** Clarifying authority in law is a starting point for achieving coherence, but state leaders also need shared expectations for how they will exercise that authority and work together. Interviewees from several states described the challenges that state chiefs faced when navigating competing direction from the governor and the SBE or legislature. Early working agreements among the governor, commissioner, SPI, SBE, and legislature could help translate AB 181's allocation of authority into consistent direction for CDE staff and school districts. These agreements could establish expectations for decision-making, communication, information sharing, and conflict resolution while respecting each office's responsibilities and obligations for public deliberation.

Clear lines between setting policy and managing a department would provide a foundation for these arrangements. For example, the transition offers an opportunity to clarify how the established distinction between the SBE's policymaking role and the commissioner's administrative responsibilities will work in practice. Working protocols could specify how the SBE communicates policy direction, receives information about implementation and departmental performance, and addresses issues that the commissioner brings forward for policy decisions. These working arrangements should also account for the SPI's distinct role as an independent voice for students and families while preserving a clear line of operational authority within CDE under the commissioner.

The commissioner's direct responsibility to both the governor and the SBE makes a process for resolving competing directions particularly important. Agreeing on how to surface and resolve disagreements could reduce conflicting instructions to staff and delays in decisions. Tracking recurring disagreements, delays, and duplicative approvals could also inform Phase Two recommendations by distinguishing problems that better working arrangements can address from those requiring changes in authority or staffing.

***Approaches to consider:*** Although Maryland was not one of the six primary comparison states, its use of a formal interagency agreement offers a relevant example of how statewide bodies can clarify responsibilities and coordinate their work. In June 2025, the Maryland SBE and the Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB) adopted an agreement addressing implementation responsibilities, information sharing, and regular meetings. The agreement came more than 3 years into implementation of Maryland's Blueprint reforms, after local school leaders and other stakeholders expressed confusion about the respective roles of the SBE and AIB. The agreement did not require legislative action (Ford, 2025a, 2025b). Although Maryland's governance structure differs from California's, the agreement illustrates how written protocols can clarify expectations and create regular channels for resolving overlap without altering statutory authority.

## Priorities for the First 100 Days

**Recommendation 4: Build a responsive agency culture through regular engagement.** AB 181 changes who leads CDE, but its practical value will depend in part on whether districts experience the department differently. Interviewees emphasized that improving the coherence and quality of support to LEAs requires changes in an agency's everyday practices and ways of working, in addition to changes in its governance. For many LEAs, CDE is experienced primarily as a compliance and monitoring agency rather than a source of implementation support (Superintendents-State Policy Exchange Planning Committee, 2026). The incoming commissioner has an opportunity to strengthen a culture in which practical guidance and timely assistance to LEAs accompany necessary oversight, and feedback from the field informs how the department operates. The commissioner could signal a different approach without creating new compliance procedures or regulatory processes through regular field engagement, accessible staff contacts, timely and consistent responses, and greater emphasis on technical assistance.

CDE could establish standing forums and designated staff contacts with districts, COEs, other support providers, and education organizations to communicate guidance, gather feedback before policies or procedures are finalized, and answer implementation questions in a timely manner. A public organizational chart on CDE's website, including staff names, titles, and contact information, could help local leaders identify whom to contact. A transition listening tour or survey could seek input from LEAs and other stakeholders on which reports, guidance,

and administrative requirements should be simplified, consolidated, or discontinued. Standing practitioner groups could review significant guidance or administrative changes for likely implementation challenges before release.

***Approaches to consider:*** Kentucky offers a relevant example of how a new education chief can gather public input and use it to inform statewide priorities. Kentucky Commissioner Jason Glass began gathering input within his first month in office through a survey that asked educators, families, and community members what the state and districts should keep, what they should stop, and what they should start doing. About 7 months into his tenure, Glass held a virtual listening tour with sessions in each regional education cooperative. A broadly constituted coalition then conducted interviews that built on this input and developed a statewide vision and learning agenda.

**Recommendation 5: Demonstrate early improvements in state support.** Addressing persistent frustrations in districts' interactions with the state could build confidence that governance reform is leading to more useful and dependable support. A small number of feasible improvements in 2027 could show how the new governance arrangements improve state support even as broader options are developed for Phase Two. Districts and communities will experience the transition through their routine dealings with the state, including whether guidance is clear, assistance is available, and concerns receive prompt responses. Direct engagement with the field could help the commissioner and SBE identify common problems experienced by LEAs that they can address with existing authority and resources.

Choosing a few priorities for improvement, each with clear responsibility and a realistic timeline, would make progress easier to assess and keep the department from overextending itself during the transition. Following through on these commitments could build the department's credibility and indicate the coordination and capacity that larger improvements would require.

***Approaches to consider:*** Getting Down to Facts III points to several areas where early action is feasible, including reducing administrative burden, reviewing state rules that constrain local flexibility, strengthening guidance on instructional materials, and improving public information. Initial steps could include simplifying reporting templates. For LCAPs, this could mean a shorter template that drops requirements already covered elsewhere while keeping the plans useful for local planning and community engagement. The state could also coordinate deadlines, use data it already collects, show districts how to use existing flexibilities, help them identify strong materials among state-approved options, and support them in setting measurable LCAP goals (Gallagher et al., 2026; Hibel & Beberman, 2026; Laski et al., 2026; Polikoff & Haderlein, 2026; Willis & Loeb, 2026).

Federal program monitoring (FPM) is another candidate for early improvement. Several interviewees familiar with California described CDE's FPM process as a particularly frustrating aspect of district interactions, citing separate reviews by program offices, occasionally conflicting guidance, and burdensome documentation requirements. Because FPM is one of the main points of direct contact between CDE and LEAs, districts may notice changes in the process quickly. For LEAs scheduled for monitoring in 2027, CDE could coordinate reviews across program offices and request each document only once while resolving conflicting guidance before reviews begin. None of these changes would alter the federal requirements themselves, which CDE must continue to monitor.

The commissioner's Phase Two report could identify requirements that cannot be streamlined administratively, along with proposed legislative changes or other actions to address them. Public updates and feedback from the people who use these processes would help leaders judge whether early actions are working.

**Recommendation 6: Establish early measures of progress and independently evaluate the transition.** Embedding learning and evaluation in a governance transition can help state leaders assess whether changes are improving state support and guide further reform. Across states, interviewees remarked that improving student outcomes was the long-term goal of governance reform, but because changes in those outcomes take time to emerge and provide only lagging feedback, tracking interim indicators could offer useful information about whether the governance system is moving in the right direction. The feasibility and fairness of expectations for progress will depend on available staff, data systems, and resources needed to support these expectations, addressed in Recommendation 9.

Baseline measures set before or early in implementation could track the state's performance and the experiences of those who rely on it and could help assess whether CDE is strengthening its capacity and culture of service to districts, reflected in both its operating practices and districts' experiences of support. Statewide leaders could consider agreeing on a small set of indicators in a few areas, such as:

- consistent guidance and responsive support (the timeliness and consistency of guidance, approvals, and responses);
- coordination and efficiency (duplicative requests and delays involving multiple offices);
- experience of support (the accessibility, usefulness, and dependability of assistance); and
- capacity and continuity (critical vacancies, leadership turnover, and retention of essential expertise).

Existing administrative data and brief, periodic feedback could support regular reviews without adding significant local reporting burdens. Publishing the findings and identifying who can address the issues they expose, as well as reporting on the actions taken, would keep the

monitoring transparent and connect it to improvements in state support. Early evidence could inform Phase Two, and longer-term evaluation could examine improvements over time. Without new resources, though, CDE may not be able to undertake this process adequately in the first year. If the indicators show little improvement, the reason could be the department's capacity rather than the new leadership arrangements. The first year of data could therefore serve as a baseline, and expectations for improvement could be limited to a few highly used services. Tracking response times alongside vacancies and turnover would also show whether delays are concentrated in understaffed offices, and that information could inform budget and staffing decisions.

An independent, adequately funded evaluation could assess whether the transition improves coherence and capacity and whether the state is meeting its commitments to the field. Public reporting and protection from control by the offices under evaluation would support the evaluation's credibility.

***Approaches to consider:*** A state education agency's effectiveness is reflected not only in the policies it implements but also in the reliability of its operations and the quality and responsiveness of its guidance and services. Oregon tracks customer satisfaction with the department as an official key performance measure in its agency budget, asking customers to rate its expertise, helpfulness, timeliness, accuracy, availability of information, and overall quality. ODE identifies its customers as schools, other agencies, education partners, tribes, community members, and families, and the department conducts an annual survey of customers' experiences with ODE services. In its response to the most recent survey findings, ODE adopted a customer-service policy, began quarterly reviews of its web pages, and directed each office to develop a service-improvement plan (Oregon Department of Education, 2025). ODE also measures State School Fund administration by the timeliness and accuracy of distributions to districts, with performance tracked monthly. Its integrated planning guidance further establishes defined timelines for grant applications and quarterly disbursement claims. Under Oregon S.B. 141, the state required an independent review of state requirements affecting school districts and ESDs, including which requirements best support student outcomes, which could be eliminated, and how they should be implemented or monitored.

CDE could also draw on practices already used by some COEs in California. For example, El Dorado COE invites district leaders to rate individual COE departments on accessibility, accuracy, attitude, operational efficiency, and timeliness, using a 5-point scale with space allowed for specific comments (El Dorado County Office of Education, 2026). A similar survey could help CDE identify service improvements and track whether districts' experiences improve.

## Priorities for the First Year

**Recommendation 7: Develop a small set of shared statewide goals and an implementation strategy.** Across states, education leaders we interviewed consistently emphasized the need for a small set of shared goals to guide a new governance structure. California has established a wide-ranging set of priorities and measures for improvement through its statewide priorities, the California School Dashboard, and related measures and planning processes. These efforts have broadened attention to student outcomes and have made differences in performance more visible. However, the breadth of these priorities can burden districts with reporting at the expense of improvement. According to a group of California superintendents, "districts are often required by the state to establish and report on more than 100 individual goals; in practice, this has led to a focus on time-consuming reporting as opposed to time focused on supporting students" (Superintendents-State Policy Exchange Planning Committee, 2026). The next step is to build upon the state's established measurement framework by elevating a clearer focus through a small set of shared, measurable goals that organize sustained action across the system.

An early priority for the commissioner, working with the governor, could be to bring together the SBE, SPI, legislature, and regional and local partners to identify these goals from the state's existing priorities. The aim would be to commit to a few outcomes that they will pursue together, with the discipline to maintain that focus. The state's own performance could be assessed separately by measures within its immediate control, such as the timeliness of guidance and the quality of its support (see Recommendation 6).

Each goal could be paired with assigned responsibilities, resource needs, interim milestones, and commitments of state support, with a clear line between what should be consistent statewide and what can be adapted locally. Where the strategy calls for new statewide practices, the state could pilot them in a subset of districts, with legislative authorization where needed, and use evidence from implementation to inform decisions about broader adoption. Reviewing existing plans and indicators against these goals could also identify activities to simplify, consolidate, or discontinue. Regular review of implementation evidence would allow strategies to improve while maintaining enough stability for local planning.

***Approach to consider:*** Oregon has set statewide targets for a concise set of student outcomes, including early literacy, regular attendance, ninth-grade on-track status, and high school graduation. Using its existing integrated planning process, Oregon then asked districts to establish aligned local goals and strategies. California could take a similar approach by incorporating statewide goals into the LCAP rather than creating a separate planning process. The LCAP could be organized around a small set of statewide goals while continuing to address the eight state priorities required by law. Building on an existing planning process could minimize additional administrative burden while sharpening the focus of local planning and resources

on advancing shared statewide goals for students. This approach could strengthen alignment between state and local efforts while preserving districts' flexibility to determine how best to meet their communities' needs.

**Recommendation 8: Assess responsibilities across the education governance and support system.** Strengthening support for districts requires clear, coordinated responsibilities across state and regional entities and sufficient capacity to carry them out. AB 181 requires identifying early education and TK–12 support entities and programs operating outside CDE, including state entities, COEs and their contracted regional and statewide lead roles, CCEE, and the Office of Civil Rights. This list is not exhaustive; other entities, such as SELPAs and the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, also support LEAs. The identification process could involve documenting each entity's and program's statutory basis, assigned responsibilities, funding sources and restrictions, staffing models, and services to LEAs. Completing this inventory by the June 30, 2027, interim report would leave time for assessment before the October 1 deadline.

The law also requires evaluating all entities that have authority over or provide statewide support to early education and TK–12 programs and considering how they could be organized more efficiently and effectively. Including CDE in this assessment would help clarify how responsibilities connect across the system. By adapting Ripma and Loeb's (2026) framework, the evaluation could begin by organizing responsibilities into five functions: program administration; standards, accountability, and system performance; LEA oversight and corrective action; programmatic support and improvement; and equity assurance and access protections. Mapping these functions across relevant entities would make overlaps, gaps, and divided responsibilities visible.

Given limited time and funding, rigorous impact evaluations of every entity and program inventoried would not be feasible. The review could nevertheless examine what services districts receive, what existing evidence indicates about results, and how well each entity is positioned to fulfill its assigned functions within the broader system. It could begin in areas with a high level of overlapping responsibilities. Support for district improvement, for example, is divided among CDE, COEs, CCEE, and other providers, which has limited its impact (Gallagher et al., 2026). This assessment of fit could consider three dimensions (Myung et al., 2025):

- **Authority:** Does the entity have the legal and practical authority needed to fulfill its responsibilities, including access to mechanisms for securing cooperation or corrective action? Is responsibility for performance clear?
- **Incentives:** Do governance arrangements, reporting relationships, funding conditions, and performance expectations encourage effective support, responsiveness to districts, and coordination? Where an entity provides both oversight and assistance, do those roles reinforce or impede one another?

- **Capacity:** Does the entity have sufficient leadership, staffing, expertise, data infrastructure, and relationships, supported by dependable funding, to deliver services at the scale and quality required? Can it meet differing district needs, including those of small and rural LEAs?

District feedback gathered through a structured input process, statutory and contract language, fiscal and workforce data, and analyses of governance and operating structures could inform these assessments of fit. The review could distinguish constraints that an entity or program can address directly from those requiring legislative, budgetary, personnel, or other state action. Recommendations could also identify which functions benefit from statewide consistency, which are better delivered regionally or locally, and where coordination, streamlining, or reassignment would strengthen support for districts. This review could establish a foundation for reciprocal accountability, matching expectations for local improvement with state responsibility for the conditions and support needed to achieve it (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014; Elmore, 2002).

Beyond assessing each entity's and program's fit with its assigned functions, the review could examine how major state investments work together. California has made substantial investments in community schools, special education, expanded learning, literacy, TK, behavioral and mental health supports, educator preparation and professional learning, secondary school redesign, and college and career pathways (Hernández et al., 2026; Kurlaender et al., 2026; Loeb, 2026; Maier & Niebuhr, 2021; Ruiz & Kimner, 2026). In addition to mapping and assessing intermediary supports, the commissioner should examine how these investments and their supports connect, particularly in terms of where they pursue shared goals, serve overlapping populations, or build complementary capacities and where separate requirements or delivery structures create fragmentation. This work should identify opportunities to align guidance, planning, professional learning, and technical assistance so that programs reinforce one another and local educators can draw on them as parts of a coherent system (Gallagher et al., 2026; Loeb, 2026; Ruiz & Kimner, 2026). The aim is to make existing investments work together more effectively, moving California towards one education system with shared responsibility for all students.

***Approaches to consider:*** Weiss and McGuinn's (2017) framework distinguishes functions that SEAs lead from those they carry out with partners. Also available for consideration is the SEA Change framework, which offers a more detailed inventory of agency functions, including periodic audits of an agency's own regulations and guidance to identify barriers to local improvement. Florida's 2001 reorganization required a review of all department bureaus, offices, divisions, and functions to identify duplication and possible transfers or realignment. All offer reference points for examining functions before redesigning the organization.

**Recommendation 9: Explore sustainable funding for state capacity and LEA support.** Sustaining stronger state support for LEAs requires funding that enables agencies to meet expectations for their work. Interviewees reported that governance reforms could place greater demands on state agencies even when their funding levels remain unchanged. Clear authority and capable leadership could strengthen CDE's effectiveness, but the department needs resources aligned with its responsibilities. Interviewees in other states suggested that reliable performance could strengthen trust in the agency and lead to increased funding for its operations. In California, this would involve building confidence among the governor, the Department of Finance, and the legislature. Yet CDE also requires sufficient baseline resources to demonstrate that performance. Long-standing funding constraints and reliance on federal sources have oriented much of the department's work towards program administration and compliance rather than instructional support (Moffitt et al., 2018; Myung et al., 2025; Taylor, 2014). Expectations for stronger LEA support should be considered alongside the resources available to provide it.

An assessment of CDE and the broader support system could identify staffing and resource gaps, along with tasks that could be simplified, consolidated, or discontinued. AB 181 requires the commissioner to recommend a long-term fiscal plan for the SPI's office, in consultation with the SPI and the Department of Finance. Although the law does not expressly require a comparable plan for CDE, the commissioner could develop one to align resources with proposed responsibilities and inform both immediate budget decisions and Phase Two recommendations. Pairing investments with staffing plans and progress reporting (see Recommendation 6) could help the administration and legislature assess improvements in services and inform future funding decisions.

The plan could also identify opportunities for philanthropic partnership, as Indiana pursued for its literacy initiative, particularly for time-limited work such as evaluation, consulting, or piloting new approaches to LEA support. Such funding would not substitute for baseline state resources.

The legislature could also examine opportunities to use Proposition 98 funds to support services that help LEAs improve, including direct assistance provided by CDE or other entities acting on the state's behalf. This could include assessing which activities are eligible for Proposition 98 funding and whether adjustments to the minimum guarantee would be warranted, taking into account legal requirements and trade-offs across education and other state budget priorities.

***Approach to consider:*** Following a 2020 legislative audit that identified limitations in the Virginia Department of Education's school-improvement support, the state directed the department to develop a plan specifying the activities, staffing, and funding needed to provide more effective support to school divisions. Virginia's 2024–26 budget subsequently conditioned the release of designated school-improvement funds on the submission of planning and progress

reports. California could adapt this approach by assessing workloads across CDE and other support providers, identifying gaps in LEA assistance and opportunities to simplify or consolidate tasks, and using those findings to guide targeted investments and phased staffing. Regular reporting on service quality and timeliness could help inform future funding decisions.

## Conclusion

California AB 181 is a significant first step towards resolving long-standing fragmentation in statewide policy leadership and departmental management. It establishes clearer responsibility for CDE's administration while preserving independent roles for the SBE and the elected SPI. Under the new governance system, California will continue to rely on multiple entities with distinct responsibilities, including the governor, commissioner, state board, superintendent, legislature, and an extensive network of support organizations. Each will need to carry out its role in ways that complement the others. Roles will need to be clearly understood and coordinated to build the working relationships, routines, and capacity that allow a complex system to act coherently while remaining responsive to local conditions.

This report's recommendations offer state leaders a framework for navigating the transition and learning from implementation as California's governance reform unfolds. AB 181 changes who leads CDE, and California now has the opportunity to build on that change to develop a state education system that gives districts and schools clearer direction and more dependable support and strengthens the conditions for local educators to improve outcomes for students.

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## Appendix A: Gubernatorial Appointment of State Education Chiefs

In 30 states, the governor appoints the chief education executive, appoints a state board that does so, or holds the office, with California becoming the 31st state in 2027.

These states fall into four groups:[3]

- The governor appoints the chief directly in 16 states and in California beginning in 2027.
- The governor appoints a cabinet-level executive above or beside a board-selected chief in Arkansas, Massachusetts, and Ohio.
- The governor appoints the state board, and the board appoints the chief in 10 states: Alaska, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, Rhode Island, and West Virginia.
- The governor serves as the chief in Oregon, although in practice their appointed chief serves as the executive.

The remaining 20 states elect their chief or have the chief selected by a primarily elected board or, in New York, by a legislature-elected board.

Selection procedures vary considerably within these groups. In Indiana and Tennessee, for example, the state board does not have a role, and there is no legislative confirmation. Nevada and Vermont require the governor to choose from candidates proposed by the state board. Kentucky and Mississippi require senate confirmation of a chief, who is appointed by the state board. Timing rules also vary by state.

[3] A state was included when the governor makes the final appointment of any of the following: the official designated in law as the chief state school officer (CSSO); a cabinet-level secretary or director who heads the SEA or holds formal authority over the official who does; or all or a majority of the voting members of the state board that appoints the CSSO. Oregon, where the governor holds the office of SPI, is also included. We treated the governor-appointed executive as the chief education executive in Arkansas, Massachusetts, and Ohio even though each state also has a separately selected official whom statute or national compilations designate as the CSSO. Massachusetts law, for example, designates the commissioner of elementary and secondary education as the CSSO for elementary and secondary education. National compilations classify these three states differently from one another, largely because they define the CSSO differently (Education Commission of the States, n.d.; National Association of State Boards of Education, 2026). We checked appointment provisions against current constitutional, statutory, or regulatory texts.

We found seven types of selection processes.

- **Direct, no confirmation:** The governor appoints the chief with no state board role and no legislative confirmation.
- **Direct, with confirmation:** The governor appoints the chief, subject to legislative confirmation, with no state board role.
- **Consultative:** The governor appoints after a required consultation with or appraisal by the state board.
- **Board constrained:** The governor appoints from a state board recommendation or a board-generated slate.
- **Layered:** The governor appoints a cabinet-level executive above or beside a chief selected by the state board.
- **Board appoints:** The governor appoints the state board, which appoints the chief.
- **Governor as chief:** The governor holds the office of chief.

Table A1 summarizes the selection processes.

**Table A1.** Selection of the State Education Leader in States With Gubernatorial Appointment

| State | Type | State board role | Confirmation of chief | Tenure | Qualifications |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Alaska** | Board appoints | Appoints (governor approves) | None | Board's pleasure | Specific requirements |
| **Arkansas** (secretary)[a] | Layered | None | Senate | Governor's pleasure | None or minimal |
| **California** | Direct, with confirmation | None | Senate | Governor's pleasure | None or minimal[b] |
| **Connecticut** | Board constrained | Recommends | Other[c] | Coterminous with governor | None or minimal |
| **Delaware** | Direct, with confirmation | None | Senate[d] | Coterminous with governor | Specific requirements |
| **Florida** | Board appoints | Appoints | None | Not specified | None or minimal |
| **Hawaii** | Board appoints | Appoints | None | Fixed term[e] | None or minimal |
| **Illinois** | Board appoints | Appoints (governor may propose) | None | Board's pleasure[f] | Set by board |

| State | Type | State board role | Confirmation of chief | Tenure | Qualifications |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Indiana** | Direct, no confirmation | None | None | Governor's pleasure | None or minimal |
| **Iowa** | Direct, with confirmation | None | Senate, two thirds | Governor's pleasure | General standard |
| **Kentucky** | Board appoints | Appoints | Senate | Fixed term[g] | Set by board |
| **Maine** | Consultative | Appraises | Other[h] | Governor's pleasure | None or minimal |
| **Maryland** | Board appoints | Appoints | None | Fixed term[i] | Specific requirements |
| **Massachusetts** (secretary)[a] | Layered | None | None | Governor's pleasure | None or minimal |
| **Minnesota** | Direct, with confirmation | No board | Senate | Coterminous with governor | General standard |
| **Mississippi** | Board appoints | Appoints | Senate | Board's pleasure | Specific requirements |
| **Missouri** | Board appoints | Appoints | None | Board's pleasure | General standard |
| **Nevada** | Board constrained | Slate | None | Governor's pleasure | General standard |
| **New Hampshire** | Consultative | Consults | Other[j] | Fixed term | General standard |
| **New Jersey** | Direct, with confirmation | None | Senate | Coterminous with governor | None or minimal |
| **New Mexico** | Direct, with confirmation | No board[k] | Senate | Governor's pleasure[k] | General standard |
| **Ohio** (director)[a] | Layered | None | Senate[l] | Coterminous with governor | None or minimal[l] |
| **Oregon** (deputy superintendent)[m] | Governor as chief | None | Senate | Governor's pleasure | Specific requirements |
| **Pennsylvania** | Direct, with confirmation | None | Senate | Fixed term[n] | None or minimal |

| State | Type | State board role | Confirmation of chief | Tenure | Qualifications |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Rhode Island** | Board appoints | Appoints[o] | None | Board's pleasure | None or minimal |
| **South Dakota** | Direct, with confirmation | None | Senate | Coterminous with governor | General standard |
| **Tennessee** | Direct, no confirmation | None | None | Coterminous with governor | General standard |
| **Texas** | Direct, with confirmation | None | Senate | Coterminous with governor | None or minimal |
| **Vermont** | Board constrained | Slate | Senate | Governor's pleasure | General standard |
| **Virginia** | Consultative | Consults | Other[p] | Coterminous with governor | General standard |
| **West Virginia** | Board appoints | Appoints | None | Board's pleasure | Specific requirements |

*Notes.* Qualifications: "None or minimal" means no requirements beyond citizenship, residency, or age; "general standard" means broad language, such as "qualified by education and experience"; "specific requirements" means required degrees or years of experience; "set by board" means the board determines qualifications. Tenure: "Not specified" means statute does not address tenure; "coterminous with governor" means statute ties the term to the governor's, whether or not it also allows removal at the governor's pleasure; "fixed term" means statute sets a term of years not tied to the governor's, even where removal without stated cause is allowed (the notes describe removal). Board role: "No board" means the state has no state board of education.

*Sources.* Alaska: Alaska Const. art. III, § 26; Alaska Stat. §§ 14.07.075, 14.07.085(a), 14.07.145 (2025). Arkansas: Ark. Code Ann. §§ 6-11-101(e), 6-11-102(a), 25-43-503(b) (2025). California: Cal. Educ. Code § 33302.5(a)(1)–(2) (as added by Cal. AB 181 (2026), Stats. 2026, ch. 66); Cal. Gov. Code § 1774. Connecticut: Conn. Gen. Stat. §§ 4-5, 4-6, 4-7, 10-3a(a) (rev. to Jan. 1, 2025). Delaware: Del. Code Ann. tit. 14, § 102(a) (as amended by 84 Del. Laws c. 455 (2024)); Del. Const. art. III, § 10 (as amended by 85 Del. Laws c. 43 (2025)). Florida: Fla. Const. art. IX, § 2; Fla. Stat. §§ 20.15(1)–(2), 1001.10(1) (2026). Hawaii: Haw. Const. art. X, §§ 2–3; Haw. Rev. Stat. § 302A-1101(a)–(b). Illinois: 105 Ill. Comp. Stat. 5/1A-1(b), 5/1A-4(B) (§ 5/1A-4 as amended through Illinois Public Act 103-594 (2024)). Indiana: Ind. Code § 20-19-1-1.1 (as amended through Indiana H.B. 1088 (2026), P.L. 23-2026). Iowa: Iowa Code §§ 2.32(8), 256.8 (2026). Kentucky: Ky. Rev. Stat. §§ 156.029 (as amended through 2026 Ky. Acts ch. 196), 156.148 (as amended by Kentucky S.B. 107 (2023), 2023 Ky. Acts ch. 134). Maine: Me. Rev. Stat. tit. 20-A, § 251; tit. 3, § 158. Maryland: Md. Code Ann., Educ. §§ 2-202(a), 2-302(a), (c)–(d) (§ 2-202 as amended by Maryland H.B. 828 (2026), 2026 Md. Laws ch. 649). Massachusetts: Mass. Gen. Laws ch. 6A, § 14A; ch. 15, §§ 1E–1F. Minnesota: Minn. Stat. §§ 15.06, 127A.05. Mississippi: Miss. Const. art. 8, §§ 202–203; Miss. Code Ann. §§ 37-1-1, 37-3-9 (2025). Missouri: Mo. Const. art. IX, § 2(a)–(b); Mo. Rev. Stat. §§ 161.022, 161.112. Nevada: Nev. Rev. Stat. §§ 385.150(1), 385.160. New Hampshire: N.H. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 21-N:3. New Jersey: N.J. Stat. Ann. § 18A:4-21; N.J. Admin. Code § 6A:2-1.1(b). New Mexico: N.M. Const. art. V, § 5, and art. XII, § 6(A)–(B); N.M. Stat. Ann. §§ 9-24-5, 9-24-9, 22-8B-16 (2025). Ohio: Ohio Const. art. VI, § 4; Ohio Rev. Code §§ 121.03, 3301.01, 3301.02(C), 3301.13 (§ 121.03 as amended by Ohio H.B. 96 (2025); § 3301.13 as enacted by Ohio H.B. 33 (2023); §§ 3301.01 and 3301.02 as amended by Ohio H.B. 96 (2025) and Ohio H.B. 455 (2026)). Oregon: Or. Rev. Stat. § 326.300 (2025). Pennsylvania: Pa. Const. art. IV, § 8(a), and art. VI, § 7; 71 Pa. Stat. §§ 67.1, 68, 1038 (Administrative Code of 1929 §§ 207.1(d)(1), 208(b); Act of July 23, 1969, P.L. 181, No. 74, § 2). Rhode Island: R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 16-60-2(a), 16-60-6, 16-97-1(b) (2025). South Dakota: S.D. Const. art. IV, § 9; S.D. Codified Laws §§ 1-32-3, 1-45-1.1, 1-45-3. Tennessee: Tenn. Code Ann. §§ 4-3-111(7), 4-3-112, 4-3-802(b)–(c). Texas: Tex. Educ. Code §§ 7.051–7.054. Vermont: Vt. Stat. Ann. tit. 3, § 2702 (as amended by Vermont Act 72 (2025)). Virginia: Va. Const. art. VIII, § 6; Va. Code Ann. § 22.1-21. West Virginia: W. Va. Const. art. XII, § 2; W. Va. Code § 18-3-1.

[a] In Arkansas, the governor-appointed board employs the commissioner, subject to the governor's confirmation; the commissioner serves at the governor's pleasure and reports to the secretary. In Massachusetts, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education nominates the commissioner by a two thirds vote of all its members; the secretary may appoint the nominee or decline; and the board may remove the commissioner by a majority of all its members. In Ohio, the state board appoints an SPI. Ohio H.B. 96 (2025) abolishes the board's elected seats as terms expire or become vacant, and Ohio H.B. 455 (2026), effective October 9, 2026, sets the board at seven governor-appointed members with senate confirmation. As the elected seats lapse, both the director and the board that appoints the superintendent will be governor appointed.

[b] The governor "is strongly encouraged" to appoint a commissioner with "demonstrated experience running a large public or private organization" and experience "in public education leadership or its equivalent"; the statute sets no mandatory qualifications.

[c] Confirmation by either house of the general assembly; serves at the governor's pleasure for a term of up to 4 years, coterminous with the governor's.

[d] Confirmation is required for each gubernatorial term, and holdovers may serve no more than 90 days after the prior term ends.

[e] The board may appoint the superintendent for a term of up to 4 years; the superintendent may be terminated only for cause.

[f] Serves at the board's pleasure under a performance-based contract. Contracts expire no later than February 1 every 4 years, and the board must make an appointment at the start of each gubernatorial term, once the governor has made board appointments; the superintendent serves until a successor is appointed.

[g] Term of up to 4 years; the board may remove the commissioner, and the statute lists no causes.

[h] The legislative committee with jurisdiction over education reviews the nomination, and its recommendation becomes final unless two thirds of senators present and voting override it. The governor must include the board chair in the selection, give the board an opportunity to interview candidates, and consider its written appraisal, due within 10 days of the interview.

[i] Four-year term; the board may remove the superintendent for causes listed in statute, after notice and an opportunity for a hearing.

[j] Consent of the Executive Council; 4-year term.

[k] The elected Public Education Commission advises the Public Education Department on policy and authorizes state-chartered charter schools; it has no role in selecting the secretary. Statute sets no term for the secretary; under N.M. Const. art. V, § 5, the governor may remove any officer the governor appoints unless otherwise provided by law.

[l] Interim service is limited to 45 days, and the Senate Education Committee must hold at least one in-person hearing before the confirmation vote. Statute sets no qualifications for the director, but the director must appoint deputy directors with appropriate educational, professional, or managerial experience.

[m] The governor is the SPI; the table row codes the deputy superintendent, whom the governor may remove after consulting the state board.

[n] Four-year statutory term, set for the SPI, who is ex officio the secretary of education; appointed civil officers may be removed at the pleasure of the appointing authority.

[o] The Council on Elementary and Secondary Education appoints the commissioner, with the advice and consent of the SBE, and the commissioner serves at the council's pleasure; the initial engagement may not exceed 3 years.

[p] Confirmation by the general assembly; the governor must consult the SBE, among others, before appointing.

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