SUMMARY

Implementing Education Governance Reform in California

Lessons from Other States

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Beginning in January 2027, California's Assembly Bill (AB) 181 transfers administrative leadership of the California Department of Education (CDE) to a governor-appointed, senate-confirmed education commissioner. The State Board of Education (SBE) retains policymaking and governing authority while the independently elected superintendent of public instruction (SPI) gains voting seats on state education boards. These changes clarify responsibility for CDE's administration, but the impact will depend on how leaders turn new arrangements into coherent direction and dependable support for districts and schools. Drawing on document review and interviews, this report examines governance transitions in Florida, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Oregon, Indiana, and Ohio to identify implementation lessons for California.

Cross-State Findings

1. **Shared goals define what clearer authority is for.** A small set of shared, measurable goals gives reform direction. Achieving them requires broad ownership, an actionable strategy, sufficient capacity, and early progress that builds support.
2. **Capable, credible leaders and strong teams determine how well new authority works.** Leadership teams need educational credibility, management skills, and political judgment. Transparent selection builds confidence while early preparation and institutional knowledge equip leaders to manage the transition and advance improvements.
3. **Coherence depends on clear responsibilities and effective working relationships.** Coordination among state leaders, clear distinctions between policymaking and management, and explicit working agreements help translate formal authority into consistent action. Regular communication and follow-through build legislative trust and support implementation.
4. **Stable, coordinated, and responsive support builds credibility with districts.** Districts experience reform through the guidance and assistance they receive. Aligning state and regional services, providing consistent direction, and responding to local needs make governance reform meaningful in practice.
5. **Local responsiveness and public access matter more as authority shifts to appointees.** Educators, families, and communities need accessible ways to inform state decisions. Regular engagement helps leaders anticipate implementation challenges and adapt policies and support to local conditions.

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Nine Recommendations for Implementing AB 181

Immediate Priorities

1. **Establish clear qualifications and a timely process for commissioner appointment and confirmation.** Prioritize the early appointment of a well-qualified commissioner, consult SBE leadership, and make senate confirmation timely and substantive.
2. **Support an effective transition with institutional knowledge and complementary expertise.** Build on SBE transition planning, engage CDE career staff and the governor's transition team, and prepare a structured handoff that preserves essential operations to a senior team whose expertise complements the commissioner's.
3. **Clarify decision-making roles and coordination among statewide leaders.** Establish working agreements on policy direction, information sharing, and decision-making authority that distinguish the SBE's policymaking role from the commissioner's administrative role while clarifying the SPI's role.

Priorities for the First 100 Days

4. **Build a responsive agency culture through regular engagement.** Establish standing forums, accessible staff contacts, and practitioner input on significant guidance, pairing necessary oversight with timely, practical assistance.
5. **Demonstrate early improvements in state support.** Choose a few feasible improvements for 2027 with clear responsibility and realistic timelines, such as simplifying duplicative reporting, strengthening guidance, and coordinating federal program monitoring reviews while maintaining required oversight.
6. **Establish early measures of progress and independently evaluate the transition.** Set baselines for guidance and responsiveness, coordination and efficiency, experience of support, and agency capacity and continuity. Match expectations to resources and support an independent evaluation of the reform.

Priorities for the First Year

7. **Develop a small set of shared statewide goals and an implementation strategy.** Identify a few measurable outcomes, paired with responsibilities, resources, milestones, and commitments of state support through existing planning processes.
8. **Assess responsibilities across the governance and support system.** Examine CDE and intermediary oversight and support providers for gaps and duplication in responsibilities. Assess each provider's authority, incentives, and capacity to fulfill their responsibilities effectively and efficiently.
9. **Explore sustainable funding for state capacity and local educational agency (LEA) support.** Develop a long-term CDE fiscal plan linking resources to responsibilities and service improvements, consider time-limited philanthropic partnerships, and examine Proposition 98 funding for direct support to LEAs.

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