

Promising Practices in Local Stakeholder Engagement in School Governance

Mary Perry, Geordee Mae Corpuz, Beth Higbee, Celia Jaffe, and Danny Kanga

Community engagement remains one of the most challenging expectations of California's Local Control Funding Formula, so much so that state leaders have funded an initiative to support regional networks focused on engagement. This brief shares insights from a session where a lead administrator from the San Bernardino County Office provided an update on that initiative. Other speakers shared their on-the-ground experiences working with educators, parents, and students to create the relationships needed for community stakeholder engagement to be consistent, meaningful, and productive.



California's new accountability and continuous improvement framework relies on district and school leaders using multiple measures of school performance to identify where change is needed, and to monitor carefully the development, testing, and evaluation of improvement strategies over time. This process of continuous improvement requires that local leaders have access to research-based evidence and strategies that they can implement in their schools and opportunities to learn from one another about what works, under which conditions, and for which students. PACE's series of Continuous Improvement Briefs aims to support education leaders at all levels in learning how to improve the performance of their schools and students.

Stakeholder engagement is central to California’s vision for how the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), with its Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), can improve outcomes for K–12 students. Two core ideas of LCFF related to engagement are:

- Shifting resource decisions to local communities will result in decisions that better reflect local contexts and needs, leading to better outcomes for students.
- Public understanding of and contributions to school district goal and budget decisions will serve to hold district leaders accountable for distributing resources equitably.

In a study published as part of *Getting Down to Facts II*, researchers found strong support for those ideas and mixed evidence on implementation. The authors found that districts largely comply with the legal requirements for engagement under LCFF but not the full spirit of democratic engagement.¹

On February 1, 2019, PACE’s annual conference, *Putting Evidence Into Action to Advance Equity in California*, brought together policymakers, educators, researchers, and interested citizens to build on the *Getting Down to Facts II* research released in 2018. With the rigorous and comprehensive research as a shared evidence base, participants discussed the future of PK–12 education policy in California.

This brief details promising practices shared in a conference session on local democratic engagement in school governance. The panelists varied in their roles and experiences working to improve stakeholder engagement. They included the county office official leading the state’s new Community Engagement Initiative, a school district administrator with a story to tell about his own district’s engagement efforts, a leader of the state’s largest parent advocacy organization, and a community organizer who works to make sure student voices are part of the LCFF conversation. Overall, panelists shared how their organizations are engaging a broad and diverse set of stakeholders and how they are building stakeholder capacity to engage productively in school governance. Reflections from session attendees are also taken into account in this brief.

The California Community Engagement Initiative: Building District Capacity to Engage Local Stakeholders

Under the Statewide System of Support, expert educators and leaders from across California are playing a role in developing capacity to implement new approaches. The San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools (SBCSS) has been selected as lead agency for the state’s Community Engagement Initiative in this capacity. The goal is to develop expertise and resources to help school districts improve their ability to engage stakeholders meaningfully. SBCSS, along with consortium partners Families in Schools and California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE), this year begins implementation of the initiative and planning for its expansion into other regions throughout the state.

Beth Higbee, Assistant Superintendent in SBCSS, said the objectives of the initiative are to:



Build the capacity of communities and districts to have difficult conversations with each other and build trust, with a focus on improving outcomes for pupils.



Identify effective models of community engagement and establish metrics to evaluate those models.



Develop effective peer-to-peer partnerships between county offices, other agencies, and school districts using a professional learning network structure in order to deepen community engagement.



Scale up this work to communities statewide, incorporating policies and practices that have proven effective and will help maintain the effort.

SBCSS’ strategy for building capacity statewide for local engagement is through the development of Peer Leading and Learning Networks (PLN) throughout the state. The first of these is expected to launch by the end of the 2018–19 school year, with five additional PLNs operating in other areas of the state by 2021.²

“ The real fuel for [the] engine of [local engagement] is relationships and trust. Without time, and venue, and folks coming through in a trustworthy way—I’m not sure it can scale. Certainly, county offices and school districts need more resources to be able to create the basis for developing relationships and trust.”

SESSION PARTICIPANT

“ Oftentimes, training for stakeholder engagement is about building the capacity of families and communities. It also needs to be about building the capacity of school, district and county leaders to engage with families.”

SESSION PARTICIPANT

A central activity of the Community Engagement Initiative is to develop and provide learning opportunities to both education staff and families based on regional needs. Each PLN will include community members, pupils, school site and district staff and leadership, and county office of education staff and leadership. As Higbee explained:

One thing we believe is critical is for education staff to learn how to reach out to parents and community members and how to respond to their contributions in a way that builds trust and a sense of common purpose and action.... Also, stakeholders need to be able to build their advocacy and their comfort about having deep conversations, so they don't feel at a disadvantage or that they somehow don't have the full knowledge they need.

The Palmdale Promise: Engaging Diverse Stakeholders to Make Positive Change

School districts, particularly those serving very diverse communities, have distinct challenges in local engagement. The approach Palmdale School District has taken is an example of how community engagement can change, in a positive way, how students are served. Palmdale School District serves approximately 19,000 students, three quarters of whom are Latinx. About 87 percent of district students qualify for free/reduced price lunch and 26 percent are English learners.

During the 2014–15 school year, the district developed and began implementing a strategic plan that works in tandem with its Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). The planning process included broad stakeholder engagement in order to create a vision, mission, and goals for the district and set a timeline for their implementation.

Danny Kanga, Palmdale's Director of LCAP, explained that the district's strategic plan and LCAP goals align. One of the goals is to “dramatically improve student engagement and achievement.” There were several actions under this goal, but of particular concern to the community and district officials was an equity issue due to the fact that not all middle school students had access to an elective

or exploratory class. Schools had a six-period day, which meant that students in English language development or resource classes did not have access to an elective. A seven-period day was needed.

To fix the issue, the district worked with staff, teachers, and parents, ultimately extending the school day by 36 minutes. That provided enough time to establish a seven-period day and make sure all students could have an elective. Since then, the district middle schools have grown tremendously in their programs offering over 30 different electives at each site. The district also recently received a federal magnet school grant.³

“This was just one action under one goal, where we engaged with stakeholders, identified an equity issue, and then did something to solve it,” Kanga said.

“Engaging families and communities” more broadly is one of the district's LCAP goals and has led to myriad activities that take place at school sites, out in the community and at the district level. Consistent with LCFF requirements, the district convenes both a parent and English learner advisory committee. However, those formal groups represent only one small part of the district's engagement approach and activity. District officials reach out to the community through formal groups, such as the Chamber of Commerce, and at community-wide events. The superintendent also holds a breakfast at each school site to engage with parents. Acknowledging the central role that school sites play in family engagement, the district works with its site administrators on engagement of both students and families. A parent community liaison is available at each site to provide outreach to families, in addition to a district parent center. The district also conducts surveys to make sure all parents have the opportunity to express their opinions.

Palmdale officials heard from their engagement efforts about specific things that parents, students and staff want. One consistent theme that emerged was a concern about student social-emotional health and the need to provide support for students, especially students in foster care, who have experienced trauma. In response, the district has developed a wealth of activities and services to address those issues.

California State PTA: Empowering Parents to Meaningfully Engage in School Decision-making

With 750,000 members and more than 3,500 local units, California State PTA has unique expertise in what information and support parents need in order to effectively engage with decision-making in their local schools. Along with many other types of activities, the organization has developed a Family Engagement Academy called School Smarts, which has been offered at 89 schools throughout the state.⁴

Celia Jaffe, president-elect for CA State PTA, emphasized that the successful engagement of families in the LCAP process begins with parents understanding the school system:

How can you participate in a system that is totally unfamiliar to you? The expectation is that parents and families are going to advocate for what their children, and all children, need. But through PTA's work with advocating for arts education, we found that parents feel uncomfortable with advocacy until they know more about how the schools work.

Jaffe provided examples of basic questions that parents need answers for when they see an issue at their own child's school, including:

- Who makes the decisions?
- When do those decisions get made?
- What is the most effective way for me to communicate a concern to school officials?

The challenge for educators, Jaffe cautioned, is how to address those questions without either overwhelming parents with too much information or explaining things using insider jargon and acronyms that parents are not familiar with. Jaffe added:

It's very personal for every parent, so having that sense of how to navigate the system is very important and is the place to start. I don't know how much participation you're going to get if you

talk to 40 parents and you say, "We want you to come to a meeting where we're going to explain our 60-page plan and you'll put dots on three things. That's what we need you for. We'll see you again a year from now for the revision of the plan."

It's also important to be transparent about the fiscal realities with parents who are asked to be part of decision-making. They need to understand what the options are and what each thing will cost. Jaffe emphasized that helping people fully understand the financial constraints takes a talented administrator who is good at communicating with people who are not school professionals.

Jaffe underscored that building parent engagement and participation needs to be an ongoing process and commitment. One thing that is helpful for schools in this regard is having a standing parent organization, whether it's a PTA or another parent organization. The key is having a group that welcomes all parents to participate and that school leaders actively encourage. With such groups in place, educators are not just talking to families when there's a crisis or when they need something.

Not all parents will be part of those regular structures, Jaffe said. School leaders need to reach out in many different ways in order to hear from all groups. One strategy for doing that is to provide opportunities, sponsored at the school, for parents to talk to each other. That helps to create a sense of community among families, which can ultimately increase family engagement and participation.

"Everyone has hopes and dreams for their family," Jaffe concluded. "That is the in, talking to parents about their dreams for their children and the school."

Californians for Justice: Leveraging the Power of Student Voice

Californians for Justice is a statewide, youth-powered organization fighting for racial justice. They work in four regions of California; Oakland, San Jose, Fresno, and Long Beach. The organization first

// The leadership starts at the top. When the superintendent makes it a priority for family engagement to start happening, then that culture can change at the school sites so, for example, parents are not afraid to talk to the school principal. Administrators in turn need to make it a priority to talk to parents and not be afraid of what they might hear."

SESSION PARTICIPANT

began advocating for full and equitable education funding, and shared governance, nearly a decade ago. Their student organizers have been prominent in supporting stakeholder engagement generally, and student engagement in particular, as LCFF has been implemented.

Geordee Mae Corpuz, Organizing Director for Californians for Justice, said that they have confronted a lack of belief that students of color have anything to contribute to decisions about the quality of their own education system. To change that, and make sure student voice is heard, valued, and reflected in local LCFF development, their organization has focused on building the leadership skills of historically marginalized students. They have advocated for students to participate in and contribute to better district budget processes, and to make sure that students are at the decision-making table.

Corpuz described the engagement plan at East Side Union High School District, in San Jose, to show the difference students can make. Students have been working in deep partnership with district leaders, in coalition with parents. The district's formal structure includes the LCAP Student Advisory Committee (LSAC), made up of students who represent various groups, including those identified as lowest achieving on the district's Dashboard.

The students appointed to the LSAC successfully advocated for student advisory committees at every district high school. Corpuz explained that having school site groups "brings the process to students where they're at and they can see the budget process unfold. The district made it a requirement to have students on the school level committees and to have the meetings during school time so students could easily attend."

The district also holds five of its district-wide meetings out at the schools, making sure students are in attendance. This is a way, Corpuz said, to help students understand what is happening elsewhere in their district and what their peers' experiences are.

Corpuz noted that students help make the student-engagement process work. They turn out other students to the meetings and administer the LCAP student survey. They also co-facilitate the planning and agendas for these meetings. Today, school plans and LCAPs have changed in ways that reflect this student engagement. Corpuz concluded:

The work that we've done and our young people have led is about shifting budget processes to embody democracy and put students at the center. Ultimately, it is transforming the relationship the students have with the education system and transforming the system as a whole. Instead of

students seeing themselves as powerless, they can see themselves as active agents, owning these processes themselves. It's really powerful for them to know they have a voice.

Conclusion

Meaningful stakeholder engagement is a critical aspect of California's current approach to the local governance of public schools. While developing vibrant and robust stakeholder engagement can be challenging for many schools and districts, this brief describes several promising approaches for increasing stakeholder engagement in school decision-making.

At its March 2019 meeting, the State Board of Education approved a new self-reflection tool for the California School Dashboard. School districts are expected to use this tool to report on their progress on parent and family engagement.⁵ The examples provided by the speakers at this session exemplify the types of practices districts need to reflect on and measure for this new local indicator.

¹ <https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/taking-stock-stakeholder-engagement-californias-local-control-funding-formula-what-can>

² For further information on the Community Engagement Initiative, readers are invited to go to the California Collaboration for Education Excellence at <https://ccee-ca.org/CommunityEngagement/index.asp>

³ A video about the district's middle schools is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=21&v=FsN8MvcYyPQ

⁴ California State PTA has a wealth of parent engagement resources, including Standards for Family School Partnerships at <https://capta.org/focus-areas/family-engagement/>

⁵ The Self-Reflection tool approved by the California State Board of Education can be found as Attachment 2 in the March 14, 2019 Board items: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr19/documents/mar19item17.docx>

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Related Publications

Julie A. Marsh, Michelle Hall, Taylor Allbright, Laura Tobben, Laura Mulfinger, Kate Kennedy, & Eupha Jeanne Daramola. **Taking stock of stakeholder engagement in California's Local Control Funding Formula: What can we learn from the past four years to guide next steps?** *Getting Down to Facts II*. 2018.

Julia E. Koppich, Daniel C. Humphrey, Julie A. Marsh, Morgan Polikoff, & Jason Willis. **The Local Control Funding Formula After Four Years: What Do We Know?** *Getting Down to Facts II*. 2018.

Julia E. Koppich. **Principals' Perceptions: Implementing the Local Control Funding Formula.** Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. January 2019.

Julie A. Marsh & Julia E. Koppich. **Superintendents Speak: Implementing the Local Control Funding Formula.** Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. June 2018.



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