

Voter Awareness, Support, and Participation in California's Local Control Funding Formula

Evidence from the PACE/USC Rossier Poll

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In this brief, we update previous research on the implementation of California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) with the results from a 2019 poll of California voters. Results show that while public awareness of the LCFF has increased, more than half of voters remain unfamiliar with this state finance and accountability policy. However, voter support for the policy remains high, though it has decreased since last year. Participation in LCFF engagement has increased, but remains low, despite a majority of voters reporting desire to be involved in decisions about local education. Finally, reports of awareness, participation, interest, capacity, and trust are higher among high-income voters relative to low-income voters, raising questions about the extent to which low-income communities are meaningfully engaged in the LCFF.

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The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), signed into law in 2013, represented a dramatic change in California’s education funding system. The LCFF eliminated most of the state’s categorical funds, offering districts greater flexibility and authority in resource allocation decisions. The policy provides districts with base funding for all students and additional funds for students considered high-need (low-income, English learners, and foster youth). Under this policy, districts are also required to engage local stakeholders in the resource allocation process, inviting them to participate in the development and progress monitoring of a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) that details the districts’ goals and approach to allocating funds. Two of the central assumptions of the LCFF are that: (a) shifting resource decisions to local communities will yield decisions that better reflect local contexts and needs, leading to better outcomes for students; and (b) public understanding of and contributions to district goals and budget decisions will hold district leaders accountable for distributing resources equitably.

Several of the reports in the 2018 *Getting Down to Facts II* series have investigated the first four years of LCFF implementation.¹ Collectively, this research indicated that, as of 2018:

- Public awareness about the LCFF was quite low.
- However, the LCFF enjoyed substantial support among educational leaders and California voters.
- Stakeholder engagement was evolving but remained challenging for many districts, and overall participation in LCFF engagement was low.
- Some barriers to engagement included perceived lack of interest, lack of capacity, and limited trust.

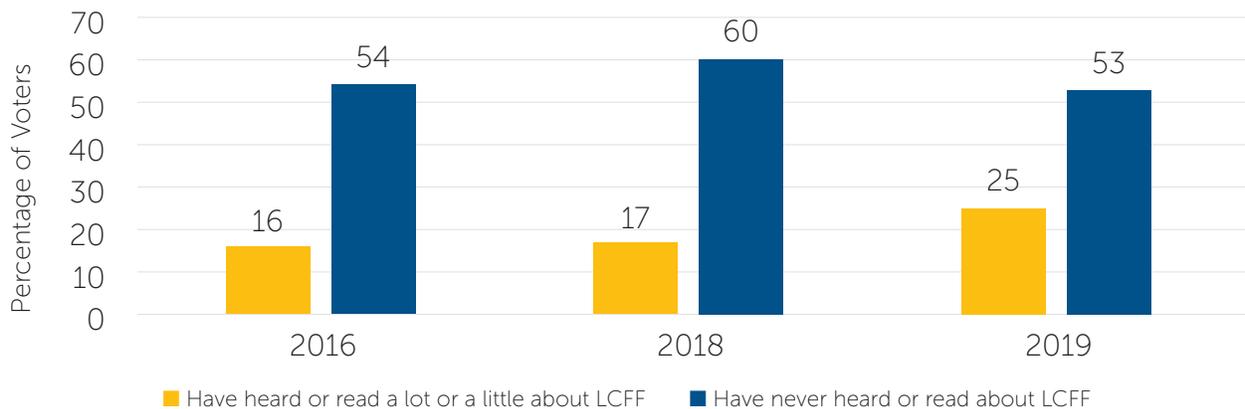
In this brief, we update these previous findings with the results from the 2019 PACE/USC Rossier poll² of registered California voters. These poll results show that, as of January 2019:

- While public awareness of the LCFF has increased, more than half of voters remain unaware.
- Voter support for the LCFF has decreased, but remains high.
- Participation in LCFF meetings has increased, but remains low.
- Contrary to the perceptions of education leaders, the majority of voters are interested in being involved in educational decisions, and about half report that they have capacity and trust needed to engage.
- Reports of awareness, participation, interest, capacity, and trust are higher among high-income voters relative to low-income voters, raising questions about the extent to which low-income communities are meaningfully engaged in the LCFF and resource allocation decisions.³

Public Awareness of the LCFF Has Increased, Yet Remains Low

In January 2019, 25 percent of voters reported having heard or read a little or a lot about the LCFF, an increase from 17 percent in 2018 and 16 percent in 2016.⁴ Over half (53 percent) of voters in 2019 indicated that they had not heard of the LCFF, suggesting that, despite this increase, awareness overall remains low (see Figure 1).

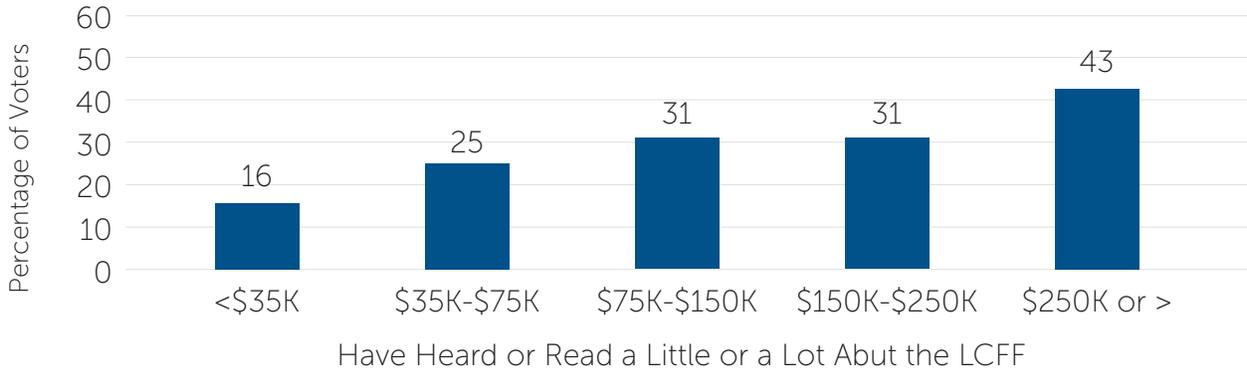
Figure 1. Voter Awareness of the LCFF Over Time



Parents reported greater awareness of the LCFF than non-parents; however, parents' reports of having heard a lot or a little about LCFF appear to have remained consistent between 2018 (37 percent) and 2019 (38 percent). The increase in LCFF awareness in the last year seems to have occurred primarily among non-parents, with the number of non-parent voters reporting having heard a lot or a little about the LCFF increasing from 11 percent in 2018 to 21 percent in 2019. Such findings might suggest that the 2018 gubernatorial and state superintendent races heightened awareness of the LCFF among the general public.

We also observed differences in LCFF awareness by socioeconomic status, with more awareness among high-income voters relative to low-income voters. For example, 43 percent of those with annual incomes of \$250,000 or more reported having heard or read a lot or a little about the LCFF, compared to 16 percent of those making under \$35,000 (see Figure 2). As we discuss later, these disparities in awareness by income raise questions about which communities are engaged with, and which may be excluded from, LCFF stakeholder engagement.

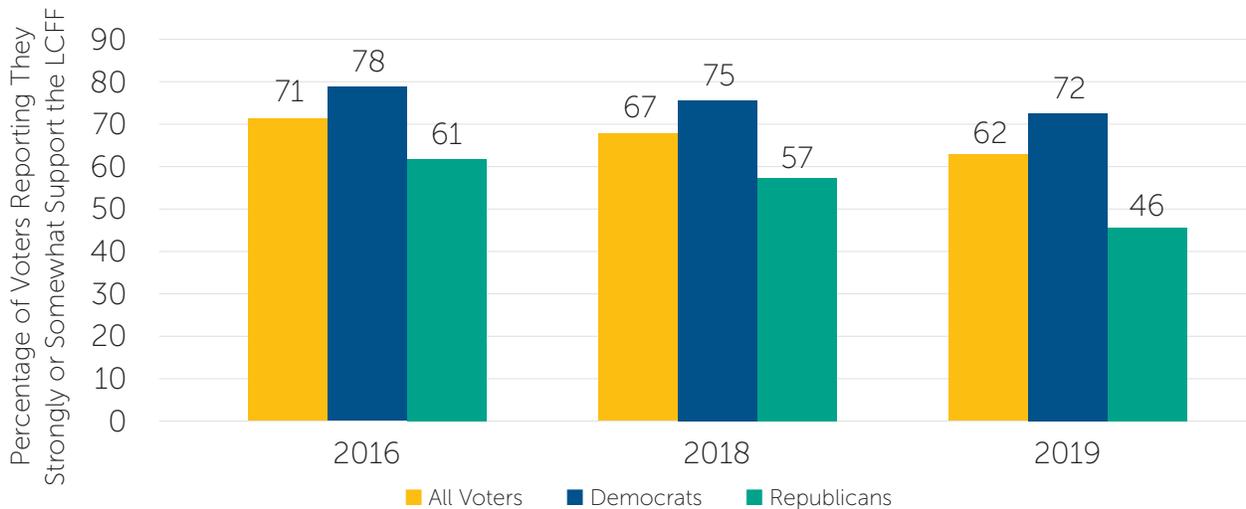
Figure 2. Voter Awareness of the LCFF by Annual Income, 2019



Voter Support for LCFF Has Decreased, But Remains High

Of voters reporting awareness of the LCFF, the majority (61 percent) expressed very or somewhat positive views. This figure represents a decrease from the previous year when 72 percent of those aware held positive views. Similarly, when the LCFF was explained to voters, a substantial majority (62 percent) expressed that they strongly or somewhat supported the policy (see Figure 3). While this support is high, it represents a decrease from 67 percent in 2018 and 71 percent in 2016. Consistent with prior years, support largely broke down among partisan lines, with 72 percent of Democrats expressing support relative to 46 percent of Republicans.

Figure 3. Voter Support for LCFF Over Time



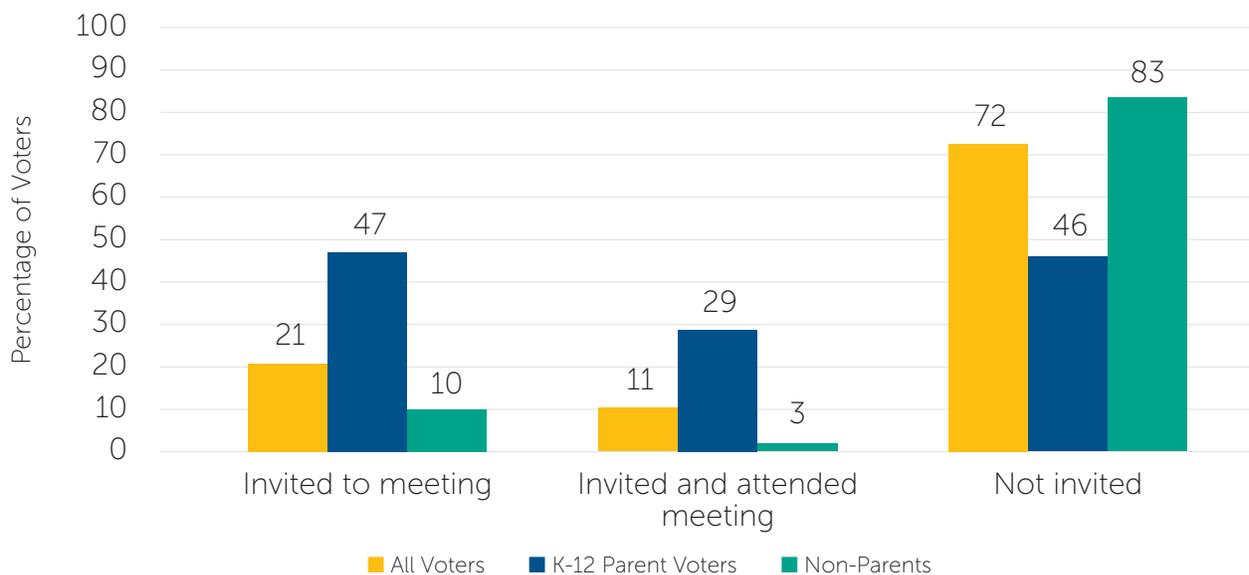
Voter support for the LCFF is consistent with the overwhelmingly positive views of the policy held by administrators across the state. For example, in 2018, 94 percent of superintendents agreed with the underlying belief of the LCFF, that students with greater

needs should receive additional resources.⁵ In another study, the majority of interviewed chief business officers expressed support for the LCFF's goals of equity and local control.⁶

Participation in LCFF Meetings Has Increased, But Remains Low

One core tenet of the LCFF is the belief that district goal-setting and resource allocation decisions should be locally determined with input from a broad range of stakeholders, including parents, community members, educators, and students. In 2019, about 1 in 5 California voters reported being invited to or made aware of meetings related to developing a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), and about 1 in 10 voters reported attending a meeting. This represents an increase from 2016 (11 percent invited or made aware, and 5 percent attended).⁷ However, in 2019, 72 percent of voters had not been invited or made aware of LCAP meetings, suggesting that overall participation remains low (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. LCAP Meeting Invitations and Attendance, 2019



As one might expect, meeting awareness and participation were higher among parent voters, with 47 percent of parents with children in school invited or made aware of LCAP meetings, and 29 percent having attended a meeting. However, nearly half (46 percent) of parents with children in school reported that they have not been invited to or made aware of an LCAP meeting.

We noted disparities in reported LCAP meeting invitations and attendance by socioeconomic status. For instance, among voters with annual incomes below \$35,000,

13 percent said they had been made aware of LCAP meetings and 4 percent attended, compared to 32 percent invited and 24 percent attended among voters with incomes of \$250,000 or more (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. LCAP Meeting Invitations and Attendance by Annual Income, 2019



Such findings are consistent with our prior research, which has suggested that educational leaders have struggled to engage stakeholders overall and, in particular, parents of low-income backgrounds, and that LCAP engagement meetings are often dominated by the voices of privileged parents.⁸ This is particularly concerning considering the policy’s emphasis on providing resources targeted towards low-income students and the requirement that districts include these students’ parents/guardians in stakeholder engagement processes.

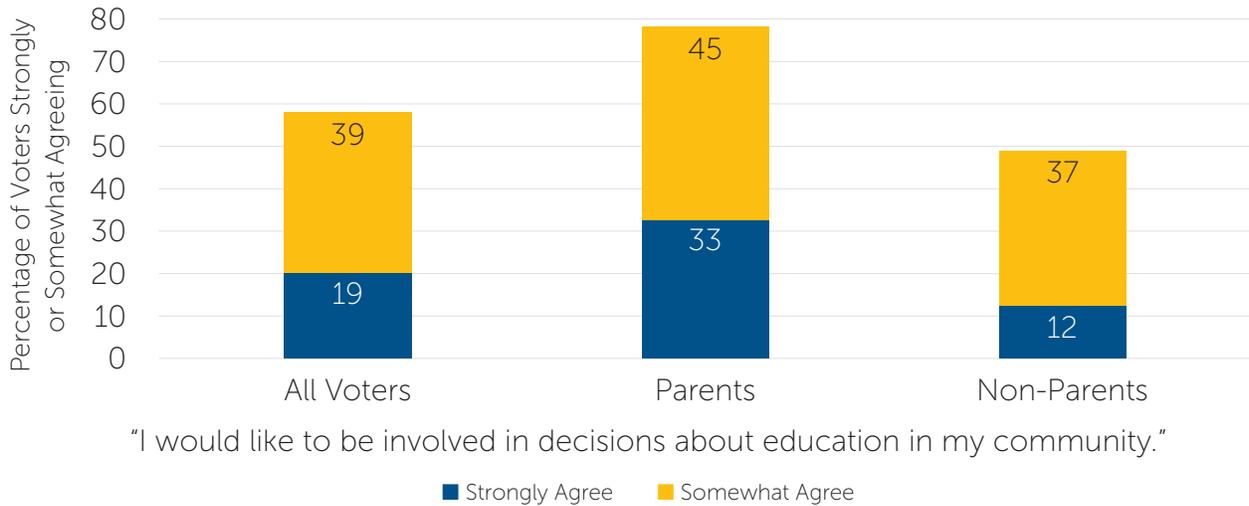
Limitations in these poll data are also important to keep in mind. The poll question did not ask about opportunities to provide LCAP input via surveys, which our prior research indicates is an approach used by many districts.⁹ Furthermore, districts may have reached out to a broader population than those included in this poll, such as non-voters and non-English speakers. Nevertheless, as noted above, data from our other research are quite consistent with these poll results and indicate persistent challenges in gaining widespread participation from all community members and parents.

The Majority of Voters Are Interested in Being Involved in Decisions About Education

In our prior research, we found that education leaders often attributed low participation in LCFF meetings to a lack of interest.¹⁰ For example, in a 2018 statewide survey of California district superintendents, 91 percent of superintendents reporting average or poor levels of stakeholder engagement cited a lack of interest among stakeholders as a reason for the low participation.¹¹ However, our poll results suggest otherwise: The majority (58 percent) of voters strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement “I would like to be involved in decisions about education in my community”

(see Figure 6). Desire to be involved was particularly high among parents (78 percent), yet nearly half (49 percent) of non-parents expressed interest in being involved as well

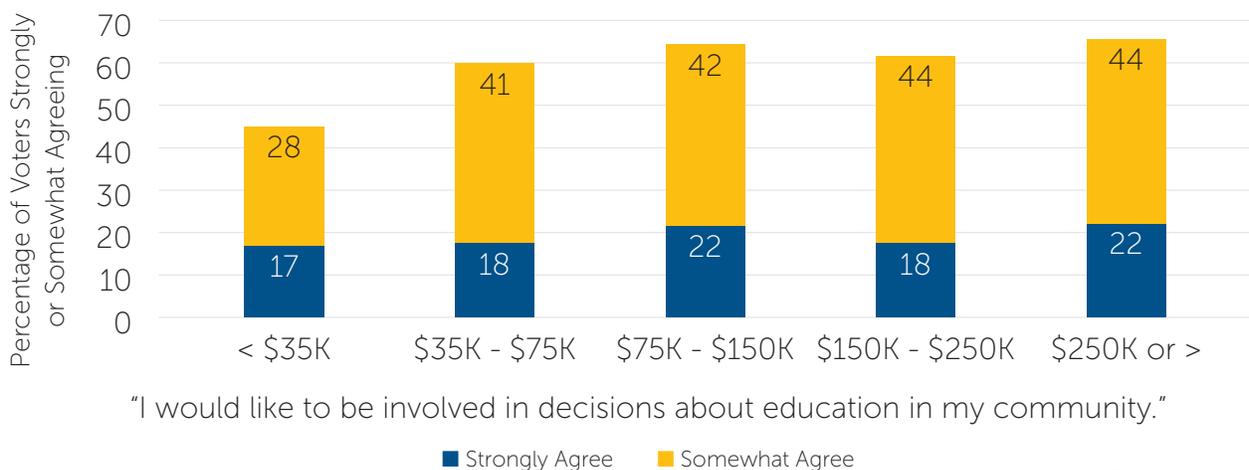
Figure 6. Voter Interest in Being Involved in Decisions About Education



Again, we observed differences by income level, with higher income voters more likely to strongly or somewhat agree with the statement "I would like to be involved in decisions about education in my community" (Figure 7). Such patterns might be explained by similar disparities in perceived capacity and trust, discussed in the next section.

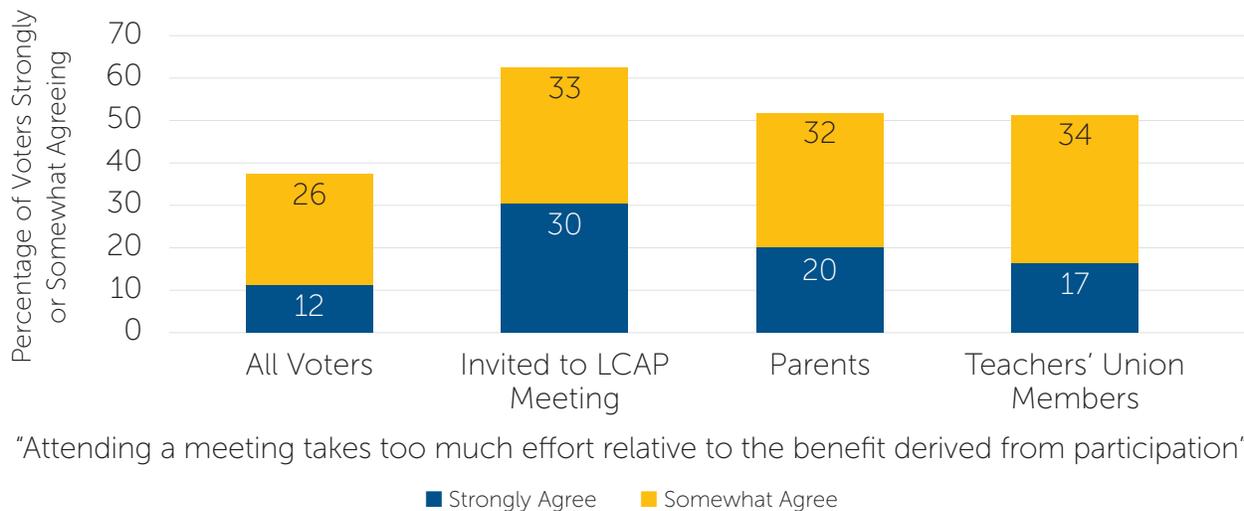
We also asked voters if they found that, in the context of public education decision-making, attending parent or community engagement meetings was worthwhile. When we asked if community engagement meetings were "too much effort relative to the benefit derived from participation," about half of voters (49 percent) disagreed. This suggests that about half of voters, if not more, consider community engagement meetings to be worthwhile, again challenging the view that stakeholders are not interested in being engaged.

Figure 7. Voter Interest in Being Involved in Decisions About Education by Annual Income



However, many groups that might be expected to be the most engaged in LCAP processes—those who had been invited to LCAP meetings, parents, and teachers’ union members—expressed more negative views of the merits of community engagement meetings than voters overall (illustrated in Figure 8). This might provide evidence for the claim, expressed by interviewees in our previous case studies, that stakeholders are experiencing “fatigue” as a result of too many engagement demands. Alternatively, these data might reflect our case study findings that many districts are practicing “shallow” engagement practices, such as one-way (as opposed to reciprocal) dialogue, or limited opportunities for stakeholders to offer meaningful feedback that will inform district policy, leaving stakeholders frustrated about the quality of engagement meetings.¹²

Figure 8. Voters Expressing Negative Views of Community Engagement Meetings



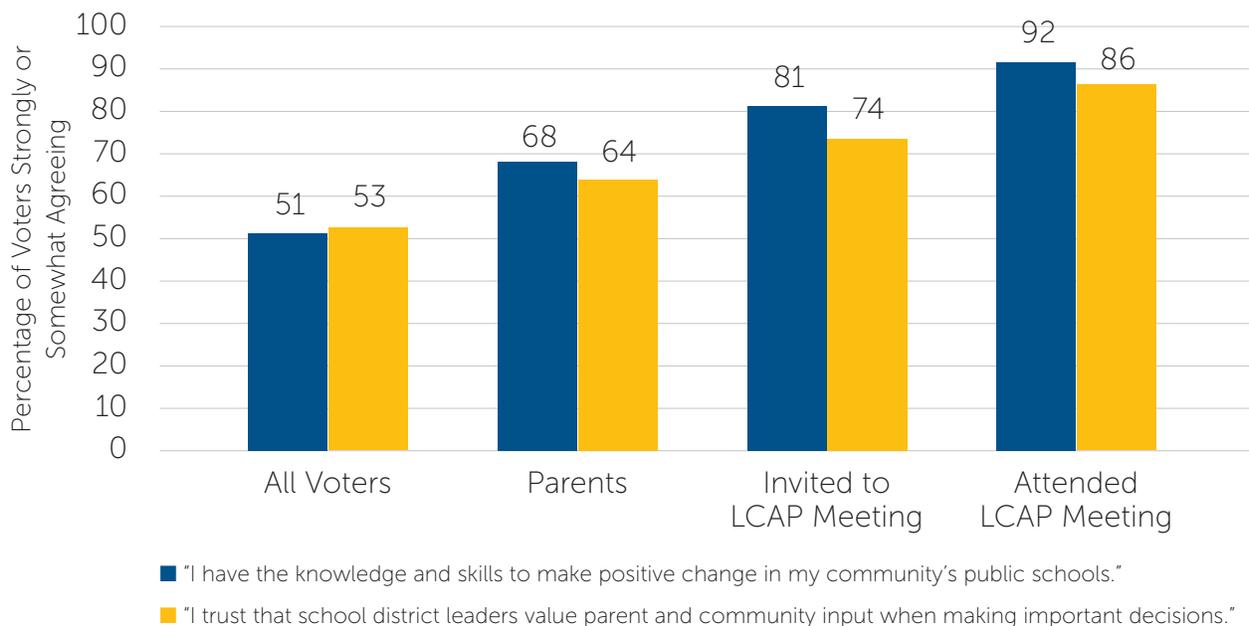
About Half of Voters Report Having the Capacity and Trust Needed for Engagement

Our previous research has suggested that low perceived capacity of stakeholders and an absence of trusting relationships may function as barriers to meaningful community engagement. For instance, in the 2018 superintendent survey, more than half of superintendents reporting poor or average levels of stakeholder engagement believed that one reason was the lack of stakeholder time, skills, and knowledge to participate. In our case studies, we found, in districts with relatively limited participation, leaders described parents and community members as lacking capacity, and interviewees also reported an absence of trust between the community and district leaders. However, in districts with greater and more substantive participation, we heard that district leaders viewed parents and community members as valuable resources, invested in building their capacity for engagement, and developed trusting relationships between the district and the community.

Regarding voters’ self-perceptions of their capacity for engagement, the 2019 PACE/USC Rossier poll results revealed that roughly half of voters (51 percent) viewed themselves as having “the knowledge and skills to make positive change in my community’s schools.” As for trust, about half of voters (53 percent) reported that they “trust that school district leaders value parent and community input when making important decisions” (see Figure 9). For each of these items, about one third of voters disagreed.

Perceived capacity and trust were higher among several groups of voters. First, parents were more likely than non-parents to report having the knowledge and skills to make positive change in schools (68 percent) and trusting district leaders to value parent and community input (64 percent). Second, we saw higher reports of having knowledge and skills to make change (81 percent) and trusting district leaders to value input (74 percent) among those who had been made aware of LCAP meetings compared to those who had not. This latter pattern might suggest that districts are reaching out to people who have greater capacity and trust already, or perhaps that being invited to participate increases one’s sense of capacity and trust. High reports of capacity and trust among voters who have attended LCAP meetings might also support our previous study’s findings that districts with strong engagement seek to build community capacity, supporting community members in learning to analyze data and understand budgeting processes.¹³

Figure 9. Voters’ Perceived Capacity for Engagement and Trust of District Leaders



Finally, we continued to see income disparities in reported capacity and trust, with high-income voters more likely to report having capacity and trust than their low-income peers. For instance, 40 percent of voters with annual incomes below \$35,000 agreed

that they have the knowledge and skills to make positive change in schools, compared to 58 percent of voters with annual incomes of \$250,000 or above. Similarly, 43 percent of voters with incomes below \$35,000 expressed trust that district leaders value parent and community input, compared to 56 percent of voters with incomes of \$250,000 or above. Perhaps, for low-income voters, low perceptions of capacity and a lack of trust in district leaders might be informing limited interest and low participation in LCFF activities. Conversely, affluent voters' relatively high perceptions of capacity and trust may explain higher reported participation as well as case study findings that engagement meetings tend to be dominated by more privileged stakeholders.

Discussion

The 2019 PACE/USC Rossier poll indicates continued high support for the LCFF among California voters, despite a decrease from previous years. However, voter participation in the community engagement activities mandated by the LCFF remains low. While many educational leaders have suggested limited participation is the result of a lack of stakeholder interest or capacity, these poll findings challenge these claims: The majority of voters expressed interest in being involved in decisions about their local schools, and roughly half viewed themselves as having the capacity to engage in such decision-making. In light of these findings, educational leaders could consider ways that districts' practices and resources—rather than simply stakeholder interest or capacity—may be shaping the quantity and quality of engagement.

In this brief, we highlight a consistent pattern of income disparities, with greater reported LCFF awareness, participation, interest in engagement, perceived capacity for engagement, and trust of district leaders among high-income voters relative to low-income voters. This pattern echoes our previous research findings regarding district leaders' struggles to engage stakeholders of low-income backgrounds, and suggests that low-income communities' perspectives may be underrepresented in districts' LCAP discussions. This is a particular concern as the LCFF provides targeted funding for low-income students. We encourage policymakers and leaders to consider strategies to increase engagement among low-income communities, including efforts to develop asset-based perspectives among district leaders, build capacity and efficacy among stakeholders, and foster trusting relationships between districts and low-income communities.

Endnotes

- ¹ <https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/local-control-funding-formula-after-four-years-what-do-we-know>
- ² <https://www.edpolicyinca.org/publications/pace-and-usc-rossier-polls-2019>
- ³ Our analysis did not detect consistent differences in results by race/ethnicity. Aside from income, the background data collected on voters (and the manner of administration) did not allow for analyses of patterns related to other characteristics relevant to the LCFF and its target student population of English learners and foster youth. We are hopeful that future polls might examine these other important characteristics.
- ⁴ The poll was not administered in 2017.
- ⁵ <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/superintendents-speak>
- ⁶ <https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/era-local-control-funding-formula-shifting-role-californias-chief-business-officers>
- ⁷ 2016 was the last time we asked this question on the poll.
- ⁸ <https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/taking-stock-stakeholder-engagement-californias-local-control-funding-formula-what-can>
- ⁹ <https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/taking-stock-stakeholder-engagement-californias-local-control-funding-formula-what-can>
- ¹⁰ <https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/taking-stock-stakeholder-engagement-californias-local-control-funding-formula-what-can>
- ¹¹ <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/superintendents-speak>
- ¹² <https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/taking-stock-stakeholder-engagement-californias-local-control-funding-formula-what-can>
- ¹³ <https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/taking-stock-stakeholder-engagement-californias-local-control-funding-formula-what-can>

Author Biographies

Taylor N. Albright is a PhD candidate in Urban Education Policy at the University of Southern California’s Rossier School of Education. Her research investigates how leaders design and implement policies with equity goals, the enactment of policies intended to mitigate racial inequity, and the process of educational policy change.

Julie A. Marsh is a professor of education policy at the University of Southern California’s Rossier School of Education and faculty co-director of PACE. She specializes in research on K–12 policy and governance, including the process and politics of policy adoption and implementation and efforts to decentralize and democratize decision-making.

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. PACE seeks to define and sustain a long-term strategy for comprehensive policy reform and continuous improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. PACE bridges the gap between research and policy, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local policymakers to increase the impact of academic research on educational policy in California.

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- Works with local school districts and professional associations on projects aimed at supporting policy innovation, data use, and rigorous evaluation.

Related Publications

Julia E. Koppich & Daniel C. Humphrey. [The Local Control Funding Formula \(LCFF\): What Have We Learned After Four Years of Implementation? Getting Down to Facts II.](#) 2018.

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.

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.

Morgan S. Polikoff. [Gauging the Revised California School Dashboard.](#) Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. February 2019.

Morgan S. Polikoff, Heather Hough, Julie A. Marsh, & David N. Plank. [Californians and Public Education: Views from the 2019 PACE/USC Rossier Poll.](#) Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. February 2019.



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