Leadership for Continuous Improvement

The Vision for County Offices of Education

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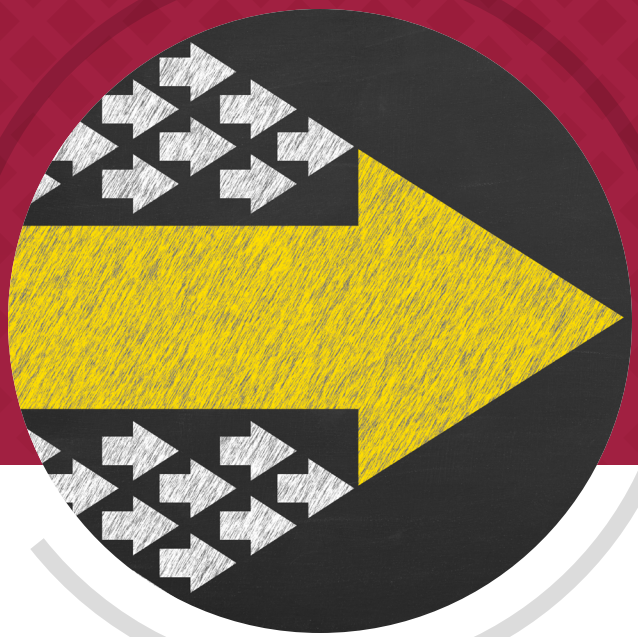

County offices of education (COEs) are expected to provide ongoing support to districts and other local education agencies to drive continuous improvement within California's education system. Fulfilling this role has required COEs to carry out their historical role as compliance monitors while simultaneously developing the necessary mindsets, skills, and structures and process to build the capacity for continuous improvement within their own offices and the districts they serve. This policy brief highlights three major shifts identified by COE superintendents in partnership with California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA) and PACE that COEs must make in order to fulfill their expanded capacity-building responsibility within California's Statewide System of Support (SSS).

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Introduction

The role of county offices of education (COEs) has changed significantly since the enactment of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in 2013. COEs have long held critical roles in California's education system as fiscal arbiters to districts, resource providers and administrators of specialized programs, and service providers for students in the justice system.[1] The passing of LCFF and related policy structures such as the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) and the Statewide System of Support (SSS) established that COEs also have to provide ongoing support to districts and other local education agencies to drive continuous improvement. In this new role, COEs are responsible for supporting districts in reviewing data and developing plans that improve student outcomes over time.[2] Making the transition from compliance monitoring to building capacity for continuous improvement has required COEs and their leadership to reframe and adjust their organizational focus, culture, and structures and processes.

What is "Continuous Improvement"?

California education has embraced "continuous improvement" as central to the vision for improving student outcomes. Continuous improvement is a disciplined and ongoing approach to improving student outcomes and sustaining "persistently higher levels of performance." Continuous improvement provides a structure for educators to identify problems, design interventions specific to those problems, learn from trying them out in context, and evaluate their effectiveness before scaling up the intervention. The distinguishing features of a continuous improvement approach are as follows:[3]

- Systems produce outcomes
- Change efforts focus on key processes
- Progress requires continual learning and discovery
- Frontline workers are uniquely situated to learn how to get ideas to work
- As effective practices are discovered, they are spread throughout the organization

To support the efforts of COEs to lead continuous improvement, PACE has been working with the COE superintendents to clarify what shifts are needed to achieve California's vision of continuous improvement in all 58 counties. From this work, PACE has identified three major shifts — agreed upon by county superintendents — that must be achieved by COEs to fulfill their role in the SSS and ultimately achieve California's vision of continuous improvement at scale:

1. Every layer of the system must assume shared responsibility to improve student outcomes, requiring a mindset shift from the historical role of COEs.
2. To support continuous improvement in districts, COEs must themselves experience and lead through continuous improvement and operate as improvement organizations.
3. To coordinate resources in service of districts, COEs must break down departmental silos and use data that provide reliable, timely feedback.

This brief articulates the rationale behind these three shifts by drawing on the expertise of COE leaders and their staffs, continuous improvement professionals, and education leaders who have successfully led continuous improvement efforts outside of California.

Data & Methods

The goal of this work was to build consensus around the vision for COEs within the SSS and articulate the shifts that must be made to fulfill that role. First, PACE conducted a literature scan of organizational best practices that support continuous improvement. PACE then conducted nine interviews with continuous improvement professionals and 10 interviews with staff from COEs identified as currently engaged in continuous improvement work. PACE then examined the mission and vision statements and strategic plans from 27 COEs for alignment around improving student outcomes. To build consensus on these shifts among COE superintendents, PACE presented the findings at the June 2019 general membership meeting of the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA) to facilitate a conversation around the role of COEs and elicit feedback from all superintendents around the shifts they were managing in their own offices.

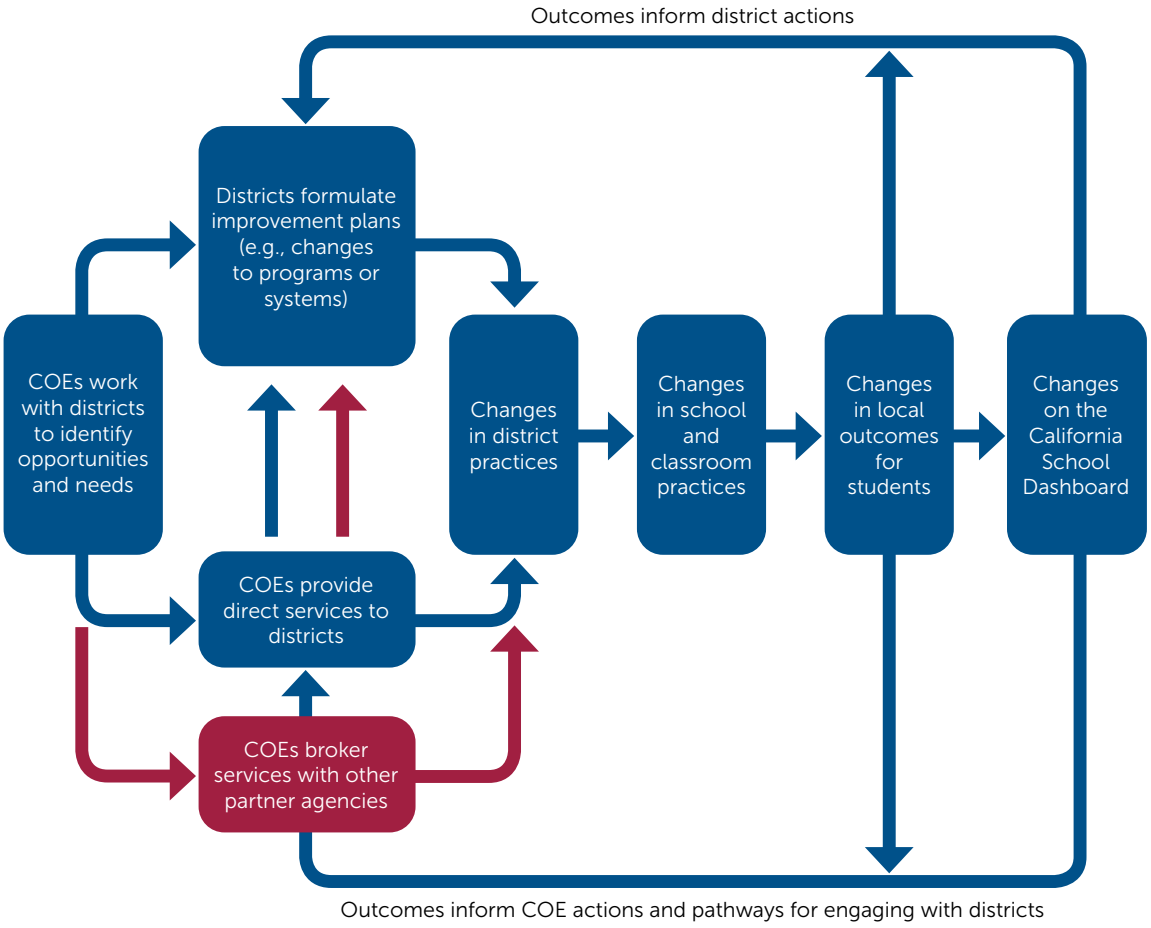
Shift 1: Every layer of the system must assume shared responsibility to improve student outcomes, requiring a mindset shift from the historical role of COEs.

The responsibilities of COEs have shifted from an emphasis on compliance and monitoring to capacity building, with COEs supporting districts to improve student outcomes. COEs are expected to maintain their historical roles while adopting additional responsibilities that require creating new mindsets, skills, and organizational structures. A continuous improvement professional who supported several counties through this transition reflected on this transformation:

We see counties getting more… comfortable with the idea that they have to shift… from the role they have played historically… as vehicles for compliance… The challenge in California is to change the culture of the [county office] organization so that it's focused on creating the conditions for everybody to learn across the system rather than being in a supervisory role… That requires a very different set of skills.

While county office staff have always been invested in improving student outcomes in principle, perhaps the biggest shift in the new policy approach is that COEs must now share responsibility for these outcomes with the districts and schools they serve. This mindset shift was posed to COE superintendents at CCSESA's June 2019 General Membership meeting, and the 46 superintendents in attendance overwhelmingly agreed that COEs indeed have a shared responsibility to improve student outcomes and must move towards holding themselves accountable for these outcomes. At the meeting a theory of action emerged as to how the support COEs provide to districts ultimately impacts students. The theory of action frames improving student outcomes around providing ongoing support to districts that in turn facilitates continuous improvement at the district and school level. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Theory of Action for How COEs Support Continuous Improvement



When COEs work with districts, their first step is to analyze current performance within a district to determine where in the system improvements are needed. COEs then work with districts to develop improvement plans, sometimes providing direct services or brokering connections with partner agencies to support implementation. These changes in district practice should lead to changes in school and classroom practice, with the ultimate goal of improving student outcomes. COEs, alongside districts, monitor changes in local outcomes to evaluate the impact of these services. This data is used to identify where systems are breaking down or are less effective than they should be, as well as which services are positively impacting students.

Providing these supports in a manner that enables continuous improvement requires a mindset shift for educators across all levels the system and a new form of partnership between COEs and districts. Before the LCFF was passed, counties acted as entities that monitored and implemented statutory measures on struggling districts. Now counties must work with districts as *partners* to help improve student outcomes. This requires an organizational and mindset shift within the COE that emphasizes building trust with districts to promote open dialogue with COEs about the struggles they are having and the support they need. One county superintendent reflected:

> *There was a perception by some districts that the county office was just a regulatory body… Even though we had great relationships, [we] didn't have the deep concern and shared ownership of their student outcomes. And now I believe that mindset is there, and that understanding is there. Emphasizing a shared responsibility around student outcomes is a critical first step for establishing the trusting relationships between COEs and districts that are needed to guide continuous improvement.*

A shared responsibility of all system actors around specific outcomes is a critical component of successful continuous improvement initiatives in education, healthcare, and business sectors, and California can learn from those examples.[4] One such example is the Ontario Ministry for Education, which has utilized continuous improvement methods for the better part of two decades to reform their public education system. From 2008 to 2015 the Ministry increased the number of students meeting and exceeding literacy standards from 54 percent to 72.5 percent and improved graduation rates from 68 percent to 86.5 percent.[5] A former Ministry leader explained that centralizing the focus of everyone in the system around student outcomes was essential for driving continuous improvement:

> *We created an organization that was designed to work in partnership with school districts, principal associations, and teachers' unions to focus the system on effective changes in classroom practice in order to effect improvements in student learning… What's the causal pathway to improved student outcomes and learning? How do we do it in a way that brings every player at every level of the system along with us in partnership?*

In order to achieve the goals of the education system — to improve student outcomes — *every player* in the system must focus on how their work impacts student learning. Here in California, that means that county offices must play a critical role in aligning their work as an organization and the work of the districts they support around improving student outcomes across the state. It also means that there must be an effective way to evaluate whether COE activities in support of districts and schools result in improvements throughout the various steps in the process.

Shift 2: To support continuous improvement in districts, COEs must themselves experience and lead through continuous improvement and operate as improvement organizations.

COE superintendents agree that since COEs are now expected to support districts in continuous improvement, county office staff must engage in the process of continuous improvement themselves. This means adopting and modeling an improvement mindset, engaging as co-learners alongside the districts they support, and building their own capacity as improvement organizations.

Development of a continuous improvement mindset. Similar to the mindset shift around shared responsibility for student outcomes, COE leaders described a parallel shift towards a "continuous improvement mindset." A key part of this mindset shift is for COEs to engage with the districts they support as partners as opposed to coming in as experts, with all parties acknowledging that they have to learn their way into improved performance. This shift means COEs acknowledge when they do not have answers to all of the problems their districts may be facing and agree to work alongside districts to find solutions. One COE leader described the realization that in order to support districts the COE had to lead with or model a continuous improvement mindset:

> *There was this kind of fear of, well we're the county office — we should… know things. We shouldn't be saying we're learning it, and breaking through that mindset was hard for some people… some of that got broken through with just trying it with people and finding out that the world didn't come to an end when you told district folks, hey, we are learning this new thing. Any shift in mindset will progress slowly, and it will take time to establish a coherent focus on continuous improvement across entire counties. COEs have already taken steps to internalize and model a continuous improvement mindset in their work supporting districts.*

Learning together with districts. COE leaders are using the differentiated assistance (DA) process as an entry point for learning and experiencing continuous improvement side by side with the districts they support. COEs must provide support to districts identified for DA within the SSS if any student group does not meet performance standards for two or more LCFF priority areas.[6] COEs can also be identified for DA at

county-run schools, making the DA process an ideal space to develop capacity for continuous improvement at both the county and district level.[7] Research has shown that education agencies that approach support provisioning as "co-learners" (i.e., COEs supporting districts) establish trust and can more effectively engage with support recipients to lead continuous improvement efforts.[8] To this end, many COEs have attended trainings with district teams to learn the approach of continuous improvement, such as the trainings held by CCSESA with the support of the Improvement Collective,[9] and California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE). A former COE leader described how orienting their work with districts as co-learners further reinforced the adoption of a continuous improvement mindset:

> *We [the county] are going to try it with you [the district] and then we want you to give us feedback… They [COE staff] were so used to being in the position of knowing… the more that we modeled it and tried it with district people… really helped to change people's minds.*

When COEs model the necessary continuous improvement processes and mindsets for districts, their actions improve relationships between districts and COEs and increase COEs' capacity and expertise to lead continuous improvement.

Building COE capacity through "learning by doing." Multiple COE superintendents emphasized the need to model and utilize improvement themselves, with one stating, "there's absolutely no way that we're going to get good about supporting districts and get better about our own work in general if we're not utilizing improvement ourselves." However, leading through improvement has posed a challenge given the dearth of expertise in leading continuous improvement work at all levels across the state. As one leader said:

> *… it's not like there exists in our universe right now a whole bunch of people that are highly trained in education with change management, or highly trained in systems work. They've worked in systems… just because you've worked in one doesn't mean you understand how the system works. You just know you were good at knowing how to do your work in the system.*

As a result, COEs are creating programs or investing in professional development that allows staff to develop the necessary skills and experience for continuous improvement. One way COEs are building staff capacity is by practicing continuous improvement focused a particular problem of practice, similar to project-based learning. In this scenario a team learns continuous improvement strategies and tools to address an issue or improve a particular problem of practice (e.g., student math outcomes or LCAP review and revision). These team members can then share their continuous improvement knowledge with colleagues or coach other teams that use continuous improvement to address other problems. In one COE, the staff tasked with providing support to districts around continuous improvement first developed an improvement model. The staff then

went through the entire training process themselves to address a problem of practice within the COE and gain experiential knowledge of continuous improvement. Only after testing the process and building their own expertise did staff begin supporting districts around continuous improvement through coaching and trainings. This project-based learning provides an entry point for individuals within COEs to build their improvement capacity, but full adoption of a continuous improvement approach requires a more comprehensive strategy.

Operating COEs as improvement organizations. COE leaders recognize that in order to lead continuous improvement and support districts they must lead the transformation of their offices into continuously improving organizations. COEs that are trying to become continuous improvement organizations focus on training senior leadership — which generally includes the superintendent and their cabinet — first. Then, these leaders train their respective departments and staff in continuous improvement methodologies, generally through experiential learning (i.e., project-based learning) that focuses on a particular problem of practice.

COE leaders also recognize that a continuous improvement methodology must be coherent with existing structures and processes so that it is not viewed as another initiative, but rather how work is done in the COE. COEs are now using these methods to improve other processes, such as LCAP approval, by streamlining the issue identification, drafting, and review processes. COEs must continue to make procedural and structural shifts to become continuous improvement organizations.

Shift 3: To coordinate resources in service of districts, COEs must break down departmental silos and use data that provide reliable, timely feedback.

COEs have to make several organizational shifts to fulfill their role in the SSS as the driver for improvement. This section highlights two primary organizational shifts — breaking down departmental silos and improving their capacity for data use — that California's COEs are committed to undertaking to meet their new role and responsibilities.

Building coherence in service of districts. COEs must break down departmental silos with the goal of coordinating multiple streams of resources in support of districts. Nearly every COE leader and continuous improvement professional emphasized the need to integrate work across traditionally siloed units. The most common areas of integration were across units that most clearly impact student learning — those considered education services (e.g., curriculum, administration, and data and evaluation). COE leaders referenced multiple strategies they have used to coordinate work across traditionally siloed units, including the intentional cross-staffing of teams, more consistent meetings with staff from multiple departments, and rearranging the organizational chart to get people with the right expertise working together. One COE leader described how they approached restructuring their COE to add in continuous improvement without creating more "things":

...Instead of creating a brand-new department, or a brand-new thing... [we considered] this idea of, How do you better use the resources you have?... at a county office level, across your teams you probably have really great people... How do you really pull all those folks together... instead of creating a brand-new team that's only focused on this new thing called continuous improvement in and of itself?

Reorganization efforts align all structures and processes around the shared responsibility to improve student outcomes. For example, multiple COE leaders described ongoing efforts to increase collaboration between business and finance departments by including these departments in student services meetings to emphasize how the work of those departments impacts student outcomes. Realignment around this goal allows COEs to determine the impact of various work streams and reorganize to ensure available resources are being maximized. COEs are able to identify which services further their goals, which makes offices more efficient, reduces costs, and frees resources to improve or expand services that best support their specific districts and students. Leaders in many COEs are actively engaged in this type of restructuring but acknowledged that some departments are more difficult to integrate with others due to unique funding structures[10] and senior staff who feel strong ownership over their "turf."

Using data for improvement. COEs must have access to data that help them evaluate progress towards improving student outcomes county-wide. One of the largest needs expressed by COE leaders and continuous improvement professionals is an expanded data system that provides more regular and specific data so that COEs can appropriately support districts. The California School Dashboard provides information that identifies local education agencies for DA, but education leaders across the state have said that this information is not enough to drive continuous improvement.[11] In response, COEs have sought out other data systems and established data agreements with districts to undergird their continuous improvement efforts. For example, 10 COEs are a part of the CORE Data Collaborative,[12] with another joining next year. Some COEs are building their own data networks with the districts they support and have offered access to other COEs in need of a similar data infrastructure. These systems increase the amount of data COEs can access and enable COEs to better align supports with pressing district needs. COE leaders also stated that they are actively looking to add more data scientists and analysts to COE staff. Expanding access to data and the capacity to use data effectively are key foci of COE leadership to lead continuous improvement.

COE superintendents also need data to evaluate the impact of their own work on student outcomes. Across the state COE staff emphasized the need for "interim measures" to identify what actions should be changed, continued, or eliminated — in their own work and for the districts they support — to continuously improve, rather than waiting until the end of each school year.[13] COE superintendents have discussed anchoring their work together in data as a way to evaluate the efficacy of programs and practices and support shared accountability. COE superintendents welcome the idea that better data

would provide a clearer sense of how to best serve students and build knowledge across the state, at all levels of the system. However, it is unclear who should administer such a system and what metrics would accurately reflect how actions taken by COEs impact district and school practices and, ultimately, student outcomes.

Conclusion

County offices of education occupy a critical role in California's Statewide System of Support and have a responsibility to lead the continuous improvement of the districts they support. In order to fulfill this role, COEs are undergoing cultural and organizational shifts to better facilitate continuous improvement. The first and most difficult shift is leading a mindset shift that COEs — and all actors throughout the system — are responsible for improving student outcomes. COE superintendents have bought into a shift towards collective responsibility for student outcomes and have begun to realign the work of their COEs in pursuit of this mission. COEs are building their capacity for leading continuous improvement by embracing a continuous improvement mindset, learning side by side with districts, and reorganizing their own structures and processes to better support districts. COEs are making investments to lead continuous improvement, but there remain questions that need to be answered as they transition to becoming improvement organizations:

- How will COEs know if the investments and resources that they are providing to districts are impacting student outcomes?
- What data systems track and provide the information that COEs need to make decisions around the support given to districts, or how could these be built?
- How will California develop the necessary human capital to lead continuous improvement work at multiple levels in the Statewide System of Support?
- Are there examples of COEs successfully leading continuous improvement in their own offices and in support of districts in California that can be learned from and shared with other COEs to guide their own improvement journeys?

Author Biographies

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Endnotes

[1] COEs provide a variety of services to districts they support, including career-technical education, alternative education, special education, and various professional development opportunities for educators.

[2] The support COEs provide is twofold: 1) reviewing district Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) and 2) providing support to districts to meet the goals set in these LCAPs. Plank, D., O'Day, J., Cottingham, B. (2018). *Building a System of Support for School Improvement.* Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education. https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/building-system-support-school-improvement

[3] Grunow, A., and Hough, H. (2018). *Continuous Improvement: Building System Capacity to Learn.* Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education. https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/continuous-improvement-building-system-capacity-learn

[4] The use of continuous improvement to improve outcomes in healthcare and business sectors is well documented through processes such as Six Sigma, Deliverology, Baldridge, and Lean Improvement.

[5] "On both… figures, the denominator includes all age-appropriate students…including students with special needs and every other student including those who've left the system." — former Ontario Ministry of Education leader

[6] There are 10 state priority areas to identify Local Education Agencies for DA: eight for districts and two for COEs. Education Code (EC) Section 52071(c).

[7] Some county offices manage schools that serve "youths at risk of failure" as well as schools for students in juvenile detention centers, vocational schools, and schools that support specific special education needs.

[8] Kennedy, K., and Gallagher, A. (2019). *Leadership that Supports Continuous Improvement: The Case of Ayer Elementary.* Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/leadership-supports-continuous-improvement-case-ayer-elementary

[9] A continuous improvement capability-building organization led by Dr. Alicia Grunow and Dr. Sandra Park that provides training and consulting to education organizations pursuing continuous improvement.

[10] It is worth noting that the leadership in one COE altered salary structures for all staff so that some percentage of each employee's salary came from unrestricted funds so that everyone functionally works for the higher mission — improving student outcomes — and not just a specific program or grant.

[11] Hough, H., Byun, E., Mulfinger, L. (2018). *Using Data for Improvement: Learning from the CORE Data Collaborative.* Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education. https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/using-data-improvement-learning-core-data-collaborative

[12] The CORE Data Collaborative was created by eight of California's largest districts under the No Child Left Behind waiver for using data for accountability. This collaborative now pools data from 50 districts and covers over 1,000,000 students, providing feedback around a variety of indicators. For more information, visit: www.coredistricts.org

[13] CCSESA established a Coordinating Committee in 2019 and has identified that determining how to best provide interim accountability measures to COEs as a high-need area for COEs to lead continuous improvement.

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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- Provides expert testimony on educational issues to legislative committees and other policy audiences.
- Works with local school districts and professional associations on projects aimed at supporting policy innovation, data use, and rigorous evaluation.

Related Publications

Humphrey, D., & O'Day, J. ***Early Implementation of California's System of Support***. Policy Analysis for California Education. December 2019.

Plank, D., Humphrey, D.C., & O'Day, J. ***The Changing Roles of County Offices of Education: Survey Results***. Policy Analysis for California Education. December 2019.

Grunow, A. & Hough, H. ***Continuous Improvement: Building System Capacity to Learn***. Getting Down to Facts II. September 2018.

Henig, J.R., Lyon, M.A., Moffit, S., & Plank, D. ***Creating Coherent Systems to Support Education Improvement. Getting Down to Facts II***. September 2018.

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