

Gauging the Revised California School Dashboard

Evidence from the 2019
PACE/USC Rossier Voter Poll

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Late in 2018, the California Department of Education rolled out an updated version of the California School Dashboard. This revision altered the look and feel of the Dashboard and added new indicators based on newly available data. This brief updates a 2018 analysis of the Dashboard. First, I examine whether the state's revisions are in line with the suggestions made in the 2018 report. I find that the state has made some improvements to the system, but that there is room for continued improvement. Second, I use data from the 2019 PACE/USC Rossier poll to characterize use of and support for the Dashboard. I find continued low use and potentially troubling equity gaps, but I also find high support for the Dashboard and a strong preference for the new Dashboard over the old.

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Just last year, I co-wrote a technical report for the *Getting Down to Facts II* (GDTFII) project focused on the California School Dashboard¹. That report used data from the Dashboard itself, from a state-representative poll of California voters, and from interviews with school district leaders to understand the early implementation of the Dashboard. The report identified several main challenges for the Dashboard, and it offered suggestions to address these problems:

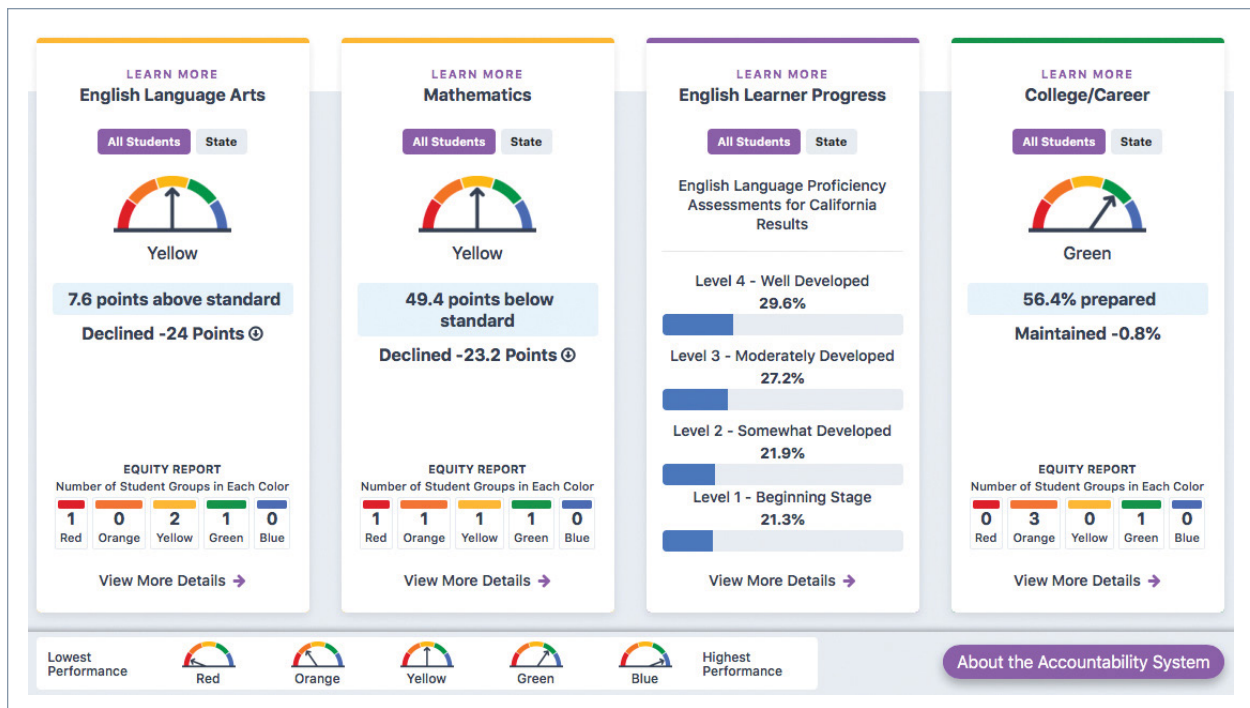
- First, the analysis found that very few parents were aware of or reported having used the Dashboard and that there were wide gaps between more and less educated voters in their reported use. It recommended greater effort to disseminate the Dashboard and to support users' access to it.
- Second, the analysis found that the tool was not well designed to offer comparisons between schools and that school ratings were highly related to student demographics in a way that likely unfairly punishes schools serving more disadvantaged students. It recommended the state allow Dashboard users to compare schools, especially schools with similar characteristics.
- Third, the analysis found that the Dashboard's chosen approach to measuring growth in student achievement (i.e., subtracting last year's school-average test scores from this year's) was poorly aligned with what research says about the proper ways to use growth models to isolate school effectiveness. It recommended the state adopt a true value-added or student growth percentile model.
- Fourth, the analysis found that the Dashboard gave insufficient weight and priority to the performance of student groups, often relegating those data to back pages or allowing schools to have high overall ratings despite weak subgroup performance. It recommended prioritizing student groups in reporting and giving users the ability to focus their search on the main groups of interest.

Since this report was written, two important events have happened with respect to the Dashboard. First, in December 2018, the state put out a new version of the Dashboard, replacing the look and feel of the old Dashboard and updating the data. Second, in January 2019, PACE and USC Rossier conducted a poll of California voters, updating the information collected on the 2018 poll used in the original report. The purpose of this brief is to update the September 2018 report based on these new changes and data and examine the extent to which the original report's recommendations still hold.

Changes to the Dashboard

The state made a number of changes, substantive, technical, and stylistic, in their 2018 revision of the Dashboard. Substantively, new indicators were included for the first time. These include chronic absenteeism, college/career, and Grade 11 test scores. Technically, the state updated its calculation of graduation rates, added adjustments for school performance in schools with low test participation, switched to three-by-five grids (from five-by-five) for some small schools, and began including new alternative schools in Dashboard calculations. Stylistically, the state put all of the Dashboard data on a single page, changed the way that the main rankings are indicated (moving from pie pieces to gauges), created a new page that allows users to see the overall ratings for each individual school in a district, and foregrounded student group data in several places (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. New Displays on the California School Dashboard



These changes are generally welcome and in line with the recommendation in the 2018 GDTFII Dashboard report. In particular:

- The inclusion of new indicators addresses some of the superintendents' stated concerns that the Dashboard was mainly still focused on test scores.
- The use of three-by-five grids for small schools will improve the year-to-year stability of ratings for those schools.
- Moving all of the information for a school to a single page likely makes the tool more usable and decreases the likelihood that users will miss important data.
- Allowing users to see all schools in a district side-by-side increases the utility of the tool for comparing schools, which may be especially important for parents seeking to use the data to make decisions about where to enroll their children.

Overall, these are a good first set of changes that users should appreciate.

However, there are several recommended changes that were not made, or that were made in ways that were not ideal, and these might be fertile ground for future modifications. For example:

- The comparison tool allows users to compare schools within districts, but it does not allow users to compare schools between districts. Given that many parents may have a choice set that includes schools from multiple districts (including both traditional public and charter schools), this could be a useful fix. Perhaps the most straightforward fix would be simply to allow parents to select as many schools as they would like in order to compare them.
- The comparison tool allows users to sort schools on any of the indicators, but it does not allow users to compare multiple indicators at once, nor does it allow users to compare schools with similar demographics. Given the well established relationships between school average performance measures and student demographics, this approach will tend to make more affluent schools look more favorable and less affluent schools to look worse. The state should consider creating a tool that allows users to compare similar schools, as they used to do under the Academic Performance Index.
- The comparison tool allows users to compare schools only on overall performance on each indicator, not on student group performance. The most relevant comparison for a given parent, in contrast, is probably "where do

students who look like my child do the best?” To this end, the tool could do more to offer parents the opportunity to customize their experience based on student demographics. The state should consider modifying the tool to allow users to compare schools for a given subgroup.

- The state has not changed its approach to student growth, so all of the concerns about the chosen approach that were described in the previous report remain relevant. In that previous report, we wrote the following, and every word of it still applies:

The state has chosen a simplistic ‘change’ measure by merely taking the difference between this year’s scores and last year’s scores on each outcome. This approach suffers from many problems, not the least of which is that it does not adjust for the fact that these are different students being compared to one another (i.e., there are ‘cohort effects’). Especially for test scores, where there is a wealth of knowledge about the best ways to construct accountability system growth measures, there is no reason for the state to choose the approach it did. The state should choose a more appropriate growth measure, such as a two-step value-added model.

The state is consulting with experts on ways to improve their growth measures (I am a part of those conversations); hopefully, after that feedback, they will make a choice that is better aligned with what the literature suggests.

Clearly, there is room for continued progress in the kinds of data reported on the Dashboard and the ways in which they are reported.

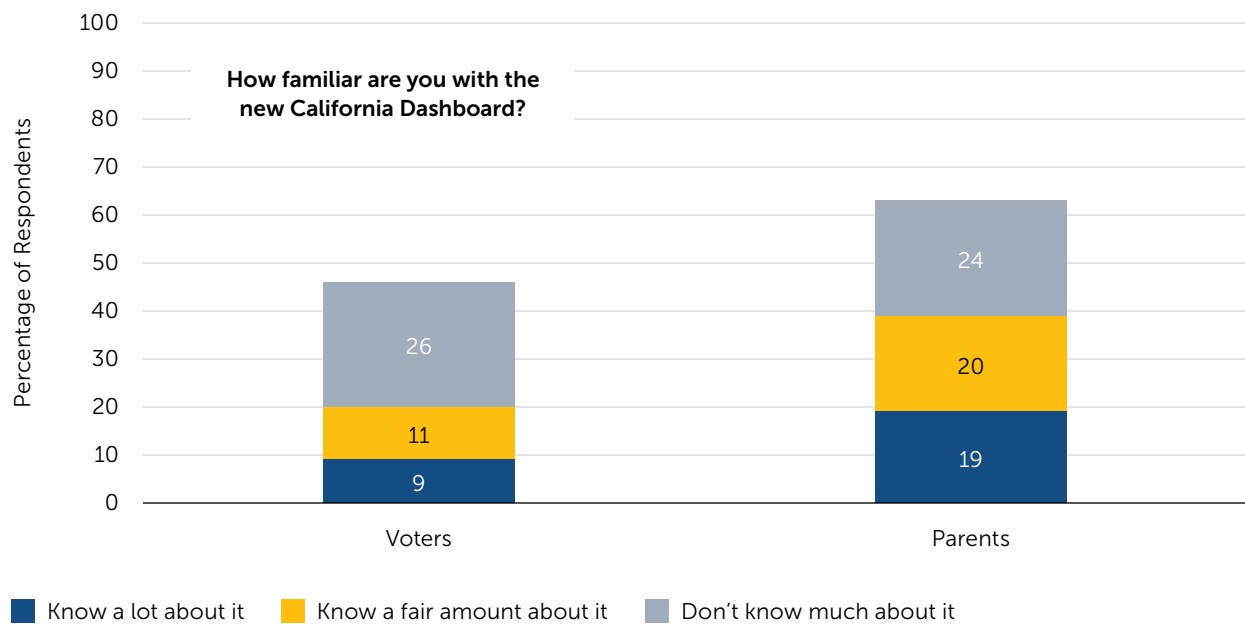
Awareness and Use of the Dashboard

All of these changes were made to the Dashboard to help educators, parents, and the public make better use of school performance data. The 2019 PACE/USC Rossier poll² offers us the opportunity to take stock of public awareness and use of the Dashboard, as well as to examine voters’ attitudes towards the new Dashboard.

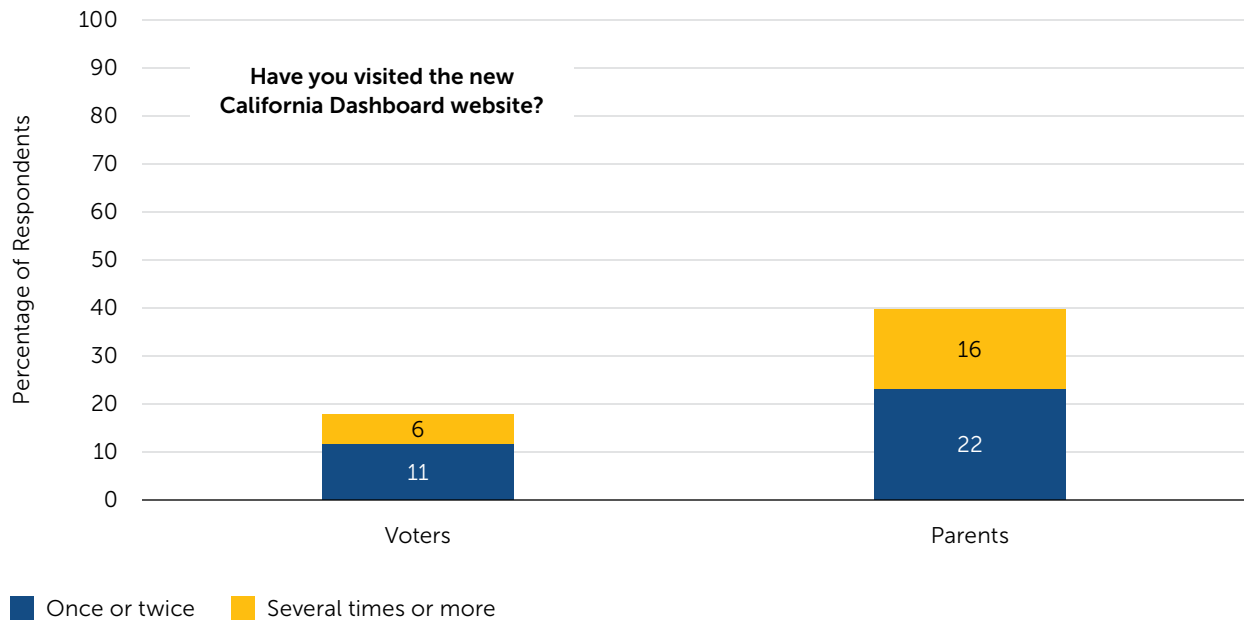
In terms of awareness of the Dashboard, our results show little change from 2018 to 2019. In 2018, 45 percent of voters reported having heard of the Dashboard, with 6 percent saying they knew a “good deal” about it and 10 percent saying they knew a “fair amount.” In 2019, 46 percent of voters reported having heard of the Dashboard, with 9 percent saying they knew a “good deal” about it and 11 percent saying they knew a “fair amount.” While the overall level of awareness was therefore almost completely

flat (and certainly within the margin of error), the increase in higher levels of awareness (20 percent this year versus 16 percent last year) is a bit larger. Narrowing the sample to just parents, we saw no increase from 2018 to 2019—66 percent of parents last year reported awareness versus 63 percent this year. However, as shown in Figure 2, there are substantial differences between parents and voters overall: In 2019, 39 percent of parents reported knowing a fair amount or a lot about the Dashboard, compared to only 20 percent of voters.

Figure 2. Voter and Parent Awareness of the Dashboard, 2019

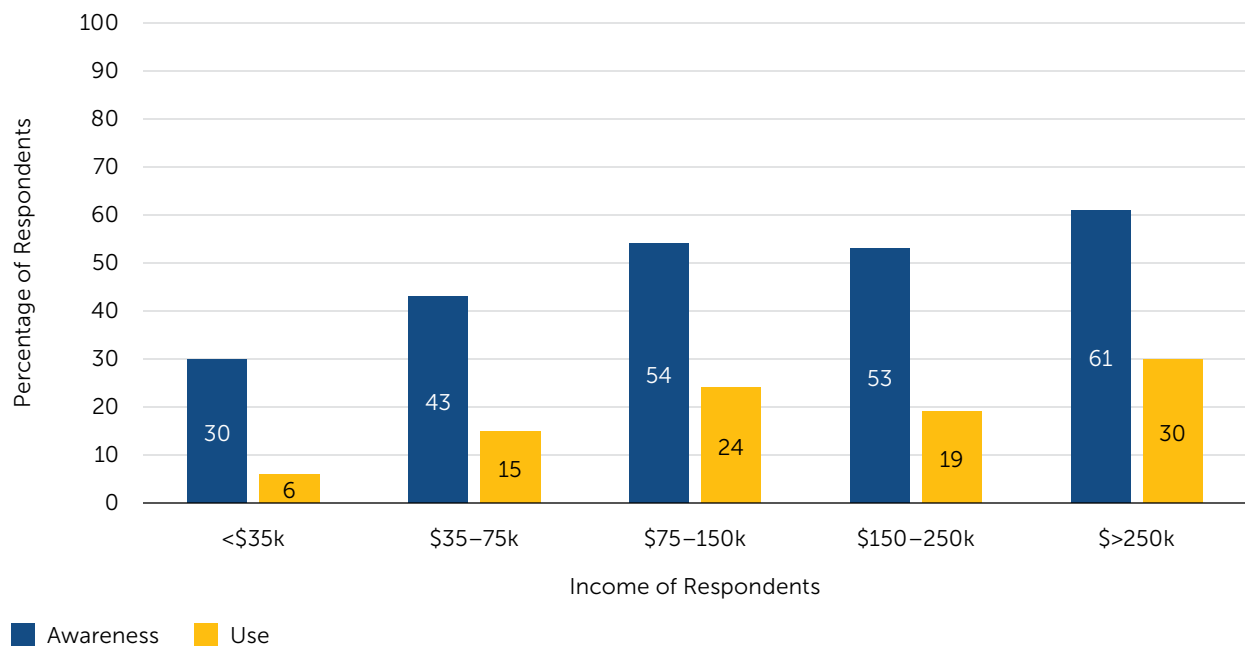


Though awareness has not increased, the proportion of voters who reported having been to the Dashboard website did increase from 2018 to 2019. In 2018, 12 percent of voters and 35 percent of parents said they had visited the Dashboard website. In 2019, 17 percent of voters and 38 percent of parents reported having been to the website. The proportion reporting having visited the Dashboard more than twice also saw increases—from 3 percent to 6 percent for all voters and from 12 percent to 16 percent for parents. Again, there are substantial differences here between parents and voters: In 2019, 38 percent of parents had visited the Dashboard, compared to only 17 percent of voters (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Voter and Parent Use of the Dashboard, 2019

We also tested whether the trends we observed in the 2018 data—with more educated voters much more likely to be aware of or use the Dashboard—held in 2019. This trend did continue (see Figure 4). Looking by household income, for instance, just 30 percent of those with incomes below \$35K had heard of the Dashboard, versus 61 percent of those with incomes above \$250K. In terms of use, just 6 percent of those with incomes below \$35K said they had visited the Dashboard, versus 30 percent of those with incomes above \$250K. Again, the state might need to do more to reach out to less educated or lower income voters if the goal is to put more data in their hands to make decisions about where to send their children.

Figure 4. Awareness and Use of the Dashboard by Income, 2019

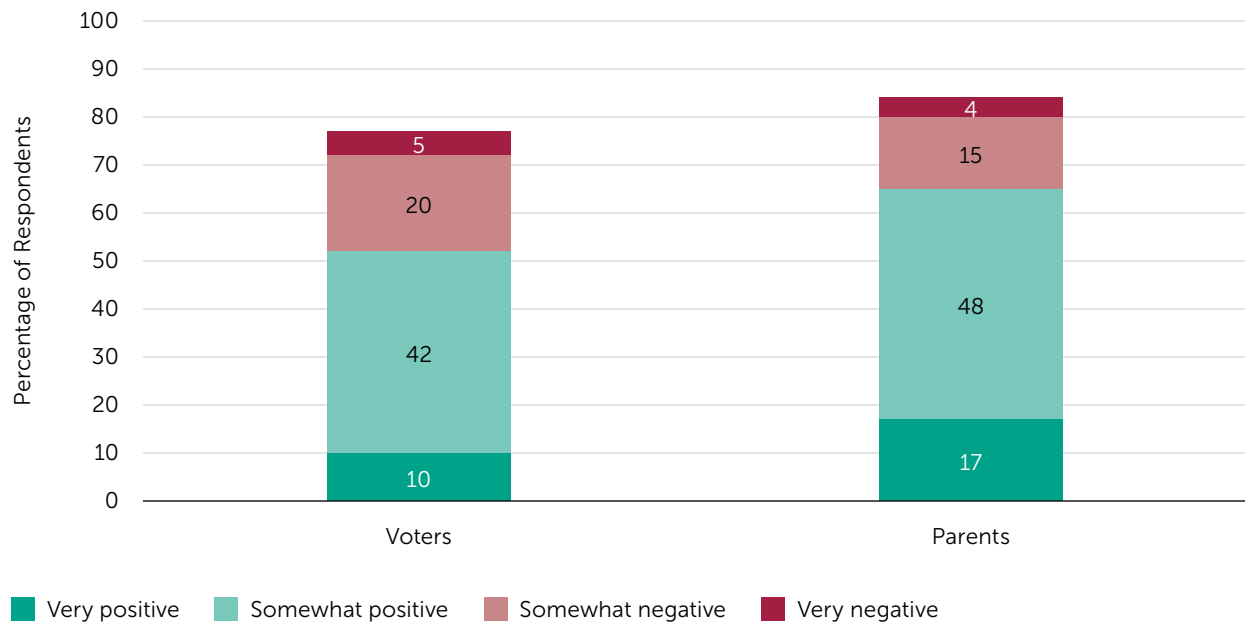


We also asked a variety of questions to get at the extent to which voters supported the Dashboard, both in general and specifically the new version. Among voters who reported having been to the Dashboard, support for the Dashboard was largely unchanged. In 2018 the margin was 51 percent with a positive view (11 percent very positive) versus 12 percent with a negative view (2 percent very negative). In 2019 the margin was 52 percent with a positive view (17 percent very positive) versus 12 percent with a negative view (2 percent very negative). In both years, parents who had been to the Dashboard were even more positive (72 percent expressed a positive view (25 percent very positive) in 2018, 71 percent expressed a positive view (32 percent very positive) in 2019). These results were similar when we asked users about the utility and effectiveness of the Dashboard indicators, with generally 55–60 percent of voters showing support and 20–30 percent showing opposition. These findings suggest that overall levels of support are not changing among users, but that some users are getting more positive in their views.

Finally, we specifically tested whether California voters preferred the new or the old Dashboard. We randomly assigned half the 2019 voters to get an image of the old Dashboard and half to get an image of the new one. Then we asked them how positive or negative their impression was of what they saw. This question highlights that voters were much more favorable toward the new Dashboard than the old. As shown in Figure 5, when seeing the old Dashboard, 52 percent of voters expressed a positive impression (10 percent very positive) and 25 percent expressed a negative impression (5 percent very

negative). When seeing the new Dashboard, 65 percent of voters expressed a positive impression (17 percent very positive) and 19 percent a negative impression (4 percent very negative). Parents were even more enthusiastic about the new Dashboard, with 81 percent expressing a positive impression (33 percent very positive) and just 11 percent a negative impression (3 percent very negative).

Figure 5. Voters' Views Toward the Old and New Dashboard



Overall, the poll results lead us to several conclusions:

- There remains a problem of awareness, with few voters and even many parents, aware of or having used the Dashboard.
- There are important inequities in awareness and use of the Dashboard along income lines, with more affluent voters much more likely to be aware of or report having visited the Dashboard.
- Voters and parents who have been to the Dashboard are enthusiastic about it; this enthusiasm is not changing much, except there may be a slight increase in people who are very enthusiastic.
- Voters and parents express a strong preference for the new Dashboard over the old, and parents are almost uniformly positive about the new Dashboard.

Discussion

The results of this analysis are promising for the state as it looks to continue supporting the Dashboard, but there is room for improvement. Clearly, the state has made some significant changes to the Dashboard, and voters and parents seem to think the new Dashboard is a marked improvement. At the same time, very few voters (and somewhat more, but far from a majority of parents) have been to the Dashboard, suggesting its impact on decisions will be somewhat muted. This brief has offered some additional suggestions for the state to consider as it continues revising the Dashboard in future years, though most of the recommendations of the prior report also still hold. In particular, the state should focus its efforts on boosting the ability of the tool to compare schools, choosing an appropriate growth model, and working to disseminate the tool more widely and encourage its use (especially among disadvantaged groups). Through these efforts to continuously improve the Dashboard, the state can better leverage this new tool to drive school improvement efforts.

Author Biography

Morgan S. Polikoff is an Associate Professor of Education at the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California. His areas of expertise include K–12 standards, assessment, and accountability policy, alignment, and the measurement of classroom instruction. Polikoff received his doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education in 2010 with a focus on Education Policy and his Bachelors in Mathematics and Secondary Education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2006.

Endnotes

¹ <https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/need-improvement-assessing-california-dashboard-after-one-year>

² <https://www.edpolicyinca.org/publications/pace-and-usc-rossier-polls-2019>

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

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Related Publications

Morgan Polikoff, Shira Korn, & Russell McFall. ***In Need of Improvement? Assessing the California Dashboard after One Year.*** *Getting Down to Facts II*. September 2018.

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. 2019.

Kevin Gee & Christopher Kim. ***Chronic Absence in California: What New Dashboard Data Reveals About School Performance.*** Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. 2019.

Meredith Phillips, Sarah Reber, & Jesse Rothstein. ***Making California Data More Useful for Educational Improvement.*** *Getting Down to Facts II*. 2018.

Heather Hough, Erika Byun, & Laura Mulfinger. ***Using Data for Improvement: Learning from the CORE Data Collaborative.*** *Getting Down to Facts II*. 2018.



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