



# GETTING DOWN — TO FACTS II —

Technical Report

## Building a System of Support for School Improvement

David N. Plank  
Stanford University

Jennifer O'Day  
American Institutes of Research

Benjamin Cottingham  
Stanford University

September 2018

**About:** The *Getting Down to Facts* project seeks to create a common evidence base for understanding the current state of California school systems and lay the foundation for substantive conversations about what education policies should be sustained and what might be improved to ensure increased opportunity and success for all students in California in the decades ahead. *Getting Down to Facts II* follows approximately a decade after the first *Getting Down to Facts* effort in 2007. This technical report is one of 36 in the set of *Getting Down to Facts II* studies that cover four main areas related to state education policy: student success, governance, personnel, and funding.

Stanford  
University

 **PACE**  
Policy Analysis for California Education

## **Building a System of Support for School Improvement**

David N. Plank  
Stanford University

Jennifer O'Day  
American Institutes of Research

Benjamin Cottingham  
Stanford University

## Introduction

The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) was adopted by the California Legislature in 2013. The LCFF made fundamental changes in the way the state funds school districts and charter schools (Local Education Authorities or LEAs), shifting decisions about how to spend resources from the state to the local level. The LCFF also introduced a new accountability system, under which the first line of accountability is local. LEAs are expected to work closely with their local communities and stakeholders to develop Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs), which set goals for improvement and adopt strategies and align resources to advance local goals. Parents and other community members are expected to monitor the LEA's progress. In the event that progress falls short of expectations, the community can hold local leaders accountable and demand changes, either directly through the LCAP process or by voting out and replacing current members of the school board.

The new system aims to support continuous improvement in the performance of schools and students, with a particular focus on reducing or eliminating gaps in opportunities and outcomes for different groups of students. This is ultimately the work and responsibility of local leaders, but in most cases local leaders cannot simply rely on what they already know or the systems they already have in place as they seek to change familiar assumptions and routines in their LEAs. They must instead *learn* how to recognize and overcome systemic barriers to change as they also *learn* to improve their own practice. Many local leaders will need encouragement and guidance to make these changes successfully. Recognizing this need, state leaders have begun to construct a system of support for LEAs in need of assistance, which comprises multiple agencies. The goal is to ensure that LEAs receive the help they need to strengthen their own capacity to sustain improvement and effectively address inequities in student opportunities and outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

The question that motivates this report is how California is progressing in building and sustaining this system of support. We begin with a discussion of the challenges that LEAs face in moving from a system focused on compliance with state regulations to one focused on improving performance in cooperation with local communities. We then review the statutory and policy provisions under LCFF that aim to ensure that all LEAs have the knowledge and skill they need to improve the performance of local schools and students and close gaps between student sub-groups. The balance of the report focuses on the current state of California's emerging system of support, with a particular focus on County Offices of Education (COEs). COEs are at the center of California's current effort to construct a robust and effective system of support for LEAs, but a variety of other agencies also have important roles to play. The report concludes with some implications for future action.

## Data Sources

Our report draws on multiple data sources, including public documents, research and policy reports, and also on four sources of original data: a survey of school district

---

<sup>1</sup> SBE, November 2017

superintendents conducted by the Local Control Funding Formula Research Collaborative (LCFFRC), a survey of county superintendents conducted for this project, and two sets of interviews with leaders in California’s education system. Our survey of county superintendents was conducted at the quarterly meeting of the California County Superintendents Education Services Association (CCSESA) in Squaw Valley on October 23, 2017, on the Poll Everywhere platform. Forty-six of the 58 superintendents were present for the meeting and participated in the survey. Response rates on specific items ranged between 93 and 100 percent of the participating superintendents. Many of the questions in our survey were written to match or parallel questions included in the LCFFRC survey of district superintendents, and we report some comparative data below. The superintendents’ survey was conducted in Winter 2018. Additional details on the design and administration of the survey can be found in the GDTF paper by Koppich and Humphrey.<sup>2</sup>

The first set of interviews on which we draw was conducted as background for the PACE report *Continuous Improvement in Practice*, which was published in November 2017.<sup>3</sup> In the summer of 2017 the research team interviewed 41 leaders from state education agencies, county offices of education (COEs), school districts, technical assistance providers, education advocacy organizations, and education associations on topics related to California’s new policy framework and local progress toward continuous improvement. The second set of interviews was conducted by a team from Brown University for the “Getting Down to Facts II” project.<sup>4</sup>

The limitations of these data are apparent. They were collected at different times, and for different purposes. Taken together, however, they provide some useful insight into the current state of California’s system of support, and the challenges that will have to be overcome if the system is to deliver the support that LEAs need both effectively and efficiently.

### **From Compliance to Continuous Improvement**

The desired end-state of California’s new policy regime is one in which LEAs have acquired the capacity to identify local needs and strengths and to develop strategies and take action (or seek the necessary assistance) to improve the performance of schools and students.<sup>5</sup> This end state is often characterized as a system focused on continuous improvement rather than compliance with state regulations. What “continuous improvement” means, and what it looks like in practice, are subjects covered in other “Getting Down to Facts II” papers, including the paper by Alicia Grunow and her colleagues.<sup>6</sup> The implementation of the LCFF to date has created some of the necessary conditions for continuous improvement, but these changes are far from sufficient to transform local practice.

---

<sup>2</sup> Koppich & Humphrey, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Hough & Willis, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Moffitt et. al., 2018

<sup>5</sup> SBE, 2017, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Grunow et. al., 2018

County superintendents generally agreed that the main goals of the LCFF had been accomplished. The vast majority either strongly agreed (59 percent) or agreed (32 percent) with the claim that LCFF has given districts greater flexibility in the allocation of resources. Meanwhile, 61 percent either disagreed (41 percent) or strongly disagreed (20 percent) that the elimination of categorical programs had removed essential protections for high-needs students. In other words, they did not see this new flexibility as endangering equity. Indeed, most of the superintendents believe that school districts should have even more flexibility: 50 percent strongly agreed and 39 percent agreed that districts should be allowed to use supplemental and concentration funds for disadvantaged students who are not explicitly targeted by LCFF.

The superintendents were similarly positive about community engagement under LCFF. Three quarters of the respondents either strongly agreed (18 percent) or agreed (57 percent) that requiring the involvement of parents and the community has increased the influence of historically under-represented students and families in local decision-making, while more than four in five strongly disagreed (45 percent) or disagreed (36 percent) that requiring parental and community involvement has made it more difficult for district leaders to develop coherent and strategic plans.

The LCFF has removed constraints associated with the previous accountability system, giving local leaders the freedom to set local priorities for the use of resources and to adapt local policies and practices to the specific needs and circumstances of the communities in which they work. LCFF implementation has also been accompanied by a steadily rising level of revenue for both COEs and LEAs. By themselves, though, local flexibility and increased resources are not sufficient to produce improvements in the performance of schools and students. The current generation of educators has spent their careers complying with state rules and regulations, and the move away from familiar mindsets and patterns of behavior will not happen quickly or automatically. Preparing principals and teachers to commit themselves to continuous improvement in their own practice will require extensive training, along with organizational changes within LEAs to provide local educators with the time they need to work and learn together.

Some COEs and LEAs have been quick to take advantage of the opportunities that the new system presents, but many others have not. Even in counties and LEAs where leaders are ready to move forward the local work of shifting familiar mindsets and patterns of behavior in schools and classrooms remains daunting.

An LEA superintendent described the situation:

Now you suddenly have a lot of freedom without these categoricals attached to it and what did districts do with that freedom? I think a lot of them just continued to do the same thing.... If we have less strings attached, but we're still practicing as if the strings are attached, then we haven't really gotten very far.

Even where the change has begun to take root in the district office, big challenges remain, as local leaders seek to enlist site administrators, union leaders, and teachers in the process of change. As one LEA superintendent made clear:

We can't do this work from the district level. So the next layer or level of leadership are our principals and assistant principals. That's where I think our biggest challenge is..., training or re-training the transformation of how leaders lead this work. Understanding the work and then leading that work.... The middle management leaders that just still aren't quite understanding and getting it.

Table 1 presents results from our survey of county superintendents on the question of what kinds of assistance local school districts need. At the top of the list are the central objectives of the LCFF: developing strategies to meet the needs of students of children living in poverty, English Learners, and foster youth; and developing strategies to continuously improve work in the district over time. On the former question, a plurality (47 percent) state that "all or nearly all" of the districts in their county need help to meet the needs of targeted students, and an additional 35 percent agree that "most" of the districts in their county need help. On the question of continuous improvement, 78 percent of the respondents believe that "all or nearly all" (39 percent) or "most" (39 percent) districts need help to engage in the process of continuous improvement.

**Table 1: How many of the LEAs in your county need help with...?**

<b>(Responses in percent, n=44)</b>				
	<b>All or nearly all</b>	<b>Most of them</b>	<b>Some of them</b>	<b>None of them</b>
Compliance with regulations	20	27	45	7
Standards implementation	32	34	32	2
Strategic planning	9	35	42	14
Community engagement	30	14	51	5
Budgeting and resource allocation	14	35	47	5
Targeted students	47	35	14	5
Continuous improvement	39	39	18	5

The Local Control Funding Formula Research Collaborative (LCFFRC) conducted a parallel survey of district superintendents in Winter 2017-18, and Table 2 reveals some interesting contrasts with the views of county superintendents. Most broadly, local leaders see themselves needing less help than county superintendents suppose they need. The percentages of county superintendents who affirm that all or most of the districts in their counties need help with different aspects of LCFF implementation range from 44 percent (for strategic planning) to 82 percent (for programs targeted to English learners, students living in poverty, and foster youth). Among local superintendents, in contrast, the percentages who want “a lot more” or “some more” help with different aspects of LCFF implementation range from 21 percent (budgeting) to 42 percent (community engagement). Strikingly, county superintendents see community engagement as the aspect of LCFF implementation with which the fewest districts need help, while district superintendents see community engagement as the place where they need the most help. A strong majority (64 percent) of district superintendents see themselves as needing no more or “a little more” help with the move to continuous improvement, while county superintendents believe that all or most of the districts in their counties need help in this area.

**Table 2: How much more support would your district want with...?**

<b>(Responses in percent, n=350)</b>				
	<b>A lot more</b>	<b>Some more</b>	<b>A little more</b>	<b>Sufficient</b>
Budgeting and resource allocation	5	16	34	46
Strategic planning	3	23	33	41
Community engagement	12	30	23	34
Continuous improvement	9	28	30	34

Judgments about the needs of LEAs in other areas varied across counties. When asked how many of the districts in their counties need help with standards implementation, for example, the responses were evenly split. One-third of the superintendents indicated that “all or nearly all” of their local LEAs need help, while one-third responded that “most” need help and the final one-third stated that “only a few” need help. Responses were also split in other areas (i.e., state regulations, strategic planning, budgeting and resource allocation), with a small plurality indicating that “most” or “all” LEAs need help and a similar number indicating that “only a few” LEAs need help. The single exception was community and parental engagement, where a majority of county superintendents indicated that “only a few” of the LEAs in their county need help.

Despite the challenges involved in implementing the LCFF most COE leaders perceive that the process of developing Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) in consultation with the local community has been a positive experience, as Figure 1 illustrates. When we asked the superintendents in our survey to provide one word that they associated with the process of developing LCAPs, a significantly larger number (24) offered positive terms (e.g., improving, engagement, opportunity) than the number (9) who offered negative ones (e.g., laborious, tedious, cumbersome). The two most common descriptors were “collaboration” or “collaborative” (5) and “challenging” (3).



**Figure 1.** What one word do you associate with the LCAP process?

County Superintendents are optimistic about the readiness of local leadership in their counties to embrace the challenge posed by LCFF, but the “zone of wishful thinking”<sup>7</sup> between the first phases of LCFF implementation and continuous improvement in the performance of schools and students is still very large. The designers of the LCFF assumed that releasing LEAs from burdensome state regulations and obliging them to engage more deeply with parents and other stakeholders would motivate improvements in some LEAs, but they also recognized that others would need help to address specific challenges. They therefore laid out guidelines for a system of support that would provide “flexible and context specific” assistance to any LEA that was not making sufficient progress on its own.

### **Building Blocks for a System of Support**

When LEAs find themselves in need of support they may seek help from a variety of sources, including the California Department of Education (CDE), the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), County Offices of Education (COEs), and a variety of other agencies and organizations. In this section of the report we provide a brief overview of the multiple actors involved in California’s emerging system of support, with a particular focus on COEs. In a state the size of California, with more than 1000 school districts, COEs are geographically and systemically well-positioned to provide the assistance to LEAs.<sup>8</sup> They are close enough to respond to the unique circumstances of individual school districts, but at some remove from the quotidian challenges faced by local educators.

<sup>7</sup> We are indebted to A. Grunow for this phrase.

<sup>8</sup> Arsen, Bell, & Plank, 2003

As a district administrator explained:

...the County Office itself is uniquely positioned to really see trends as they are developing. At the site level and at the district level, we're kind of in the heat of the battle with our kids this year and what are we doing? Whereas the County Office has the, I guess, the gift of being a little bit removed from that so they can kind of peer down the road just a little bit more.

At the same time, the State Board of Education has made it explicitly clear that

...COEs are not expected to be the sole provider of direct assistance responsive to every need that school districts may identify. Differentiated assistance will often entail connecting school districts to other assistance providers with relevant expertise and capacity. COEs will also need support to identify resources that may be available around the state.<sup>9</sup>

The SBE has also affirmed that COEs are themselves expected to seek help from other COEs and from agencies including CCSESA and the CCEE when they run into challenges that exceed their local capacity or expertise.

The SBE foresees the creation of a comprehensive and effective system of support comprising multiple agencies to ensure that every LEA will receive the assistance they need. The potential demands on such a system are both extremely large and highly variable, however, and the work to build a support structure that can meet the full array of local needs is still in its earliest stages. The successful implementation of LCFF depends on how effectively the diverse agencies that will make up this new system at the state level are able to work with LEAs to build their capacity to improve school performance. It also depends on how effectively these agencies are able to work with one another. Effective collaboration among the agencies will require clarification of the roles that each is expected to play in the overall system of support.

### **The California Department of Education**

The California Department of Education (CDE) is responsible for aligning the supports for LEAs and schools under multiple state and federal programs. The CDE provides a variety of resources and tools to support improvement in all California LEAs and schools, and is also responsible for providing direct oversight and possibly technical assistance in the seven counties that comprise a single school district. In addition, the CDE is responsible for identifying the LEAs and schools that must be provided "differentiated assistance" or "intensive intervention" under LCFF and the state's ESSA plan<sup>10</sup>, and for working with the CCEE, COEs,

---

<sup>9</sup> SBE, 2017, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> The latest version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (known as ESSA) requires each state to define its procedures for identifying "the bottom five percent of schools," which are entitled to "intensive support" from the state to improve performance. ESSA further requires the state to provide support to additional schools, based on the specific needs of each school.

charter authorizers and others to ensure that the assistance that LEAs receive leads to improved performance and the reduction of disparities among student groups.

The California Department of Education (CDE) and the Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) are required to intervene in LEAs that persistently fail to improve the performance of local schools and students. CDE intervention may include directives to other agencies (specifically the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence [CCEE], but possibly COEs and others) to provide additional support to LEAs, along with other actions that remain unspecified in statute. The SPI may only intervene directly in an LEA with the approval of the State Board of Education (SBE), and only after the CCEE has engaged with the LEA and concluded that the intervention of the SPI is necessary to improve the district's performance.

### **The California Collaborative for Educational Excellence**

The California Collaborative on Educational Excellence (CCEE) was created under LCFF to serve as a statewide source of expertise to help LEAs (school districts, COEs, and charter schools) achieve the goals set forth in their LCAPs and to improve the performance of schools, teachers, and students. The CCEE is primarily responsible for leading and coordinating the state's new system of support, rather than for the direct provision of support to LEAs. In some instances, however, (i.e., at the request of a COE or LEA, or at the direction of the SPI) CCEE staff may provide direct guidance and support to local leaders as they seek to improve the performance of their districts and schools. The CCEE is otherwise expected to work closely with COEs and other agencies to ensure that LEAs receive the support they need, to serve as a repository of evidence-based strategies and practices, to share information about these strategies and practices with the many other agencies that constitute the system of support, and to coordinate the work of these multiple agencies within regions and across the state.

### **County Offices of Education**

Under the California Constitution, each of the state's 58 counties maintains a County Office of Education (COE) under the direction of a County Superintendent of Schools. The large majority (53) of County Superintendents are elected, with the others appointed by an elected board of education. Seven counties (San Francisco and six sparsely populated rural counties) comprise a single school district, and in these counties a single person serves both as County Superintendent and district superintendent. The number of school districts in the other counties ranges from two (in Mono and Plumas) to eighty (in Los Angeles). Most counties are home to between 10 and 25 school districts, but a few (Fresno, Humboldt, Kern, San Bernardino, San Diego, Santa Clara, Sonoma, and Tulare) include significantly more.

COEs have a number of varied responsibilities. Statutorily they are required to provide educational services for students who are involved with the justice system, including students who are in jail or on probation. In addition (since 1991), they are responsible for the fiscal oversight of school districts in their counties and for intervening in districts that are in fiscal distress, in cooperation with the statewide Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team

(FCMAT).<sup>11</sup> COEs also provide a variety of ancillary services to local LEAs, including the administration of specialized programs (e.g., in career-technical education, alternative education, or special education) and professional development for educators. Under California’s previous school finance system many of these services were funded through categorical programs. Under LCFF, most are funded out of the COE operating budget or on a fee-for-service basis.

With the adoption of the LCFF, the Legislature assigned two large new responsibilities to COEs. On the one hand, each COE is responsible for reviewing the LCAPs of the LEAs within its jurisdiction, to ensure that they satisfy legal requirements and address key local priorities identified in the LCFF “dashboard.”<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the COE is responsible for providing guidance and support to LEAs in their county that are failing to make progress toward the achievement of their LCAP goals. County Offices of Education thus provide the primary backstop to local accountability.

### **Non-governmental Agencies**

A variety of other agencies may also play important roles in California’s emerging system of support. Professional associations including the California County Superintendents Education Services Association (CCSESA) and the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) provide technical assistance and professional development for their members, and a variety of non-profit organizations (e.g., WestEd, Pivot Learning Partners, Education Resource Strategies) are working closely with specific districts and schools to build local capacity and improve performance. University-based organizations (e.g., the California Subject Matter Projects) and individual faculty members have also partnered with schools and districts to support their improvement work.

The role of nonprofit organizations in providing technical assistance to LEAs is not explicitly recognized under the LCFF statute. In a July 2017 letter to the State Board of Education representatives from a variety of non-profit organizations asked the Board to consider three “design principles” for the state’s new system of support.

- Recognize the value of high quality nonprofit, equity-focused technical assistance providers for schools, districts and county offices of education.... The role of high quality providers in the new system should be explicit.
- Create a process that provides an assurance of quality yet supports diversity and a breadth of providers to meet the varying needs of local education agencies.... The capacity and reach of county offices of education and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence will be significantly enhanced by recognition and inclusion of the role of high quality nonprofit equity-focused technical assistance providers who reflect the diversity and diverse needs of California schools. Districts should be able to work with their choice of certified provider.

---

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, 2017

<sup>12</sup> The California school “dashboard” is discussed in the GDTF paper by M. Polikoff.

- Authorize and establish vetting and approval of providers...to ensure a level of consistent quality control.

For now, however, nonprofit technical assistance providers continue to work with individual districts or networks of districts on a contract basis, outside of the state’s official “system of support.” This could change over time. Indeed, to the extent that deep expertise for addressing particular problems of practice or supporting improvement processes is in fact located in these non-governmental organizations, the emerging state support system will need to figure out how best to capitalize on these resources. To do so would enlarge the support infrastructure and could also advance the State Board’s design objective that “LEAs are the primary drivers of the technical assistance and support that they receive.<sup>13</sup>”

### **Putting the System of Support Together**

The comprehensive and effective statewide system of support that LCFF requires is still a work in progress. It is already clear, however, that COEs will play a central role in the system, both in providing direct support to LEAs and in coordinating their work with other agencies and providers. In the following sections of the report we address two sets of questions about the role of COEs in California’s new system of support. The first has to do with how well COEs are prepared to provide the assistance that LEAs in their own counties or elsewhere may need, while the second addresses the political challenges that COEs (and other agencies) face as they work together and separately to build a comprehensive and effective system of support.

#### **Capacity to Provide Support**

LEAs will need a lot of help if they are to realize the promise of California’s new policy framework, and to make the transition successfully from a focus on compliance to a focus on continuous improvement and more equitable outcomes for all students. The capacity of COEs to meet these varied needs is the big unanswered question in the design of the state system of support. Indeed, the sheer number of LEAs identified as in need of assistance by the California “dashboard” could quickly overwhelm the ability of COEs to provide effective support.

COE capacity concerns are two-fold. First, the staffs in most COEs are small, and many serve large numbers of districts and/or vast reaches of territory. They may not have enough people on staff to engage deeply with the needs and aspirations of all of the LEAs in their counties. Equally important, the new roles and responsibilities assigned to COEs under LCFF represent a significant departure from the work that the COEs have previously done, and the people now on staff may not be well suited for these new challenges. For COEs to fulfill their new responsibilities they will have to recruit or re-train staff with the experience, expertise, and dispositions necessary to support the process of continuous improvement at the local level.

---

<sup>13</sup> SBE, 2017, p. 5.

County superintendents will have to transform their own organizations, even as they support transformation in LEAs.

According to one COE administrator, speaking of the continuous improvement approach:

It is a five-year process to learn it. We have a whole generation of [COE] ed services administrators who have been geared, programmed, and fine-tuned to do one thing—be in compliance. They are compliance thinkers.<sup>14</sup>

A district superintendent took a less charitable view:

I don't think the county office is held accountable for the type of support that they're supposed to provide and I don't know what entity is supposed to hold them accountable.... I think that's a major, major gap in the theory of action around how districts are supposed to improve. If they don't improve, the county is supposed to provide the expertise and technical assistance and support. That's a big assumption there.... There's a serious capacity issue at the county level that is beyond money. That's not the main issue.

Most county superintendents believe that they are in a better position to help local districts than they were before LCFF. (See Table 3.) A majority (65 percent) of superintendents affirmed that the implementation of LCFF had in fact led to improved relations between the COE and most or all of the districts in their county, and a similar number (72 percent) believed that the districts in the county have been working together more closely since the adoption of LCFF. Moreover, according to the large majority of superintendents (87 percent), the districts in their counties come to the COE for help when they have a problem with LCFF implementation.

---

<sup>14</sup> Koppich, Humphrey, & Marsh, 2015

<b>Table 3: The relationship between COEs and LEAs</b>				
<b>(Responses in percent, n=42)</b>				
	<b>All or nearly all</b>	<b>Most of them</b>	<b>Some of them</b>	<b>No</b>
LCFF Improved Relations Between COE and LEAs	29	36	10	26
LEAs Come to COE for LCFF Assistance	63	24	10	2

The superintendents split on the question of how COEs should work with the districts in their counties, as may be seen in Table 4. A small plurality (43 percent) agreed that COEs should specialize in one or two areas relevant to LCFF implementation and seek other forms of expertise in partnership with other organizations to fill gaps in their own expertise, but a nearly equal number (39 percent) believed that COEs should work to develop their own capacity in all areas of LCFF implementation. A smaller number (18 percent) saw the primary role of the COE as connecting districts to “high-quality expertise” from a variety of sources.

<b>Table 4: Which of the following statements do you agree with MOST?</b>	
<b>(Responses in percent, n=44)</b>	
COEs should develop their capacity to provide assistance in all areas relevant to LCFF implementation.	39
COEs should develop strong expertise in one or two areas relevant to LCFF implementation and partner with other organizations or COEs in other areas.	43
COEs should focus mainly on connecting the districts in their counties to sources of high-quality expertise and assistance, whatever it comes from	18

As Table 5 makes clear, county superintendents also split on the question of the scale of changes they had made in their organizations to meet the challenge of LCFF implementation, but 93 percent agreed that they had made “some changes” (50 percent) or “big changes” (43 percent). A large majority of the superintendents (84 percent) strongly disagreed with the

statement that their COE had “adequate funding” to support LCFF implementation in their county.

Table 5: How much change has the implementation of LCFF required in your COE?	
(Responses in percent, n=44)	
We have made big changes, placing LCFF implementation at the center of our work with the districts in our county and learning to work with them in new and different ways.	43
We have made some changes in staff assignments and budget allocations to support the implementation of LCFF in our county.	50
We already had the necessary systems and personnel in place to support the implementation of LCFF in our county.	7

Whether the COEs will be able to translate their perceived progress in district-county relations and assistance with LCFF implementation to provide truly effective support for continuous improvement, however, is still an open question. A lot will depend on the success of current efforts to build capacity for this work among COE staff, and in turn among staff at the district and school levels.

### Political Obstacles to Change

COEs face both internal and external political challenges in their work with LEAs. Internally, their relationships with the LEAs in their counties are characterized by a fundamental dilemma. COE staff are required by statute to review and approve the LCAPs of local LEAs, which obliges them to serve as what one COE administrator called “L-Cops.”<sup>15</sup> At the same time they are expected to serve as the primary source of technical assistance to LEAs as they work to improve performance.

Fullan and Rincon-Gallardo point out the inevitable tension between the COEs’ obligation to review LCAPs and their responsibility to offer assistance and support to the LEAs in their county. As they state:

... counties face pressure from SBE and CCSESA to tighten the review of LCAPs to avoid lawsuits from advocacy groups. At the same time, they are now also expected to shift

<sup>15</sup> Koppich, Humphrey, & Marsh, 2015

the nature of their relationship with districts from one of compliance to one of support and assistance for continuous improvement.<sup>16</sup>

Reconciling these quite different responsibilities complicates relationships with LEAs, but some COEs are doing their best to give priority to the goal of supporting improvement. A COE administrator described their approach:

The review of the LCAP... is more or less a compliance checklist activity. But we wanted to look at how do we ensure that our districts have a plan that in fact will have an impact on closing the achievement gap and ensuring all students are college and career ready. So, we set some areas out that we are looking at more closely so we can ensure that we can provide some recommendations and supports to our district.<sup>17</sup>

Externally, achieving the ambitious goals embodied in the LCFF will almost certainly require the multiple agencies and organizations engaged in the work of systemic transformation to work together. In reality, though, the state agencies—the COEs, CCEE, and CDE—are entirely independent of one another, and none is accountable to any other. The CDE and most of the COEs are led by publicly-elected superintendents, and the CCEE is governed by an independent board. These agencies have little or no experience working together, and their incentives for cooperation in addressing the needs of LEAs are weak. Weaving these competing agencies into a coherent system of support will take a lot of work, and a lot of good will among the partners. There is some initial evidence that this process has begun in some parts of California, where COEs have partnered with the CCEE and other organizations to support specific LEAs. In addition, at the state level, leaders from CDE, CCEE, the COEs, and the SBE have met several times to define their respect roles and coordinate their work as part of the statewide system of support. These are positive steps, but we still have a long way to go to develop a sufficiently robust and sustainable system of support to effectively address the urgent and diverse needs of local districts.

The superintendents' views are mixed on the question of how county offices relate to other organizations in California's system of support for LEAs, as Table 6 shows. On the one hand, they are strongly positive about their relationships with other COEs and CCSESA, with 95 percent affirming that other COEs have been helpful (33 percent) or very helpful (62 percent) in supporting their work on LCFF implementation and virtually all agreeing that CCSESA has been somewhat helpful (19 percent) or very helpful (79 percent). The superintendents are less enthusiastic about the CDE and CCEE, with 75 percent viewing the Department as "somewhat helpful" and a small plurality (45 percent) viewing the Collaborative as "not at all helpful." When asked about other organizations (e.g., universities, non-profit TA providers) a majority (51 percent) stated that they have had no experience with these organizations, while an additional 37 percent indicated that such organizations are "not at all helpful."

---

<sup>16</sup> Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2017

<sup>17</sup> Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2017

**Table 6: How helpful has ... been in supporting LCFF implementation in your county?**

<b>(Responses in percent, n=44)</b>				
	<b>Very helpful</b>	<b>Somewhat helpful</b>	<b>Not at all helpful</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
CDE	11	75	9	5
CCEE	7	36	45	11
Other COEs	62	33	2	2
CCSESA	79	19	0	2
Other agencies	0	12	37	51

**Table 6.** How helpful has ... been in supporting LCFF implementation in your county?

Data from the LCFFRC survey of district superintendents indicate that local leaders are already seeking support from a variety of sources, and that they are generally satisfied with the support that they receive. Table 7 shows that more than 90 percent of surveyed district superintendents have received support from their local COE, and that nearly all of them (94 percent) found their local COE “very” (67 percent) or “somewhat” (27) helpful. The percentages receiving help from other sources range from 15 percent (other COEs) to 41 percent (CDE). Aggregate levels of satisfaction with the assistance received from other agencies are similar to those for COEs, but the percentage who found their COE to be “very helpful” (as opposed to “somewhat helpful”) is substantially larger than the percentages for other agencies.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that the local superintendents were asked specifically about LCFF implementation. Their responses on other issues might be different.

**Table 7: How helpful has ... been in supporting LCFF implementation in your district?**

<b>(Responses in percent)</b>				
	<b>Very helpful</b>	<b>Somewhat helpful</b>	<b>Not at all helpful</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
CDE (n=141)	20	76	4	1
COE (n=322)	67	27	5	1
Other COEs (n=52)	46	50	4	0
CCEE (n=64)	34	62	3	0
Other agencies (n=59)	26	74	0	0

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

This is not the first time that California has instituted a system intended to provide support to districts in need of help. The District Assistance and Intervention Teams (DAITs) under NCLB were expected to provide outside expertise and assistance as well. What makes the current system potentially different is the explicit *approach to* and *goal* of the support. Rather than providing answers for districts or schools, the new support system is in principle designed to help districts analyze their own problems of practice, discover the underlying root causes, and create their own solutions. COEs and other providers are supposed to work in partnership with districts to create the conditions in which local leaders learn how to work with teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to discern what works best for the students in their local context. In this new conception of a system of support, learning what works (and doesn't) becomes the main driver of improvement.

The implementation of the LCFF has produced some of the necessary conditions for local leaders' to take up this new approach. There is still a long way to go, however, to redesign systems and policies to support innovation, experimentation, and organizational learning, and to give educators the time and support they need to improve their own practice and to learn from one another. County Offices of Education and the other organizations included in the state system of support have key roles to play here, but they themselves face a steep learning curve as they work to provide the guidance and support that LEAs will need to achieve this transformation.

At least some COEs are ready to accept these new responsibilities, and to embrace an expanded leadership role. As one COE administrator put it:

I think it's just a fascinating way to think about the role of the county office, not just in the frame of technical assistance provider but also being able to create the political narrative and community message that surrounds what it means for all students to succeed [in our] county.

According to Koppich, Humphrey, and Marsh, however:

Many COE officials expressed deep concern that the kind of patchwork arrangement they were able to put together...cannot be sustained without an infusion of resources.... Capacity issues are especially acute in counties with very small, often rural districts.... These COEs have even fewer slack resources to allow them to take on LCAP responsibilities with the care they would like.<sup>19</sup>

According to our survey data substantial majorities of County Superintendents believe that the implementation of LCFF has already led to improved relations between the COE and LEAs in their county, and has also increased communication and cooperation among the LEAs themselves. A large majority report that LEAs come to the COE when they have a problem with LCFF implementation. This at least suggests that the foundation for closer cooperation between COEs and LEAs is being laid, but superintendents' initial optimism is likely to be tested as implementation deepens, for at least three reasons.

First, COEs will have to make significant shifts in their mission, staffing, and focus if they are to lead the transformation of the LEAs in their counties. CCSESA has committed a great deal of time and energy to professional development programs and materials for COE superintendents and staff aimed at deepening their understanding of the continuous improvement process and guiding their work with local LEAs. A substantial majority of County Superintendents report that they have already made "big changes" or "some changes" in response to LCFF, but it is virtually certain that in most COEs further changes will be required.

Second, COEs will have to strike a careful balance between their obligation to monitor and review LCAPs and budgets with their responsibility to support learning and sustained improvement. This is especially hard to do because the experience of driving change through compliance is so recent, and the compliance mindset remains pervasive in COEs as well as in LEAs. Providing effective support to LEAs for locally-driven improvement will require COEs to establish relationships based on mutual confidence and trust. Reversion to a focus on compliance is likely to prove fatal to the state's nascent system of support.

These new relationships are beginning to take root in some counties, as a district superintendent acknowledged:

What I'm starting to see...is efforts to have strong collaboration within our county, and it's being led by our county superintendent and his staff to become a very collaborative

---

<sup>19</sup> Koppich, Humphrey, & Marsh, 2015.

county, and to share resources and to share ideas and to get out of trying to do things on your own, as much as possible.

In a different county, however, an LEA superintendent expressed a different view:

...we have, I think a county office of education that serves our school districts very well. We have monthly superintendent meetings where all the superintendents get together. There's meetings for the assistant supes and the project directors. I think we've got some pretty good lines of communication in those formal meetings, but what I'm noticing is outside of those formal meetings I don't know how much sharing is really going on.... I think people are always, they're interested, they're kind, conversationally they're interested, but then to take that next step and really send the team and it's, "Okay now, let's roll up our sleeves and sharpen our pencils and we want to know exactly how you're doing what you're doing." The conversation never gets to that level.

Third, COEs will have to establish new relationships with external agencies including other COEs, the CCEE, and other sources of expertise including nonprofit technical assistance providers. A substantial number of County Superintendents remain committed to the quixotic view that the COE should develop expertise in all aspects of LCFF implementation, in order to provide all of the assistance that LEAs in their county need. A majority, however, believes either that COEs should specialize in one or two areas and share their expertise with others or that the COE should serve mainly as a broker, connecting LEAs to the expertise they need from a variety of sources.

CCSESA and other organizations have done important work to strengthen relationships among COEs and between COEs and other participants in the state's system of support. This work has led to new collaborations between COEs both within and across regions, and in at least two instances to cooperation with the CCEE in work with specific LEAs, but relations with other organizations including the CCEE are generally still precarious where they exist at all.

Just as many LEAs need external assistance to improve the performance of their schools and students, COEs will also need support if they are to play their new role in California's education system effectively. In our survey, an overwhelming majority of county superintendents strongly disagreed with the statement that their COE had sufficient resources to support LCFF implementation in their counties, and it appears likely that the Legislature will provide some supplemental funding in the 2018-19 budget to help the COEs fulfill their new responsibilities. As the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) has argued, however, COEs can also do more to shift the resources they now receive to better align with their goals and obligations under LCFF, as they encourage the LEAs in their counties to do.<sup>20</sup>

COEs will also need support from other organizations including CCESESA and other COEs as they learn how provide effective support to the LEAs in their counties. It is unreasonable to expect every COE to have in place the knowledge and skill necessary to guide all of the LEAs in

---

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, 2017

their counties onto a path of sustained improvement. Creating opportunities for learning across counties and groups of counties, and creating incentives to encourage COEs to take advantage of these opportunities, is a critical step toward the establishment of an effective system of support. Encouraging and assisting COEs and other agencies to develop specialized expertise in specific areas of need could also help to build capacity in the state's system of support.

The CCEE has invested heavily in the creation of networks, several of which are led by COEs. Establishing and strengthening local networks may help to strengthen local capacity, both within and across counties, but there is little reason to suppose that the exemplars or expertise that specific LEAs need to address specific problems will always or even often be found within their local network.

To provide effective support to LEAs COEs must have ready access to reliable information about tools, strategies, and promising or exemplary practices that can support improvement in specific kinds of performance for specific groups of students. COEs will also need access to vetted sources of expertise (other COEs, non-profits) that can help them to address problems that lie beyond their own capacity to help. This information must be collected and curated statewide, either by the CDE or the CCEE. COEs cannot obtain this kind of knowledge on their own, but it is an essential resource for the work they are expected to do with LEAs.

Finally, a system that aims to support sustained improvement needs a strategy for accumulating knowledge about what works, which will require partnerships with local research organizations to evaluate new policies and practices and provide feedback on what's working (or not) for which kids. COEs and other organizations are gaining valuable experience as they work with LEAs and with one another, and they are learning from this experience, but their work will only produce knowledge that can be generalized and made available to others if there is a commitment to capture and validate what they are learning. In the absence of such a strategy what COE staff and other providers learn remains strictly personal or at best local, which may end up leaving many schools and students behind.

Summing up what has been accomplished so far, one school district administrator presented a mixed view:

I would say certainly the groundwork has been laid, the people know what to say, they know what they're supposed to do. In terms of it being powerful enough to make the changes in student outcomes, it's not there yet. We still have work to do.

This is true at every level of California's education system, from the classroom to the CDE. Building a system that will support sustained improvements in performance and more equitable opportunities and outcomes for all California students is an ambitious but distant goal. The work towards this goal has just begun, and there is a lot left to do. A COE administrator made clear what's ultimately in prospect:

It's not something that you're going to get there and be done. We tell people all the time that there's a reason why it's called continuous improvement. You're always growing, always learning, always improving in that area. It's never finished.

## References

- Arsen, D., Bell, C., and Plank, D.N. (2003). *Who will turn around 'failing' schools? A framework for institutional choice*. East Lansing: Education Policy Center.
- Fullan, M., & Rincon-Gallardo, S. (2017). *California's golden opportunity: Taking stock—Leadership from the middle*. Toronto: Motion Leadership.
- Grunow, A., Hough, H., & Park, S. (2018). Continuous improvement in practice. *Getting Down to Facts II*.
- Hough, H., Willis, J., Grunow, A., Krausen, K., Kwon, S., Mulfinger, L.S., & Park, S. (2017). *Continuous improvement in practice*. Palo Alto: Policy Analysis for California Education.
- Koppich, J.E., Humphrey, D.C., & Marsh J.A. (2015). *Two years of California's local control funding formula: Time to reaffirm the grand vision*. Palo Alto: Policy Analysis for California Education.
- Koppich, J.E. & Humphrey, D.C. (2018). The local control funding formula (LCFF): What have we learned after four years of implementation? *Getting Down to Facts II*.
- Moffitt, S.L., Cohen, D.K., Lyddon, M.J., Morel, D., O'Neill, M.K., Smith, K.B., & Willse, C. (2018). Structures for instructional support. *Getting Down to Facts II*.
- Polikoff, M.S., Korn, S., & McFall, R. (2018) In need of improvement? Assessing the California Dashboard after one year. *Getting Down to Facts II*.
- Taylor, M. (2017). *Re-envisioning county offices of education: A study of their mission and funding*. Sacramento: Legislative Analyst's Office.
- State Board of Education (2017, November). *Agenda item #4*.