



Current Conditions And Paths Forward For California Schools

— SNAPSHOT OF FINDINGS —

California schools and students have been moving in the right direction, but face a great need for policies to address system weaknesses and build capacity.

After 10 years of significant change to the system, the time is right for a comprehensive look at how recently adopted education reforms are working and where additional reforms are needed. In September 2018, a collaboration of researchers from institutions across the country—coordinated by Stanford University, and led by Professor Susanna Loeb, now director of the Annenberg Institute at Brown University—released a comprehensive report entitled *Getting Down to Facts II* (GDTFII) compiling up-to-date analysis and facts that can help lawmakers refine and improve policy for California’s PreK-12 education system.

The findings demonstrate that if California stays the course with reforms in place while addressing significant gaps in implementation capacity, finance, and early education, the State’s schools will continue to move in the right direction. Comprising 36 studies researched by more than 100 investigators from across the nation and disseminated by Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), GDTFII covers four main areas: Student Success, Governance, Personnel, and Finance. The research evidence suggests that state leaders should focus on:

BUILDING ON CURRENT REFORMS

During the past decade, California's education system has undergone major reforms that have resulted in improvements, but the system is still in need of capacity building—ensuring that educators and other practitioners have the skills, information and materials they need—to support putting those major reforms further into practice.

KEY FINDINGS

- California still lags the nation in achievement in reading and math, even when accounting for income and racial/ethnic differences, but the state's students have been performing better over time and have been increasing at a faster rate than the rest of the nation.
- Superintendents, principals, teachers, state and regional education leaders widely support recent reforms. In the areas of finance, standards and information infrastructure, California has improved. However, the state falls short of realizing the potential of these new systems because of serious capacity limitations.
- Initial research provides evidence that Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)-induced increases in school spending led to increases in high school graduation rates and academic achievement, particularly among low-income and minority students. A \$1,000 increase in district per-pupil spending experienced in grades 10-12 led to an estimated 5.9 percentage-point increase in high school graduation rates. However, some districts still struggle with how to allocate resources given their new flexibility, and a large group of districts do not have access to necessary supports to build the knowledge and skills that they need.
- The new standards also have broad local support. Moreover, aid for instructional improvement and alignment of aid with standards has improved. However, educators have difficulty assessing quality and selecting the best available options. Many superintendents look to the state for help and information, but the California Department of Education (CDE) does not have the capacity to reliably support the improvement of instruction.
- The state's education data system is now richer, with information on student learning over time and mobility across districts, potentially allowing for better decision making. However, access to data is severely limited, significant gaps in data remain and the CDE does not have the capacity to use the data effectively to guide policy decisions.
- California charter school policy has led to a diverse sector of schools that, on average, have had positive effects on learning for charter school students who traditionally have poorer educational outcomes, though the broader effect of charter schools on students in other schools is unknown, and charter authorizers would benefit from more guidance and support.

ADDRESSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

Large achievement gaps by race, ethnicity, income and English learner (EL) status persist in California and need a continued focus through multiple approaches, including enhanced early childhood education.

KEY FINDINGS

- California has greater disparities among student groups than other states. In more affluent California districts, student achievement levels are similar to the average performance in affluent communities nationally, but students in non-affluent districts score, on average, nearly a full grade level behind their national counterparts.
- At least part of these inequalities stem from unequal education in K-12 schools. For example, schools serving less advantaged students tend to have more difficulty filling teaching positions and, as a result, employ fewer experienced and appropriately credentialed teachers and principals. Moreover, many English learners in California do not have equitable access to grade-level core content instruction, partly because ELs may be tracked into lower-level content area classes and because English language development classes often crowd out content instruction.
- The learning rates of California's third through eighth grade students are the same or a slightly better than other students nationwide. Low-income students lag behind their national counterparts, however, primarily because of lower school-readiness levels among entering kindergartners. Black and Latino children and dual language learners are less likely to have attended preschool than white children. Children from low-income families are more likely to have child care that is license exempt, not having to meet any quality standards. Child care workers in California receive low wages and benefits; 58 percent depend on at least one public income support.

INCREASING FUNDING AND FIXING SYSTEMS

Funding for schools in California has improved but remains short of adequate levels given the goals of state policies. Moreover, funding reforms left critical issues unresolved: pensions, special education, and facilities each have the potential to destabilize the system or worsen inequities if not addressed.

KEY FINDINGS

- California school district expenditure levels have not only recovered from their post-recession lows, but also reached higher levels in 2016-17 than at any point since 2004-05.
- The average school revenue per pupil in California is substantially above Florida, on par with Texas and Ohio, but lower than Illinois and substantially lower than many northeastern states, including New York. At least in part due to the higher cost of living and wages of college graduates in California, average teacher salaries are higher in California than in these comparison states except for New York.
- The shortage of resources combined with high salaries has resulted in California having far fewer adults in schools than most other states. For example, California ranks at or near the bottom of all states in the percentage of K-12 public school students with access to various types of health care or mental health services inside their school buildings. Prior research studies have linked these services to better child behavior, reduced emergency department usage, higher educational success, and lower teen birth rates.
- One study estimates that an additional 32 percent above actual spending would have been necessary for all students to have had the opportunity to meet the goals set by the State Board of Education. On a per-pupil basis, that would average around \$16,800 per student in school district costs. That compares with actual California district-level spending of \$12,750 per student that year.
- The pension system is drawing substantial funds away from school operating expenditures. Past contributions were not nearly enough to cover the costs and one result is substantial increases in contributions required of teachers, school districts, and the state. Without intervention, this drain on system resources will continue to expand, requiring expenditures approximately equivalent to one-third of teacher salaries by 2021.
- LCFF did not change special education finance in California, which can be unpredictable and draining for districts. *Getting Down to Facts II* researchers interviewed approximately 50 chief budget officers from a randomly chosen set of school districts, and *all* the CBOs identified special education funding as one of their three biggest concerns.
- California has wide disparities in school facility funding that are systematically related to school district property wealth, driven in part by California's School Facility Program (SFP) which operates on a first-come, first-served basis and as a result favors wealthier and larger districts that are better positioned to provide the required matching funds.