Getting Down to FACTS

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California's Balance Between State and Local Control

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Introduction

California's education policy system combines substantial local responsibility with significant state control over many of the conditions under which schooling operates. Districts are expected to interpret state priorities, manage compliance, engage communities, and translate broad goals into day-to-day practice. At the same time, the state regulates instructional time, course requirements, curriculum frameworks, textbook adoption, categorical funding rules, and accountability processes in ways that shape what local systems can do.

The evidence points to recurring problems in how that state-local structure currently operates. In some areas, districts face high search costs and uneven support even where the evidence base is relatively clear. In other areas, districts operate inside rules that are highly prescriptive and that make adaptation, differentiation, and interdisciplinary design more difficult. Administrative burden is widespread across the system, but the value of compliance activities varies considerably. Accountability tools generate plans, reports, and dashboards, yet they are often weakly connected to decision-making and improvement. One-time funding supports useful work but does not consistently build durable capacity. These pressures are especially acute for small and rural districts, which often depend on county offices of education to interpret policy and absorb administrative demands.

This brief draws on the Getting Down to Facts III technical reports to describe how California's state-local policy structure functions in practice. The studies suggest that the central issue is not whether the state should play a role in local improvement. The central issue is how that role is structured, where guidance is strongest or weakest, where state rules constrain useful flexibility, and whether the surrounding infrastructure helps districts act on available knowledge with clarity and consistency. The evidence reviewed here focuses on five features of the current structure: the balance between state guidance and local flexibility, the scale and character of administrative burden, the design of accountability mechanisms, the role of one-time funding, and the uneven distribution of system capacity across the state.

Key Findings

1 **California's current balance between local flexibility and state guidance leaves districts with substantial responsibility but uneven support.**

California's policy structure gives districts substantial responsibility for implementation, improvement, and resource use, while also placing them inside a state framework that regulates important features of schooling. Lack of state guidance, especially when the evidence base is relatively clear and local practice is uneven, currently hinders effective practice and improvement. In other areas, state rules are sufficiently prescriptive that they limit adaptation, differentiation, and interdisciplinary design. As a result, districts face both uncertainty and constraint as they sort through materials, supports, and requirements while operating within rules that they do not control. This pattern places substantial demands on local capacity and contributes to uneven implementation across the state.

2 **Administrative burden is pervasive across the system, though its value varies across activities.**

Administrative burden affects multiple actors, including local education agencies, teacher candidates, multilingual learner families, and charter authorizers. Some compliance activities support core governance goals such as equity, civil rights, accountability, and fiscal stewardship. Others are experienced as duplicative, low-value, or disconnected from instructional improvement. The current system often layers new requirements on top of older ones, producing cumulative burden that absorbs time and attention that could otherwise support schools and students.

3 **California's accountability mechanisms are producing reports and plans without clear feedback loops for improvement.**

The state has built an extensive accountability infrastructure, including dashboards, plans, and public reporting tools. In practice, these tools do not consistently shape decision making or support improvement. District leaders often describe them as reflecting existing priorities rather than guiding future action. More broadly, the system has not consistently defined who these tools are for, how they are meant to be used, or how they connect to support and follow-through.

4 **One-time funding plays a large role in California's policy approach and makes sustained system building difficult.**

California has used one-time funds to launch new initiatives, respond to immediate needs, and seed local improvement efforts. These investments have often supported useful work, but they do not consistently build durable infrastructure. Districts must manage multiple short-term programs with separate timelines and requirements, and effective efforts are often difficult to sustain once funding ends. This pattern contributes to fragmentation and to recurring "field fatigue" as systems are asked to start new work without stable long-term support.

5 System capacity is uneven across California, with small and rural districts relying heavily on county offices of education to absorb administrative and implementation demands.

Districts do not enter California's policy environment with the same staffing, expertise, or organizational capacity. Small and rural districts often depend on county offices of education to interpret requirements, provide technical assistance, and help manage administrative work that larger districts may be able to absorb internally. This reliance makes county offices central to how the system functions in practice, but county office capacity also varies across the state. The result is another layer of unevenness in how policy is experienced and implemented locally.

The Evidence Behind These Findings

California's current balance between local flexibility and state guidance leaves districts with substantial responsibility but uneven support

California's local-control system gives districts broad responsibility for interpreting policy and organizing implementation. The evidence suggests that this arrangement works poorly when districts are asked to make consequential decisions in areas where the research base is relatively strong but public guidance remains weak. District leaders, for example, report substantial uncertainty about which instructional materials and supports are highest quality, and the state's curriculum processes often leave them with long lists of options but limited help distinguishing among them. That approach pushes substantial review work onto districts, including many that do not have the staff capacity to do it well. The result is uneven implementation in one of the state's weakest instructional areas (Gallagher et al.).

The same pattern appears in multilingual learner policy. California has articulated an ambitious vision for multilingual education, but the comparison-state evidence suggests that the state relies too heavily on broad expectations without enough role clarity or verified competence. Texas and Indiana use clearer specialist roles, more explicit licensure structures, and stronger verification of preparation for

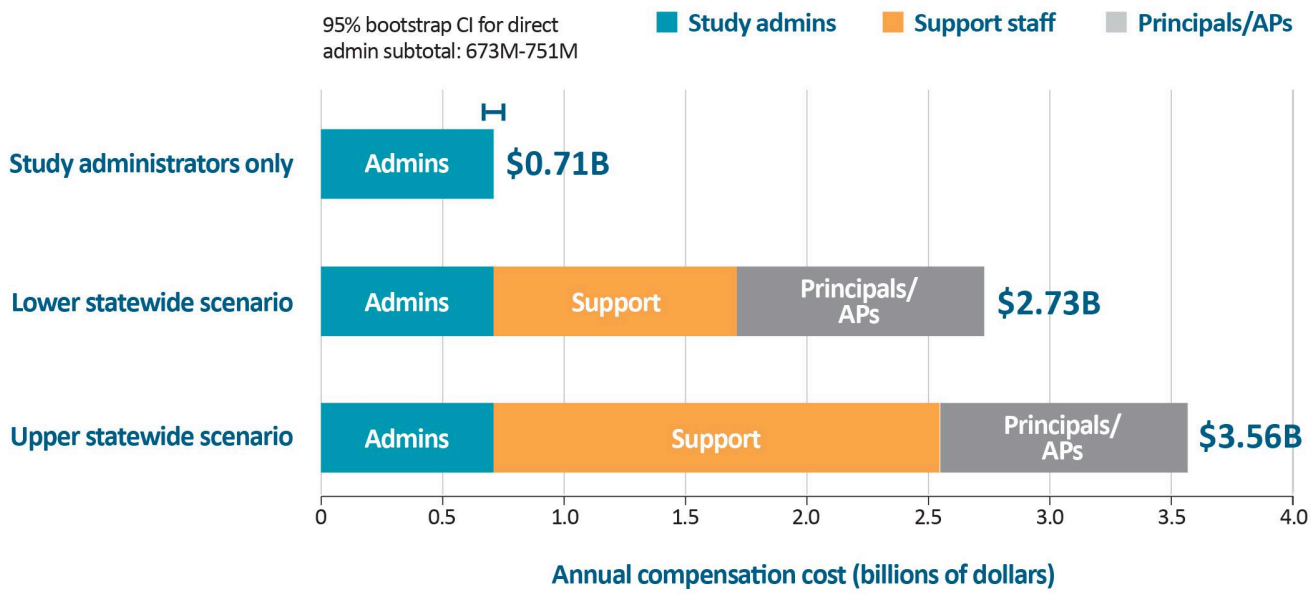
teachers serving multilingual learners. California's more diffuse approach preserves local flexibility, but it also makes implementation less predictable and less coherent across settings (López et al.).

There are also examples of a more productive balance. The early literacy reforms paired local discretion with stronger guardrails, including planning expectations, technical assistance, and oversight. Schools had flexibility in how to use funds, but that flexibility sat inside a more developed structure for implementation and follow-through. For literacy, this combination was associated with stronger results than looser approaches that relied primarily on local initiative (Novicoff).

Administrative burden is pervasive across the system, though its value varies across activities

Administrative burden is pervasive across California's education system. Survey data from 909 administrators indicate that local education agency administrators spend about 20 hours per week on compliance activities, or roughly 40 percent of a typical workweek. Statewide, that amounts to about 151,000 hours per week and an estimated annual opportunity cost of $3.44 billion in personnel time. This burden is concentrated in a relatively small number of areas, especially special education, financial reporting, LCAP work, student support programs, and human resources.

Figure 1: Compliance Time Carries a Large Compensation Cost



Notes: Includes salary plus a 38% benefits assumption for all salaried employees. Lower and upper statewide scenarios hold the study-administrator subtotal and the direct principal/ AP count fixed; the range comes from a narrow versus broad proxy for administrative support staff. Still excludes contractors, opportunity costs, and psychological burden. Adding a 38% benefits load raises the direct survey-based estimate for 7,569 study

administrators to $0.71B. Extending the same logic to 23,000 support staff and 16,859 principals/ assistant principals yields $2.73B–3.56B statewide.

At the same time, the compliance findings also show that burden and value are not the same thing. Some compliance activities are seen as supporting equity, accountability, or continuous improvement. Others generate what the report calls compliance friction: duplication, distraction from student priorities, reduced engagement, and lower planning capacity. Across 19 activities with sufficient sample size, 15 received negative net ratings, meaning that administrators rated their burden as greater than their value. The strongest negative ratings were associated with activities such as public records requests, federal finance reporting, and state-mandated plans other than the LCAP.

This distinction helps clarify the policy problem. California is not facing a simple choice between compliance and flexibility. Some requirements support legitimate state purposes, especially around equity, civil rights, and stewardship. The larger issue is that requirements have accumulated over time without sufficient alignment or removal of older demands. The result is a system in which administrators spend large amounts of time on work that they often experience as only weakly connected to improvement.

California's accountability mechanisms are producing reports and plans without clear feedback loops for improvement

California has built a substantial accountability infrastructure, including the Dashboard, SARCs, the LCAP, and related reporting tools (Haderlein and Polikoff). The evidence suggests that these tools are not functioning as a coherent improvement system. District leaders describe state test scores as a more meaningful signal than the Dashboard, which they tend to use reactively rather than strategically. They also describe LCAPs as reflecting district priorities rather than shaping them. The documents are produced, but they are not widely viewed as strong drivers of planning or instructional improvement (Gallagher et al.).

California's accountability approach is characterized by the absence of clear audiences and feedback loops for reports, plans, and accountability tools. Reports and dashboards are most useful when they are tied to a defined user, a defined purpose, and a clear connection to support, follow-up, or intervention. The current system often produces information without clearly establishing who is expected to act on it or how it should change practice (Haderlein and Polikoff).

This pattern also appears in board governance and local planning. Many school board members lack confidence in using data to evaluate program effectiveness or improve student outcomes. The issue is not simply the presence of too little data. It is that accountability structures have not been built around a clear theory of use (Marsh et al.).

One-time funding plays a large role in California's policy approach and makes sustained system-building difficult

One-time funds have played a large role in California's recent policy activity. They have allowed the state to launch programs quickly, respond to immediate needs, and seed new forms of work. In some cases, these investments have supported meaningful progress. The literacy grants are again a useful example. They provided funding, coaching, professional development, and implementation support that schools could use to strengthen literacy instruction.

The broader evidence, however, suggests that California has struggled to convert one-time investments into durable system-building. Gallagher et al. describe a landscape shaped by multiple initiatives, short-term grants, and fragmented supports, with districts layering together resources that often operate in parallel rather than reinforcing one another. District leaders describe these efforts as piecemeal and dependent on inconsistent funding streams. Effective efforts are often launched with temporary funds, but the system is weak at deciding what should continue, how successful programs should be absorbed into regular operations, and what older requirements or initiatives should be removed. This approach leaves local leaders managing multiple short-term efforts without stable infrastructure for continuation.

System capacity is uneven across California, with small and rural districts relying heavily on county offices of education to absorb administrative and implementation demands

Districts differ substantially in the staffing, expertise, and administrative infrastructure they bring to state policy demands. Many districts, especially smaller and more remote ones, lack the staff and internal capacity needed to support high-quality instructional improvement. They rely heavily on county offices of education for technical assistance, interpretation, and support. County offices of education often compensate for gaps elsewhere in the system rather than operating within a coherent support structure. Their quality and reach vary considerably across the state (Trinidad).

Kaler et al. point to a similar pattern for special education. California's staffing system for students with disabilities has little slack, and staffing shortages take different forms depending on district context. School leaders describe wanting more special educators, paraeducators, and related service providers, while also facing persistent challenges in recruitment and retention. These pressures are harder for systems with less internal capacity to absorb.

Small and rural districts are particularly dependent on external support. County offices are key actors absorbing administrative burden for these districts. County offices are therefore not peripheral to

California's policy approach. For many local agencies, they are central to how the system works in practice. But because county office capacity varies, districts experience very different implementation conditions depending on where they are located (Trinidad).

Implications for California

The research points to five areas where the evidence has direct bearing on decisions California is now facing.

A clearer state role where evidence is strong and local search burden is high

California's current policy approach asks districts to make consequential decisions in areas where the evidence base is often stronger than the public guidance they receive. This is especially visible in mathematics, where districts report uncertainty about instructional materials and supports and are often left to conduct their own reviews with limited capacity. A similar pattern appears in multilingual learner policy, where the state has articulated a strong vision but has not built equally strong mechanisms to ensure coherent implementation statewide. In these areas, a stronger state role need not remove local discretion. The evidence suggests its value lies in reducing uncertainty where districts are now sorting through too many options with too little guidance.

A more deliberate approach to administrative burden

The evidence suggests that California's current system does not clearly distinguish between compliance activities that support core governance functions and those that add burden with limited value. Some compliance activities are closely tied to legitimate state purposes, including equity, civil rights, fiscal stewardship, and accountability. Others generate duplication and absorb time without providing comparable value. The current policy problem is not simply that the system has too many requirements. It is that requirements have accumulated without enough review of whether they still serve a useful purpose, whether they overlap with other demands, and whether they are implemented in ways that support improvement rather than paperwork. A more deliberate approach could reduce duplication while preserving requirements that protect students and support public purposes.

Accountability systems designed around use, not just production

California's accountability tools are more likely to support improvement when they are tied to a clear audience and a clear use. The current system produces plans, reports, and dashboards at scale, but often without a strong connection to who is expected to use them, what decisions they should inform,

or what support should follow from them. This points to the importance of accountability structures designed around use rather than documentation alone. In practice, that means asking whether a given report shapes planning, whether a dashboard result triggers meaningful action, and whether identified problems connect to support, follow-through, or intervention. California's current system has more reporting capacity than improvement capacity.

More durable capacity-building and less dependence on one-time funding

One-time funding has allowed California to launch new efforts and respond quickly to emerging priorities. It has also made it harder to build stable systems. Districts are repeatedly asked to start new work on temporary timelines, often with separate requirements and uncertain continuation. The literacy reforms suggest that state investments can be more effective when they combine funding with planning expectations, technical assistance, and oversight. The broader policy challenge is how to shift from a landscape of short-term initiatives to one in which the state is building durable infrastructure for implementation, support, and learning. That likely requires stronger decisions about what to sustain, what to phase out, and how to absorb successful efforts into regular operations.

Regional capacity as a central part of the policy approach

California's policy approach already depends heavily on regional institutions, especially county offices of education. This is particularly true for small and rural districts, which rely on COEs to interpret policy, provide technical assistance, and absorb administrative and implementation demands they cannot manage alone. The current system makes this support unevenly available rather than considering it as a core design feature that should be developed intentionally. The evidence suggests that regional support structures need a clearer place in California's policy approach, along with more explicit expectations about what support districts should be able to access and under what conditions. Without that, the quality of implementation will continue to depend too heavily on local geography and intermediary capacity.

Conclusion

California's state-local policy structure reflects a persistent effort to combine local responsibility with statewide goals. The evidence suggests that the current structure often produces limited coherence, uneven sustained support, and substantial variation in how policy is experienced across districts. Districts are expected to make consequential decisions across a wide range of domains, often with uneven guidance, fragmented funding, and accountability tools that are only weakly connected to improvement, while also operating inside state rules that constrain flexibility over time, course design, curriculum materials, and funding use.

The research points toward a more selective and coherent state role in areas where evidence is strong, local search burden is high, and implementation conditions vary sharply across districts. It also points toward a clearer distinction between compliance that serves public purposes and administrative burden that absorbs time without comparable value.

California already has examples of more productive policy design. The literacy reforms show that local discretion can be paired with clearer guardrails, planning expectations, technical assistance, and follow-through. The multilingual learner comparison work shows that stronger role clarity and more explicit competence requirements can support more coherent implementation. Across these examples, the broader lesson is that local responsibility works best when the surrounding system provides clearer signals, more usable support, less low-value procedural burden, and stronger infrastructure for learning and adjustment.

These studies point to five recurring sources of strain in the current system: duplication, uneven regional and local capacity, accountability tools with weak use, state rules that can constrain flexibility, and reliance on short-term initiative funding. How California addresses these sources of strain will shape whether its state-local structure supports adaptation and improvement or continues to produce unevenness and strain.

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