Getting Down to FACTS

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Governing for Improvement: Transparency, Alignment, and Accountability in California Education

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Introduction

For more than a decade, California has pursued an education governance strategy built on local control, multiple measures of performance, and an array of state, regional, and local institutions charged with supporting improvement. California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) governance model rests on a set of linked assumptions: local actors are best positioned to identify needs and set priorities, public accountability and planning tools can support transparency and improvement, and regional and state institutions can provide the oversight and capacity-building needed to make local control effective. This model reflects an ambitious vision in which districts and schools have autonomy to respond to local needs, while the state and regional institutions provide the transparency, support, and capacity to support local control's success.

The evidence across the Getting Down to Facts III governance studies suggests that although California's education governance system has high aspirations for improvement and coordination across institutions, it is too fragmented in authority, accountability, and support to make local control work as a coherent, equitable, and reliable strategy for improvement. Authority and implementation responsibilities are spread across agencies and other intermediary bodies. At the same time, the state's core accountability and planning tools often do not function as clear or actionable drivers of improvement, and the quality and capacity of regional support structures vary substantially across the state. The core governance challenge is a weak fit between California's local control strategy and the infrastructure needed to make local control work: clear roles, usable accountability tools, coherent regional support, and enough capacity to translate statewide goals into consistent local practice.

This research brief synthesizes evidence from Getting Down to Facts III studies of California's public accountability system, county offices of education, school boards, and the broader architecture of state governance, with supporting evidence from related analyses of Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs), special education governance, teacher credentialing, and the state's role in supporting district instructional improvement. Across these studies, a common pattern emerges: California has built a system with many ambitions and many actors, but with uneven coherence in how responsibility, information, and support are organized. The result is a governance system that asks a great deal of local schools and districts without consistently providing the clarity, alignment, or capacity needed to help them succeed.

Key Findings

1 California's education governance system is highly distributed, with authority and implementation responsibilities spread across multiple state, regional, and local institutions.

This includes multiple state agencies, county offices of education, Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs), local school boards, and separate governance structures for areas such as teacher credentialing, resulting in a system that is institutionally dense and structurally complex.

2 California's main accountability and planning tools do not consistently function as clear, coherent drivers of improvement.

LCFF's theory of action depends on public accountability and local planning tools including the Dashboard, School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs), and LCAPs to help districts, schools, and communities identify needs, set priorities, and improve outcomes. Yet these tools do not consistently function that way in practice.

3 Regional intermediary institutions are essential to how the system operates, but their capacity and quality are uneven across the state.

COEs and SELPAs provide critical oversight, coordination, and services, especially for smaller and rural districts, yet their expertise, responsiveness, service quality, and capacity vary considerably across regions.

4 Across multiple parts of the system, accountability is more reactive than capacity-building.

State and regional structures are more effective at signaling when districts or schools are struggling than at providing the coherent, ongoing support needed for long-term improvement.

5 Local control depends on infrastructure that is not consistently in place.

School boards, districts, and regional entities all retain major roles in improvement, but the evidence points to diffuse priorities, fragmented supports, uneven capacity, and practical difficulty translating statewide aspirations into consistent local improvement.

The Evidence Behind These Findings

California's education governance system is highly distributed, with authority and implementation responsibilities spread across multiple state, regional, and local institutions

The evidence points first to a governance structure that distributes authority and responsibility across many agencies and levels. Ripma and Loeb show that California divides supervisory authority, administrative authority, and implementation decision-making across multiple entities rather than concentrating them within a single state agency. They identify nearly 200 entities exercising authority or implementation roles beyond central state offices, making California unusually distributed compared with other large states. The cross-state comparison also shows that California differs from Florida, Texas, and New York in both the number of entities involved and the kind of authority those entities hold: California delegates administrative authority to independent public bodies outside the California Department of Education, while the other large states generally retain that authority within the state education agency.

This distributed structure extends across major parts of the system. Grossman and Kaul show that teacher preparation and credentialing are governed through an autonomous commission separate from the state education agency. Trinidad and colleagues describe county offices of education as central intermediaries between the state and districts, while Ripma and McClellan show that SELPAs form an additional regional governance layer for special education funding, coordination, and compliance. Marsh and colleagues find that locally elected school boards retain substantial authority over policy, oversight, and resource allocation. These arrangements create a governance system that is institutionally dense and structurally complex. Gallagher et al. show how the loose coupling among multiple institutions hampers efforts to build district capacity.

California's main accountability and planning tools do not consistently function as clear, coherent drivers of improvement

LCFF's theory of action depends on public accountability and local planning tools including the Dashboard, School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs), and LCAPs to help districts, schools, and communities identify needs, set priorities, and improve outcomes. Yet the evidence suggests these tools do not consistently function that way in practice.

Haderlein and Polikoff benchmark the Dashboard and SARCs against six principles of effective accountability tools drawn from research and 50-state reviews and find that California fully meets none of them. Instead, the state only partially meets two principles and does not meet four, including

anchoring the system in a clear theory of action and user base, showing trends and enabling fair comparisons, designing for usability and coherence, and making results actionable. Their analysis also finds that the Dashboard's complexity and fragmented design make it difficult for users to interpret and act on the information it provides, and that the current separation among the Dashboard, SARCs, DataQuest, and LCAPs weakens coherence across the broader accountability infrastructure. Their survey evidence reinforces that point: only a small share of surveyed district leaders reported that the Dashboard is a major driver of district priorities. In short, the state has built public accountability tools with substantial information in them, but not tools that consistently translate that information into usable guidance for action.

Evidence from the district perspective points in the same direction. A survey of school board members showed that the Dashboard ranked at the bottom of the list of sources they used to set board priorities (Marsh et al.). In the TK–8 mathematics report, Gallagher and colleagues find that district leaders most frequently cite state test scores, not the Dashboard, as the major driver of their priorities. Leaders describe the Dashboard as something they respond to when ratings are low, especially when subgroup performance triggers Differentiated Assistance, rather than as a tool they use to guide long-term strategic improvement. They also describe the LCAP as reflecting priorities that have already been set rather than shaping those priorities itself. Multiple respondents characterize the LCAP document as a "side document" or compliance exercise whose reporting requirements consume staff time that could otherwise go toward instructional work. The report concludes that the Dashboard and LCAP do not, in practice, play the role of helping districts undertake strategic, long-term planning.

The large-scale LCAP analysis by Hibel and Beberman adds statewide evidence that the planning side of the system is often weakly specified and unevenly connected to action. Across 2,680 LCAP documents, they find that the median measurability score for goals is zero, only 7.9 percent of goals include an explicit numeric target, and 36.8 percent of goals are exact or near-exact copies appearing across multiple LEAs. They also find that accountability-oriented topics such as Dashboard and subgroup targets are among the least prevalent in the corpus and are backed by relatively few actions compared with instructional improvement topics. In the discussion, they note that these patterns raise questions about whether the LCAP process is consistently functioning as a genuinely local planning tool or instead as a compliance ritual populated with template language.

Regional intermediary institutions are essential to how the system operates, but their capacity and quality are uneven across the state

The evidence shows that California relies heavily on regional intermediary institutions to translate policy into practice and provide expertise that many districts cannot build on their own. At the same time, the capacity and quality of this intermediary layer vary substantially across the state. Trinidad and colleagues find that COEs differ significantly in scale, staffing, expertise, and fiscal resources, with larger

counties often able to provide broader instructional and technical support while smaller or rural counties focus more on shared services and compliance. District leaders report that the usefulness of county support depends heavily on whether it is sustained, in-person, and tailored to local context, and that variation across counties is substantial.

Ripma and McClellan document a similar pattern in special education governance. SELPAs are widely valued for administrative and regulatory expertise, particularly by smaller LEAs, but their responsiveness, service quality, and problem-solving capacity vary considerably. Across these reports, intermediary institutions are essential to how California's system operates, especially for districts with limited central-office capacity. What districts can access depends heavily on geography, organizational context, and the capacity of the regional entities that serve them.

Across multiple parts of the system, accountability is often more reactive than capacity-building

The evidence suggests that state and regional structures are more effective at signaling when districts or schools are struggling than at providing the coherent, ongoing support needed for long-term improvement. This pattern appears most clearly in how California's accountability tools and support systems operate in practice. The public accountability report finds that the Dashboard and SARCs do not yet make results especially actionable for users and that the state's accountability infrastructure does not clearly connect performance information to next steps, improvement supports, or resource decisions. Haderlein and Polikoff and the report by Marsh and colleagues also report that only a small share of district leaders said the Dashboard is a major driver of district priorities, suggesting that the system is more successful at displaying results than at helping local actors use those results to guide sustained improvement.

The COE report indicates that this pattern extends beyond the Dashboard itself and into the state's broader support structure. Trinidad and colleagues find that California's instructional accountability system remains primarily reactive. Mechanisms such as Differentiated Assistance identify districts with performance problems, but they lack strong preventive incentives, consistent follow-through, or clear capacity-building mechanisms. Unlike fiscal oversight, which carries concrete consequences and more formal intervention tools, instructional accountability depends largely on relationships, persuasion, and a district's willingness to engage. The report concludes that this dynamic contributes to uneven improvement efforts and limits broader system learning and capacity-building.

Evidence from the TK–8 mathematics study points to the same basic dynamic from the district perspective. Gallagher and colleagues find that district leaders do pay attention to the Dashboard when ratings are low, but they do not generally use it as a strategic planning tool. Leaders described

responding to low colors or subgroup volatility rather than relying on the Dashboard to organize long-term instructional improvement. More broadly, the report finds that the state's support system for mathematics improvement is fragmented, inconsistent, and insufficient. Multiple state agencies, county offices, and initiatives all play roles, but with few formal connections among them and no clear leader of the statewide support system. As a result, districts often encounter signals about performance problems without receiving the kind of coherent, ongoing support that would help them build lasting local capacity.

The school board report suggests that this gap between identifying problems and building capacity also appears at the local governance level. Marsh and colleagues find that board members reported substantial strain related to fiscal pressure, federal policy uncertainty, labor issues, and political conflict, while also expressing a clear desire for more support in areas such as data use, evaluation, legal guidance, and navigating conflict. Their findings suggest that local governing actors are being asked to manage increasingly complex conditions without a commensurate system of ongoing professional learning and differentiated support. In that sense, the state's governance environment often places responsibility on local actors to respond to problems without consistently equipping them to do so.

Local control depends on infrastructure that is not consistently in place

School boards, districts, COEs, SELPAs, and other regional entities all carry substantial responsibility for improvement, but the evidence points to diffuse priorities, fragmented supports, uneven capacity, and limited common infrastructure for translating statewide aspirations into local practice. Marsh and colleagues find that board members value local control while also wanting clearer state guidance, stronger support in data use and evaluation, and more help navigating legal, fiscal, labor, and political challenges. Gallagher and colleagues similarly find that districts face a "cacophony" of competing initiatives, that mathematics is often deprioritized amid diffuse demands, and that leaders do not experience the Dashboard or LCAP as strong strategic tools for long-term improvement.

The same pattern appears in accountability, regional support, special education governance, and workforce development. Haderlein and Polikoff find that the Dashboard and SARCs do not yet function as especially clear, coherent, or actionable tools for users, while Hibel and Beberman find that LCAP goals are often vague, weakly measurable, or duplicated across LEAs. Trinidad and colleagues describe COEs as central actors in California's governance system, but also find substantial variation in their capacity, expertise, and support across counties. Ripma and McClellan document a similar pattern in special education governance: SELPAs are essential for coordination and compliance, especially for smaller LEAs, but their responsiveness, quality, and administrative value vary widely. Grossman and Kaul show that teacher credentialing and induction are governed through the autonomous CTC, while ongoing professional development

sits with CDE. Across these examples, local actors hold major responsibility for improvement, while the clarity, coherence, and support surrounding that responsibility remain uneven.

Implications for California

Governance coherence and institutional design

These studies indicate that California's governance challenges are not primarily a matter of insufficient activity or insufficient reform. They are more fundamentally questions of coherence: how authority is allocated, how accountability tools function in practice, and how support is organized across state, regional, and local levels. The evidence points to governance design itself as a central policy issue because fragmented authority changes what the state can steer, how clearly responsibility can be assigned, and how consistently improvement efforts are experienced across districts.

Accountability and planning instruments as tools for action

The effectiveness of local control depends heavily on the quality of the infrastructure surrounding it. LCFF assumes that tools such as the Dashboard, SARCs, and LCAPs will help make priorities visible, support accountability, and guide improvement. Yet the public accountability and LCAP studies indicate that these tools are often experienced as clearer for reporting than for action. These findings make the design of accountability and planning instruments consequential not only for transparency, but also for how clearly the system defines who these tools are for, how different users interpret them, and how they support action and improvement under local control.

Regional capacity as a mechanism for equity

Regional capacity is likely to be an important mechanism through which statewide inequities are reproduced or mitigated. COEs and SELPAs are essential to how California's system operates, especially for smaller and rural districts, yet the evidence shows that their expertise, responsiveness, service quality, and fiscal capacity vary substantially across regions. Regional variation is not only an administrative issue, but also an equity issue. The findings point to regional capacity as an important condition for whether local control advances equity consistently across the state.

Capacity to support improvement over time

The reports point to a broader imbalance in the state's governance architecture: California appears better equipped to identify problems than to build the capacity needed to address them. Across the studies, accountability systems and intervention structures are more often described as signaling low performance, compliance issues, or strain than as providing coherent, ongoing support for long-term

improvement. This pattern points to the importance of structures and supports that enable districts and regional actors to address problems over time, not only identify them.

Alignment, simplification, and system legibility

California's next phase of governance work may turn less on creating additional structures than on how existing structures relate to one another. Across the reports, recurring problems stem from layering, duplication, diffuse responsibility, and uneven alignment among institutions that already exist. This evidence brings legibility, alignment, and capacity to the center of California's governance challenge: how clearly different institutions' roles are defined, how accountability and support connect, and where variation across regions and localities most affects the state's ability to translate aspiration into consistent improvement.

Conclusion

The evidence in these reports paints a picture of a state that has assembled a governance system that is expansive but not well aligned. Authority is distributed across multiple state, regional, and local bodies. Accountability and planning tools do not consistently function as clear drivers of improvement. Intermediary institutions are essential, but uneven in capacity and quality. And local actors carry substantial responsibility for improvement, often without equally clear, coherent, or dependable support surrounding that responsibility. These studies suggest that California's core governance problem is not simply one of decentralization, nor a lack of capacity at the state level. It is a problem of fit between aspiration and infrastructure. California has asked local control to do substantial work in advancing equity, transparency, and continuous improvement. But the evidence indicates that the broader system surrounding local control often remains fragmented in authority, uneven in support, and limited in its ability to connect information, responsibility, and capacity in ways that produce consistent improvement across the state.

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