Getting Down to FACTS

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Improving Instruction in California: Capacity, Coherence, and State Support

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Introduction

California has improved instruction and student outcomes in recent years, but not at a pace sufficient to meet students' needs (Reardon, 2026). The evidence shows that districts and educators are already operating near capacity under the current system, leaving them struggling to respond proactively to major shifts like the rise of generative AI and current students' future needs.

This brief connects studies that focus on improving mathematics and literacy instruction, the teacher pipeline and teacher preparation with studies of educational policy and governance. The studies show that districts generally have insufficient capacity to improve instruction. They also point to California policies that have improved aspects of the teacher workforce and literacy instruction in the early grades, though not at sufficient scale to meet the state's needs.

The brief then looks across studies of state accountability policy, the Statewide System of Support, and educational governance in large states to understand why California has pockets of excellence instead of consistent strength. These diverse studies provide evidence that: 1) the state has interpreted local control as meaning that the state should play a minimal role instead of supporting effective local implementation, and 2) educational policies lack coherence. Districts face a barrage of well-intentioned policies but lack the capacity to implement them well because their time is spent independently reinventing the proverbial wheel with insufficient supports.

The evidence points to the importance of better supporting local control by ensuring districts have the capacity to exercise it effectively. One implication is that the current cycle of short-term education policies produces diffuse district goals, cycles of change with little improvement, and layers of paperwork. A more fundamental implication is that governance arrangements matter: when funding for district support is disconnected from accountability for improved instruction and student outcomes, local capacity remains uneven. Evidence from California and across the country shows approaches that could be adopted and expanded to realize the potential of local control.

Findings

1	**California's districts face diffuse priorities and high compliance burdens that limit focus on instructional improvement.**

Under LCFF, authority is largely delegated locally, but additive policies and shifting requirements create a fragmented policy environment. As a result, district leaders spend substantial time on compliance, limiting their ability to prioritize and sustain work on instruction.

2	**The state does not consistently provide clear, actionable signals about instructional quality.**

In some areas, the state offers limited guidance on which approaches are most effective; in others, it articulates a vision of quality but does not ensure it reaches districts or classrooms. This leaves educators at all levels without clear direction.

3	**Districts lack the instructional capacity to implement policies and initiatives effectively.**

Challenges in hiring, preparation, and retention lead to uneven access to well-prepared educators, and ongoing professional learning is insufficient, leaving districts unable to create instructional coherence.

4	**Fragmented governance and additive policy-making contribute to uneven district capacity and incoherent implementation.**

Authority is distributed across multiple entities with limited alignment and basic connections between funding and accountability are broken in multiple places. As a result, districts experience state policy as a collection of loosely connected initiatives rather than a unified strategy.

The Evidence Behind These Findings

California's districts face diffuse priorities and high compliance burdens that limit focus on instructional improvement

Willis and Loeb found California district leaders divide their time across many roles in ways that detract from instructional improvement. The study finds that administrators spend roughly 20 hours per week (40 percent of their time) on compliance activities, which they widely experience as taking time away from instructional leadership and improvement. Leaders attribute this burden to the accumulation of

new initiatives without the removal of older ones, resulting in multiple, unaligned planning and reporting processes.

Aspects of state accountability policy intended to support strategic planning create instability and inefficiency. Gallagher et al. and Haderlein and Polikoff show that the state dashboard reports on many outcomes and student groups but provides limited guidance on how to interpret results, prioritize among competing signals, or translate findings into action. Gallagher et al. and Willis and Loeb found district leaders view the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) as burdensome, reflecting planning processes rather than driving strategic focus. Novicoff's study shows that even policies that improve student learning, such as the Early Literacy Support Block Grant and the Literacy Coaches and Reading Specialists Grant, often require layers of local decision-making that consume time without substantially improving implementation. Gallagher et al. found district leaders consistently explained that part of the challenge they experienced came from the layering of policies on top of each other, not just the attributes of individual policies.

Louisiana offers an approach for building coherence. Beginning in 2017, the state replaced dozens of separate grant applications and planning processes with the Super App, a single platform that aligns funding, reporting, and planning to a small set of priorities, allowing districts to braid resources and cutting administrative burden (Gallagher et al.).

The state does not consistently provide clear, actionable signals about instructional quality

Curriculum adoption is a major pain point for district leaders in TK–8 mathematics. The most recent K–8 adoption process yielded 38 approved titles—all submitted titles were approved—with little guidance on their relative strengths. State leaders describe this as a deliberate effort to preserve broad choice. Because the state-approved list includes many largely undifferentiated options, districts must navigate a broad set of materials on their own, contributing to wide variation in curricula, many of which do not meet current quality standards (Polikoff and Haderlein; Gallagher et al.).

The Literacy Coach and Reading Specialist Grant is another example, discussed by Novicoff. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond explained a key tenet of the policy design: "We're not here to tell you what you have to use… Every community is unique and has its own needs." In the absence of clear guidance, most local education agencies spent their first year of the Literacy Coaches and Reading Specialists Grant on planning, with only 22 percent using funds to serve students, before converging on similar strategies over time. Local discretion without guidance can delay implementation and increase burden without producing meaningful variation in approaches.

Stipek and Meloy show that early childhood education reflects a different version of this problem. The state's primary quality rating system is voluntary and focused on compliance rather than instructional quality, while transitional kindergarten programs serving the same age group lack comparable monitoring altogether, creating inconsistency in how quality is defined and supported.

The effects of limited state guidance extend beyond educators to school board members (Marsh et al.). Survey data show strong demand for more support in navigating policy changes (80%), evaluating curricula (79%), identifying policies that improve student learning (79%), assessing programs and services (78%), and using data to inform decisions (74%), indicating that key decision-makers lack access to clear, actionable signals about quality.

In other cases, the state has articulated a vision but not connected it to practice. While 76 percent of district leaders identify mathematics standards as a major driver of instruction, only 26 percent say the same of the Mathematics Framework, which many describe as difficult to access and apply. As one state leader noted, "The vision is strong, but the bridge to classrooms is weak." District leaders also point to the volume of communication as hindering the state's messaging. As one district leader put it, "I think the challenge… is we get a lot of stuff from the [state], and it is over-saturation… I honestly don't look… And you know that adage, when you prioritize everything, you prioritize nothing." (Gallagher et al.).

Massachusetts and Texas illustrate that stronger state guidance can coexist with local control in large, diverse states. In Massachusetts, trained educators review and rate instructional materials through the CURATE process, producing differentiated ratings that help districts compare options. Texas takes a complementary approach by vetting and endorsing high-quality materials, developing its own curriculum, and supporting implementation through funding and training (Gallagher et al., 2026).

Districts lack the instructional capacity to implement policies and initiatives effectively

District capacity challenges stem from weaknesses across three connected parts of the educator development system: teacher and principal pipeline, teacher preparation, and ongoing teacher development. California districts face persistent challenges hiring and retaining fully prepared teachers and leaders, with shortages concentrated in high-need schools and subjects (Arshan et al.,; Leung-Gagné et al.; Santibañez). Polikoff and Haderlein also find that California teachers receive less curriculum-focused support than teachers nationally, including less professional development, coaching, and collaborative learning tied to curriculum implementation.

The prevalence of the post-baccalaureate credential pathway compresses opportunities to develop instructional skill and engage in well-aligned pre-service clinical experiences, and limits access to the profession (Grossman and Kaul). Variation in preparation pathways, broad credentialing structures, and

weak alignment between clinical training and teaching assignments contributes to uneven readiness among novice teachers. López et al. found California's approach to teacher credentialing embeds limited preparation for multilingual learners into general credentialing, resulting in less consistent access to deeply trained teachers for these students. States like Indiana and Texas require more specialized preparation and credentialing for teachers of multilingual learners, which in turn supports them to achieve at higher levels than their peers in California.

Challenges in the teacher pipeline and preservice preparation leave districts trying to fill gaps between teachers' knowledge and the demands of effective instruction. Districts are not well positioned to do so. Teachers have limited time for district- or school-provided professional learning, and available opportunities are often brief, fragmented, and spread across competing priorities. Teachers often must identify professional learning on their own, without a district strategy grounded in research on effective professional development. Instructional coaching can support job-embedded learning and alignment around instructional quality, but in California it is often optional, unevenly implemented, and difficult to sustain due to funding and staffing constraints, particularly in smaller and rural districts (Novicoff; Gallagher et al.). Novicoff found that the Early Literacy Support Block Grant and the Literacy Coaches and Reading Specialists Grant both had positive effects on student outcomes, but, because of the lack of strong infrastructure for coach training and credentialing, effects for the latter grant were smaller in rural communities who had the most difficulty hiring instructional coaches to support improvement.

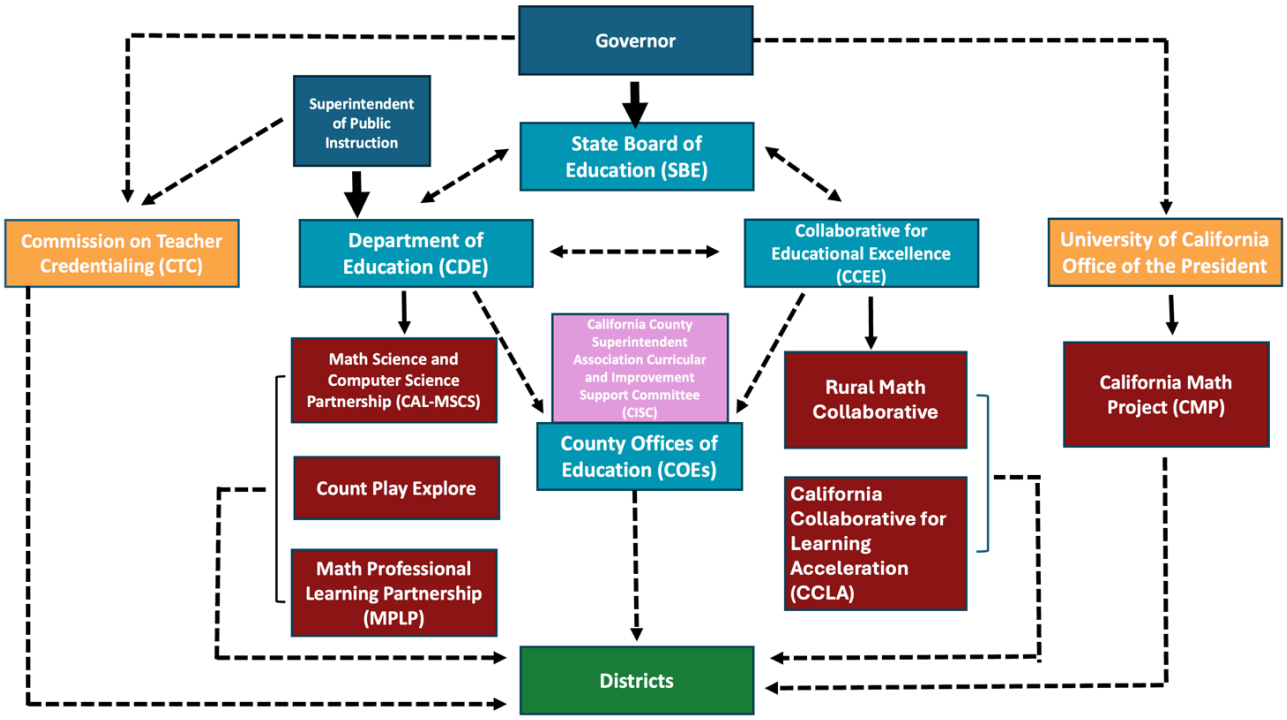
Fragmented governance and additive policy-making contribute to uneven district capacity and incoherent implementation

California's constitutionally and statutorily fragmented governance system limits its ability to build district capacity for instructional improvement, with authority over policy, funding, and implementation distributed across multiple independent entities and reliant on informal influence rather than clear lines of authority (Ripma and Loeb). This differs from other large states, where administrative authority is more often retained within the state education agency even as implementation is carried out through regional partners. Trinidad et al. found county offices of education serve as regional hubs but are primarily responsible for oversight functions, vary in capacity, and are accountable locally rather than to the state. It is unusual for states to delegate this level of authority to entities over which they have no hierarchical control. What feels, at the state level, like coordination and negotiation among entities is experienced by districts as a set of competing, short-term initiatives rather than a coherent strategy (Gallagher et al.).

Gallagher et al. illustrate this for TK–8 mathematics. The Statewide System of Support, which includes the California Collaborative for Education Excellence, California Department of Education, State Board of Education, and County Offices of Education, provides universal supports such as the Mathematics Framework and voluntary professional learning. These efforts operate within a broader context of

additive policy-making: six statewide mathematics initiatives are housed across multiple county offices and the California Mathematics Project and collectively report to three different entities, which themselves report to different authorities. No formal authority connects these efforts, and they are spread across so many actors that no single entity has both the capacity and responsibility to ensure instructional improvement (Figure 1).

Figure 1: State supports for instructional improvement in TK-8 mathematics



Note: Thick solid arrows represent formal authority, grounded in legally defined relationships. Dashed arrows among agencies represent mediated authority or influence. Thin solid arrows show California's math initiatives nested inside three distinct institutional homes.

(Source, Gallagher et al., Getting Down to Facts III, 2026)

Similar fragmentation exists in the governance of teacher preparation, where responsibility for preparation, credentialing, induction, and ongoing professional learning is spread across multiple agencies with limited coordination (Grossman and Kaul). These examples show that fragmentation in governance is a central contributor to the uneven capacity across districts that underpins California's incremental improvement in instruction and student outcomes.

Examples from Louisiana and Alabama show how states can build coherence in instructional improvement by aligning governance, funding, and supports around a clear vision of high-quality

teaching while preserving district choice. Alabama's Numeracy Act illustrates a more directive approach, establishing a statewide focus on K to 5 mathematics and reinforcing it through funding for full-time math coaches in every elementary school, centralized training through the Alabama Math, Science, and Technology Initiative, and governance structures to vet materials and align teacher preparation. These elements align standards, materials, professional learning, and coaching to reinforce instruction and have contributed to early gains in elementary mathematics achievement. Louisiana's approach uses the Super App to support local choice within a coherent framework. The state directs districts towards evidence-based approaches while allowing districts to choose among vetted options and determine implementation. State staff support this work through ongoing partnership, using tools and joint walkthroughs to build local capacity and support effective instruction. This combination of clear priorities, aligned supports, and collaborative implementation has strengthened instructional practice. As a result, Louisiana is one of the few states to show improvement across both reading and math, and one of only two states where 4th graders exceeded pre-pandemic levels of NAEP proficiency in both subjects (Gallagher et al.).

Implications for California

Supporting long-term work on a small set of priorities

California districts have made incremental progress and outperformed most states in post-COVID recovery, but struggle to sustain focus in key areas due to diffuse priorities and compliance demands that place significant burdens on district leaders' time. The evidence suggests that further progress depends on clearer direction around a small number of priorities and accountability processes that support sustained instructional improvement. This points to the value of more streamlined planning and reporting requirements that preserve transparency while reducing administrative burden and allowing leaders to focus on sustained instructional improvement.

Clearer signals around quality to support local control

Across system roles—district leaders, school board members, school leaders, and teachers—there is a consistent demand for clearer information about what constitutes high-quality practice so that local educators can make informed decisions. Educators want to retain local control, but they also want the state to leverage its expertise to make that control easier to exercise effectively. The evidence points to the importance of clearer quality signals, which depend more on changes in state mindset and processes than on new legislation or governance structures. It also suggests that districts are better supported when they can draw on a smaller set of well-vetted options and on more concentrated investment in a limited number of programs, rather than diffuse supports spread across many initiatives.

Improving educator learning systems, pre-service and inservice

California's systems do not sufficiently recruit or develop effective teachers across their careers. The evidence underscores the importance of stronger teacher pipeline and preparation systems that build the state's supply of qualified teachers, including pathways that allow candidates to earn a bachelor's degree and credential within four years, reduce financial barriers, and better align clinical experiences with classroom demands, while reducing reliance on teachers with emergency-style permits. These conditions are associated with greater teacher readiness and reduced burden on districts.

The evidence also points to the importance of stronger systems for ongoing educator learning. Key elements include clearer expectations for continuous learning, funding and guidance aligned with the research base on high-quality professional development, and conditions in which districts and unions can negotiate dedicated time for collaborative learning during the workday. The findings also highlight the value of instructional coaches in key academic areas such as literacy and mathematics, particularly in the highest-need districts, where the system currently lacks capacity, especially in smaller and rural communities.

Revising governance and policy-making to build coherence

Fragmentation in authority, responsibility, and resources underlies many of the challenges described above, including diffuse priorities, weak signals about quality, and uneven district capacity. Without greater alignment, efforts to clarify priorities, strengthen quality signals, and build capacity are unlikely to succeed. The evidence suggests that local control works best when the state takes a more intentional approach to how it organizes and carries out its work. This includes clearer roles across agencies, stronger alignment of funding and initiatives around a small number of long-term priorities, and clear responsibility and adequate resources for coordinating instructional improvement. Under these conditions, districts are better positioned to focus their efforts, select and implement high-quality approaches, and build educator capacity.

Conclusion

California adopted LCFF in 2013, so the state has spent just over a decade operating under its current model of local control. Evidence across studies shows that California's approach to instructional improvement is shaped by a governance system that is fragmented and heavily reliant on local decision making without clear, aligned state direction. In practice, the state has enacted its role under local control in ways that leave districts to fend for themselves while requiring extensive planning and compliance monitoring. This limits the state's ability to define and support a coherent vision of high-quality instruction and to ensure districts are consistently supported to deliver it.

The evidence points toward a more coherent state role in instructional improvement—one that clarifies what high-quality instruction looks like and aligns standards, materials, professional learning, and supports around that vision. In a local control system, this role is not to prescribe every decision, but to make it easier for districts to make strong, evidence-based choices through clear expectations, usable guidance, and aligned supports. Coherence does not require centralization; rather, it means structuring local control within a system where expectations are clearer and effective approaches are easier to identify and implement. California has already demonstrated elements of this approach in areas such as early literacy and teacher pipeline initiatives. Building on these strengths will require more streamlined policy, stronger educator learning systems, and better alignment in governance so districts can focus their efforts and deliver consistently high-quality instruction for all students.

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