

# Supporting Continuous Improvement in California's Education System

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## About This Brief

With radical shifts in California's accountability system, every stakeholder — from the Capitol to the classroom — must play a role in ensuring high-quality education for all of California's students. This brief looks at the key elements of an accountability system and how those charged with educating California's children can do so effectively. This brief summarizes a full report that can be found at <http://edpolicyinca.org/node/495>

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California's new accountability system originated in the radical decentralization of power and authority from Sacramento to local schools and their communities brought about by the Legislature's adoption of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in 2013. Under California's previous accountability policies and the federal No Child Left Behind law, the state set performance targets for schools and districts based almost entirely on students' standardized-test scores. Schools that fell short of their targets were subject to a variety of increasingly harsh sanctions, ranging from designation as a "failing" school to reconstitution or closure.

California's new accountability system is different from the previous system in nearly every important respect. The new system is grounded in the concept of reciprocal accountability: that is, every actor in the system — from the Capitol to the classroom — must be responsible for the aspects of educational quality and performance that it controls.

## Key Elements of California's New Accountability System

The state has made three fundamental commitments:

- To pursue *meaningful learning* for students — through the adoption of new standards and curriculum frameworks more focused on higher order thinking and performance abilities;
- To give schools and districts the *resources* and flexibility they need to serve their communities effectively — through the new Local Control Funding Formula which allocates funds based on student needs and allows communities to determine where the funds should be spent to achieve the best results;
- To provide *professional learning* and supports for teachers and administrators — through stronger preparation and ongoing professional development.

As shown in Figure 1, these constitute three pillars of a new accountability system that is designed to support continuous improvement.

At the same time, the state has adopted three complementary mechanisms to hold schools and districts accountable:

- **Political accountability**, operationalized through Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs), which are developed by districts in consultation with their communities, updated annually, and reviewed by county agencies. The LCAPs are intended to ensure that resources are used wisely and effectively, and to articulate local goals for schooling and report progress toward those goals.
- **Professional accountability**, through effective licensure, professional development,

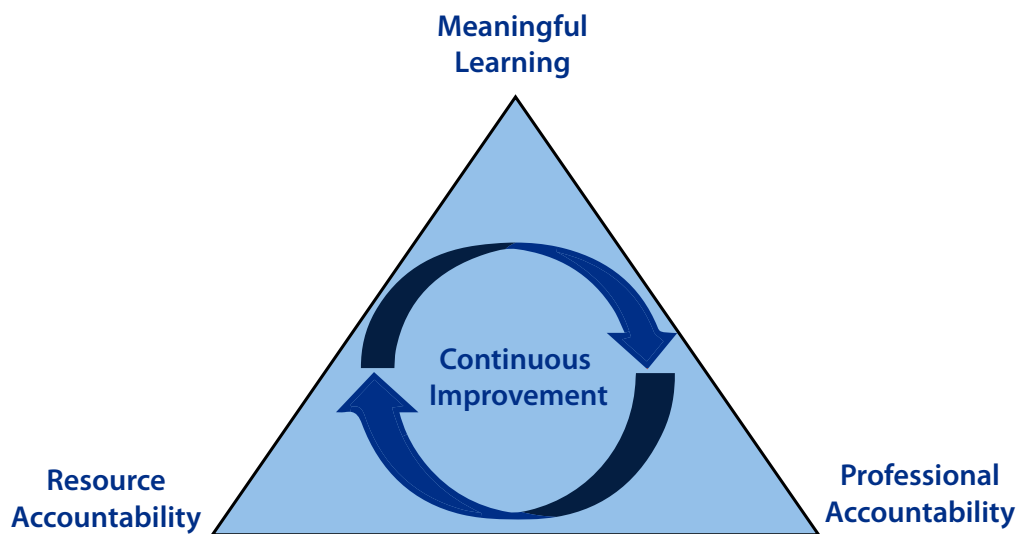
and productive evaluation, to ensure that educators deliver high-quality instructional and other services to their students, and

- **Performance accountability**, to ensure continuous improvement in the performance of schools across the state’s eight priority areas, plus other priorities that local communities choose. These priority areas include student achievement, student engagement, school climate, parent involvement, provision of basic services, curriculum access, and implementation of the state’s new standards.

### Creating a Continuously Improving System

With the simultaneous implementation of LCFF and LCAP, along with new standards, curriculum, and assessments,

**Figure 1: Key Elements of California’s Accountability System**



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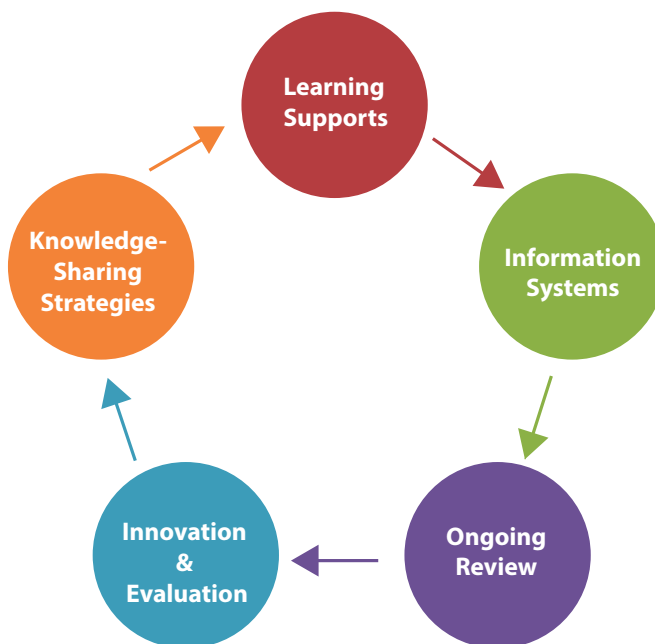
schools and school districts throughout California have a unique opportunity to reconfigure themselves as learning organizations, committed to continuous improvement and explicitly organized to support experimentation, evaluation, and organizational learning. Key features of a continuously improving education system include:

- **Learning supports** (materials and professional development) for the continuous improvement of curriculum, teaching, assessment, and student support strategies;
- **Information systems** for keeping track of what schools and districts are doing and to what effect;
- **Ongoing review** of school and district efforts and outcomes, including self-assessment and review by experts and peers;

- **Thoughtful innovation and evaluation**, so teachers, schools, and school districts experiment with promising policies and practices in ways that are a) informed by existing knowledge about those practices, b) designed to support serious evaluation of their implementation challenges and effects, and c) intended to support broader adoption of successful approaches and abandonment of unsuccessful ones;
- **Knowledge dissemination strategies** (through a central repository of research and exemplars, convenings, networks, and leveraged supports) so that successful practices become widely known and supported in their wider adoption / adaptation.

These features of a continuously improving system support and interact with one another, as suggested in Figure 2. For example, the results

**Figure 2: Elements of a Continuously Improving System**



of learning supports may be partly captured by the information system, which can in turn guide the ongoing review of strategies and outcomes. This review may suggest places where interventions are needed, or where careful experimentation accompanied by purposeful evaluation can make a difference in problem solving. The results of promising experiments and innovations can then be shared through a variety of avenues, producing a further set of learning supports. The cycle of continuous improvement proceeds accordingly.

Two key pillars are needed to support continuous improvement in California's education system. The first is an information and reporting system that can enable educators and state agencies to assess how things are working and how well students are learning. The second is an agency — the new California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) — that can create supports for learning, knowledge sharing, and evaluation, as well as for direct intervention and improvement in the work of schools and districts that are struggling to provide an adequate education. These two pillars are linked, as a productive role for CCEE will depend in substantial measure on a high-quality information system.

### Organizing and Reporting Information

An important key to a sustained process of continuous improvement is the regular review of data to guide diagnosis of local strengths and weaknesses and to identify strategies and practices to support improved performance. In California's new accountability system it will be important for districts and schools to easily access and use data on state and local priorities, and for county offices to have the capacity

to evaluate it in a reliable, consistent manner. To support these needs, and to assist struggling schools, the state will need to have school performance data that can be compared across schools and districts and aggregated on a statewide basis.

Rather than maintain competing systems and measures from earlier reforms, California should develop a coherent approach that places the state's eight priorities at the heart of a unified accountability system, augmented with local measures that reflect additional community goals and priorities. The state should replace the Academic Performance Index (API), the State Accountability Report Card (SARC), and the current on-line reporting system with a dashboard of measures that reports progress on the state's priorities.

Instead of seeking to rank schools and districts on a single measure, the dashboard will reveal how they are doing in relation to criteria for performance and how they are improving in different areas. The use of multiple measures is much more informative than a single index for planning and improvement efforts. Like the dashboard on a car — which provides indicators of speed, distance traveled, fuel, fluids, tire pressure, and more — the combination of measures provides information about where to look further in order to figure out how things are working and what may need attention.

An additional policy lever as the state moves toward a better aligned accountability system is the evaluation rubric that will be used in examining and assessing the LCAPs to determine when a school or district needs assistance. An on-line statewide reporting tool to support LCAPs could in-

corporate the rubric’s standards and provide available state data for most of the LCAP indicators. The dashboard could be further informed by a set of student, teacher, and parent surveys that include some common questions across the state in addition to questions of specific interest to particular local communities. The surveys could provide information about many of the state’s priorities, including school climate and services, without creating burdensome reporting requirements for schools and districts.

Local schools and districts could draw from this tool and add their own indicators and data for the remaining areas that are not amenable to comparable data or where local goals have been included in the LCAP. An example of what such a tool could look like, modeled on the Alberta (Canada) Results Report Card, can be seen at the end of this brief.

The primary use of the LCAP evaluation rubrics will be to provide guidelines against which schools and districts can assess their own progress to guide ongoing improvements. Some, however, will need additional help to be successful. The first line of technical assistance will be County Offices of Education (COEs) and Charter School Authorizers (CSAs), while the ultimate responsibility will rest with the CCEE.

### The California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE)

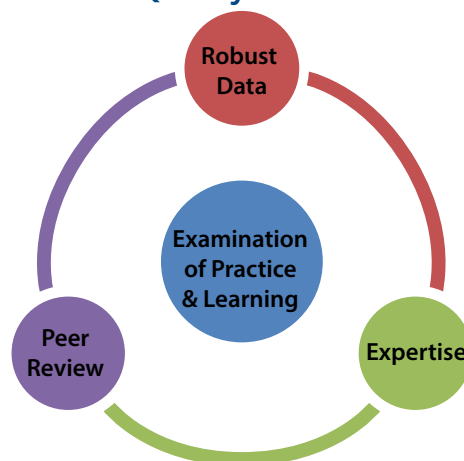
The cornerstone of California’s new accountability system is the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), not because the CCEE can or will do most of the work required to support continuous improvement in the system but because it is the agency that is ultimately responsible for

making the system work. Under the LCFF statute the CCEE’s main responsibility is to help develop and implement strategies to improve local performance in schools and school districts where action by the County Office or Charter School Authorizer has failed to launch a cycle of continuous improvement. This entails two main tasks.

First, the CCEE must provide *direct assistance* to schools, school districts, COEs and CSAs that are falling short of their goals and obligations, including both those that are identified by the SPI and those that request assistance on their own. To fulfill this responsibility the CCEE will have to conduct *skillful, diagnostic investigations* for schools that have requested or been identified for assistance. These investigations should be based on a *School Quality Review* process (see Figure 3) that engages experts and peers in school visits and consultation with local stakeholders about what is observed as well as school data.

The resulting diagnostic reports should identify weaknesses and problems and suggest context-sensitive strategies for remediation, with the goal of strengthening local

Figure 3: Elements of a School Quality Review



capacity for organizational learning and continuous improvement.

The School Quality Review (SQR) process would be used by the CCEE for schools that are identified as needing assistance or that volunteer for this support. It would be joined with an intensive support process in which the district and state identify and activate the human and other resources that are needed to enable the school to turn around its practices and students' performance.

The SQR could ultimately become available to all schools on a cyclic basis (typically every fifth year), and to schools that volunteer to participate more frequently because they want the additional help it can provide. To facilitate broader use, it might be useful to consider whether current school accreditation could be re-conceptualized to focus more directly on teaching and learning, with leadership from full-time trained experts who guide the work of the volunteer participants on teams that can, thus, be more consistent and effective.

Second, the CCEE must organize *assistance for improvement*. This could take several forms, including, as in some other states, the training and deployment of a cadre of Distinguished Educators — accomplished teachers, principals, and superintendents — who are intensively prepared and made available to work closely with schools and districts that are engaged in improvement or turnaround efforts. Another promising strategy is the creation of school or district pairings and networks, connecting schools that are struggling to more successful schools that face similar challenges. This approach to continuous

improvement has been pioneered in Shanghai, China and in the CORE districts in California. Networking of small groups of schools, combined with knowledge dissemination strategies, has also been used successfully to support improvement in other contexts, including England and Ontario.

In addition to these two core functions, the CCEE should work with others in the state — CDE, the County Offices, and other providers — to support *knowledge sharing and dissemination* of several kinds. In order to support continuous improvement in more systemic ways, rather than one school or district at a time, California will need to develop knowledge production and sharing strategies that can generate, validate, and share information about promising policies and practices. Specifically, the state will need to build its capacity to *compile and evaluate information* about practices, tools, and resources that show promise, and to share this information with County offices, districts, and schools.

In addition, in a state that has eliminated most of the infrastructure for professional learning, the CCEE will want to figure out what kind of *learning supports* it can contribute to the range of learning needs schools and districts will present. One especially urgent task is to provide guidance to schools and school districts about the quality and alignment of instructional materials and professional development programs that claim to advance the goals of new standards implementation. Other supports aimed at building local capacity could include assistance to districts in developing professional learning communities and stronger evaluation systems, including Peer Assistance and Review strategies. The CCEE should help to figure out how these



functions can best be managed in the state and how they can be phased in over time.

Three fundamental principles should guide decisions about organizational design of the new California Collaborative for Educational Excellence. First, the CCEE should employ a core professional staff to review intervention strategies and oversee technical assistance activities, while contracting with multiple partners to provide direct assistance to school districts and schools. Second, the CCEE should engage in partnerships that build on existing public infrastructure to the greatest possible extent. Finally, the design should be scalable, to enable the CCEE to respond

to new expectations and growing demand for assistance over time with a thoughtful phase-in process.

The unified long-term strategy described in this brief could enable California to move successfully from a compliance-driven system to one that is capable of system learning and continuous improvement.

### Endnotes

This conception of accountability is further described in Darling-Hammond, L., Wilhoit, G., & Pittenger, L. (2014). *Accountability for college and career readiness: Developing a new paradigm*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. <https://ed-policy.stanford.edu/publications/pubs/1257>

## Education Priorities Report

	State Priority Areas	Measured By	Current Year Result	Previous Year Result	3 Year Average	Analysis of Progress		
						Achievement	Improvement	Overall
<b>A. Learning Opportunities</b>	Basic Services	Credentialed Teacher Assignment						
		Instructional Materials						
		School Facilities						
	Implementation of State Standards	CA Standards Implementation						
	School Climate	Pupil Suspension rate						
		Pupil Expulsion rate						
		School Safety & Connectedness*						
Course Access	Full, rich curriculum							
<b>B. Learning Outcomes</b>	Pupil Achievement	SBAC assessments						
		College and Career Readiness**						
		English Learner reclassification rate						
		ELL Proficiency rate						
	Pupil Engagement	School Attendance rate						
		Chronic Absenteeism rate						
		Middle School Dropout rate						
		High School Dropout rate						
HS Graduation rate								
Other Student Outcomes	Completion of work-based learning experience							
<b>C. School/District Responsiveness</b>	Parental Involvement	Parent Involvement						
		Community Involvement						
<b>D. Other Locally Determined Goals</b>	Locally Determined Indicators	Locally Determined Measures						

\*Educator, student, and parent perceptions of school climate

\*\*Completion of a-g course sequence; completion of approved CTE course sequence; passage of AP, IB, or dual credit course standards; passage of industry credential or other performance standard for career / college readiness; met EAP college readiness standard.

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