CALIFORNIA**COLLABORATIVE** on District Reform

Meeting 24 Summary
Developing the LCAP: Engaging Communities, Aligning Strategies

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Almost since its inception, the California Collaborative on District Reform has engaged in efforts to increase local flexibility so that districts can better meet the needs of their students. These efforts began with a series of briefs produced for the *Getting From Facts to Policy* convening (hosted by EdSource in fall 2007), continued as a thread running through core meetings and policy activities over the next few years, and culminated with our work to inform and support the passage of the new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in 2013. The 24th meeting of the Collaborative brought members together at a critical stage in the early implementation of LCFF—the creation of districts' first Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs). Meeting sessions addressed the need for coherence across the LCAP, resource allocation decisions, and existing strategic directions within districts, as well as the challenges of authentically engaging the full range of community members in educational improvement efforts. These conversations—as well as deeper dives into concrete challenges facing specific school and district leaders—helped to reveal some of the early successes of LCFF, as well as some of the key challenges that California educators still need to address as they work to fulfill the promise of the new funding system.

Maintaining a Focus on Teaching and Learning

Conversations about the LCAP necessarily revolve around resource allocation. While money is important, participants emphasized throughout the meeting that the bottom line for school improvement should focus on success for students. As a result, any conversation about LCFF and the LCAP must fundamentally revolve around efforts to improve students' classroom learning opportunities. As one meeting participant stated, "We need to make sure the money is used to put good teachers in front of the students." A principal who

joined the meeting as a guest on the second day made the same point: "It's not about the money. It's about teaching and learning."

Meeting participants argued that attention to programmatic changes and the flow of resources must be accompanied by attention to quality. The temptation exists to increase funding for programs that are *designed* to improve opportunities for students targeted with LCFF funds, but with insufficient attention paid to whether or not these programs have been effective. As one individual observed, "Investing more money into what isn't working well now won't make it better." Another participant echoed this sentiment: "If it is not done well, it is a waste of time."

Several meeting participants advocated for the deliberate integration of Common Core implementation efforts and LCAP development. Since the state adopted the new standards in summer 2010, Collaborative meetings have highlighted the critical role the Common Core can play as a vehicle for developing and maintaining high-quality teaching and learning opportunities. The State Board of Education (SBE) has already defined the Common Core as one of the state's eight priority areas, but comments throughout the meeting suggested that identifying them as merely one of eight areas of focus understates the important role the standards play in driving district improvement. If the Common Core is the thread uniting efforts to improve teaching and learning and define more equitable opportunities for students, it is critical that district leaders make the connection between these standards and resource allocation decisions.

As districts develop their LCAPs, it is worth considering that investments in programs for students might achieve the greatest success if they also directly seek to address instructional quality. For example, one district's summer school programs—which provide extended learning opportunities to students in greatest need of academic support—also pair experienced and novice teachers to provide individuals in the early stages of their career with professional development experiences in the summer months.

Meeting participants also suggested that as comprehensive as the LCAP aims to be, successful strategies may need to extend beyond the specific elements of the template. For example, LCAP requirements do not address issues of school culture and climate that promote and facilitate student learning. Meeting participants nevertheless identified these as important conditions for success, and suggested that districts need to continue to prioritize them in their strategic planning efforts.

Finally, conversations during the meeting highlighted the need for resource allocation decisions to acknowledge the potential for unintended consequences. If new programs or funding streams create perverse incentives to access dollars or evade accountability at the expense of program quality, they might undermine efforts to improve outcomes for targeted students.

Building Capacity to Meet New Expectations

A fundamental change introduced through LCFF is the elimination of categorical funding streams and resulting expansion of local autonomy to make programmatic and resource allocation decisions. Meeting participants suggested that one of the most important results of this change—albeit one that is receiving insufficient attention in statewide dialogue—is the demand to improve capacity at all levels of the state's education systems.

LCFF Creates New Expectations for Administrators and Educators

An expansion in local autonomy that revolves around teaching and learning, with an emphasis on quality, calls for a major shift in the role of many central office administrators—as well as the state and county offices—from ensuring compliance to supporting successful performance. LCFF alters not only the ways in which the state distributes money, but also the way districts allocate central office resources to programs and services, how they distribute funds to schools, and how schools plan and allocate available resources to programs and services at the site level. The resulting expectations for people in the system may be dramatically different from traditional practice and will require learning at all levels.

In central offices, individuals formerly charged with ensuring compliance to categorical spending and programmatic requirements now find themselves in a position of providing support to school sites. This new role implies not only a change in specific job responsibilities but also a different mindset. People accustomed to issuing verdicts on school-level ideas according to clearly established criteria may now play a critical role in tolerating and supporting innovation, and in trying to incubate creativity while helping site leaders make decisions grounded in evidence.

Roles change at other levels as well. In districts that choose to pass on increased flexibility to school sites, principals may find themselves in positions of greater responsibility (and with greater discretion), but with no additional support to handle this expanded role. Similarly, county offices now bear responsibility for reviewing district LCAPs, but comments during the meeting suggested that a wide range of preparation for this role exists. Community members, meanwhile, now have an explicit role in district-level planning, which shifts the focus of many established groups from putting pressure on central office decision makers to collaborating with district leaders and other community organizations to create solutions and strategies. While many individuals need to step into new responsibilities, however, the major transition at other levels—including at the state level and in some portion of the central offices—involves adjusting to a more restrained role that allows local leaders to make decisions that were prescribed under the previous funding system.

New Expectations Require Improvements in Capacity

Capacity building is an extremely important component of implementation because of the changes brought about by the LCFF. Education systems will succeed only to the extent that individuals within them master the demands of their evolving roles. This transition is

difficult, however, and it will take time. As one meeting participant observed, "We're really good at telling people what to do. We're not good at telling them how. If there's no capacity building, we could be dumping all these new resources into things that aren't going to work." This capacity building needs to happen at all levels, from the central offices to schools and community groups, as well as at the county and state levels.

As educators throughout the state embrace the commitment to improve capacity, an important opportunity exists for individuals and systems to learn from one another. The SBE seeks to learn from district experiences so that it can refine regulations and expectations to best address the needs and challenges faced at the local level. Districts can accelerate their growth by learning from the successes and struggles of peers going through the same process. Just as importantly, district leaders can learn from principals about the supports central offices should provide (and the obstacles they should remove) to maximize effective planning at school sites. School leaders can also learn from one another, particularly those who are navigating the opportunities and challenges associated with expanded autonomy.

Opportunities may also exist to leverage the initial support of external providers who have experience in training and supporting principals or developing site-level budgeting tools. Outside expertise can help inform districts in the transition period when they are building capacity. Some participants noted, however, that this approach may be politically challenging. As districts continue to recover from a period when dollars were taken away from the system, employees and community members may object to spending resources to secure support from outside the district.

Tolerating Inevitable Early Stumbles

Meeting participants emphasized the need for stakeholders around the state to tolerate the inevitable stumbles that will occur as part of the LCFF implementation process. Building capacity will take time and sustained effort, and although the new system creates space for innovation, some of the new ideas will fail. Meeting dialogue suggested that the legislature and the general public do not have a full understanding of the capacity gaps and learning curve that districts must navigate under LCFF. Moreover, a call for tolerance and understanding may not be well received in communities where people have already watched districts stumble for years. As a result, meeting participants emphasized the need to manage expectations, suggesting that stakeholders need to support districts—and districts need to support one another—through the process. As one individual stated, "We need permission to stumble, but no one is granted permission to fail… We need to make sure that we don't let others fail."

Tolerance for stumbles is especially important given public expectations for progress in the wake of LCFF. Advocacy efforts for both Proposition 30 and LCFF built on promises of new resources for schools and better outcomes for students. Community groups pushed for new policies that would increase funding for their schools, and elected officials responded to these calls for change that by revamping a funding system previously driven by legislative initiatives. Having acted in good faith to redesign the state's funding system in a way that

should improve student results, these individuals and groups have high expectations that, having had categorical restrictions removed, schools now have the necessary conditions to achieve success. It will therefore be important to help these constituencies understand and support what a complete picture of what progress will entail.

Meaningfully Engaging the Community

One of the most high profile elements of the LCAP template is the call for community engagement in district planning processes, yet community involvement in education policy is nothing new. Proposition 30 and LCFF achieved success in large part through the advocacy efforts of community groups. At the same time, districts have their own histories of—and infrastructures for—community engagement, which puts each district at a starting point for LCFF that may be unique from its peers. Although meeting participants were consistent in the view that engagement should focus on student learning and a conversation framed around assets and investments (not necessarily budget line items), wide variation across districts means that notions of "community" and "engagement" may differ, and that different districts may require distinct approaches. A panel of representatives from community groups and advocacy organizations in Los Angeles and from across the state helped draw out some key ideas about community engagement.

Who Is the Community?

The LCAP calls for "the meaningful engagement of parents, pupils, and other stakeholders" as a critical element of the budget process, but when stakeholders translate the call for community engagement, the word "community" can mean different things to different audiences. Community involvement in LCFF—particularly state-level participation in passing the new policy and framing the parameters of the LCAP—has been substantial. Meeting participants cautioned against the assumption, however, that a district's community is fully represented by the people and organizations that participate in SBE meetings. Some players have more agency than others, and parents are often the most important and yet least involved voice. Community engagement, then, means not only collaborating with the organized groups within a district or the state overall, but also reaching out to parents who may not be informed or feel empowered. As one meeting participant explained, "You have to get to the silent majority."

Meeting participants also argued for the importance of soliciting and incorporating students' voices. Active student outreach has been a component of some districts' LCAP planning processes, and leaders from those systems described this strategy as yielding some of the most powerful and genuine feedback they received. "Of all the engagement we did," one district leader relayed, "I think the most meaningful ones were the ones where we went directly to youth."

What Is Engagement?

There are many reasons to engage a community. Community groups can contribute to the development of constituencies and advocacy efforts (as happened in support of the passage of the LCFF and the refinement of the SBE's LCAP guidance), provide policy analysis, and

help decision makers understand the implications of their decisions. Engagement can also help build shared understanding among stakeholders. In the context of LCFF, community engagement can help district leaders learn more about community priorities and the obstacles that stand in the way of achieving shared goals, while community groups can come to understand the constraints that shape district decisions.

Framing Conversations Around Student Needs

These reasons suggest that community engagement is, itself, a goal. However, just as resource allocation decisions must align with goals for teaching and learning (and not compliance to regulations), meeting participants emphasized that engagement needs to focus on leveraging assets to meet student needs. Community members and groups might contribute most effectively as partners in making sound, evidence-based decisions. Referencing the LCAP requirement for districts to work with local stakeholders, one community representative observed, "It's not about looking at the [regulations]; it's about looking at data." Some districts shared their approaches to this, including heavy use of surveys and open meetings to understand priorities and gather input and ideas, followed by an evidence-based selection process that ensures that the strategies ultimately selected are those that have been shown to make a difference for students.

In order to work effectively with community groups, meeting participants raised the importance of framing conversations appropriately. California's tradition of categorical programs has contributed to a tendency to talk about funding in terms of budget line items, but districts must instead find ways to frame conversations around student learning. An orientation that focuses on budget line items can prompt stakeholders to take an adversarial stance in which they lay claim to specific dollar allocations in what is perceived as a zero-sum game. A more productive conversation centers around assets—not only monetary assets, but the skills, resources, and connections that all partners bring to bear to improve educational opportunities for students. In the end, community engagement in local education decisions will be most effective when all stakeholders see their mutual involvement as a collective benefit and a shared responsibility.

Leveraging the LCAP to Build Lasting Relationships

Conversation also highlighted that the LCAP development process provides an opportunity to build lasting relationships with parents and community members. Districts who reach out to stakeholders only to comply with SBE regulations miss an opportunity to leverage the strengths of community groups, and they risk fracturing local support for LCFF. To build these relationships effectively, however, districts must recognize and address barriers to participation. Translation and transportation services for parents, for example, may be essential preconditions for effective engagement, and they will require attention from district leaders if they wish to value and incorporate parent perspectives.

Addressing Community at the School Level

Conversations about community engagement often suggest that responsibility resides within the central office, in part because the LCFF distributes funds through districts, and

in part because state guidelines call on districts to engage stakeholders in the LCAP process. Meeting dialogue emphasized, however, that partnership and collaboration is also critical at the school level. This may especially be true in large districts, where diversity across the geographic regions of a district's attendance boundaries may mean that the student population, student needs, and organized advocacy organizations vary widely across a district's schools. Effective engagement at the school level can help ensure that school programming and resource allocation decisions meet the needs of students in ways that the central office may not be well positioned to accomplish.

Building Community Capacity

Meeting participants also noted that effective engagement requires capacity building within and across community groups. Building coalitions and finding areas of convergence across organizations will help these groups maximize their effectiveness. Likewise, building capacity to evaluate effectiveness and suggest approaches that are linked to student achievement can help community organizations partner more effectively with districts.

In sum, meeting dialogue emphasized that community engagement is complex and multidimensional. It is political, social, and cultural, and, as a result, it may require different approaches that reflect the realities of each local situation. Nevertheless, LCFF creates an opportunity to pursue engagement in more effective ways, not only to develop stronger LCAPs, but also to foster relationships that can sustain and elevate district efforts over time.

What Are the Challenges?

Validating Contributions While Managing Expectations

In a context where new policies have created new expectations for involvement in planning, potential disappointment looms if the final outcomes of policy decisions do not match the ideas of the people and organizations that participated in their development. Meeting participants noted that engagement does not always mean getting everything one asks for. As one person observed, "People think they're heard until they don't get their way." Dialogue therefore highlighted the need to make and share decisions in a way that validates the contributions of all community members, regardless of the final outcome.

Building Trust

Meeting participants also recognized that existing histories and relationships within each local context will impact a district's approaches to engagement. Districts with long histories of trusting relationships might leverage those existing connections to support a high-quality LCAP. Alternatively, districts that have operated without much community interaction may see LCFF as an opportunity to establish and grow collaborative relationships. Districts with low levels of trust and adversarial histories, however, may struggle to work together effectively, or to continue collaborating productively through areas of disagreement. Nevertheless, community engagement around the LCAP could provide a means of addressing some of these relationships and beginning the process of

moving forward. As one individual expressed, "How you can gain that trust in places where it's broken is perhaps one of the potentials of the Local Control Funding Formula."

Maintaining a Constituency of Ongoing Support

These challenges point to the political dynamics of community engagement around LCFF. Much of the political support for Proposition 30 and LCFF came from community groups—including higher wealth communities—that do not stand to benefit from immediate funding increases. If the state, counties, and districts cannot foster buy-in among a range of constituents, the long-term political sustainability of LCFF could become tenuous. District planning and communication efforts must therefore validate the perspectives—and address the priorities—of a range of stakeholders. As one meeting participant declared, "This has to be seen as a win-win for everyone." In one district, for example, leaders have dedicated 80 percent of their funds to meeting the specific needs of low-performing schools, but they are also investing additional money in all of their high schools, and in extending music programs in the third grade to all elementary schools. By creating opportunities for all individuals to benefit from LCFF, district leaders hope to build a sense of shared purpose and benefit among educators and community members that will be critical in terms of maintaining support in the future.

Identifying and Addressing Site-Level Opportunities and Challenges

One of the hallmarks of LCFF is the increased flexibility districts have to make resource allocation decisions. Many districts, in turn, are passing on expanded autonomy to school sites—some going so far as to ask individual school leaders to complete their own site-level LCAP. As such, the changes introduced through LCFF have particular implications for school sites. Five principals representing a range of schools in Los Angeles Unified School District joined the meeting to share some of their experiences. Their reflections identified issues specific to their school sites, but they also echoed some of the key themes raised at other times during the meeting.

The Balance of Flexibility and Direction

The increased autonomy provided to districts through LCFF comes with a responsibility to meet the new policy's equity goals by ensuring that added resources serve those students in greatest need. In cases where districts pass on flexibility to schools, meeting participants emphasized that a similar balance is critical at the site level, and that the shifts in both autonomy and responsibility will require substantial supports. As one person explained, "The balance that needs to be struck is not flexibility or not flexibility, it's flexibility and responsibility… We're just at the edge of understanding the lift you have to provide when you balance flexibility and responsibility." One element of this is the balance between flexibility (where school leaders can make decisions they feel are in the best interest of their students) and equity (where high-quality learning opportunities exist for all students in all schools). For example, as one person stated, "You can't decide not to enroll Latino students in A-G classes."

Meeting participants also raised issues about the appropriate parameters of autonomy and the conditions under which districts might grant it. At the school level, answers to the question of whether schools should earn autonomy through effective decision making and strong student performance, or whether schools perform best once they have already received autonomy, might fall along a continuum and lead districts in different directions.

Site-Level Challenges Introduced Through LCFF

Principals suggested that the LCAP timeline has increased the difficulty of the budgeting process. Working on accelerated timelines under changed expectations makes effective planning problematic. To help combat this, principals and other meeting participants argued that communication must be regular, clear, and multidirectional. Principals must receive clear direction about timelines and expectations in order to meet districts' new expectations. Meeting participants also emphasized the need for districts to create channels to receive feedback from schools so they can understand and address challenges at the site level. Opportunities for communication among schools are also important, especially as a means of providing principals an opportunity to learn from colleagues that may already have experience with some level of autonomy.

Principals also raised the capacity challenges associated with managing these new responsibilities. Even without the additional planning responsibilities introduced through LCFF, principals are already expending substantial time and energy to manage the transition to the Common Core, and to navigate the logistical and capacity-related issues associated with the Smarter Balanced field tests. Initiative overload threatens to put principals in a position where they are unable to devote sufficient time to any one of these endeavors. Moreover, this increased level of responsibility comes on the heels of budget cuts that have forced principals to lead their schools without the support of assistant principals, secretaries, and counselors.

Opportunities to Address Site-Level Challenges

Defining Appropriate Parameters for Autonomy

To help achieve the appropriate balance of autonomy and direction, the meeting highlighted the need to establish clearly defined parameters for expected behavior, within which discretion and innovation can take place. Several meeting participants voiced support for a model unfolding in one district, where the central office has developed a matrix of strategies for sites to consider when developing their own programmatic and resource allocation plans. The central office vets these strategies to ensure that they build on a strong body of research and are appropriate for the students before giving schools the ability to make decisions based on data from their own site. A district leader told the story of one school, for example, that had elected to eliminate its popular International Baccalaureate program—a decision the central office supported because it was consistent with the data on student performance and other more promising strategies.

Promoting Ongoing Attention to Budgeting

To better position schools to budget and manage their sites effectively, principals also identified some key shifts that need to continue to take place. Budgeting needs to be an ongoing conversation. If schools truly hope to integrate resource allocation with strategic and programmatic decisions, conversations about the budget need to take place on an ongoing basis, not simply at the time when schools submit their completed budget to the central office.

Removing Red Tape

Principals also suggested that the shift from compliance to support in the district office will play a major role in creating the conditions for school success. School leaders described the frustrations under the current system of battling red tape and expending unnecessary energy merely navigating the bureaucracy of various district regulations, and called for districts to remove obstacles to success. For example, principals explained that restrictions on vendor contracts or purchasing avenues—often the byproduct of district-level contracts intended to create consistency across the district—often fail to come with the promised levels of technical support, and they restrict principals with limited funding to options that are more expensive than those they could have found independently. As one principal shared, "We'd like to see more of that shift from 'No, you can't do that' to 'How can we help you do that?'"

Providing Tools and Training

Principals and other meeting participants also identified some concrete opportunities for districts to support site-level efforts. Providing budget templates can give site leaders a strong starting point for managing their own budgets, thereby avoiding a situation in which every person needs to start from scratch. Participants also advocated for district training that extends beyond the nuts and bolts of budgeting—which characterizes most current efforts—to focus on the kinds of strategic planning LCFF calls for. Finally, meeting participants pushed for networking opportunities among principals. Site leaders who can share struggles and successes with their peers can accelerate their own learning and improve the overall quality of work across the district.

Research on Conditions for Success

To build on some of the personal observations of individuals involved in site-level work, Karen Hawley Miles—president and executive director of Education Resource Strategies—shared some conditions for success that she has identified in her research on (and in support of) school-level budgeting work. First, she noted that districts need to be clear about how flexibility and autonomy fit into a broader strategy for improving school performance. Research suggests that if flexibility in funding allocation is not accompanied by flexibility in hiring, firing, and organization of the school day, it is unlikely to achieve any real impact. Second, districts and schools need to integrate budget planning and staffing—a process that might require redesigning existing timelines. Third, districts need to determine the conditions under which schools receive flexibility, because existing capacity and school performance matter. Fourth, schools need differentiated levels of support that

respond to their capacity levels and the specific challenges they face. Finally, schools need models that demonstrate how to take on the budgeting work effectively, as well as supports to take on this work, all of which takes time.

Recognizing Additional Tensions and Concerns

Conversation throughout the meeting identified some key tensions associated with LCFF implementation. The balance between local autonomy and central control requires careful navigation by the central office. The moral imperative (and state direction) to direct funds to students in need, while maintaining goodwill and future support within the community, represents another important consideration for districts. The general public has high hopes for new funds and better outcomes, and creating realistic expectations and encouraging tolerance for a developing process will increase LCFF's prospects for success. Beyond these examples, two additional concerns emerged from the two-day meeting.

Equity Is Not Enough

Proposition 30 and LCFF have created excitement throughout California about new levels of funding that begin to address the disastrous effects of the state's fiscal crisis. Flexibility and increased support for students in need help create the conditions necessary for districts to more effectively improve student learning. However, despite the positive conditions (and feelings) generated by these substantial state-level changes, meeting participants pointed out that the overall funding levels in the state are still wildly insufficient to meet student needs. For all the problems it addresses, LCFF does not put the state in a position to support the kind of education that children deserve. One individual made this point particularly eloquently: "Equity isn't enough. What needs to be enough is excellence." Even as districts seek to make the most of the opportunities afforded by LCFF, ongoing attention to increasing overall funding for education must remain a priority.

Labor-Management Relations Pose Particular Challenges

LCFF regulations make clear that the weighted supplementary and concentration grants allocated to districts must go toward meeting the needs of the students that generate them. Context matters, however. New funding is entering school systems on the heels of a financial crisis that led to the elimination of teaching positions and stagnation of teacher salaries. Many teacher unions see an increase in funding as an opportunity to make up for the sacrifices teachers made in response to the state's funding problems. District leaders face the challenge, then, of aligning resource allocation with student learning goals and adhering to the directives of the funding system, while also finding ways to fairly compensate teachers for their instrumental roles in facilitating student learning. Meeting participants suggested that leaders in districts and county offices (which will review district LCAPs) who are not prepared for these politically challenging conversations and decisions may need support to navigate these waters.

Highlighting Early Impressions of LCFF Implementation

The discussion around these key themes, as well as additional conversations that took place throughout the meeting, revealed some early overall impressions about LCFF and the LCAP process.

LCFF Can Impact District Practice in Positive Ways

LCFF appears to have genuinely impacted approaches to planning and resource allocation in Collaborative member districts. District leaders who have long argued for increased local flexibility suggested that the new regulations will, in fact, allow districts to be more coherent in their use of funds (while maintaining a fundamental focus on teaching and learning in any resource allocation decision). Reflections during the meeting also indicated that districts are examining existing strategies—even in cases where strong planning already existed—rather than simply repackaging prior approaches to meet the requirements of the LCAP template. As one district leader explained, "It has forced us to rethink our own strategies and to bring in new tools to support our sites, our teachers, [and] our administrators." In other words, these districts are not using the LCAP as merely an exercise in compliance, but rather as a tool to aid in the process of continuous reflection and improvement.

Important Gaps Exist in Data Systems and Capacity

LCFF has also revealed many gaps in the state's data systems, as well as gaps in the capacity of many individuals charged with leading implementation efforts. The new funding policy calls for attention to foster youth, for example, yet existing data systems are currently ill equipped to identify these students. One participant also noted that although LCAP regulations demand specific planning to meet the needs of foster youth, all foster youth are also identified as "low income" in current data systems. The result is that while districts are increasing attention to meeting the needs of foster youth, the current systems for resource allocation and student identification do not actually generate additional dollars to facilitate these efforts.

Gaps in capacity also exist throughout education systems. The increased flexibility provided through LCFF implies a new role for the state and districts—one that requires them to shift from compliance to support—and individuals will require substantial training and support to adapt to their roles within this new system. This evolution will take time, however, and meeting participants emphasized the importance of tolerating stumbles as people at all levels struggle, learn, and improve.

District Contexts for LCFF Implementation Vary Widely

Despite shared challenges and promising ideas associated with LCFF implementation, the meeting made clear that the local contexts each district must address vary widely. The levels of LCFF awareness inside and outside the central office, the level of engagement from a range of community members, the emphasis given to LCAP development relative to other district priorities (like Common Core implementation), and the capacity to navigate change can all look very different depending on the local context. Of course, shared challenges exist

across the state, and common strategies will undoubtedly emerge through the implementation process. It is also true, however, that the challenges associated with LCFF implementation in one environment may be very different in another context. As such, it is important that the supports and ideas that unfold can be adapted to suit these different contexts.

Effective Communication Will Play a Critical Role in LCFF's Prospects for Success

Conversations about engaging the community, managing expectations, and navigating the political challenges around LCAP development all call for conscious attention to messaging and strategic communication. LCFF allows for more coherent planning, focuses resources on the students who need them most, and seeks to engage community members in meaningful ways, and it therefore provides school systems with an opportunity to have the right kinds of conversation. Nevertheless, without a strong communication plan, expectations for economic windfalls or questions about what is coming to "*my* school" can dominate the conversation.

Meeting participants argued that, as with resource allocation, messaging around LCFF needs to center on students. Instead, it has often focused on spending, and dialogue frequently revolves around the protection of programs and jobs that provide adults in the system with greater levels of comfort and security. Alluding to this, one individual posed a question that applies to many district planning contexts: "Is this a budget for adults or is it a budget for kids?" As conversation threads repeatedly revealed, framing dialogue in this way (i.e., focusing on the adults rather than the students) can distract from the decisions and outcomes that matter most—those that revolve around teaching and learning and improved student performance.

Many comments during the meeting suggested that information around the Common Core needs to drive everything. Such information can anchor the conversation about student learning, and it can help to demonstrate that LCFF is ultimately a tool to help achieve a more targeted set of goals for students. Meeting participants noted, however, that levels of Common Core awareness vary widely across districts. In local contexts where the new standards are not yet on the radar, they can be perceived as a distraction, especially in communities with low levels of trust in the central office. The Common Core, some may feel, is merely an attempt to draw attention away from critical conversations about funding. Effectively messaging the Common Core, then, requires an emphasis on why it matters to parents. Focusing on what the Common Core is, or selling it as one of the eight statewide priorities identified in the LCAP guidelines, will not be nearly as persuasive or effective as emphasizing why it will help students prepare for the outcomes parents care about—entry to and success in college and career.

Meeting participants also recognized the nature of LCFF conversations that are already underway. The narrative around LCFF is one of increased funding and flexibility, and many individuals and groups seek a piece of the pie to ensure the protection of their own interests. In some ways, this narrative is the byproduct of successful political marketing efforts. The education community and its allies successfully secured support for

Proposition 30 and LCFF because they promised more money for schools. The reality, however, is that this will not be true for all schools. Just as communication needs to help build tolerance for stumbles during implementation, it also needs to reflect the reality of the implementation timeline. The general public may not understand the timeline for gradual funding increases or the relative increases that LCFF promises for students from low-income families, English learners, and foster youth. Strong communication efforts can help mitigate this information gap.

Meeting participants suggested that transparency is important not only as a communications strategy writ large, but also as a way to mitigate oversized expectations. Districts have solicited input from community members about the programs that can best meet student needs, but they also need to be clear about how much money is actually available and how much it would cost to implement community recommendations. In many cases, districts will not be able to meet the hopes or expectations of all stakeholders. However, transparency can help bridge the gap between initial expectations and reality, and it can help people feel heard, even if they do not get everything they requested.

Meeting dialogue highlighted not only the content of communication, but also the ways in which this communication needs to take place. Participants emphasized, for example, the importance of multidirectional communication. District leaders need to work not only to inform their schools and local communities, but also to gather information from school sites about the supports they need. In addition, district leaders must employ differentiated and multifaceted communication strategies that acknowledge and address multiple audiences with distinct access points, background knowledge, and priorities. Just as there is no uniform "community," there is no uniform message that will speak effectively to all of a district's target audience.

Next Steps for the Collaborative

Meeting participants suggested that many of the key themes that emerged during this meeting have the potential to communicate important perspectives to the broader field of educators engaged in LCFF implementation. Collaborative staff plan to highlight some of the most salient themes in a series of short policy briefs that can contribute to this effort. In addition, general agreement among meeting participants suggested that ongoing Common Core implementation, especially with regard to capacity building, is likely to be a primary concern for districts for the foreseeable future, and it therefore represents a natural theme to connect the next several Collaborative meetings. As always, resources from this and previous meetings, updates about Collaborative members, and information about upcoming events are available on our website at www.cacollaborative.org.