

January 7, 2022

Dear State Superintendent Thurmond and Members of the California State Board of Education:

We are writing as the outgoing and incoming chairs of the California Collaborative on District Reform to applaud the state's commitment to and investment in community schools and to share a few thoughts on the promise and challenges of implementing that commitment at the local level, particularly in the current context. For the past 15 years, we have worked with a diverse collection of district leaders, researchers, policymakers, support providers, advocates, and funders to better understand and support improvement in school systems across the state. During this time, this group of stakeholders and leaders has explored state policy development and implementation to consider how policy can foster high quality student learning at the local level. We believe that lessons from this work might inform the implementation of the California Community Schools Partnership Program so as to increase the likelihood of realizing its admirable goals.*

The Context

As 2022 begins, California educators, students, families, and communities continue to navigate a state of prolonged and volatile crisis. The spread of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 has compounded the challenge of ensuring safe and healthy learning environments for students and adults. Meanwhile, too many students continue to suffer from the lingering and ongoing effects of the pandemic—not just academically, but socially, emotionally, and mentally. These obstacles to learning and general well-being are especially pronounced for students and families who have been historically underserved in our school systems.

In the face of these challenges, California's education system is experiencing an unprecedented window of financial abundance through state and federal recovery funds as well as new resources to support approaches like expanded learning, universal transitional kindergarten, and community schools. Despite this apparent opportunity, however, the reality is that local school districts—already strained to the very limits of their capacity—are being inundated in ways that make coherence and effectiveness across these efforts difficult to achieve.

The Promise of a Community Schools Approach

We support California's investment in community schools because it emphasizes both the holistic and coordinated nature of improvement efforts that can make a difference for students. Whether they use the label or not, many districts have operated community schools for several years. During the pandemic, that approach has become more systemic as districts and their partners have facilitated widespread and equitable access to meals, childcare, computing devices, broadband connections, and COVID-19 testing and vaccination while also creating learning opportunities that transcend school walls.

* Please note that the views expressed in this letter are our own and may not represent the perspectives of individual California Collaborative members or our funders.

A community schools approach recognizes what these districts have learned: that students learn best when they feel safe and valued; that learning happens everywhere, not just in school settings; that families are instrumental to student success; and that organizations throughout the community play key roles in helping students to maximize their potential. At a time when educators are overwhelmed by personal and professional pressures, it is clearer than ever that school systems cannot do this alone.

The Challenge

At the November 2021 meeting of the California Collaborative on District Reform, members and guests emphasized two key factors that are vital to the effectiveness of any state policy effort, including community schools:

- **Coherence and responsiveness:** The work of a school system should be driven by coherence around a clear vision that reflects the priorities and concrete realities of the district and its community.
- **Sustainability:** Improvement requires sustained and focused attention over time so that it is embedded into and supported by all the individuals and organizations who foster student success.

The meeting also identified several aspects of the current environment that—coupled with past patterns of policymaking in the state—could undercut the potential for achieving and sustaining a coherent and responsive approach at the local level. A wave of separate funding streams, for example, each with specific requirements for achieving siloed programmatic goals, can lead to fragmentation and compliance-oriented responses rather than thoughtful integration of those goals and funds into the ongoing work of the district and its schools. The infusion of one-time monies with short timelines for implementation can lead to short-sighted resource allocation decisions that encumber budgets down the road and diffuse attention in unproductive ways. This is particularly problematic in the current situation, in which staffing shortages make it difficult to fill needed positions despite the allocation of new funds and short-term solutions undermine the development of relationships that are so critical to effective and sustained improvement.

But if the community schools grant awards and technical assistance to those schools are designed in a way that fosters coherence and long-term commitment to systemic change, they can help districts resist pressures to fragment their improvement efforts to align with specific funding streams or grant requirements rather than an overall district vision. Grants and supports can provide the space and time for investing in long-term relationships rather than rush to meet surface-level, transactional commitments to grant requirements. Design and implementation decisions can help districts and their partners harness human capital and expertise rather than become overwhelmed by unmet capacity needs. Measures of success can honor system transformation and student experience rather than compliance with a set of programmatic requirements. These metrics can focus everyone's attention on the same key goals—to keep everyone in the community rowing in the same direction—rather than establish different expectations for different programs.

Suggested Considerations

In light of these opportunities and concerns, we encourage the California Department of Education to take into account three considerations in finalizing the details of the community schools grant program:

1. **Develop a Request for Applications that encourages and rewards focus, coherence, and alignment with existing efforts.** Grant requirements and scoring rubrics should reflect and align with existing expectations for the Local Control Accountability Plan, as well as for emerging planning

requirements for expanded learning opportunities, universal transitional kindergarten, and other aspects of the state’s P–12 education system. Moreover, metrics of successful student opportunities and outcomes in community schools should reflect the goals for the state’s school system overall.

2. **Align technical assistance efforts for community schools with other support systems.** Any supports provided for community schools work should connect to the statewide system of support, as well as to the technical assistance being developed for other state initiatives like expanded learning opportunities and universal transitional kindergarten. Because most school systems and state agencies do not have a deep experiential base with community schools to draw on, the state should be expansive in the kinds of organizations that school leaders can turn to for expertise—including community-based organizations, higher education, and other districts.
3. **Look for ways to remove barriers that prevent community schools from working effectively.** Successful collaboration across youth-serving organizations often requires data sharing, joint facility use, and fluid access to financial resources, yet bureaucratic obstacles frequently complicate district efforts to partner with others. The greatest needs of school systems now are likely to have less to do with new requirements than with removing obstacles to partnership.

Eight years ago, the California legislature ushered in an entirely new educational paradigm when it passed the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). LCFF was a direct response to years of categorical proliferation that siloed improvement efforts, steadily increased administrative burden, and undermined district efforts to establish the coherence necessary to thrive. The community schools model has the potential to facilitate a coherent and aligned approach to fostering student success within districts and across their communities. This fundamentally reflects a view of schools as responsive to and tailored to the assets and needs of a local community—the very best of “local control.” We urge the state to approach its community schools commitment in a way that honors and creates the conditions for it to succeed.

Sincerely,



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