

Postelection Virtual Meeting Summary
Understanding Our Current Reality and Preparing for the Future:
Processing the 2024 Election

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***Note:** This meeting summary was developed as a resource for members of the California Collaborative on District Reform. We are making this document publicly available in an effort to share the work of the Collaborative more broadly and to inform the dialogue and decisions of educators throughout the state. This summary does not, however, contain the background and contextual information that might otherwise accompany a product created for the general public. For more information about the meeting and other Collaborative activities, please visit www.cacollaborative.org.*

In December 2024, members of the California Collaborative on District Reform convened virtually to discuss what the election results might mean for the work of K–12 public education in California, to foster a shared understanding of the path ahead, and to identify the priorities to best serve students and their families in the years to come.

The meeting started with a set of presentations from four individuals who shared their thoughts about key opportunities and challenges facing K–12 public education and ways in which policy developments that follow the November 2024 elections might shape that work moving forward. The second half of the meeting provided individuals with the opportunity to break into role-alike groups to share their reactions and to discuss priorities and next steps.

Understanding the Current Landscape of K–12 Public Education in California

Four presenters began the meeting by sharing insights about the current and upcoming landscape for California K–12 public education.

Challenges Facing the System

Independent of any election results, several critical challenges continue to shape the work of K–12 educators in California. Staffing shortages have been a growing problem for multiple years but were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and are particularly pronounced in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM);

¹ Thanks to Emily Agopian, Crystal Aguilera, and Marina Castro for taking careful notes to make this summary possible.

special education; and career and technical education (CTE). Declining student enrollment is another pressing issue, with many districts having already experienced substantial drops in enrollment and projections indicating a loss of an additional 500,000 students statewide by 2032. Curricular challenges also loom large, as the focus on evidence-based reading and the implementation of a new math framework necessitate significant professional development, resource alignment, and stakeholder buy-in. Meanwhile, navigating approaches to assessment and accountability in ways that align with teaching and learning goals in these subject areas is a key area for attention. The rise of artificial intelligence and digital technologies introduces new opportunities for teachers and students but presents both logistical hurdles for classroom implementation and ethical concerns that must be addressed. Finally, funding concerns remain a persistent challenge due to California's reliance on unstable state revenues, insufficient per-pupil spending, and Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funding cliffs.

In light of these challenges, two critical questions emerge for the California education community: How can California address these issues effectively, ensuring the well-being of students and families without overburdening educators and the education system? Furthermore, how can California craft a policy agenda that is both inclusive and future-oriented to address these diverse and complex challenges?

Implications of Federal Election Results Education Policy in California

Federal plays an important role in shaping the work of districts and schools, but there are limits to its influence. Notably, federal dollars account for approximately 14% of state education budgets, primarily through Title I dollars for low-income students and Pell Grants for postsecondary education. Beyond funding, the federal government wields influence through regulatory responsibilities.

Projections from Education First illustrate the range of likely and possible federal policy changes that could arise with a new administration and Congress. Potential shifts under the Trump administration might include changes to Title IX protections, particularly for transgender students; modifications to civil rights enforcement; and adjustments to federal reporting requirements. Cuts to federal funding, rollbacks of civil rights protections, and efforts to advance school choice initiatives through vouchers or tax policies are also anticipated. Additionally, during the campaign, then-candidate Trump announced his intention to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education, aiming to transfer educational responsibilities back to individual states. This proposal raises concerns about potential negative impacts on marginalized students. Given that eliminating the Department of Education would require congressional approval, it appears unlikely that it will be completely abolished.

Attention to immigrant students and families is likely to grow through changes to immigration policy enforcement. Potential challenges to established precedents, such as the Supreme Court's *Plyler v. Doe* decision guaranteeing public education for undocumented students, could have far-reaching effects. Additionally, voter suppression's impact on electoral outcomes and civil rights enforcement are major concerns under the current administration. In response, states like California are taking proactive steps to

protect immigrant and undocumented students through legislative measures and resource distribution, aiming to counter federal policy shifts.^[1]²

Culture wars, including book bans and discriminatory policies, continue to shape education policy debates. States like California have enacted legislation to safeguard inclusive education, positioning themselves as leaders in countering these trends. However, rapid economic changes necessitate redesigning schools to better prepare students for evolving job markets. Career pathways, STEM advancements, and updating outdated curricular frameworks like A–G requirements to include skills such as computer science are priorities that could merit more focused attention. Despite anticipated federal budget cuts that may strain state resources, bipartisan opportunities exist to invest in school redesign, career preparation, and tax reforms benefiting children and educators.

Career pathways represent a rare bipartisan opportunity for collaboration between political parties. Investments in school redesign and strategic tax reforms could support educators and students alike. By fostering a responsive, future-ready education system, states can address challenges such as economic shifts and career preparation while continuing to advocate for equitable and inclusive education policies.

Preparing for Immigration Policy Impacts on California Schools

One particular area of emphasis from the new Trump administration is likely to be immigration policy, which could have significant implications for K–12 public education in California. Enforcement actions are expected to target undocumented populations, particularly long-term residents, parolees, and individuals with Temporary Protected Status.³ California, although more prepared than other states due to robust policies and resources, faces challenges related to the protection of undocumented students and families, especially in schools.

Key preparations that states and districts can take to protect undocumented and mixed-status students and families in the face of heightened immigration enforcement include safeguarding student data, enforcing policies restricting immigration enforcement on school grounds, and updating family protection plans. Districts have a legal obligation to educate all student, including undocumented children, as affirmed by the Supreme Court’s decision in *Plyler v Doe*. If districts are to meet their responsibility to foster student learning, they must proactively address the challenges posed by these policies.

Schools can also play a role in addressing logistical concerns about supporting families in crisis, such as ensuring emergency contact protocols, translation services, and support for families affected by worksite raids or large-scale enforcement actions. Collaboration with legal services, consular offices, and community partners can help districts navigate these challenges effectively to ensure that schools remain a safe place physically and emotionally for students to learn while offering students a free and appropriate public education.

² For policies and recommendations from California Attorney General Rob Bonta, see <https://oag.ca.gov/news/press-releases/response-increased-threats-california-immigrant-communities-attorney-general>.

³ ³ For more information, see <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/temporary-protected-status-overview>.

Tackling These Challenges Collaboratively

Following the presentations, the Collaborative members broke into one of five small groups composed of individuals in similar roles—district leaders, funders, policymakers and advocates, support providers, and researchers—to address these pressing education challenges. Several themes emerged from these conversations.

Maintaining Focus on Core Educational Goals

In the face of public narratives and policy moves that can distract attention from the core work of schooling, Collaborative members emphasized the critical need to maintain focus on students and the teaching and learning environments that enable students to thrive. District leaders highlighted the importance of prioritizing what best meets the needs of their students despite the external noise and political pressures that often threaten to derail progress. As one district leader reflected, “One of the things we learned during COVID was the importance of staying focused on the students and their learning needs and social-emotional needs while dodging all the distractions. We have to remember to do that.”

Researchers echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the necessity of centering education on evidence-based practices and maintaining a steadfast commitment to student outcomes despite the noise and fragmentation in the system.

Changing the Narrative About Public Education

With public confidence in education increasingly under attack, members stressed the importance of advancing a positive narrative that underscores the value of public education and the strengths of the existing system. One district leader stated, “The story of public education and public schools has not always been done well. We need to find ways to better promote public education.”

Members emphasized the potential of leveraging collective advocacy to support public education and the importance of consistent backing for robust educational systems and made a call to reexamine education strategies in comparison to other states to identify strengths and areas for improvement. They also highlighted the critical need to improve public messaging about the value of education, with lessons from past challenges serving as a foundation for strong advocacy. Additionally, members underscored the value of demonstrating how innovative programs positively impact student outcomes to rebuild confidence in public education.

Reflecting and Adapting to Evolving Challenges

This time of transition presents an opportunity to reflect on strategies and adapt to changing circumstances. Members discussed the challenges of navigating political shifts within school boards and addressing ongoing funding constraints. They also emphasized the need to reimagine schools to better meet current and future demands and called for innovative approaches to flexibility, encouraging schools to rethink traditional learning strategies to address today’s challenges. There was consensus on the value of employing creativity and adaptability to design systems that are resilient and responsive to evolving

educational needs. One participant urged, “We have to do something radically different to remind ourselves why public education is so damn important for what it provides both socially and economically.... This is a moment where we have to address the craziness that will come with this new administration and figure out what we need to do differently to continue to be able to educate the future generations of this country.”

Addressing Funding and Accountability in a Changing Environment

As districts face increased challenges in an environment of declining resources, participants highlighted the urgency of addressing funding and accountability issues because, in the words of one participant, “when enrollment and budget are declining, ongoing instability in resources to support schools will be a weak spot.” Meeting participants raised concerns about declining enrollment and the expiration of one-time funding streams, advocating for greater flexibility in policy and resource allocation. They also echoed the call for innovative and flexible approaches to support school leaders in navigating funding shortfalls and emphasized the importance of adapting accountability measures to foster systemic improvements. Finally, they highlighted the need to leverage and document data to sustain legislative investment in education.

Additional Critical Issues in Education

Several additional issues emerged as areas requiring focused attention. Members noted the challenge of navigating political shifts within school boards, which often shape policy and resource decisions. They also raised concerns about chronic absenteeism and the need to expand CTE programs. They underscored California’s leadership in reform areas such as CTE, community schools, and early learning, urging stakeholders to build on these strengths while addressing gaps in implementation. One district leader shared, “While we are in California, it will still be important to find less polarized points of intersection. CTE is a point where we might be able to elevate teaching and learning. Special education may also be a point of intersection. We have to think about ways to maximize teaching and learning.”

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The Collaborative will meet next in Garden Grove in February 2025 to discuss engagement strategies with students and families to foster a sense of well-being and belonging in schools. Resources from this meeting, as well as resources from previous meetings and updates regarding Collaborative members, are available at www.cacollaborative.org.