

March 27, 2026

Dear Collaborative members and guests,

We look forward to seeing you at our upcoming convening on April 9-10 in Long Beach Unified School District. This meeting is a departure from our typical approach. Rather than nest our deliberations in the context of a specific district, we are tackling a broader issue that has emerged consistently during our time together and in the education landscape more broadly: narratives about public education. Many of you have raised concerns that the prevailing messages about public education have become increasingly negative in recent years. Although perspectives vary among audiences (e.g., parents, policymakers), growing negativity threatens to harm not only morale, but the ability of schools and districts to deliver excellence in learning opportunities for all students. The response to these concerns from education leaders, however, has too often been uncoordinated and reactive in nature. For two days in April, we will take some initial steps to address this challenge by unpacking the narratives that have gained traction among key constituencies and the underlying motivations, values, and concerns that shape them. Then, we will work as a group to identify the messages that we believe have the potential to inspire ongoing investment in California public education without glossing over valid concerns.

Meeting Overview

Day 1: Our two days of problem solving will begin with an effort to better understand the challenges in front of us. In small groups, we will review public opinion polling data and examples of the language people in a variety of roles have used to describe the current state of education. Through our collective review of these resources, combined with the insights that meeting participants bring from their own personal and professional experiences, we aim to clarify the messages that are gaining traction, and therefore demand the attention of the education community if it hopes to build the informed support of key constituencies.

We will turn to a second round of small group discussions next, this time to review data about student performance and school spending. Our purpose is to compare the prevailing narratives about public schools to evidence about how those schools are performing. In some cases, we expect to see alignment among these sources of information that highlights areas of persistent challenge that require attention to achieve desired results. In other cases, the discrepancies among the resources we review might reveal misinformation or misunderstanding that require a different kind of response.

We will close this opening portion of the meeting with a full group discussion about the broader societal trends and ways of thinking that are driving the way people view public education. By exploring what matters to different people, we position ourselves to explore the processes of improvement and engagement in ways that build from shared values.

Our afternoon will conclude with an effort to craft a set of messages that will resonate with key constituencies in ways that can win their informed support. We will break into small groups to focus particular attention on two audiences: (1) the parents and community members whose support and

engagement are critical for sustained student enrollment, selection of school board members committed to effective governance, and passage of local bonds that can enable key system priorities to take shape; and (2) state policymakers who create the conditions for districts to succeed through funding allocations and programmatic and reporting requirements.

We will conclude our first day by enjoying an evening of networking, collective relaxation, and additional conversation at our group dinner at Parkers' Lighthouse.

Day 2: Thursday will begin with an orientation to research and best practices for engagement and communication in high-stress situations. Following a presentation and short discussion, we will return briefly to our small groups from the previous afternoon to refine our messages about public education in ways that are more likely to reach their intended audiences.

We will next reconvene in the full group to consider strategies for delivering messages in ways that are likely to resonate with the intended audience. Building on research that demonstrates that the selection of an appropriate messenger can be as important as the content of a message itself, we will explore the partners and allies who are best positioned to reach our intended audiences and the vehicles that might be most effective to connect with them.

Our final session will create an opportunity to chart a path forward. Although we are confident that this meeting will create an opportunity for rich dialogue, we also recognize that it is only a first step to address concerns that have emerged among many constituencies on whom the state's public education system relies for support. We will therefore consider what next steps might be productive for advancing a narrative about public education that reflects the values and priorities of the California education community.

Preparation and Dropbox

You should find all the information you need for the meeting at a DropBox link you will receive via email, including a set of readings that will provide important background and context for our collective learning in Long Beach. The reading materials are also available on the Collaborative website at <https://www.cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting57>. **On March 27, you will receive an email with the subset of priority pre-meeting readings attached. We strongly encourage you to read this subset of materials prior to the meeting.**

If you have any questions regarding the meeting logistics, please do not hesitate to contact Emily Agopian at 909-342-3895 or eagopian@air.org. If you have any other questions, please email me (jknudson@air.org) or reach out by phone or text at 650-924-0373. I look forward to seeing you all soon!

Sincerely,



Joel Knudson
Chair, California Collaborative on District Reform
Principal Researcher, American Institutes for Research