

Meeting 57 Summary

Crafting a Proactive Narrative for Public Education: Understanding the Landscape, Planning for the Future

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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.

The California Collaborative on District Reform convened for its 57th meeting in April 2026 with a central focus on addressing the evolving and increasingly negative narratives surrounding public education. Public education is operating within a complex environment that increasingly reflects the polarized nature of our national political landscape. Meeting participants gathered to engage in a broad, more strategic discussion about the messages and resulting perceptions about public education in today's social, political, and media landscape. The group also explored ways to build more proactive narratives that reflect the values and beliefs of Collaborative members, build from evidence about current school performance, and make the case for continued investment in public education.

Prevailing Narratives About K–12 Public Education

Participants began the meeting by reviewing a set of artifacts to develop a shared understanding of the narratives about public education that have gained traction in recent years. This process began with an examination of public opinion polling and statements from elected officials and other influential individuals—drawn from press releases, social media posts, and news articles—on topics such as student performance, parents' rights, school closures, and education finance. The group then turned to data on school spending, student academic outcomes, and enrollment trends to consider the degree to which narratives about public education align with facts about school performance. After the review, participants discussed what the artifacts collectively revealed about prevailing

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

narratives surrounding K–12 public education, as well as the underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs reflected in those narratives.

Public Education as “Failing”

One of the strongest themes across the convening was the prevalence of a broad “schools are failing” narrative. Participants noted that this narrative often lacks nuance and tends to reduce highly complex educational systems to simplistic judgments about success or failure. They also noted that, although there are national narratives that frame public education as falling short of expectations, the data about student outcomes are frequently more complex and uneven across student groups. For example, public conversations and media coverage about overall academic performance often overlook substantial differences in achievement across racial and socioeconomic groups. Participants noted that on many national and international assessments, White and Asian American students continue to perform at high levels, while Black and Latino students continue to face persistent differences in opportunities and outcomes. They suggested that broad narratives of overall system failure can obscure these disparities and make it more difficult to focus public attention on the specific structural inequities and resource challenges that continue to affect particular student populations.

Public Education as a Political Battleground

A second major narrative centers on public education as a site of ideological conflict. Participants discussed how issues related to curriculum, diversity, equity, inclusion, gender identity, and civic education have become highly politicized and emotionally charged. These debates often frame schools as spaces where competing values are imposed, contested, or threatened.

Participants noted that narratives around “indoctrination” and parental rights have become especially prominent in recent years. In many cases, participants suggested that these narratives are connected to broader societal fears about loss of control, demographic change, or shifting cultural norms. Some participants noted that these fears are often amplified through social media and organized political efforts that intentionally frame public education as a threat to traditional values.

At the same time, participants emphasized that many of the values underlying these debates are not entirely incompatible. Principles such as fairness, safety, opportunity, responsibility, patriotism, and student success are widely held, even when communities disagree sharply about how those values should be interpreted or enacted. For example, participants pointed to curriculum debates that have emerged in districts across the country over the teaching of race, history, and gender identity, where families and community members often shared a common concern for students’ well-being and preparation for civic life but differed deeply on what schools should teach and how those topics should be addressed in classrooms. In some districts, disputes over ethnic studies courses or book selections became highly polarized, but across a range of individual perspectives, people frequently framed their concerns around supporting students and preserving community values. Similarly, the fears that drive people in these debates often

focus on having their presence and history insufficiently reflected in students' learning. Participants repeatedly noted that the challenge lies in navigating polarization to find common ground without reinforcing division.

Public Education's Role as an Economic and Civic Institution

Participants also reflected on the degree to which common stories about public education reflect competing views regarding the purpose of education itself. Some narratives frame schools primarily as vehicles for workforce preparation and economic competitiveness. Others emphasize civic development, social responsibility, and community well-being, and still others focus on personal growth and advancement. Meeting participants noted that these competing understandings of the purposes of education shape how the public interprets debates about accountability, curriculum, student achievement, and public investment in schools.

Participants noted that education increasingly operates within a highly individualistic societal framework where parents often focus primarily on their own child's academic achievement, college and career opportunities, and long-term economic success rather than broader public benefits such as strengthening democracy, fostering social cohesion, and ensuring that all students have access to educational opportunity. Participants observed that this tension closely echoed themes from the briefing materials for the meeting, which explored the competing view of education as both a private good that benefits individuals and a public good that serves broader societal and democratic purposes.²

The Disconnect Between Funding Levels and Fiscal Reality

Participants discussed a prevailing narrative that California has dramatically increased per-pupil funding in recent years, leading many members of the public to assume that school districts now have ample financial resources. Participants noted, however, that per-pupil funding levels exceeding \$20,000 can obscure the significant hidden costs that districts continue to face, including but not limited to STRS and PERS pension obligations, growing special education costs, employee health care expenses, and declining enrollment. Many districts across California are experiencing deficits and considering staffing or program reductions despite increases in overall state funding. However, this disconnect between public perceptions of funding and districts' day-to-day fiscal realities contributes to misunderstandings and false narratives about why schools continue to face budget reductions—for example, accusations of administrative bloat—and it can complicate efforts to build support for parcel taxes and bond measures.

Unpacking the Narratives

While participants identified a wide range of narratives about public education, discussions consistently pointed to a smaller set of underlying forces driving many of these

² See, for example, Labaree, D. L. (2018). Public schools for private gain: The declining American commitment to serving the public good. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 100 (3), 8–13. <https://kappanonline.org/labaree-public-schools-private-gain-decline-american-commitment-public-good/>

perspectives. Participants emphasized that current debates about schools are often shaped not only by policy disagreements but also by broader social, political, economic, and emotional dynamics that are influencing how people interpret public institutions, change, and uncertainty. Several interconnected themes emerged repeatedly across conversations, including fear and loss of control, the influence of social media and information ecosystems, and growing tension between individual interests and collective responsibility.

Fear, Control, and Loss

Fear emerged as one of the most important underlying drivers of current educational narratives. Participants repeatedly described public anxiety about economic instability, demographic change, political polarization, safety, parenting, and uncertainty about the future. These fears often become concentrated around schools because education is one of the most visible and personal public institutions in people's lives.

Participants noted that many conflicts about curriculum, equity, and student support services are rooted less in policy specifics and more in deeper fears about loss of control, identity, status, or opportunity. Several participants observed that when people experience fear, they often become more susceptible to simplistic narratives, confirmation bias, and emotionally charged messaging.

During the second day of the convening, presenters from the Center for Risk Communication reinforced this point, emphasizing that stress and fear significantly reduce people's ability to process complex information.³ Under high-stress conditions, individuals are more likely to respond to emotional cues and simplified narratives than to detailed factual explanations. Presenters noted that this dynamic can allow reactive, fear-based narratives to gain traction more quickly than nuanced policy discussions, while also underscoring the importance of trusted, empathetic communication in helping communities navigate uncertainty.

The Role of Social Media and Information Ecosystems

Participants consistently identified social media as a major force in shaping public perceptions of education. Unlike in the past, when information was filtered through local news organizations or community relationships, today's narratives spread rapidly across nationalized and algorithm-driven media environments.

Several participants described how emotionally provocative stories travel faster and farther than positive or nuanced stories. Negative incidents at individual schools can quickly become national talking points, regardless of contextual details or factual accuracy. At the same time, participants noted that the decline of local journalism has reduced opportunities for communities to hear balanced or contextualized stories about schools. Participants also emphasized that misinformation spreads easily when individuals feel disconnected from institutions or lack trusted relationships with educational leaders,

³ Please refer to the section on *Crafting a Proactive Narrative for Ongoing Investment on K–12 Public Education* for more information about this presentation.

making it especially important for schools and districts to communicate proactively and consistently. As one participant noted, “If we don’t tell our story, someone else will”—highlighting the concern that in the absence of clear and trusted communication from public education leaders, others are likely to shape public perceptions and narratives about schools.

Tension Between Individual and Collective Good

Another major theme involved tension between individual interests and collective responsibility. Echoing earlier reflections about education as a public versus a private good, participants discussed how many current narratives frame education primarily through the lens of individual outcomes rather than broader public or civic benefit. Participants pointed to school choice debates as one example of this tension, noting that families often make decisions based on what they believe is best for their own child, while less attention is given to how those decisions may affect enrollment patterns, funding stability, or opportunities for students across the larger public school system.

Participants suggested that similar tensions emerge in discussions about curriculum, accountability, and resource allocation. For example, debates about instructional materials often reflect disagreements between individual parents’ preferences about what their own children should learn and broader efforts to establish shared educational experiences and civic understanding for all students. In conversations about accountability, participants noted tension between families seeking highly individualized measures of school quality and public systems attempting to balance multiple goals across entire districts and student populations. Participants also discussed how debates over resource allocation can reflect competing priorities between directing resources toward specialized programs or specific student groups versus ensuring access to services and opportunities across schools and communities.

Several participants observed that public conversations increasingly emphasize individual advancement in an environment of scarcity and competition. For example, participants pointed to narratives suggesting that families must compete for access to the “best” schools, programs, or opportunities in order to secure their children’s futures, particularly amid concerns about economic instability, college admissions, and rapid technological change. Participants noted that these conversations often frame education as a limited resource that individuals must navigate strategically for personal benefit rather than as a shared public system designed to support all students. They suggested that this framing can make it more difficult to sustain public investment in systems intended to serve students collectively. Participants worried that when education is viewed primarily as a private commodity rather than a shared public institution, support for equitable funding and collective responsibility may weaken.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that many families are responding rationally to broader societal pressures, including economic insecurity, perceptions of limited opportunity, and uncertainty about how rapid technological changes, including artificial intelligence, may shape their children’s futures. Participants noted that public education leaders have long faced the challenge of addressing legitimate public concerns while also

reinforcing broader civic values, though these concerns are increasingly taking new forms in response to changing conditions.

Crafting a Proactive Narrative for Ongoing Investment in K–12 Public Education

While participants acknowledged the challenges associated with growing polarization, declining trust in institutions, and increasingly negative public discourse surrounding education, conversations also reflected a strong sense of opportunity and responsibility. Participants emphasized that public education cannot remain solely in a reactive posture responding to criticism, misinformation, or political attacks. Instead, there was broad agreement on the need to articulate a clearer, more proactive narrative that communicates the value of public education as both a public and a private good.

Principles for Effective Communication

To gain a better understanding of the principles of effective messaging, Joe Wojtecki and Eddie Riley from the Center for Risk Communication shared insights about principles for effective communication in an increasingly polarized and emotionally charged environment. Wojtecki and Riley emphasized that communication is not simply about transmitting information, but also about ensuring that information is heard, understood, and trusted. Because stress and fear significantly reduce people’s ability to process information, in high-stress environments, individuals are more likely to rely on emotional cues, perceptions, and trusted relationships than on detailed facts or data alone. When delivering messages in these environments, approaches must be concise, clear, and disciplined. In service of these goals, frameworks such as the “27-9-3” model—which encourages messages that are 27 words, delivered in 9 seconds, and focused on three main points—can serve as powerful tools.

Another major focus of the presentation involved trust and messenger credibility. Presenters emphasized that audiences often evaluate the messenger before assessing the substance of the message itself, particularly during moments of uncertainty or conflict. Research demonstrates that three major drivers of trust are especially important: competence and expertise, honesty and openness, and caring and empathy. Importantly, presenters noted that in high-stress situations, expressions of empathy and care often become even more influential than expertise alone. Participants identified clear connections between these principles and the responsibilities of educational leaders, reflecting on the importance of authenticity, relationship building, and local trust in shaping how communities respond to educational messaging.

The presentation also explored the concepts of “credibility transfer” and “credibility reversal,” emphasizing that trusted local voices can significantly strengthen communication efforts, while conflicts between less trusted and more trusted messengers can further erode public confidence. Participants reflected on the importance of identifying trusted community messengers among their students, educators, parents, and local leaders who can help communicate more effectively across diverse audiences. Across the discussion, participants recognized that successful communication efforts will require more than

factual accuracy alone; they will require empathy, clarity, consistency, emotional awareness, and trusted relationships capable of moving hearts and minds in addition to conveying information.

Crafting Messages to Various Interest Holders

Meeting participants broke into small groups during two portions of the meeting, first on the afternoon of the first day and a second time, during the next morning, to reflect on the presentation and continue refining messages they had started crafting during the previous afternoon. Each group developed messages targeted for a specific set of interest holders: local parents and community members, the general public, and policy actors. During the second small group breakout, participants aimed to apply the principles of effective communication to help refine their messages. Across discussions, participants highlighted the importance of grounding communication and messaging in shared values, authentic storytelling, transparency, community relationships, and a broader understanding of the role that schools play in supporting students, families, local communities, democracy, and economic opportunity.

Messages to Local Parents and Community Members

Local parents and community members are often the individuals most directly connected to schools and most likely to shape local perceptions of public education through personal relationships, experiences, and community conversations. The group that focused on this audience observed that while public conversations often emphasize the challenges facing schools, they pay far less attention to the dedication of educators, staff, and families who continue supporting students every day. Maintaining strong public schools requires ongoing partnership, shared responsibility, and continued public investment so that all children have access to safe, supportive, and engaging learning environments. Meeting participants emphasized the importance of several points:

- Public schools are more than institutions that focus on academics. They are community spaces where children learn, grow, and build relationships that shape the future of neighborhoods, the workforce, and democracy.
- Schools play an important role in supporting children and families. In addition to academics, schools provide meals, counseling, mental health supports, extracurricular opportunities, and connections to social services that many families rely on daily.
- Strong public schools help create safer neighborhoods and healthier local economies.

In keeping with guidance that “27-9-3” messages are most effective in reaching their intended audience during times of high stress, this small group distilled the key observations from their discussion into the following statement:

Children are our shared future and when we show up and stay engaged, we all benefit from a shared workforce and healthier community.

Messages to the General Public

Because broader public perceptions of education can affect trust in schools and the larger narrative surrounding educators and students—even among individuals without direct ties to local schools—a second small group focused its attention on this audience. District leaders in this group emphasized that the support of the general public is often critical for the passage of local parcel taxes and bond measures that directly affect school resources and services. This group highlighted that public schools continue to play a foundational role in preparing students for life, work, and civic participation in an increasingly complex and changing society. While public conversations about schools often focus narrowly on test scores or political debates, participants stressed the importance of communicating the broader value schools provide to communities and the nation as a whole.

This group also crafted a set of messages that centered on three key points, with two to three subpoints supporting those central statements. This was the result of their work together:

Public schools are...

1. Preparing the nation's children to be contributing members to society in a changing economy.
 - Schools teach children language, literacy, and math skills.
 - Schools help students develop workforce skills that are adaptable to this changing economy.
 - Schools prepare students to participate in this democracy.
2. Demonstrating good stewardship of taxpayer dollars.
 - 85%–90% of district budgets are spent on the people who serve students.
 - Checks and balances through boards and state/federal law ensure the appropriate and effective allocation of funding.
3. Providing safe and supportive environments to students.
 - Trained and caring adults serve our children.
 - Schools provide wraparound support services.
 - Schools ensure a safe environment and safe facilities.

Messages to Policy Actors

Elected officials and other decision-makers play a critical role in shaping education policy, funding, and public priorities, making it important to communicate district needs and realities in clear and actionable ways. The third small group focused on a policy audience and emphasized the importance of creating policy conditions that support effective implementation while recognizing the realities facing schools and local educational agencies. Many participants noted that policy conversations often focus on compliance and new requirements without sufficient consideration for local capacity, implementation challenges, or the cumulative impact of multiple initiatives.

Like the group focused on the general public, the small group that examined an audience of policy actors identified three key messages, with supporting points:

1. State policy needs to be tight on some things and loose on others.
 - Local practitioners can provide a list of things for which it is useful for the state to establish clear guidelines and expectations.
 - The state can be helpful in these arenas.
 - These are the places in which legislators can establish a legacy through policy action that supports public schooling.
 - Policymakers should avoid micromanaging the implementation details.
2. There is a need in California for aligned and adequate funding.
 - Increased per capita funding does not always equate to increased capacity.
 - California education funds based on attendance, but districts staff based on enrollment.
3. California public education needs a policy process that promotes stronger implementation practices.
 - Policymakers need to talk to practitioners before passing new legislation.
 - Improvement efforts need feedback loops that allow for continuous input and refinement.

Trusted Messengers to Deliver Messages

Reinforcing findings from the field of risk communication, participants repeatedly emphasized that people are more likely to engage with messages about public education when they come from trusted individuals who are perceived as honest, transparent, and genuinely connected to the experiences of students and families.

Participants suggested that trusted messengers are often local voices rather than large institutions—though there are important differences in who is viewed as credible by different audiences. One member noted that legislators often look to superintendents and other district leaders as trusted messengers on public education issues, viewing them as the most reliable voices for communicating district needs and realities. In response, others noted that superintendents frequently lack the time, and in some cases, the substantive expertise about the nuances of specific district practices to consistently engage in this role. This discussion underscored both the importance of local leadership voices and the practical challenges districts face in meeting growing expectations around public engagement and advocacy.

Participants also discussed the vital role teachers can play in communicating the value of public education because of their close relationships with students and families. The conversation highlighted the opportunities for shared and mutually reinforcing messaging that emerge when labor and management work collaboratively. However, participants also acknowledged the complications that arise when those relationships are strained—including a tendency for labor and management to position one another as the cause of district problems rather than partners in solving them. Participants further noted that

parents, students, coaches, counselors, faith leaders, and other community members can communicate the value of public education in ways that feel personal and credible. Even when public confidence in larger systems or national conversations about education is low, participants suggested that strong local relationships with schools and educators create opportunities to strengthen public understanding and support by elevating trusted voices and stories from within communities.

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The convening highlighted both the urgency and complexity of the challenges facing public education in today's communication environment. Participants reflected on the growing influence of polarization, misinformation, declining trust in institutions, and simplified narratives that often fail to capture the realities, successes, and broader contributions of public schools. At the same time, discussions revealed strong alignment around the need for a more proactive, coordinated, and values-driven approach to communicating about public education. Sustaining public investment in K–12 education will require not only stronger messaging strategies, but also deeper attention to trust, relationships, local storytelling, and shared understanding of the role that public education plays in supporting students, communities, democracy, and economic opportunity. Moving forward, participants expressed interest in continuing to revisit and deepen this work, including exploring communication strategies grounded in research, examining lessons from related fields such as risk communication, and drawing on evidence and findings from efforts such as the Getting Down to Facts studies to better understand public perceptions, financial realities, and opportunities for strengthening public confidence in education systems.

The Collaborative will meet next in fall 2026. Resources from this meeting, as well as resources from previous meetings, are available at www.cacollaborative.org.