

October 16, 2026

Dear Collaborative members and guests,

We look forward to seeing you at our upcoming convening on October 28-29 in Sacramento, just days before California voters head to the polls. Public education continues to operate in a dynamic environment: recent changes in the broader political context have shifted resources and priorities; upcoming elections will influence the direction of policy at the federal, state, and local levels; and a revision to K-12 governance in California will reshuffle the reporting structures and responsibilities of influential state leaders. These changes introduce uncertainty about the path ahead, but they also present an opportunity to shape the context in which our education systems serve the students and families in their communities.

For the second time this year, therefore, we will zoom out from the work of instruction and student learning to focus on the conditions in which school districts operate. First, we will continue our attention to narratives about public education and how Collaborative members—individually and collectively—might communicate with key constituencies to keep them informed and to engage their continuing support. Then, we will turn to Assembly Bill (AB) 181 and the ways in which it has restructured roles and responsibilities for California’s educational governance. Through discussion around key issues related to those transitions, we hope to generate concrete recommendations that can inform and guide new state leaders as they take on their new positions.

### Meeting Overview

Day 1: Our collective learning will begin with a return to our topic of discussion from April 2026: narratives on public education. Partners affiliated with the Center for Risk Communication will provide a brief reintroduction to a strategy called “message mapping,” which can both help structure internal collaboration about organizational values and priorities and organize public-facing communication activities. We will then break into small groups to explore a set of message maps that a subgroup of Collaborative members has worked to create over the past several months. This breakout session will create space for participants to review these maps and provide feedback about opportunities for revision and improvement. Following these discussions, facilitators will share the highlights of their message map with the full group. Together, we will consider ways in which each message map can help to inform responses to common questions and concerns that emerge from key constituency groups.

After lunch, we will shift our focus to upcoming changes to K-12 education governance in California. After a brief introduction to AB 181 and the conditions that enabled it to achieve legislative success, we will anchor our deliberations in a vision for what we believe a productive relationship between the state and local districts should entail. To help advance our thinking, Jeannie Myung of Policy Analysis for California Education will share new research findings about states that have employed similar approaches to governance as those planned in California.

Next, we will examine one of the fundamental changes introduced by AB 181, the creation of an Education Commissioner to oversee the California Department of Education (CDE). Through a combination of small and full group discussion, we will seek to identify the qualifications, values, and attitudes that can equip the full leadership team at CDE to move the department toward the kind of relationship with districts that participants envisioned earlier in the afternoon.

After a full day of learning, we will conclude our day with informal discussion, networking, and collective relaxation at a group dinner at Scott's Seafood.

Day 2: On Thursday, we will begin to identify the concrete steps that state agencies can take to maximize the potential of AB 181. First, a panel of superintendents will ground our discussion in the lived experiences of district leaders and the ways in which they currently interact with CDE. Informed by their insights, small groups will then identify specific steps that can improve the state's effectiveness in guiding and supporting local education work in the first six months of a new Education Commissioner's tenure, without the need for any statutory change. Following those discussions, we will turn our attention to the future and the issues that warrant attention if California is to further refine its approach to governance in ways that facilitate coherence and alignment across the state.

Our final session will enable us to translate the ideas from our discussions over two days into concrete next steps. Returning to the principles of effective communication that anchored our April 2026 meeting and structured our Wednesday morning discussion, we will clarify the messages we want to communicate, the audiences we aim to reach, and the best formats and messengers to deliver those key messages to our intended audiences.

### **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 Sacramento. The reading materials are also available on the Collaborative website at <https://www.cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting58>. **On October 16, 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](mailto:eagopian@air.org). If you have any other questions, please email me ([jknudson@air.org](mailto: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