

Meeting 34 Summary

Building a Statewide System of Support for Equity and Improvement: Principles, Players, and Proposals

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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 to inform 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 in December 2017 to continue several strands of conversation that began during its June 2017 meeting. Through the June gathering, designed to take stock of California’s education landscape, members consistently identified three areas for attention in the months and years to come: equity, capacity building, and continuous improvement. The 34th meeting of the Collaborative presented an opportunity to apply these themes to a pressing matter of state policy and practice: developing a statewide system of support “to assist LEAs [local education agencies] and their schools to meet the needs of each student served, with a focus on building capacity to sustain improvement and effectively address inequities in student opportunities and outcomes.”² The June meeting also revealed an interest among Collaborative members in learning more about the county office of education (COE) system, which has a key role in the proposed statewide support plans. El Dorado County Office of Education (EDCOE) graciously agreed to host the group for this 2-day conversation, which was the first Collaborative meeting to occur in a COE.

Although efforts are already well underway to create a state system of support that meets both state (Local Control Funding Formula) and federal (Every Student Succeeds Act) requirements, we decided to hold off on discussing those specific plans until the group had

¹ Thanks to Marina Castro, Linda Choi, Kathleen Jones, and CoCo Massengale for taking careful notes during the meeting, which made this summary possible.

² California State Board of Education. (2017, November). *Update on the development of California’s system of support for local educational agencies and schools* [Agenda item, November 8–9, 2017, California State Board of Education meeting]. Available at California Department of Education website: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/vr17/documents/nov17item04.doc>

established a foundational understanding of what we actually know about effective support. Our goal in this decision was to facilitate a well-informed discussion that could take a long-range and independent perspective. The convening thus began with a process of discovery that sought to elevate lessons from research, practice, and continuous improvement endeavors. Based on those reflections, meeting participants considered a set of design principles—or criteria—that might guide an effective statewide system of support. It was only after discussing these principles that the group turned its attention to current plans for that system in California. Participants learned about what the proposed system will entail, reflected on the degree of alignment between that system and the principles they had established earlier in the meeting, and offered recommendations for how the state might move forward.

Orientation to the COE System

To provide some background on the COE system, the meeting began with an overview of EDCOE’s evolving work, followed by reflections on the broader system of COEs statewide.

EDCOE Overview

El Dorado County includes 185,000 residents, and the COE employs a staff of 542 full-time employees to serve 27,000 students spread across 15 school districts. More than two-thirds of students in the county are White, and one-fifth are Latino. Eight percent of students are classified as English learners (ELs) and 20 percent come from low-income families. Student performance in EDCOE compares favorably to overall state results: Sixty percent of students met standards in English language arts (compared to 49 percent statewide) and 50 percent met standards in mathematics (compared to 38 percent statewide).

These overall numbers, however, mask considerable variation within the county. Demographically, EDCOE school districts range in size from 11 to 6,500 students. The percentage of Latino students ranges from 9 to 42 percent, and the percentages of ELs and socioeconomically disadvantaged students range from 0 to 26 percent and 8 to 59 percent, respectively. Overall performance levels vary as well, but gaps exist across all districts between ELs, students from low-income families, and students with disabilities and their more advantaged peers. Moreover, the scattered pockets of ELs pose their own programmatic challenges. Whereas larger school systems with more resources and higher concentrations of ELs can dedicate staff and design programs to meet EL needs, EDCOE faces similar struggles to other rural counties in ensuring that students can thrive when they are isolated from peers with similar backgrounds who lack frequent exposure to educators with deep levels of expertise in their specific learning needs.

EDCOE provides a range of services to its districts and students. Some of these services are legally mandated by the state. For example, the COE must review and approve district budgets and expenditures. It also provides instruction in juvenile detention facilities and assistance in emergencies. Other services are based on the identified needs of the county. For example, the county office runs the El Dorado Charter Special Education Local Plan Area, which provides oversight and support to charter schools around the state. EDCOE

also has developed a team of teachers who are experts in the Common Core State Standards to help train teachers and build capacity, especially in some of its smaller districts. Likewise, the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) Lead Writers Network is an effort to build capacity in smaller districts to navigate a state-mandated process.

EDCOE leaders described a shift in their responsibilities and approach that came with the passage of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in 2013. Whereas the traditional COE role has been that of a monitoring agency, the team in El Dorado County has tried to lead a transition to serve as a support provider and partner to its districts. The Common Core State Standards and LCAP programs are examples of approaches that EDCOE has developed to provide differentiated support that builds capacity among educators.

EDCOE in the Context of the Whole COE System

Representatives from three other COEs offered their reflections on how the EDCOE story connects to the broader system of 58 counties across the state. Each described a similar need to address a wide variety of district sizes and needs within their counties. The other COE leaders also echoed points about a recent transition to take a stronger support orientation to their work—in contrast to a stronger monitoring or compliance role in the past—especially as it relates to implementation of the Common Core State Standards and development of district LCAPs. In fact, 43 of the 58 county superintendents are in their first or second term; with a new group of leaders not tied to the models of the past, there may be a great opportunity to capitalize on this transition. COE participants also mentioned that the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA) plays a prominent role in training county leaders to understand new expectations and take on new responsibilities.

Despite the similarities among COEs, observations revealed substantial sources of variation. Some of these differences are demographic: One COE leader described their charge to serve nearly 500,000 students across 42 districts with a staff of roughly 1,000 employees; another COE leader noted that four districts within their county have larger student populations than all the districts in El Dorado County combined. Other COEs also serve different student populations; larger counties that encompass major urban centers also tend to serve higher percentages of ELs and socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

Variation also exists in the services that COEs provide. Although some county responsibilities are mandated, others emerge on the basis of district and community needs. One COE leader described running an education school with a leadership training program. Another described a juvenile court school tailored specifically to serving foster youth and a second designed solely for homeless students. Comments from other meeting participants also revealed differences in the cost structures for various services, with COEs making different decisions about whether to pick up costs for some services or pass them on to districts.

Across the conversations about similarities and differences, meeting participants highlighted areas requiring attention as COEs continue the transition to a more supportive role. First, the knowledge and skills required to provide effective support may be different from those traditionally prized within COEs. Counties need to both develop and recruit

talent to handle new responsibilities in their work with districts. Given the wide range of needs across counties and districts and the discretion that county offices have to meet those needs, COEs also need to prioritize their resources toward the most important services. Finally, participants emphasized the importance of building a strong relationship between a COE and a district if productive support is to take place. This point became particularly salient later in the meeting when participants discussed the proposed communication and support demands articulated for COEs in current plans for the statewide system of support.

What We Know About High-Quality Support

Following the introduction to the COE system, the meeting turned to issues of support for districts and schools. The subsequent sessions examined the characteristics of high-quality support through three lenses: research on support for low-performing districts and schools, teacher and administrator experiences with receiving support, and lessons from the perspective of continuous improvement.

Support Through a Research Lens

A presentation by Collaborative Chair and AIR Institute Fellow Jennifer O'Day surveyed findings from decades of educational research. Most of the research base that informed the presentation comes from evaluations of high-stakes accountability systems. It is therefore difficult to tease out the effects of the support from the effects of the systems themselves, including the threat of consequences such as school closure or personnel changes. Nevertheless, across the whole body of research, the results generally are consistent: On average, external support has a negligible or null effect on student outcomes in the long term.

Observers have posited several explanations for the apparently weak long-term effects of these systems on student performance. Initial attention to neglected sites, coupled with an influx of new money, may produce an initial bump in performance that dissipates when the attention wanes and the money disappears. Another hypothesis is that the punitive nature of many accountability systems—which invokes steep consequences for failure—might overshadow the benefits of any support that the system offers. Incoherence is another potential culprit. Many approaches to improvement are piecemeal in nature and unconnected either to the core academic program at a district or school or to the broader, systemic contributors to failure. Furthermore, one-size-fits-all models designed in the spirit of common expectations or political expediency generally ignore the centrality of context in effective improvement efforts.

Despite poor results on average, success has occurred in pockets. Sources of variation across settings might help to explain these positive results despite weak findings overall. One type of variation is in the design of the support. This can include the targeted unit of change (district versus school), the recipient selection process (criteria and numbers of targeted recipients), and decisions about whether participation in a program is mandatory or voluntary. A second source of variation is the implementation of support, including the type and quality of the providers and the duration and intensity of the support. Finally,

variation in outcomes emerges from the contexts of targeted districts and schools and the degree to which support fits the particular needs of the school or system.

O'Day concluded the presentation by highlighting themes and implications from these research findings. First, the evidence suggests that there is no one best approach to providing support for improvement. Designers of support systems should ensure that the approach is directed to address key goals for the system, respond to the state and local contexts, anticipate likely implementation challenges, promote coherence, and address systemic contributors to performance. On a related note, systems of support should respond to local context and needs and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to improvement. It also is important to consider the undesired consequences of a focus on "fixing" (or punishing) "failure," including perverse incentives that can lead to dysfunctional responses. Finally, designers of support systems should recognize and incorporate the key role of districts, both the ways in which they shape success and failure in school sites and the support they themselves need to improve.

Support Through a Practice Lens

The group next turned to a panel discussion featuring two superintendents, two principals, and one teacher, who reflected on their experiences as recipients of external support for improvement. The panelists described both mandated supports—including those provided through the School Improvement Assistance Team and School Improvement Grants interventions—and voluntary supports sought from within school systems to meet specific, internally identified needs. For these educators, providers have included COEs and other external organizations, but also peers within and outside the schools and districts in which the panelists worked. From the conversation, several characteristics of effective support emerged, many of which echoed the research findings.

Practitioner Reflections on Characteristics of Effective Support

Most consistently, panelists described the importance of responsiveness to context. Effective support was based on needs that local educators identified. This support responded to data and evidence about the source of any problems, and it monitored those data to examine improvement. According to the panelists, the most productive providers of support were those who understood and were able to address the specific needs of the community in which they were working. One-size-fits-all approaches were not effective.

Panelists also highlighted the importance of focusing on capacity. The support experiences that provided the most value were the ones that built the knowledge and skills of teachers and leaders within the system to do their jobs more effectively. According to one principal, "We learn to do the work by doing the work ourselves...so that we become the experts." Another participant observed that too often, approaches to support have introduced external parties to do work in place of the educators in districts and schools. It is important, therefore, not to confuse capacity *building* with capacity *substitution*, and to ensure that local educators have opportunities for improvement and empowerment.

Additional characteristics emerged from the conversation. Panelists described the value of facilitating coherence; one principal described the positive experience of creating a plan for improvement, then receiving supports that were aligned to that plan. Participants also attested to the importance of accessing support from highly skilled providers. In addition, their experiences suggested that effective support should be ongoing. Moreover, meeting participants emphasized the importance of paying attention to the right things. Support fundamentally should connect to student needs, and it also might need to explicitly address issues of culture and climate—including things like mindsets trusting relationships among adults and between educators and students in the building. According to one individual, “Nothing changes until teaching and learning changes...but teaching and learning [aren’t] likely to change unless the culture of our institutions changes, both for children and adults.”

Finally, the panel discussion addressed the issue of increased resources. Many programs have sought to encourage improvement through the infusion of additional money into districts and schools. Panelists stressed that the way in which money is used is much more important than simply receiving more of it. In particular, education leaders need to focus on sustainability. According to one principal, “Getting computers and new teachers is not sustainable. Our focus is on building capacity of our staff. The question we always ask is, ‘What does it look like when the grant goes away?’”

Support Through a Continuous Improvement Lens

Since their inception as a cross-district network, the CORE Districts have sought to leverage the power of collaboration toward systemwide improvement. In recent years, they have focused their attention specifically on learning and instituting processes of continuous improvement. Representatives from the CORE Districts and their research partners at Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) shared some of their experiences and lessons learned from these efforts.

Background on the CORE Districts’ Approach

The CORE Districts’ approach to continuous improvement builds on several assumptions. First, the work needs to focus on systems. Second, the work is about process. Instead of focusing exclusively on outcomes, the districts explore what organizations and people do and how those processes produce various outcomes. Third, the CORE Districts are learning by creating and testing hypotheses. The answers to districts’ most pressing challenges are not always apparent; thus, the use of the scientific method and plan-do-study-act cycles creates a structured approach for generating knowledge. Finally, the districts believe that those closest to the problem are best situated to learn how to solve it. The approach therefore engages the “front line” by explicitly including teachers and students in the work.

The CORE Districts also have developed the belief that continuous improvement organizations do several things. They establish a clear and consistent sense of purpose and shared responsibility in service of that purpose. They use common, evidence-based practices. They work across school and departmental boundaries using an aligned set of processes. These organizations also focus on capacity building in improvement by using common methodologies. They use a data infrastructure to guide improvement. And they

embrace leadership practices to build and sustain culture—including a culture of continuous improvement that fosters comfort at all levels of the system with taking chances and being able to fail.

Conditions That Can Facilitate Continuous Improvement

Reflections from the presenters identified some of the conditions that might facilitate a culture and practice of continuous improvement.

A strong data infrastructure can enable systems to identify challenges and monitor progress toward meeting those challenges. Beyond making data available, using data effectively requires analytic capacity that teachers and administrators alike may need to develop. This may be especially important at the classroom level; one representative relayed the lesson learned that classroom staff need to be involved from the beginning “because they’re the ones who will be launching and sustaining the system.”

In efforts to advance continuous improvement, a key role of external support providers is to elevate the expertise of people in the system. Although these providers may bring unique skill sets in terms of process, one of the CORE Districts’ support providers advocated for the importance of humility and curiosity in the role. She explained, “We’re not telling people what to do, but working alongside them.” In her experience, a lot of the work that happens in districts is invisible—that is, practices and informal policies rarely are formalized or explicitly acknowledged. Much of what an outside source of support does is to take the invisible and make it visible so that people within the system can meaningfully intervene.

The CORE Districts’ team highlighted the important role that district leaders play in facilitating continuous improvement. Although senior organizational leaders may be indirectly involved in day-to-day efforts, acting as internal champions gives others the authority they need to do the work. Senior leaders who do actively engage in trainings and other activities can present themselves as “lead learners” to help foster a culture of open reflection and growth. Describing his approach in this regard, one district leader explained, “What I have called for from our leaders is an intentional display of humility.” Leaders also play a key role in messaging and navigating the balance between validating and valuing what people already are doing and communicating urgency about the enormous work that remains. CORE Districts’ representatives suggested that the continuous improvement frame can help with this balance.

Meeting participants had varying views on the role that “compliance” might play in shifting toward a culture of continuous improvement. Some individuals cautioned against mandating activities in a way that reinforces a compliance mentality and misses the deep understanding of new practices and the rationale behind them. One of the panelists argued, however, that compliance to a process—though not necessarily specific actions—is part of the change process. Compliance around issues of equity may be especially important. In the absence of mandates to apply educationally appropriate strategies to meet the needs of underserved groups of students, the pull of traditional practice and unconscious bias could perpetuate inequitable opportunities. Another panelist advocated for the importance of developing professional accountability, wherein people commit to an approach not because

they have been required to do so but because they feel a sense of commitment to the people in their network.

Through the discussion, participants explored considerations in motivating struggling systems to embrace continuous improvement. Many of the ideas from the panelists' comments assume a fairly rational school system, but the systems in most need of improvement may not be rational. Dysfunctional school boards can undermine rational behavior. So can high teacher or administrator turnover. Moreover, bureaucracies are designed to make change difficult and slow. Some participants advocated for piloting new ideas on a small scale with educators eager to embrace change. It may be that leaders of continuous improvement efforts are most effective if they apply their efforts first at a level of the system where it will work—perhaps a school, perhaps a central office department—while at the same time planning for broader, systemwide change over time.

The conversation also addressed issues of timing and the need for education systems to navigate appropriate expectations for change. The political winds and policy demands in the education system shift at a rapid pace, and outside actors may insist on changing course when evidence of success is not obvious. Deep and lasting systems change, however, takes more time. One district leader described a commitment in their system to stick with an approach for 5 years before determining whether it works. A panelist estimated that building a critical mass for continuous improvement work that could create a tipping point for systemwide change within a district would be a three-year process.

Design Principles for a Statewide System of Support

Having engaged in a discovery process to examine support through three lenses, meeting participants set out to develop a set of criteria that should inform and shape any statewide system of support. This process began through small-group discussion, then continued with the full set of meeting participants.

Criteria for an Effective System

The following ideas emerged most consistently as design principles for an effective support system.

Promote and Foster Equity

Meeting participants emphasized that any statewide system of support needs to address gaps in opportunities and resources. Areas of particular attention include both high-need districts—often those serving high percentages of traditionally underserved students, and low-resource districts—those geographically isolated from outside sources of support or that generate insufficient revenue to meet their needs. And although equity is an important consideration across districts, it also is critical to recognize and address the inequities within school systems. Several meeting participants argued that this attention to equity cannot merely be an add-on or take the form of a new program or intervention; it is part and parcel of the work to be done. According to one participant, “Equity can’t be a ‘thing’; all our work needs to be driven by it.”

Fit the Context

Comments in small groups and the full-group setting highlighted the importance of tailoring support to the specific needs of a district and the schools within it. Echoing comments from the research base and the practitioner panel, participants lamented the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, support should align with the areas of need identified within a school system. Closely tied to this idea, participants described the importance of having access to multiple sources of support. A variety of government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and even networks of peers might be positioned to help a district make progress with their most persistent challenges. An effective system of support should enable access to all of these sources to ensure that the expertise, contextual understanding, and relationships are best aligned to make progress.

Create Agency for Local Leaders

Participants described the importance of districts having agency in identifying their needs and sources of support. Agency and local expertise help to ensure that any support a district receives is responsive to the context. It also helps with buy-in, especially if local leaders see supports as happening *with* their involvement rather than happening *to* them.

Address Capacity Needs at Multiple Levels of the System

Consistent with observations from the earlier session, participants identified the need to build capacity so that leaders within the system can drive improvement efforts. Many district capacity-building efforts appropriately target the administrators, teachers, and students charged with making change happen in the classroom. Just as important, however, school boards and employee associations require attention for their knowledge, skills, and will to improve. Moreover, the full-group discussion emphasized that everyone needs to keep improving. As one participant observed, “Just having blue on the dashboard doesn’t mean you’re okay.” If a state is serious about continuous improvement, that effort requires attention to the needs that exist in all districts and all schools.

Ensure Quality of Supports

An effective statewide system of support also must include mechanisms for ensuring the quality of that support. Meeting participants drew connections in particular to previous approaches to school improvement in California that did not ensure the provision of effective support. Comments in all small groups, however, stressed the importance of quality—both through creating access to multiple sources of support as a way of deepening the pool of expertise and in specifying the parameters of a system that might seek to ensure quality. Some small groups suggested that this calls for clarity on who can act as a support provider, and who makes that determination and how. It also may call for monitoring and feedback to ensure that district experiences with receiving support match the expectations laid out in the design of a system.

Support Coherence

Reflections from the small-group conversations pointed to the importance of facilitating coherence. Any support that a district or school receives should align to what they are

already doing rather than fragment or “layer on” new and potentially competing ideas. The support also should align with other processes and expectations at the state level (e.g., requirements for district planning and reflection in the LCAP). Some meeting participants further noted that accountability to eight state priorities, as outlined in LCFF statute, undermines coherence by asking districts to focus on too many issues to meaningfully turn their attention to any of them.

Build From (and Articulate) a Theory of Change

Two small groups suggested that a system of support should reflect a clear logic model for how the various components of the system are supposed to work and why. According to this point of view, it is not sufficient to be different from something that has come before; it is important to understand and articulate how the various pieces fit together. The theory of change also plays a key role in communication efforts; one group in particular argued that it should be communicated clearly enough that a lay audience can understand it.

Highlight Lessons Learned to Inform Ongoing Improvement

Small-group contributions advocated for a system that enables learning at all levels. Any system of improvement will produce successes and struggles. State leaders can help foster a learning stance that leverages these lessons to inform growth rather than using them to label districts and schools as failures. Experiences with receiving support also should create feedback loops for improvement so that leaders at all levels of the system can use their experiences to drive refinements and course corrections. Structures to facilitate learning also should facilitate continuous improvement about the system itself so that developers of the system can revisit and improve it as time goes on.

Key Questions, Tensions, and Areas for Further Exploration

Among recommendations for design principles, meeting participants highlighted some key issues that require deeper exploration in designing an effective system of support.

Responding to Persistent Shortcomings in Effectively Serving Students

New systems, carefully designed to overcome shortcomings of the past and capitalize on the best knowledge available, generate optimism about a more productive path forward. But what happens with districts and schools that continue to not do right by kids? A statewide system of support also must address the educational settings in which educators are unwilling or unable to make progress in addressing their areas of greatest need.

Small groups also raised questions about where responsibility lies when improvement efforts do not achieve expected results. Many accountability systems have traditionally held schools and school systems responsible for their persistent struggles. If improvement relies on external sources of support, however, how can a state hold a district accountable if the quality of support is unknown? A district may protest that it did not receive support of sufficient quality to improve. A provider, in turn, may argue that they delivered support but the district did not use it with fidelity. Designers of a new system must navigate this tension in way that promotes reciprocal accountability rather than finger-pointing.

Planning for Sustainability

The time horizon for improvement poses additional challenges. On one hand, experiences from practitioners—especially those from the session on continuous improvement—suggest that deep and lasting system change requires several years to develop. On the other hand, many districts and schools lack the capacity or stability to make necessary improvements, and waiting several years to see progress could irrevocably harm the students who are not receiving the support they need today. Parents and students deserve better than to fall through the cracks while education leaders figure out what to do. As a byproduct of this dynamic, political pressures often create agitation for change when the slow pace of organizational transformation has not yet produced dramatic results. Navigating the tension between urgency for improvement and patience for meaningful change is another challenge for education leaders and system developers.

Securing Needed Resources

Issues of resources presented a source of tension and disagreement among meeting participants. Addressing organizational challenges by using external providers to build capacity often requires resources above and beyond a district's existing financial commitments. Historically, many systems of improvement have provided extra money for this purpose. In the California context, ongoing issues of inadequate funding, exacerbated by increased obligations to the California State Teachers' Retirement System and the California Public Employees' Retirement System, make it difficult for districts to adequately and appropriately address their students' needs. The advantages of new funding streams also can be political, as state mandates to spend money in a particular way can provide cover for district leaders who need to make controversial decisions.

On the other hand, infusion of new money is difficult politically because short-term funding to provide assistance in California historically has not been effective. Moreover, one interpretation of LCFF is that the funding system is already set up to provide additional resources to districts with more struggling students. According to this view, no new money should be required to meet a purpose already built into the legislation. Creating new funding streams with mandatory spending provisions also might undermine the very principle of local control that undergirds LCFF.

Evangelizing for Mere Surface-Level Change

Meeting participants cautioned against the allure of renaming things in the absence of true change. Too often, an education system introduces new ideas with flashy names that never meaningfully depart from existing practice or penetrate the classroom door to actually make a difference for students. New names sometimes encourage a false belief in actual transformation. If a new statewide system of support merely renames the structures but enables policymakers, administrators, and teachers to do the same thing they have always done, authentic improvement is unlikely to occur.

Current Proposals for a Statewide System of Support

Following a discussion on the first day of the meeting about the characteristics of effective support, participants on the second day turned to the current proposals for California's statewide system of support. The session began with a presentation about the current status of the system design efforts.

Goals and Processes

State Board of Education (SBE) agendas from the second half of 2017 articulate the following goal for California's statewide system of support: "To assist LEAs and their schools to meet the needs of each student served, with a focus on building capacity to sustain improvement and effectively address inequities in student opportunities and outcomes." Four agencies—the SBE, the California Department of Education (CDE), the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), and the COEs—have worked together to design the parameters of the system and articulate a set of roles and responsibilities for each agency. The planning process has been under way for several months, and the group's evolving ideas have been part of the SBE agendas since summer 2017. Representatives from these conversations shared information with meeting participants about the current status of their work.

System Components, Roles, and Responsibilities

The system, as currently designed, articulates three levels of assistance available to districts and schools. The first, Level 1 supports, encompasses an array of resources, tools, and voluntary assistance available to all districts and schools across the state. The second, Level 2 supports, provides for differentiated assistance to districts and schools to address performance issues as identified in the California school dashboard. Level 3, intensive intervention, focuses on districts or schools with persistent performance issues. Although the eventual system of support will encompass all three levels, participants in the planning process shared that most of the conversation to date has focused on the parameters of Level 2 assistance.

According to the presentation, each of the four agencies involved in the planning discussions will have particular roles to play in the system of support. The CDE, with its access to extensive data, will lead data investigation and help to provide a systemwide view about state progress and challenges. The CCEE will organize networks, work with pilot districts, and provide targeted support. COEs, according to current plans, will act as the lead agency in working with school districts, beginning with a root cause analysis with districts that have been identified as recipients of Level 2 support. CCSESA is working with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to provide training to COEs for this responsibility. As the lead agency, the counties will work with districts to design an improvement activity or strategy, then coordinate and partner with other state agencies and organizations as necessary to accomplish the stated outcome of that activity or strategy.

Across the roles, participants in the planning discussions acknowledged some of the capacity limitations for each agency. For example, although the CDE boasts more than 2,200 employees, roughly 80 percent of its funding comes from federal sources. This

funding dictates much of what the organization does and limits the ability to mobilize in support of struggling districts and schools. For its part, the CCEE has a staff of fewer than 20, meaning that for all its direct services and coordination of support, it has limits in its ability to reach a large number of districts and schools. From a size perspective, the 5,000 staff spread across the state's 58 COEs afford them the most manpower among the four state agencies to manage responsibilities of the system of support. Meeting participants raised questions, however, about whether the knowledge and skills necessary to manage these responsibilities are also present.

According to those involved in the planning process, the nature of support provided to districts will vary depending on the particular local context. Some districts might need help navigating a one-time need or a unique situation. Others already might be working to address an issue. Still other districts already might be receiving assistance. Some districts might confront an unaddressed area of need revealed through the California school dashboard or through the root cause analysis. And in other cases, districts might need support to deal with persistent challenges.

Current Implementation Status

Some aspects of the new system of support are already underway. In December 2017, the state released a list of 228 districts targeted for differentiated assistance (Level 2) based on their results on the California school dashboard. Nearly three-quarters of these districts (168) were identified for the performance of students with disabilities. Another 20 percent (44) demonstrated challenges with homeless students, and 18 percent with foster youth.³ An analysis of the identified school systems reveals that they tend to fall into two categories: large urban districts and isolated rural districts. One dimension of support—targeted efforts from the CCEE—is already underway and has exposed other common challenges. According to a CCEE representative, struggling districts tend to battle issues of stability and troubled relationships between the superintendent and the school board.

Participants in the development process described several shifts they are pursuing with the new system and, in some cases, are already experiencing. First, the developers aim to achieve a shift from shaming and blaming districts and schools to providing support and assistance and sharing successes. Representatives of the planning group also described embracing an approach of mutual accountability. For the planning agencies in particular, there also is a shift in cross-agency work from relationships that historically have been competitive or siloed to a more collaborative way of working. Finally, participants in the process articulated a desire not only to provide support to districts and schools in areas of challenge but also to highlight the positive efforts underway. These changes collectively represent a profound shift in the culture within state agencies and in relationships between those agencies and school districts around the state.

³ These numbers add up to more than 100 percent because districts can be identified for multiple reasons.

Alignment Between Design Principles and Current Proposals

Having heard current plans for California’s statewide system of support, meeting participants returned to their small groups to examine the alignment between those plans and the design principles for an effective system of support developed on the first day of the meeting. To help the reader better understand the connections across the conversations, the observations that follow fall under the same categories shared earlier in this summary. Across the categories, meeting conversation identified areas of alignment, gaps between the design principles and the current plans, and recommendations for moving forward.

Promote and Foster Equity

Although attention to equity figured prominently in the discussion of design principles, it did not come up explicitly in the small-group or full-group discussions of alignment. Further exploration of the statewide system of support may benefit from some targeted attention to the ways in which the new system advances equity goals.

One set of comments related to equity, however, reiterated the tensions around establishing a time frame for improvement. The urgency to improve results for the state’s traditionally underserved students appropriately remains a priority, and political pressures will demand some evidence of progress. At the same time, participants underscored the need for stability and sustained attention to promising improvement efforts. Achieving an appropriate balance of urgency and patience, and establishing the conditions under which each is appropriate, will take careful thought and planning as designers refine the system of support.

Fit the Context

Small groups consistently noted the consistency between design principles and the intent of the proposed California system to design supports to meet local needs. The root cause analysis embedded in the Level 2 support approach specifically seeks to identify context-specific challenges. Small groups also noted that districts could have some degree of agency in this system and appreciated the aspiration that the work will be done with—rather than to—local educators.

Meeting participants offered recommendations to help ensure that the proposed root cause analysis appropriately identifies and addresses the areas in which districts need to improve. Although the brief overview of the root cause analysis described district leaders as partners in the process, one small group advocated for the inclusion of parents and community members in the process as well. If LCFF considers community engagement to be a critical component of the strategic planning process, support efforts should do the same. In addition, the group advocated for root cause analyses to include issues such as stability and board relations that fundamentally shape prospects for improvement. If processes of reflection and improvement do not take these factors into account, they are unlikely to help districts achieve meaningful progress.

Create Agency for Local Leaders

By appearing to mandate that a district's COE serves as the "lead agency" in providing Level 2 support, the proposed architecture could constrain access to a wide variety of providers—and thus infringe upon local educators' abilities to make decisions that best align with their own preferences and priorities. Participants questioned in particular whether districts that have existing relationships with other organizations would be precluded from leveraging those relationships for a root cause analysis in cases in which their external partner is strong in that area. Their inability to do so would seem to undermine the agency that participants identified as an important design principle for effective support.

Participants also discussed the appropriate level of involvement of districts in the design of the system itself. Some individuals noted that the collaborative discussions among the SBE, CDE, CCEE, and COEs have taken place in the absence of district leaders who will be the recipients of support. Representatives of the planning group clarified that opportunities exist for superintendents to provide feedback in several reaction sessions. Nevertheless, the system design process has happened without the end users being part of the team. The discussion did not arrive at a conclusion about the most appropriate degree of engagement, but did raise the importance of including districts' voices in the process.

Address Capacity Needs at Multiple Levels of the System

Conversation exposed concerns about whether the proposed statewide system of support will address the full range of needs that all districts and schools are facing.

In particular, focusing attention on Level 2 supports without having articulated a clear theory of action for the support system as a whole or having presented a coherent vision for the Level 1 supports for all districts and schools runs the risk of perpetuating the old failure-focused approach to accountability under new names and slightly different mechanisms. Some participants argued that just as a coherent and effective core instructional program is of primary importance in a multi-tiered system of support for students, so should the support system for all districts and schools be of central importance in a differentiated system of support for schools and school systems. Although the listing of some Level 1 supports in the background memos to the SBE nominally addresses this issue, meeting participants suggested that these supports are underspecified and lack a coherent vision. As one individual remarked, "We should recognize that continuous improvement is a responsibility for all of us and not just those in trouble." Indeed, releasing "the list" of 228 identified districts in December 2017 before Level 1 supports have been fully articulated could reinforce notions of a system based on intervention with low performers, not one built to support all districts, schools, teachers, and students. Given these concerns, multiple small groups recommended the careful development and clear articulation of the basic set of supports that all systems receive—the Level 1 supports.

There also may be gaps in the range of needs that the system identifies and seeks to address. Although the dashboard is a promising move away from an exclusive focus on test scores to identify district needs, the biggest issues faced by districts and schools—for

example, a dysfunctional school board—do not necessarily show up. The system does not explicitly address work with parents, school boards, or employee associations. Some participants cautioned that focusing on dashboard measures alone (for example, suspensions) could distract from more important underlying issues.

Ensure Quality of Supports

Although meeting participants on Day 1 emphasized the importance of quality, multiple small groups observed that the system as currently proposed includes no mechanisms for ensuring the quality of support providers or of the assistance that districts receive. The apparent mandate for the COE's "lead agency" role could limit access to high-quality providers that are nongovernmental organizations. Participants noted that this could create problems for districts that have strained relationships with their COEs. They also raised questions about COE capacity, especially given that the proposed system represents such a major shift from the traditional COE role. Although CCSESA is arranging training opportunities, will leaders in every COE have the knowledge and skills to effectively coordinate a root cause analysis? And what happens in those cases in which the COE has been identified as in need of assistance based on its own dashboard results?

On a topic related to quality, meeting participants in multiple small-group discussions expressed appreciation that the presentation about the proposed system at least mentioned the importance of mutual accountability. Just as districts and schools can and should be accountable for the performance of their students, so too should the organizations and agencies responsible for creating the conditions for them to succeed. However, while the rhetoric is a move in the right direction, it is not yet clear how the proposed system creates or facilitates mutual accountability.

Participants offered several suggestions for improving access to high-quality supports. Most consistently, participants advocated for the system's designers to open options to work with a wide variety of partners. This includes deliberately creating space for cross-sector and cross-system collaboration as a vehicle for improvement. One of the main dynamics funneling districts to work directly with counties appears to be statute language declaring that districts "shall" work with the COE. One small group in particular suggested changing the statute language so that districts have alternatives to working with county offices under the right conditions. Another small group suggested that, even within the county system, COEs should organize regionally to provide services to districts. In that way, expertise in different areas can come from a range of counties without having to meet the unrealistic expectation that each COE be expert in every area in which a district might struggle.

Participants emphasized the importance of addressing issues of provider quality but struggled to provide concrete suggestions for doing so. The challenge is substantial: Who determines quality, and according to what criteria? As designers navigate these questions, some participants encouraged the group to be mindful of the problems encountered in previous accountability systems that created lists of vetted providers. Although the exact approach to ensuring quality is unclear, it may be critical to the success of the state's system.

Support Coherence

Meeting participants reacted favorably to reports of increased collaboration among state agencies. Such an evolution should increase the quality of the work and increase coherence in plans and actions among government organizations. It also models the collaboration that the state should encourage within districts and schools. However, some small groups observed that work remains to ensure consistent communication and collaboration and to meaningfully change the dynamics among policy actors in Sacramento and around the state.

Comments about the underdeveloped Level 1 supports also tie to coherence, and represent a concern about whether the proposed system will sufficiently tie the various pieces of an improvement effort together at the state and local levels. By designing supports that are directly responsive to local context and tailored to address local needs, the new system of support may also help create conditions that can foster local coherence.

Build From (and Articulate) a Theory of Change

Although discussions about California's statewide system of support include references to important philosophies underlying it—among them, local control, increased collaboration, and mutual accountability—meeting participants observed that it does not yet feature a clearly articulated theory of change. Small-group conversation therefore generated several recommendations about the importance of communication. Some participants articulated the need to describe the system clearly to an outside audience, particularly parents and other community members who have not been part of the development process or who may not understand the jargon that emerges frequently within education policy and practice circles. If the new system is to foster continuous improvement, it will also be important to help stakeholders understand what that is and how to support it.

Participants also called for clarity about the details of the system and various players' roles and responsibilities in it. This includes information about how charter schools fit into the system. It also includes expectations and guidelines for what happens when differences of opinion emerge between support providers and recipients about areas in which attention is required or the appropriate course of action to address them.

Highlight Lessons Learned to Inform Ongoing Improvement

The expressed commitment of the statewide system of support to take a learning stance and to identify and share positive practices resonated with meeting participants who saw a clear connection to the design principles discussion on the first day of the meeting. As with the commitment to mutual accountability, it was not yet clear how this will take shape in the new system. Multiple small groups argued that the system's designers should create visible opportunities to aggregate and share both successes and lessons learned from district experiences. That learning process also can apply to the system itself, so that the system can be adapted and improved based on its strengths and weaknesses. One suggestion for facilitating this learning process was to fund a research partner with the explicit charge of studying the implementation of the system and using findings in a formative way to inform and improve the policies and practices of local educators and state policymakers. The CORE-PACE research partnership could provide a model for this kind of relationship.

One of the small groups also suggested that learning might happen best if new developments start small. Current conversations and proposals around the system of support have laid out plans for a statewide rollout of new approaches. As comments throughout the meeting highlighted, however, the shift of state agencies and accountability systems to adopt a support stance is a dramatic departure from policies of the past. “If nobody knows how to do this, everyone is going to do poorly,” one participant observed. “In improvement science, start as small as possible, and then you actually have something to spread.”

Additional Observations About Funding

Conversations about alignment yielded some additional observations about resources that did not directly connect to the design principles identified on the first day of the meeting. Funding adequacy remains an area that requires persistent attention. Although differences of opinion existed about whether the statewide system of support should provide additional resources to districts, comments revealed a general agreement that the overall level of school funding in California remains insufficient. Resources need to be part of the conversation if districts and schools are to make progress in addressing their most persistent challenges.

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The Collaborative will reconvene at the Garden Grove Unified School District in spring 2018 to examine challenges and opportunities associated with serving ELs in the current educational and political climate. In the meantime, the Collaborative staff will continue to partner with the CCEE, Pivot Learning, and WestEd to advance the work of the LCFF Test Kitchen and to pursue publications that share key lessons from our core meetings with the broader field of California educators. As always, resources from this and previous meetings, updates regarding Collaborative members, and information concerning upcoming events are available on our website at www.cacollaborative.org.