

## Meeting 29 Summary Fulfilling the Promise of LCFF: Improving the LCAP

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Sacramento, California

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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 in order to inform dialogue and decisions of educators throughout the state. It does not, however, contain the background and contextual information that might otherwise accompany a product created for public consumption. For more information about the meeting and other Collaborative activities, please visit [www.cacollaborative.org](http://www.cacollaborative.org).*

### Background to the Meeting

The California Collaborative on District Reform has grappled with issues of education finance and governance almost since its inception. In 2007, a working group of Collaborative members developed a set of briefs as part of the Getting From Facts to Policy convening; these briefs provided an early articulation of principles of equity and flexibility that have become hallmarks of both the Collaborative and of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). The Collaborative and its members were active in early efforts to define and pass a transformed approach to school funding and continued to provide input to the state as it fleshed out the parameters of LCFF. Then, when districts were going through the first round of LCFF planning in spring 2014, the Collaborative met to discuss opportunities, challenges, and early lessons learned. That meeting was the catalyst for two briefs that outlined key considerations for LCFF implementation.<sup>2</sup>

Now, having completed two rounds of Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) submissions, district leaders and others around the state know much more about what the process of developing the plans entails, where it has created the conditions for improved practices and outcomes, and where obstacles remain. The 29th meeting of the Collaborative came at the specific request of Collaborative member and State Board of Education (SBE) President Mike Kirst to examine the current state of the LCAP and explore recommendations for improvement. Collaborative members and guests—including several

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Jarah Blum, Marina Castro, Suzette Chavez, Kaitlin Fronberg, Erik Loewen, and Dawn Smith for their careful notes during the meeting, which made this summary possible.

<sup>2</sup> For meeting materials and links to these two briefs, see [www.cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting24](http://www.cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting24).

individuals who have not traditionally participated in Collaborative meetings but have been deeply engaged with LCFF implementation—met for two days in November 2015 with the goal of informing the LCAP process and template so they can best realize the promises of LCFF.

This document follows the flow of conversation throughout the meeting. After outlining some key contextual factors about LCAP improvement efforts, the summary describes the multiple (and sometimes competing) goals that various stakeholders associate with the LCAP. It then moves to a description of some of the specific challenges that districts and others have encountered in the LCAP development and approval process. Next, the document identifies some potential solutions to those challenges. It then describes criteria that districts might consider in communicating about the LCAP with communities members. The summary closes with a discussion of ways that the SBE can facilitate more clarity and consistency in the messaging and supports that districts receive from the county office of education (COEs).

## **Setting the Context for Improving the LCAP**

Participants in the meeting emphasized that LCFF remains a vitally important and positive development in California’s K–12 education system. They indicated that despite its inevitable growing pains, LCFF is a good thing and should be continued.

### ***Seeing the LCAP Through the Lens of Continuous Improvement***

Education leaders who talk about LCFF and the LCAP often couch the system, process, and document in the language of continuous improvement aimed at more effectively serving California’s diverse student population. Participants in the Collaborative meeting offered reminders that we should apply the same continuous improvement mindset and practices to refining the LCFF and LCAP themselves. Two years in, California is still at the very early stages of a process that will take time to refine. As a point of comparison, some individuals referred to the state’s Fiscal Crisis & Management Assistance Team (FCMAT)<sup>3</sup> process and noted that while that approach is now well regarded, it started more than 20 years ago and only came to its current state after years of evolution. Viewed through that lens, the LCAP is exactly where we might expect it to be, an imperfect process that will improve over time. Nevertheless, several participants tempered this optimistic view of ongoing improvement with cautions about the political landscape in which many see LCFF’s future as tenuous. If the state is unable to demonstrate results through the new funding system, it risks a return to the old categorical funding system.

In recognition of the political context, conversation throughout the meeting highlighted the need to communicate about the LCAP through the lens of continuous improvement. As one individual advised, “If we don’t continue to beat the drum that this is the best thing California has seen in 25 years, there are people waiting to pounce.” Another participant

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<sup>3</sup> FCMAT was created through Assembly Bill 1200 in 1991 to help districts meet financial and management expectations through the provision of fiscal advice, guidance for management, training, and other supports. See <http://fcmat.org/> for more information.

offered a similar perspective about progress to date: “This really is a bold approach to things and after only a couple years, we’re doing pretty darn well. And we really do have to applaud that and keep it going and make sure people understand that it will take time.”

### ***Maintaining a Focus on the Big Picture***

Participants also returned repeatedly to the fundamental purpose of a system like LCFF: to improve outcomes for kids, especially those who have traditionally been underserved. Conversation about policy can fall prey to debates about process and regulations. Although those details are important to resolve, dialogue throughout the meeting reminded all participants to maintain a focus on improving student opportunities and outcomes as the guiding purpose for any LCFF discussion.

### ***Understanding the History of the LCAP***

A final context for examinations of the LCAP is the process through which the document and the expectations surrounding it came into existence. According to historical accounts shared at the meeting, the legislature did not fully develop the parameters around the LCAP through the legislative and budget process. Rather, the LCAP was somewhat of an afterthought in what one person called a “grand bargain,” in which the primary focus through the legislative and budget processes was ensuring that dollars went to students in need. Given the relatively minimal planning that went into the LCAP design at the outset, its imperfections should come as no surprise.

Comments at the meeting also shed additional light on the sometimes controversial eight state priorities.<sup>4</sup> The identification of state priorities was a reaction to frustration across the state with an accountability system that focused almost exclusively on test performance in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. By identifying multiple priorities, the legislature aimed to focus attention on the full range of issues it believed to be important for ensuring school quality.

## **What Are We Trying to Accomplish? Identifying the Multiple Purposes of the LCAP**

The meeting began with a brainstorming exercise in which participants identified the key purposes of the LCAP process and template. Doing so helped to illustrate what many have discovered through the first two years of LCAP development: There is a range of priorities that different stakeholders have for the LCAP, those priorities may not be shared across all individuals and groups, and those priorities can in fact be at odds with one another.

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<sup>4</sup> The LCAP guidelines require districts to describe their goals, strategies, and expenditures to address eight state priorities identified in LCFF statute: (1) basic conditions for learning, (2) implementation of state standards, (3) parental involvement, (4) pupil achievement, (5) pupil engagement, (6) school climate, (7) course access, and (8) other pupil outcomes.

### ***To Engage and Reflect Community Goals and Aspirations***

One of the purposes identified through the exercise is to both reflect and communicate community aspirations for local public education. The LCAP should identify goals, both for all students and for students who have traditionally struggled in school, especially English learners, foster youth, and students living in poverty. Integral to this point of view is the belief that the LCAP should also engage the community in decisions about how districts spend money. Parents and community members provide input and receive information from the district. The LCAP then communicates a district's plans to the larger community.

### ***To Ensure Equitable and Strategic Resource Allocation***

Comments during the meeting also described equitable and effective resource allocation as a key goal of the LCAP. Under this view, the LCAP should provide transparent information about how districts distribute funding for particular strategies and programs to address key student needs. Tied to this purpose, some individuals indicated that the LCAP should ensure compliance for spending money on the intended purposes—essentially, to replace an oversight function that once existed for the state's categorical funding streams. With this in mind, the LCAP plays an important role in holding districts accountable for allocating funding in appropriate ways—in other words, ensuring accountability for inputs.

### ***To Enable More Responsive and Coherent Strategies for Meeting Local Student Needs***

Observations during this session also called out the importance of the LCAP for outlining district strategies for improving student learning opportunities, particularly with respect to traditionally underserved students. LCFF and the LCAP should provide districts with greater flexibility to advance the work of instruction and student learning in their local contexts. As part of this work, the LCAP should facilitate the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Meeting participants also pointed to the importance of improving procedures, curriculum, textbooks, and other elements of the learning environment. Comments later in the meeting suggested that the LCAP should provide a forum for districts to be able to “tell their story,” to describe their overall vision and the ways in which various programs and strategies can foster progress toward that vision.

### ***To Hold Districts Accountable for Improving Outcomes***

Meeting participants further described the need for the LCAP to lead a shift toward accountability for outcomes. Funding streams available through California's categorical programs featured a nearly exclusive focus on inputs. In contrast, some argued, the LCAP should emphasize how the state's funding system is leading to better outputs, or student outcomes. Moreover, the LCAP should address multiple outcomes and move beyond a narrow focus on mathematics and ELA test scores. Finally, participants asserted that the LCAP should demonstrate progress over time.

The morning conversation highlighted one of the key challenges that has emerged from early LCFF implementation: People attribute many different goals to the LCAP, and they do not share all at the same level of priority. On top of that, the multiple purposes can be in tension with one another. How do we foster local flexibility in decision making while also

holding true to state accountability? How do we make plans comprehensive and budgets transparent while also making them accessible and understandable to community members? How do we balance a focus on accountability for outcomes with a desire to ensure that districts make decisions on inputs that further goals of equity? These tensions are at the root of some of the challenges experienced through the LCAP's first two years.

## **What Is the Problem? Exploring the Challenges of the LCAP Process and Template**

Planning calls for the meeting revealed some of the general concerns that have emerged around the current LCAP template. For example, its length creates a heavy burden for districts, and it is so dense that few community members or other stakeholders can understand its content. To help ground the conversation in the actual LCAP template and processes, representatives from six districts (Elk Grove, Fresno, San Bernardino, San Francisco, San Jose Unified School Districts, and Whittier Union High School District) shared excerpts from their LCAPs with meeting participants in small groups, discussing both the ways in which the LCAP had advanced their efforts to serve their students more effectively and the ways in which the process or template got in the way. Observations from those discussions follow, beginning with overall reflections and continuing with comments that relates specifically to each of the LCAP's three sections.

### ***Cross-Cutting Observations and Issues***

In their small-group conversations and subsequent full-group reports, district leaders and other meeting participants shared overall reactions to the LCAP process and template.

#### ***Improved Attention to Planning and Engagement***

On the positive side, some district leaders reported that the LCAP had encouraged them to more explicitly connect the dots among goals, strategies, expenditures, and outcomes. District leaders also described ways in which the LCAP had prompted them to be more deliberate, inclusive, and expansive about community outreach activities. More details about these observations appear later in a discussion of Section 1 of the template.

#### ***Burdensome Compliance Orientation***

Despite these advantages, meeting participants described the template as too burdensome and compliance oriented. Its details require that district leaders engage in a time-consuming document preparation process. The documents average nearly 150 pages in length, and one Collaborative district developed a 435-page LCAP—yet participants observed that for all the various goals for the LCAP, nobody is asking for documents that long. Conversation suggested that a compliance mentality that produces long documents ties back to years of practice in California education. For district leaders, a mentality born from categorical programs prompts them to develop comprehensive plans that will survive external scrutiny. From the perspective of COEs or other stakeholders, a tension exists between allowing local control but not yet trusting local intentions and decisions; that tension can lead to comprehensive and explicit details throughout a district's plan.

Complicating the compliance mentality is wide variation among COE staff in the way they interpret the LCAP requirements, both when providing guidance to districts and when reviewing the final plans.

### *Obstacles to Coherence and Alignment*

Participants also observed that the current iteration of the LCAP template works against goals of strategic coherence and alignment. The requirements for the template do not call for the theory of action driving a district's goals and activities. In addition, integration is lacking between the LCAP and other planning and reporting requirements. Furthermore, the timeline for submitting the LCAP document prevents districts from including not-yet-available budget numbers and student outcome data. For these reasons, districts report struggling to reflect an overall vision in their LCAPs or to connect their plans to other districtwide efforts.

### *Distraction From Continuous Improvement*

Meeting conversation also revealed that the existing LCAP process and document do not match the rhetoric about continuous improvement that often accompanies it. That is, the LCAP does not position districts to monitor progress, identify areas of need, and adapt strategies in a process of ongoing reflection and growth. Echoing a theme about coherence, the LCAP does not identify the problems that drive the strategies that appear in the plan. It also lacks clear information about how outcomes and strategies are changing over time. Moreover, the document is static; once submitted, it does not change as district practices and results evolve over the course of the year. As a result, the document does not capture the ways in which districts are analyzing and addressing trends in student performance.

The LCAP template also does not direct attention to the need to improve district capacity to actually perform the work outlined in their plans. The template says nothing about the capacity of educators in the districts, the broader community, or elsewhere, nor does it create a clear place to describe approaches to building that capacity. Similarly, the LCAP says nothing about issues that meeting participants described as fundamental components of an effective school system. As one participant observed, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast, and we're being asked [in the LCAP] to talk about strategy when we should be talking about culture."

Participants also suggested that there are simply too many areas of focus. Effective continuous improvement strategies, several individuals argued, requires an ability to target a limited number of key goals to anchor a district's work. The LCAP, by requiring districts to address eight different state priorities and multiple metrics within each, requires too many areas of attention to be a useful tool for continuous improvement.

### *Lack of Transparency for Community Members*

In small- and large-group conversations, participants described ways in which the LCAPs have become inaccessible to community members. In general, the documents tend to feature extensive use of acronyms and jargon. One participant further explained the lack of

a connection between the LCAP and other district plans that community members might more clearly understand: “The document is super confusing to families, so others need to be able to say how the logic of the decisions line[s] up with our mission.”

A fundamental problem with the current LCAP is the inability for readers to draw lines between the LCAP and the actual district budgets to understand resource allocation decisions. Some participants suggested that the LCAP should act as a summary of the budget, but does not do so effectively in its current form. As a cautionary tale, one person described a funding system in Maryland that policymakers designed with similar goals to LCFF, only to learn in a study several years later that spending decisions at the local level had become *less* equitable over time. Despite its good intentions, we cannot assume that districts will use flexible funding to pursue equity goals. Without transparency in the budget process, districts will not have the political cover they need to make the hard choices to spend more on disadvantaged students.

Another challenge to accessibility is not only showing where the district directs resources, but the broader context in which those decisions take place. Public messaging around LCFF may lead community members to believe that districts have a great deal of flexibility to spend an influx of newly available dollars. However, many of those dollars are already committed—both to existing programs and to expenses like pension funds. Moreover, supplemental and concentration funds often represent a small percentage of the overall district budget. Finally, collective bargaining agreements constrain the ways in which districts can allocate funds.

Meeting participants also highlighted the lack of transparency about where money comes from and where it goes. Standardized Account Code Structure (SACS) codes are outdated and do not match new funding streams, especially the supplemental and concentration funds. On top of that, clear connections rarely exist between the expenditure information included in the LCAP and the district budget that the LCAP should represent.

### *Comparison to Special Education’s Individualized Education Plan*

As a way of illustrating some of the challenges that have emerged with the LCAP, one participant drew a comparison with the individualized education plans (IEPs) required for students with disabilities.<sup>5</sup> Both are government-sanctioned forms that require hours of data entry. Both operate on a three-year timeline. Both require collaboration among multiple stakeholders to develop. And both the LCAP and IEP serve as a planning document also used for accountability purposes.

Although well intentioned, the person who gave the example asserted that neither the LCAP nor the IEP guarantees a great education. Both are challenging for parents and teachers to read and understand. Both create long compliance-oriented plans that are incoherent and inaccessible. According to the individual describing this connection, “It

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<sup>5</sup> See this *Education Week* blog post from Arun Ramanathan for a full articulation of this comparison: [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/on\\_california/2015/11/ive\\_seen\\_the\\_lcaps\\_future\\_and\\_it\\_aint\\_pretty.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/on_california/2015/11/ive_seen_the_lcaps_future_and_it_aint_pretty.html)

distracts from the real meaningful work to please bureaucrats and lawyers.” The caution, then, is to avoid a bureaucratic document and process that could fail to advance—and even potentially undermine—the goal of LCFF, to create better student outcomes, especially for the traditionally underserved.

#### *Need to Focus on Process, Not on the LCAP Document*

Participants suggested that emphasis on the process of developing a district plan is more important than the document itself. One individual observed, “How much of the resources in the LCAP go to the document versus the process? We put 80 percent into the process and 20 percent into the document. Processes are way more important than the document.” Despite this reality and belief, it is the document that receives the greatest scrutiny around the LCAP. What is most important is not the plan, per se, but the degree to which the written plan matches what people in districts say and what people in schools do. Absent that connection, a plan is simply a piece of paper.

#### *Acknowledgement of the Context for Collaborative Districts*

Through all the conversation about the LCAP document, participants acknowledged that the set of districts whose work informed the meeting dialogue are not representative of the state overall. In most cases, Collaborative districts are building on a strategic plan that already aligns their work. The LCAP for these districts does not need to drive a strategic planning process because such a process is already in place.

As another key difference, most of the districts associated with the Collaborative are large urban districts whose student populations allow for a large central office staff. For small districts without the manpower to develop the LCAP document, the burden introduced by expectations around LCFF is much greater.

#### ***Issues Related to Section 1 of the LCAP***

Beyond the more general observations regarding the LCAP, comments in small-group and large-group discussion identified some key considerations about Section 1 of the template, which requires districts to describe their community engagement activities.

#### *Positive Elements*

Comments from district leaders suggested that the LCAP has pushed them to expand or focus their outreach beyond their traditional practice. In many cases, this enabled districts to build on existing engagement strategies developed through other outreach activities. District leaders also talked about proactively targeting specific groups that may not typically respond to requests for input. According to one,

“What the LCAP has forced us to do is be more thoughtful about our engagement and think about the subgroups we’re not bringing to the table. So instead of holding meetings at the district, we’re going out to meetings and community centers and churches and that has given us very rich data to think about our strategic activities.”

Participants also described the advantages of bringing more voices to the table in conversations about district activities. In many districts, these conversations have traditionally included only central office leadership and labor representatives. The community involvement that the LCAP calls for pushes districts to involve more of the individuals and groups together with a stake in the district's approach to meeting student needs. In the process, it creates healthy pressure to act in students' best interests.

### Promising Practices

Several district leaders described approaches they had taken to address language barriers. On the input side—for the process of creating a district plan—it is important to hold events in multiple languages that allow all parents to participate. Outreach that leverages English learner advisory committee groups can help with this process. On the output side—helping community members understand the content of the plan—it is important to create the LCAP and communications materials that accompany it in multiple languages. One district went so far as to format their LCAP so that the page numbers for each component of the LCAP matched for both the English and Spanish versions.

Beyond translation, some districts also worked with parents to help make sure the process and document addressed their needs. As described earlier, visiting the community (not just inviting them to the central office) can help reach multiple segments of parents and other stakeholders. One district also had parents read the LCAP and identify pieces they did not understand so that district leaders could modify the document to make it more digestible.

### Challenges

An important consideration for districts—and one the Section 1 requirements do not explicitly draw attention to—is recognizing who is *not* in the room. The approach of inviting community members to attend meetings at the central office is likely to attract parents and other stakeholders who feel comfortable interacting with the school system, who can communicate in the language of the district, and whose schedules enable them to participate at the district's convenience. Comments suggested that districts committed to authentically engaging all segments of their community may need to be more proactive and creative in working with the full range of parents and other stakeholders.

Participants also observed that LCAPs often catalogue district engagement activities (what the district did), but without information about the input collected (what the community said) or connections to subsequent programmatic and budgeting decisions (what the district will do moving forward to respond to community input). If community members are to be authentic partners in the planning process, it may help to make those connections explicit in the district's LCAP.

Meeting participants also noted that messaging around the LCAP can be challenging. Beyond language barriers and issues of length and jargon, community members may struggle to make connections with other things they already know about the district's work. If the district has already done outreach as part of its strategic planning process, for

example, how is this different? How does it connect to what community members have already heard about and contributed to the district's work?

### ***Issues Related to Section 2 of the LCAP***

Small groups also covered Section 2 of the LCAP, in which districts are to describe the specific goals, strategies, and expenditures they have planned to address each of the state's eight priority areas.

#### *Positive Elements*

Several participants shared positive experiences with the annual update portion of Section 2, a new addition to the LCAP template in its second year of implementation. Because it describes how the district made progress toward outcomes, the update helps readers make the connection between what a district said it would do and what is actually happening. It can also create an opportunity for reflection, for revisiting and refining goals and strategies based on progress to date.

#### *Challenges*

Despite the benefits of the annual update, participants argued that the timing is wrong. Because the LCAP guidelines require districts to submit the update with their full plan over the summer, districts do not yet have the data they need to report on progress toward key student outcomes.

Participants also complained about the LCAP's requirement that districts enter goals, strategies, and expenditures separately for each year of its three-year plan. Because the vast majority of district approaches vary little from year to year, this has created extensive repetition in the LCAP, a copy-and-paste job that participants described as redundant and burdensome. Moreover, because of the organization of the document, it is difficult to see changes in plans or outcomes over time. As a result, the LCAP does not lend itself to an external review of progress or an internal reflection on how to continue or interrupt trends toward desired district outcomes.

Ambiguity in expectations has also produced wide variation in the level of financial details districts provide. Some districts include expenditure information for all funding sources, including state-level funding (base, supplemental, and concentration grants allocated through LCFF), other local revenue, and federal income. Others provide information only about the dollars funneled to the district through LCFF. Many participants further observed that ambiguity about expectations leads districts to be unnecessarily comprehensive. Still emerging from the categorical environment and conditioned to protect against audits for misappropriation of funding, districts frequently default to providing as much information as possible to avoid sanction—and, consequently, produce longer documents.

Lack of clarity also exists about other expectations for Section 2. For example, the LCAP requires districts to "address" each of the eight state priorities, but the definition of "address" is unclear. Must districts develop goals, strategies, and funding approaches for all

eight, or is it sufficient to merely describe the district's current status with some? If a district's average daily attendance is at 96 percent, for instance, are strategies and new resource allocation decisions really required? Similarly, districts have received no clear definition for what it means to have dollars "principally directed" toward students in need. Finally, the LCAP says nothing about what districts can do to meet the needs of students who need special attention but who are not targeted by LCFF funds. For example, many districts have developed programs for African American males or special education students in response to persistent struggles for these subgroups. To address the needs of struggling students in service of equity seems to be highly consistent with the goals of LCFF and yet may not match the language of the LCAP template. What flexibility do districts have to target funds to meet these students' particular needs?

Finally, participants noted that the manual data entry required to complete Section 2—both to enter information from the budget into the template and to repeat information in Years 1, 2, and 3—wastes time and increases the probability of error.

### ***Issues Related to Section 3 of the LCAP***

Section 3 of the LCAP requires districts to explicitly identify ways in which the expenditures described in Section 2 go to meet the needs of the students targeted by LCFF funds—students in poverty, English learners, and foster youth. Participants also offered reflections on this section.

### ***Challenges***

Several comments suggested that the LCAP template unnaturally divorces information in Section 3 from information already presented in Section 2. Asking for information in this part of the template both encourages repetition and makes it difficult for the reader to understand the big picture of a district's plan.

Participants also raised the concern that requiring funding to be "principally directed" to students in need can prevent districts from supporting the kinds of foundational reform efforts that need to be in place for district success. For example, many districts rely on a strong data system to monitor student progress, identify areas of persistent struggle, and intervene appropriately to ensure equitable opportunities and outcomes. Such a system plays an instrumental role in identifying and serving students in need, but as a budget line item it appears as a districtwide expense. How can districts leverage LCFF funds to support key foundational elements of reform while still meeting the regulatory requirements for supplemental and concentration spending?

Comments throughout the meeting also cautioned that Section 3 could encourage the kinds of practices that emerged under the old categorical funding system. Many services target specific subgroups of underserved students but do not connect with other district strategies or, even more troubling, may not actually improve outcomes for kids. Yet because it is easier to connect funding with student subgroups on the input side, districts may pursue these kinds of strategies in order to submit an approvable LCAP.

Finally, the state's accounting system does not lend itself to providing the kind of information that Section 3 requires. Current accounting codes are not set up to track base, supplemental, and concentration dollars. To make a connection in the LCAP that is not clearly identified in the district budget, then, creates challenges for the district in the development process and for COEs in the oversight process.

## **How Can We Improve? Identifying Potential Solutions for Key LCAP Challenges**

Having unearthed some of the more troubling challenges of the current LCAP process and document, the group then identified potential solutions. Meeting participants broke into working groups to explore solutions related to four general areas that emerged in the morning conversation: improving transparency, reducing burden, increasing alignment and coherence, and facilitating continuous improvement. Following are some of the strongest ideas that emerged from these conversations, both short term and longer term.

### ***Short-Term Solutions to Improve the LCAP Document and Process***

Among the solutions generated, some are short-term solutions that might improve the effectiveness of the current approach to the LCAP. The suggestions in this section assume an LCAP process and template that retains the main elements of the current ones. Meeting participants believed that most or all of these recommendations could be accomplished without legislative action.

#### **Revisit Timing**

*Move to an actual three-year plan:* Meeting participants proposed that the state revisit the timing of various LCAP requirements. One approach is to move to an actual three-year cycle. Rather than ask districts to submit a comprehensive three-year plan every year, the state could actually allow states to follow through on their plans for three full years. This would bring the state closer to the three- to five-year strategic planning process in which many districts already engage. It would also reduce the burden on districts to develop hundreds of pages of an LCAP document every year. Furthermore, the state could stagger the plans so that a third of districts would submit the full LCAP in one year, another third in the second, and the final third in the third year. By doing this, it could also reduce the burden on COEs, who could spend more time reviewing and providing support for the LCAPs without being overwhelmed by the full complement of districts every year.

*Alter the timing of the annual update:* Under this approach, more attention would turn to the annual update in Years 2 and 3. The state could also revisit the timing for the annual update and make it due after districts have student outcome data to report. The format of the update itself could even change to become more accessible through a platform like video or an online report. By focusing on year-to-year changes (rather than the full plan) and by timing the update to include relevant data so that districts can act in response to key outcomes, the state could better position districts to use the update as part of a continuous improvement cycle.

One concern with these timing changes is to ensure adequate community engagement. In the absence of the full LCAP template each year (in which Section 1 requires an accounting of outreach activities), the state and districts would need to find ways to include community members in the annual update process.

### *Make the Budgeting More Transparent and Efficient*

Working groups also identified ways to make the budgeting process more transparent and efficient.

*Link directly to budgets:* First, participants argued that not all of the resource allocation information has to appear in the LCAP itself. The primary source of funding information for a district is its budget. Rather than duplicate that information in the LCAP, districts can map back to the actual budget in their plans so that the LCAP becomes a summary of the district's budget rather than a separate document with separate numbers. Reframing the document as a summary of the district's budget and providing this direct link could help alleviate some of the burden on district staff who must currently enter a lot of financial information into the LCAP manually. It could also increase transparency by directing readers to the primary source of the district's financial plans. To better identify funding sources for activities in the LCAP, the state might also need to update the SACS codes so that districts and community members can better track dollars.

*Mechanize data entry:* Mechanizing the entry of budget information into the LCAP could also relieve burden on central office staff. Prepopulating much of the budget information—perhaps by the COEs, who already collect and review district budgets—could both reduce burden and mitigate the potential for error.

*Invest in a budget transparency tool:* Even with these changes, district budgeting offices and systems may not be positioned to share information in the way that the LCAP calls for. As one individual cautioned, “I think the budget process is like building on sand in some ways.... I’m very wary of proceeding without getting into the basics of budgeting and accounting.” Observations like this may call for more fundamental changes to the budget process. In the meantime, a one-time state-level investment in a budget transparency tool for district use can help facilitate a transition into a better means of tracking state money.

In light of—and despite—these suggestions, several challenges and unintended consequences remain. Changing SACS codes to reflect base, supplemental, and concentration grants could encourage a return to the categorical mentality that California is trying to escape, or to an approach in which districts would have to spend money specifically (and even exclusively) on the students that generated it. Moreover, tracking concentration and supplemental funding could also distract from the need to spend *base* funding in a more equitable way.

There are also barriers to making links among systems and agencies. For example, although it would help if counties could prepopulate portions of the LCAP with information from

district budgets, it is not clear that existing data systems and timelines could allow for this to happen.

*Commission a more comprehensive analysis:* Ultimately, working group participants concluded that they did not necessarily have all the facts they needed about (1) where key information resides and (2) what timelines would be required for change. Therefore, participants suggested commissioning an investigation into the issues. Such an analysis could identify the actual barriers to progress and make more concrete recommendations for moving forward.

#### *Provide Clearer Guidance to Districts*

Working groups also called for the SBE to provide clearer guidance to districts about expectations for various components of the LCAP. For example, comments throughout the meeting indicated that districts are erring on the side of caution, opting for comprehensive plans to ensure approval by the county office of education. The SBE could share a 20-page LCAP with districts as an exemplar of what an acceptable stripped-down plan looks like. It could also develop answers to a set of frequently asked questions to clarify common issues about what the LCAP requires. Finally, echoing suggestions about making the development process more efficient, COEs could prepopulate some of the information in the LCAP based on budget information they already review or previous years' documents. Through these actions, the state could reduce the burden on districts. By providing clear answers and guidance for what an acceptable shorter plan looks like, the SBE can free districts to actually create one.

The group would discuss issues of clarity in more detail in response to a problem of practice posed by the SBE. Those observations appear later in this summary.

#### *Create New Platforms to Communicate the Stories Behind the LCAPs*

Working groups also advocated for finding better ways to help community members understand the bigger picture of the district's story. This could include encouraging other platforms beyond the existing document—including vehicles like video or Web-based information sharing. It might also mean community-friendly budget summaries—some organizations in California are already working on putting these together. Participants also recommended finding ways to demonstrate not just which outreach activities have taken place, but how community input is reflected in a district's plan.

To encourage better communication, the SBE could play a role in highlighting promising approaches from around the state. In doing so, it might help districts increase transparency by reaching out to community members in ways they can understand. It could also facilitate alignment by better positioning districts to make connections between their LCAP and strategic plans. Moving in this direction, however, could increase burden on districts if they are to create new materials and strategies above and beyond what they already do for their LCAP.

### ***Longer Term Solutions to Address More Fundamental Challenges***

The first set of potential solutions represent relatively minor adjustments to the LCAP document and process already in place. Other solutions from the small groups call for more fundamental changes.

#### ***Address Root Causes That Stand in the Way of Continuous Improvement***

Participants noted that district capacity is the starting point for continuous improvement. Although the LCAP outlines goals and strategies, it says nothing about a district's level of preparedness to effectively carry out its plans. An LCAP might meet all the requirements for county approval, but a district may fail to demonstrate improvement because it cannot effectively implement its plans, or because the ideas in the template do not match the way that leaders actually describe their work or the way that leadership and instruction play out in schools and classrooms. One of the working groups therefore suggested employing a process like the one used in FCMAT to help identify some of the root problems getting in the way of district improvement. If the LCAP is truly to facilitate continuous improvement, such an approach would get at the core issue of whether a district can translate the elements of their plan into actual classroom growth—and if it cannot, to address that capacity issue head on.

#### ***Create an Alternative to the LCAP Template***

All four working groups proposed the same major change to the current LCAP requirements: get rid of the template entirely. Meeting participants argued that instead of the current approach, the state should establish a key set of targets and let districts determine the best way to demonstrate that they are addressing those targets. This approach could reduce the burden on districts that comes from the input-oriented details required in the current template. A district-driven approach would also allow for better alignment by allowing districts to create a document that reflects its strategic plan and theory of action. By telling their story on their terms, districts can also advance transparency goals by sharing information in a way that their communities can understand. Finally, by enabling districts to articulate their plan in a way that reflects their overall theories of action, the state could facilitate the cycle of continuous improvement that many stakeholders believe the LCAP should support.

Participants emphasized that it would be critical to design the criteria for this new approach carefully and appropriately. California might turn to a model like the Baldrige Criteria, which provide a standard for excellence in health and other fields. District plans would be judged against such criteria using a common rubric. To avoid confusion or frustration that could surface if districts have no concrete guidelines on which to rely, the state could develop advisory templates for districts to use as a model if they do not create a design of their own.

Of course, many stakeholders around the state may resist leaving so much autonomy in the hands of districts in the absence of compelling results. Participants therefore advanced the idea of creating a set of tiered requirements for the LCAP based on district capacity. Low

capacity districts might need to complete a highly scripted LCAP similar to the one currently in place, but those systems that have demonstrated sufficient progress toward key outcomes could receive an exception and submit a plan of their own design.

This approach introduces some important challenges. A dramatic change along these lines would likely open LCFF to legislative changes that could spark political pushback—or invite scrutiny and modifications to elements of the system that educators do not wish to change. The design choices for a new approach to the LCAP will also shape its prospects for success. Participants made it clear that the criteria for deciding (1) what the key targets are for districts and (2) when an alternative approach to the current LCAP is acceptable (i.e. when a district has demonstrated sufficient capacity) will be incredibly important to get right.

## **How Do We Communicate the Content of the LCAP With Our Communities?**

Conversations about transparency and community understanding early in the meeting set the foundation for a more comprehensive discussion about ways in which districts are communicating the contents of their LCAP to parents and other community members. To explore these approaches, meeting participants reviewed examples of actual district communications materials, including executive summaries, infographics, and a staff newsletter. Based on their review of these materials, participants identified several criteria that should guide district approaches to communication.

### ***Think About the Audience(s)***

Different audiences want different levels of detail. For example, parents trying to understand what a district's plan means for their child might want different information than civil rights advocacy organizations trying to ensure that districts are allocating resources to meet LCFF's equity goals. Because of this, districts may need to develop multiple materials to meet the needs of various community groups. Translation into languages beyond English should be part of this approach—especially to reach parents whose children are driving LCFF's motivation toward equity.

### ***Consider Multiple Modes of Communication***

Just as different audiences may benefit from different materials, districts should consider multiple modes of communication. Text-based documents like executive summaries may be one part of a district's communication strategy, but video, text messages, and other platforms for sharing a district's message can help expand and deepen the community's understanding of the LCAP. In the spirit of alignment, some participants suggested that LCAP-related communication should leverage existing forms of district communication (for example, newsletters, outreach to registered voters, or websites). Other individuals noted that parents often turn to one another as trusted sources of information; districts might therefore leverage parents to help communicate.

### ***Make the Material Accessible***

Participants addressed ways to make sure that community members understand the content of various outreach materials. First, simplicity is key. Districts should avoid jargon and limit written documents to three to five pages if they hope for parents and others to read and digest all of what the district produces. Districts can also look for ways to catch people's attention—color and graphics can help with this effort—as long as methods for doing so help the audience understand key information. Infographics, for example, should help illustrate key points but may need explanatory text in order to do so.

### ***Include the Information That Community Members Need***

Participants also noted that district communication materials need to include the right information. The temptation may exist to begin by summarizing the contents of the LCAP, but materials should emphasize the big picture: How is my school or district doing?

To tell the big picture story, outreach from districts should connect the dots for the audience. It may be useful to describe community engagement activities, but how is the input collected reflected in the district's plans? The LCAP and summary materials that accompany it may list programs and expenses, but what is the rationale behind these district decisions? Supplemental and concentration funds may go directly to meeting the needs of underserved students, but what is the district's overall approach to equity? How does the district's use of *base* funding contribute to those goals? Documents and other tools should also help community members understand the district's overall trajectory. Where was the district before, what has happened recently, and what are the next steps?

Finally, participants suggested that summary materials should include references and links to original sources that readers can explore for more information. The summary materials should not obscure those details, but instead act as an overview and (if the audience desires) entry point into comprehensive information about the LCAP.

### ***Avoid Common Pitfalls***

Participants also offered several cautions against common missteps when developing executive summaries and other communications materials. Districts can unintentionally drown parents in information. Do not try to do too much; links to additional information can help avoid the temptation to include everything in one location.

The effort to grab a reader's attention can lead to splashy marketing pieces that obscure or lack key information. Descriptions of district activities can lean too far toward success stories without emphasizing key challenges and steps to address them. Use of infographics can introduce images that draw the eye but do little to actually help the reader better understand the content. Anything a district shares should advance the user's knowledge of the district's plans for improvement.

Meeting participants also reflected that communicating effectively requires skills and procedures that many districts do not traditionally have. Central offices may need to build

internal capacity to perform this role effectively. They can also leverage external partners, from community members to COEs, to help them pursue more effective outreach.

## **How Can the SBE Facilitate Consistency and Clarity in Communications About the LCAP Process?**

LCFF sought to move California away from a compliance orientation to resource allocation while maintaining a mechanism for oversight through the county offices of education. To ensure quality with district LCAPs, counties have new responsibilities that include both technical assistance (helping districts prepare their LCAP) and compliance (reviewing and approving the LCAP), yet neither role is well defined. Participants noted that turnover exacerbates this ambiguity—almost 20 county superintendents are new since the original passage of LCFF. Moreover, the fact that many county superintendents are in elected positions makes them susceptible to local political pressure. As a result, some may choose to act differently than their colleagues in other counties. Finally, participant experiences with the LCAP process suggest that inconsistency occurs even *within* county offices of education. Two administrators from within the same building might provide conflicting guidance to district staff.

To address these challenges in consistency, representatives from the SBE posed the following problem of practice for meeting participants to consider: How can the SBE facilitate consistency and clarity around the LCAP process and ensure consistency in messaging and supports that county offices provide? Meeting participants followed a consultancy protocol in small groups to provide input on the problem.

### ***Inherent Challenges With the County Role***

In their small-group consultancy conversations, meeting participants highlighted some of the basic challenges that emerge from the way the state has defined the counties' responsibilities. A fundamental tension exists between providing oversight and facilitating improvement, and yet the state has charged the COEs with doing both. The assistance role is particularly challenging against the backdrop of the traditional county role. Most COE staff are building from their typical responsibility of reviewing budgets, which has generally not been a job orientated toward continuous improvement. Administrators are unlikely to have training or experience in guiding conversations and planning to revolve around ongoing reflection and revision of strategies to achieve key goals. The many (sometimes competing) goals of the LCAP complicate matters further. As one participant observed, "The LCAP is a source of conflict when the rules are unclear. Everyone comes in with a different perspective."

### ***Possibilities for Improvement***

To guide the SBE in the direction it provides to counties, meeting participants offered several suggestions. First, the consultancy panels pointed to the need for clarity on the purpose and big picture of the LCAP. As the conversation at the beginning of the meeting demonstrated, people attribute many different purposes to the LCAP. For consistency in guidance from COEs to districts, a common understanding about purpose is critical. For

example, rhetoric around continuous improvement surrounds the LCAP, yet meeting participants identified many ways in which the current template gets in the way of that effort. If the template is not designed to facilitate continuous improvement, some participants argued, the state should not pretend that it is a goal.

To get this kind of clarity of purposes, key leaders from the SBE, California Department of Education, and COEs need to get together in the same room. As one participant observed, “It sounds like there’s been siloing of the different groups that have jurisdiction or political will around the LCAP.” Forcing conversation can help break down these silos and move toward greater consistency.

Participants also recommended that the SBE identify and clarify answers to the questions that consistently produce confusion. For example, which funding sources should the LCAP represent? What does it mean to “address” all eight state priorities? Should Section 3 be a table, a narrative description, or something else? Common questions have emerged across districts in the latest round of the LCAP, and responses to frequently asked questions can help provide the guidance districts need to move forward.

Consultancy panel discussion also suggested that the SBE could provide direction on how to appropriately focus the metrics identified in the LCAP. The LCAP identifies more than metrics that help gauge progress toward the eight state priorities but also enables districts to add their own measures. Some guidance for the development of sound metrics would help districts. Some participants also asked that the state allow districts to focus on fewer higher level goals. As some individuals observed in the planning calls for the meeting, “When you have too many goals, you don’t have any.” Allowing districts to focus and prioritize might help the processes of alignment and continuous improvement that can move the needle on student outcomes.

Finally, participants advocated for a focus from the SBE on promoting *quality*, not just consistency. Too broadly employed, consistency can encourage lock-step approaches to meeting state requirements and, in the process, stifle innovation. Although the SBE needs to play a role in clearing up confusion about expectations, it needs to accompany any guidance it provides with an emphasis on quality. The California Collaborative for Educational Excellence could play a role in emphasizing goals of quality.

## **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Having reflected on challenges and opportunities posed by the current iteration of the LCAP process and template, meeting participants suggested several next steps. First, the district perspective so well reflected in this meeting has been largely absent in Sacramento. One individual called on district leaders to share their thoughts and experiences: “[State legislators] need to hear from everybody. The advocacy groups are doing a really good job of talking to our members. I don’t hear that they’re hearing the district perspectives, so you need to do work to see [state legislators] locally and talk about what’s working and how it’s not [working].”

Meeting participants also saw value in bringing the chief financial officers from several districts together to address how supplemental and concentration funding are operationalized in their budgets and LCAPs. The Collaborative staff will follow up with members to clarify what such a meeting might entail and move forward with the planning process.

In the meantime, Collaborative staff will work to translate some of the key ideas from this meeting into briefs that can inform California's broader education community. The date and location for the next Collaborative meeting have yet to be determined. We expect to convene in late spring and will share logistical details as soon as they are available. As always, resources from this and previous meetings, updates about Collaborative members, and information about upcoming events are available on our website at [www.cacollaborative.org](http://www.cacollaborative.org).