

March 14, 2019

Dear Collaborative Members and Guests,

We look forward to seeing all of you in Elk Grove on March 28-29 for our upcoming meeting of the California Collaborative on District Reform. Our focus for this convening is the financial pressures that threaten to destabilize district budgets despite recent increases in funding. We extend our thanks to the Elk Grove Unified School District team for hosting us, working together with us in the planning process, and sharing some of their successes and struggles with the group. We will be drawing both on their experience and that of multiple districts and communities over the course of the two days as we explore the challenges and potential solutions emerging from across the state.

### Meeting Overview

Day 1: The meeting will begin with an examination of the problem and its sources. Despite California's overall economic recovery and increased education revenues after the Great Recession, a host of growing financial obligations are again straining local budgets and limiting the ability of many districts to provide optimal learning experiences for their students. Participants will explore the case of one district in particular to better understand how the confluence of increasing costs, combined with other state and local factors, shapes the district's fiscal and programmatic options. From this local example, we will then consider statewide patterns and influences, based on the findings of two recent reports on California education's fiscal situation, *The Silent Recession* and *The Big Squeeze*. Collaborative members Jason Willis and Arun Ramanathan will share key takeaways from the research underlying these reports, and through subsequent group discussion we hope to generate a shared understanding of some of the fiscal challenges facing districts and their implications for educational equity.

From this examination of the problem, we will then turn to district strategies for improving quality and efficiency in two high-leverage domains: special education services for students and healthcare benefits for employees. Rising special education costs and a flawed special education funding system have forced many districts to allocate increasing portions of their general fund monies to serve their students with disabilities. At the same time, costs for health care and employee benefits have also created growing obligations for school districts. Representatives from four districts will share strategies they have developed locally—two for special education and two for employee benefits—to improve the quality of their services while maximizing the value of their investments. Meeting participants will have an opportunity to consider how these strategies might apply in other district contexts and how state policy might facilitate more productive local decision making.

The first day will conclude with three districts sharing a specific problem of practice related to their local financial situation. We will break into small groups and follow the consultancy protocol that has guided conversation in many previous Collaborative meetings. Through this structured dialogue, we hope to leverage the multiple experiences and perspectives of meeting participants to spark ideas for improvement within each of the three presenting districts.

In keeping with our longstanding tradition, we will follow Thursday's deliberations with an opportunity for networking, collective relaxation, and continued conversation over dinner.

Day 2: While Thursday's deliberations will focus on effective and efficient use of funds in hand, Friday morning will begin with a consideration of the adequacy of the total pool of state and local monies available to districts to reach the state's ambitious educational goals. We will explore potential strategies for increasing that pool and consider both their feasibility and potential trade-offs.

The remainder of the meeting will pivot from specific strategies for addressing fiscal constraints to an exploration of the varying narratives in the public discourse about districts' fiscal realities and options. A panel of community leaders from across the state will join the meeting to explore how districts and their communities can move from an us-against-them narrative to a more shared understanding and collective problem solving. Further discussion will explore the ways in which labor-management dynamics shape perceptions and options for district leaders and employees, as well as opportunities to shift the narrative for a state policy audience.

### Readings

As usual, all readings and reference materials for the sessions are available in multiple formats. If you requested a hard copy of the binder, all of the materials are included there; the cover sheet behind each tab identifies a subset of priority readings that we suggest you read before the meeting. **For your convenience, on Friday, March 15, you will also receive an email with the subset of priority pre-meeting readings attached. We strongly encourage you to read this subset of materials prior to the meeting**, as they provide important background information on the topics we will discuss. Also for your convenience, all of the meeting materials are available on the Collaborative website at <http://www.cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting38> and at a DropBox link you will receive via email.

If you have any questions regarding the meeting logistics, please do not hesitate to contact Dawn Smith at 650-376-6439 or [dcsmith@air.org](mailto:dcsmith@air.org). If have any other questions, please email me ([joday@air.org](mailto:joday@air.org)) or give me a call at 202-262-4987. I look forward to seeing you all next month!

Sincerely,



Jennifer O'Day  
Chair, California Collaborative on District Reform, and  
Institute Fellow, American Institutes for Research