

Implementing Local Accountability in California's Schools: The First Year of Planning

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SUMMARY

The passage of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in 2013 gave California school districts flexibility in allocating resources and significantly boosted state support for the education of disadvantaged students. LCFF also includes a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), which requires districts to enlist the help of parents and the public in identifying student performance goals and ways to achieve them. Our research in 25 California districts suggests that educators have worked hard to develop the first of these three-year plans, but that knowledge about strategic planning, data-driven decisionmaking, and involving parents and the public in the process varies significantly among districts. As a consequence, the clarity and effectiveness of the initial plans varies widely. The state can help by making technical assistance to districts and county offices of education available and affordable. Our research also indicates that expanding the role of county offices would help them push for improved student performance.

IMPLEMENTING LOCAL CONTROL AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The passage of LCFF represents the most significant change to California's school finance system in decades. The new funding formula increases local flexibility, directs a greater share of K–12 funding for low-income, English Learner (EL), and foster care students, and mandates the development of Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) every three years.¹ (Students are identified as low-income if they are enrolled in a free- or reduced-price meal program. A related PPIC report looks at factors linked to participation in the National School Lunch Program and the potential impact of LCFF on program enrollment.)² The new law directs county offices of education to provide guidance and assistance to districts during the planning process. County offices provide services to K–12 students (special education, alternative schools); they also provide a range of administrative and professional services to districts.

LCAP requirements cover both the planning process and the resulting plan. The process has three stages: identify district goals with the input of parents, the public, and teachers; develop action plans to meet district goals and state priorities; and review by the county office of education. LCAPs must outline their public engagement processes, identify goals and performance indicators, and lay out action and budget plans.

The success of LCAP will hinge on whether the local process creates the right mix of flexibility, resources, expectations for student achievement, and community engagement that holds school boards accountable for performance. This report looks at the first year of LCAP development in 25 California districts for an early indication of how well the law is working. We begin by analyzing a sample of district LCAPs. We then briefly examine the effect of county office of education reviews. We conclude by discussing the policy implications of our findings.

DISTRICTS IN OUR STUDY

Our study takes an in-depth look at 25 districts in an urban coastal county and a rural county in the Central Valley. We focus on only two counties to better understand the impact of county offices of education on the quality of district plans. County offices play critical roles throughout the LCAP process by providing technical assistance to districts in developing local plans and reviewing final plans. Through their review responsibilities, county offices also have the potential to strengthen district accountability.



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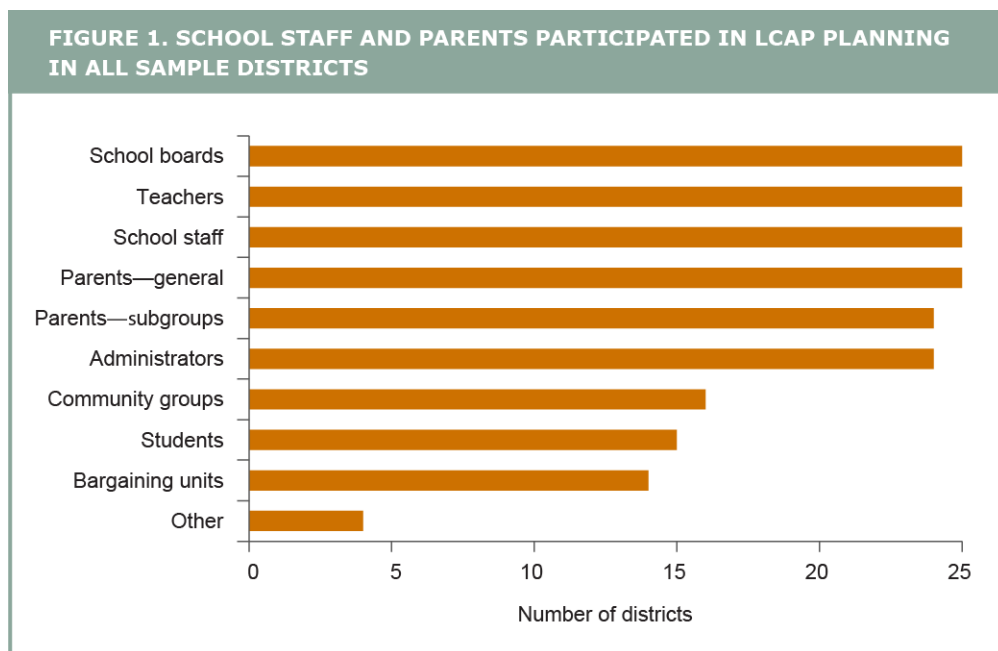
Our two-county sample includes a diverse set of districts. About half are relatively small, enrolling fewer than 10,000 students,³ and 60 percent enroll more than 55 percent of low-income, English Learner, and foster care students. In about a third of the districts in our sample, English Learners account for more than 25 percent of enrollment—similar to the state average. Our sample includes elementary and high school districts as well as unified school districts.

Our findings are drawn from an analysis of the 25 district LCAPs and interviews at four of the districts and the two county offices. This approach allows us to analyze the plans in detail and see how the plans change as the result of the county office reviews.⁴

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

LCFF directs school boards to involve parents, teachers, administrators, and students in the development of local plans. In part, this requirement opens the door for a discussion of the quality of education experienced by students and communities. It encourages parents and the public—who elect school board members—to demand accountability and provides a way for districts to communicate their priorities and plans. The law requires districts to seek feedback on finished plans by presenting the LCAP to parent advisory councils and responding in writing to any comments or suggestions made by the councils. Districts must also hold two public hearings on the plan. The idea is to build interest and participation in the process and promote district accountability for the resulting strategic plan.

Figure 1 displays the groups identified as participating in LCAP planning in the 25 districts. Every district reported involving teachers, school staff, and parents in LCAP planning, and about half reported involving community groups, students, and bargaining units.⁵



SOURCE: PPIC review of 25 district Local Control Accountability Plans, as submitted to county offices in July 2014.

Districts reported using many forms of communication to obtain input. On average, seven approaches were used, including district and school site meetings, paper or Internet surveys, and social media. Most districts held meetings specifically focused on the needs of low-income, English Learner, and foster care students, and about half translated LCAP information and/or the finished plan into other languages.⁶

Limited impact on district plans. Our interviews with district staff uncovered disappointment about the turnout of parents and community groups. Staff felt they worked hard to get people to meetings, but relatively few attended.⁷ In some cases, though, districts reported attracting parents who normally do not attend district meetings (parents who do not speak English, foster parents). District staff also found that issues raised at the meetings often mirrored district concerns. As a result, staff in three of the four districts

interviewed reported that the process was useful, reinforcing district analyses and helping communicate to parents and other groups.

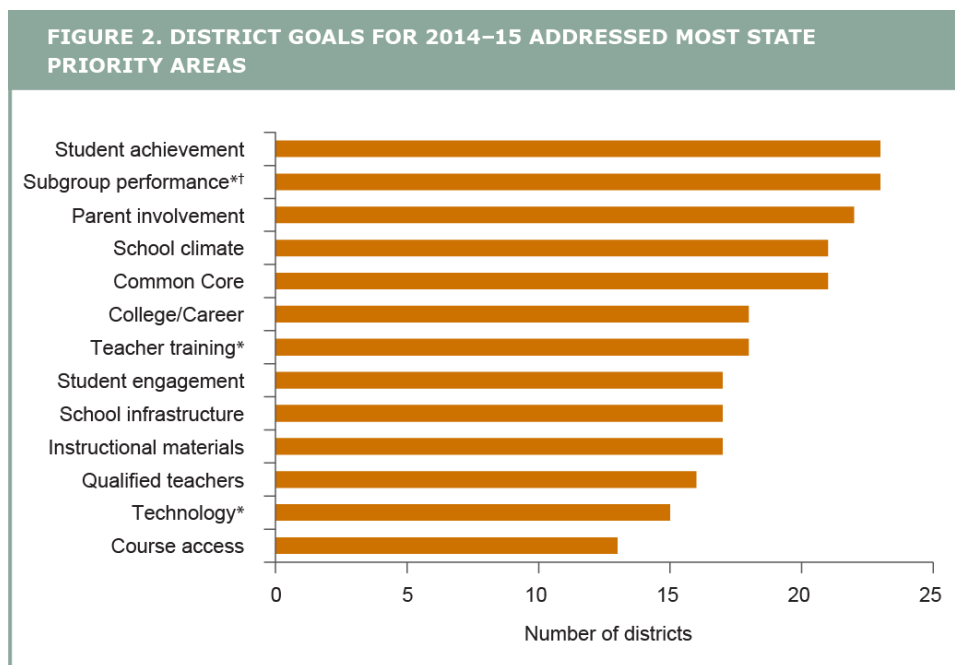
Asked if the LCAP would make the district more accountable for results to parents and other groups, staff indicated that input was generally quite narrow in scope. Parents were seeking a stronger focus on college or more help for struggling students. This meant that input was limited to issues raised by the relatively few people in attendance, and there was no discussion of other issues of importance to students. One educator commented, “We had district data binders at all of the community meetings. No one opened them.”

While it seems clear that districts tried to involve community groups, their inability to generate useful new information suggests districts may not know how to do so or have weak incentives for encouraging robust public participation.⁸ Yet, the success of LCAP depends partly on stronger local pressure generated through the engagement of parents and the public. For this reason, the need to boost the quality of local participation in planning represents a key early finding.

GOALS AND TARGETS

State law requires districts to produce a local plan using the state-developed LCAP form, known as the “template.” The template asks each district to describe its goals for improvement in eight priority areas: academic achievement; basic educational inputs (adequate teachers, materials, facilities); parental involvement; student engagement; school climate; implementation of the Common Core State Standards; course access (access to classes in required areas of study); and other student outcomes (outcomes in required areas of study).⁹ State law identifies 19 performance indicators that districts must use to evaluate district performance on these eight priorities.¹⁰ LCAPs must also contain performance targets for these indicators over a three-year period.

The number of local goals identified in our 25 study districts ranged from a low of 3 to a high of 33. All of the plans asserted that districts had addressed all eight state priorities, although our analysis indicated that many did not clearly do so.¹¹ Moreover, the plans did not rank their goals by importance, which made it difficult to gauge their significance in the overall plans. As Figure 2 shows, almost all districts set goals for student achievement, parental involvement, school climate, and implementation of the Common Core standards.¹² Roughly 60 percent adopted technology and instructional materials, goals not associated specifically with implementing the new standards.



SOURCE: PPIC analysis of 25 district Local Control and Accountability Plans, as submitted to county offices in July 2014.

* Is not one of the state priorities.

† Subgroups = low-income, English Learner, and foster care students.

Effectiveness of goals and targets is uneven. We analyzed the 25 district plans to determine how clearly each LCAP identified goals and whether desired outcomes were linked to measurable data.¹³ Table 1 compares more- and less-effective goals from two plans. The more-effective example begins with a clear objective: closing the achievement gap. It includes one of the performance indicators (attendance), the current performance level, and a numerical target for 2014–15. It would have been even more effective to draw a connection between attendance and the achievement gap and identify the groups of students with the worst attendance problems.

TABLE 1. A SNAPSHOT OF MORE- AND LESS-EFFECTIVE LCAP GOALS AND STRATEGIES				
	Goal	Performance indicator	Current performance	2014–15 target
More effective	Close the “achievement gap”	Student attendance*	2013–14 rate was 96%	96.25%
Less effective	All teachers will meet state and federal criteria for Highly Qualified† teachers, will be able to provide instruction to all students, and will participate in continued professional growth relevant to state and district initiatives	1. Percentage of Highly Qualified† teachers	No data	100% appropriately trained and assigned teachers
		2. Student test scores	No data	Achieve at county average
		3. Access to aligned instructional materials	No data	All students

SOURCE: Authors’ analysis of 25 Local Control and Accountability Plans.

*Attendance is one of several performance indicators for this goal, including test scores, graduation and dropout data, and indicators of achievement in the primary grades.

† “Highly Qualified” refers to a federal requirement that teachers possess the appropriate training and subject matter expertise.

The less-effective example starts with a goal that actually consists of three vague objectives. What, for instance, does the district mean by “able to provide instruction to all students?” The performance indicators are measurable, but two are not directly connected to the goal. For example, it is not clear how instructional materials and student test scores measure teacher preparation. Further, the plan does not include any way to measure whether all teachers can provide instruction to all students or whether they participate in professional growth. Finally, the plan does not include data on the three indicators that might provide some context for the plan’s targets.

We found similar problems in many of the LCAPs we reviewed. While some districts seemed to have significant experience crafting effective goals and performance expectations, others seemed relatively new to the planning process and struggling to develop clear goals with appropriate measures. Finally, data and analysis was sparse in most LCAPs. Plans seldom provided data on current performance levels or analyzed the performance of low-income, English Learner, and foster care students. This is especially unfortunate because our interviews revealed that staff did analyze data during the planning process; a focus on EL needs was common, and all districts were struggling to understand how best to address the needs of children in foster care.

These findings raise a couple of red flags. First, educators need better guidance on strategic planning and using data to assess district needs. Our findings also suggest there may be problems going forward, as some district plans lack solid foundations for action or commit to unrealistic performance targets.

ACTION PLANS AND BUDGETS

The second major part of the state’s LCAP template is the three-year action plan and budget, which describes the strategies and costs of achieving the targets set in the goals section. Districts must include a separate action plan and budget for state funding allocated specifically for their low-income, English Learner, and foster care students. Ideally, the specifics of the action plan should clearly illustrate a district’s strategy for achieving its goals. A related PPIC report outlines the importance of these plans in ensuring that LCFF funding reaches high-need students in all schools.¹⁴

Most of the plans we reviewed were clear about general actions that districts proposed to take in the coming year. As with goals and targets, though, the clarity and logic of district action plans and budgets were uneven. In Table 2, we compare more- and less-effective samples taken from action plans and budgets we reviewed. In the more-effective example, the goal of improving parent and community participation in school matters is clearly connected to specific actions and costs.

TABLE 2. A SNAPSHOT OF MORE- AND LESS-EFFECTIVE LCAP ACTION AND BUDGET PLANS				
	Goal	Actions	Resources	Amount
More effective	Improve parent, guardian, and community participation in school meetings and activities	Translate school communications into home languages; provide bilingual services for parent meetings	Personnel costs and contracted bilingual services	\$126,000
Less effective	Promote a college going and career ready culture with high expectations	Implement full-day kindergarten; develop alternative middle school activities; improve CTE program; increase access to AP courses; provide training to improve student behavior	Staff training Increased online course offerings	\$20,000 federal funds \$10,000 LCFF

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of 25 Local Control and Accountability Plans.

NOTE: CTE = Career Technical Education, AP = Advanced Placement.

The less-effective action and budget plan example fails to provide the same progression. The goal—promoting a culture of college and career with high expectations—is fairly clear.¹⁵ The action plan, though, is confusing. Two of the actions—implementing full-day kindergarten and developing alternative middle school activities—are not clearly related to the goal. In addition, it does not clearly describe how improving the Career Technical Education (CTE) program and addressing student behavior would help achieve this goal. The identified costs and budget plan do not provide much useful detail.

Despite the challenges of strategic planning, district staff saw the process as a beneficial long-term change. The biggest concern expressed in our interviews was that the state would continually revise the process, which would make it difficult to focus on the bottom line: improving services for students. Concerns about compliance with state LCAP rules were also common. From a local perspective, the state template is an unusual mix of specific requirements and a very general planning process. Some districts worried about “what the state wanted,” while others found the state requirements excessive. For instance, one district felt that the requirement to include all 19 state-required indicators in the plan makes the LCAP seem like a compliance document rather than a plan for improvement.

Another issue raised was the lack of state guidance on what should be reported in the LCAP budget. This lack of guidance resulted in differing interpretations on the part of districts and county offices. For example, the two county offices in our study issued very different advice to districts on the budget. One advised that LCAP budgets reflect only new funds included in the 2014–15 budget, while the other asked districts to include their entire budgets.

The problems with LCAPs go deeper than interpretation differences. To be fair, budgets are complex documents, making it a challenge for districts to communicate their plans in detail to a public that lacks budget and educational expertise. But the action and budget sections of many plans were only marginally effective at outlining strategies for improving the quality of education.

COUNTY OFFICE REVIEW

County offices play multiple roles in the LCAP process. They provide guidance and technical assistance in the development of district plans. County office staff reported that they spent significant time and resources

helping districts understand and comply with LCAP requirements. The offices held training sessions, sponsored working groups on specific issues, and acted as conduits of information from the state to districts. Our district interviews confirmed that county office assistance was useful.

County offices are mandated to review local plans for adherence to LCAP requirements to make sure the plans follow state laws.¹⁶ But county staff point out that there is significant room for interpretation in their roles. The review and approval of LCAP budgets, for instance, could open the door to more substantive issues. Over time, some county offices may use this ambiguity to address the effectiveness of district plans.

During this first year, county office reviews did not result in substantive changes, although our comparison of submitted and approved LCAPs reveals that county offices asked many districts to add more performance indicators than they had included in their initial plans. In a few cases, county offices asked for more specificity in performance measures, actions, or budgets. Overall, the county office review process marginally improved the substance and quality of district plans.

County offices shared district concerns about the lack of state guidance on the LCAP process. The districts' need for guidance put county offices in a difficult position, as they often had no more information than districts. At some point, however, county offices had to make decisions. As we have seen, this led one county in our sample to require budget plans to include all state funds while the other county required only state funding increases.

The concerns about guidance illuminate the difficulty of identifying where state control should give way to local discretion. Which aspects require statewide policies and which should differ by county or district? On the issue of the LCAP budget section, there is no "correct" answer—both approaches have advantages and disadvantages. The more pertinent question is which approach works more effectively, and letting counties try different approaches is an avenue to learning that.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STATE POLICY

From these early results, the promise and problems of the LCAP process begin to emerge. The promise: LCAP creates the potential for a new local dynamic—one that includes districts, parents and community members, and county offices of education—for improving the quality of the K–12 system. The problems: the LCAP asks for more sophisticated planning and communication skills than many district administrators have available.

Immediate issues for the state include refining the LCAP process so that it continues to promote district flexibility and responsibility, and developing technical assistance that supports districts and county offices. The legislature and state board are likely to hear many suggestions for altering the template and the process. But LCAPs cannot satisfy all desires for information without becoming unwieldy compliance documents. Moreover, significant modifications would divert district and county office attention from refining and improving their plans.

The revised state template is a case in point. Responding to concerns that the 2014 template was unwieldy, the State Board approved a revised version for 2015 that requires districts to group performance targets, actions, and proposed expenditures in a different format. The benefit of this change seems modest, and it comes at the cost of diverting attention from the second- and third-year goals and budget plan.

A more important state task is to make technical assistance available and affordable to districts and county offices. The state has created a technical assistance center—the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE)—but it is not yet operational. Given the significant need for help in the early stages of LCAP implementation, the \$10 million appropriated to CCEE development in 2014–15 should be used to provide near-term support. Districts and county offices could use immediate help in eliciting useful information from parents and community members, strategic planning, and using data for decisionmaking. They also need models of effective curricular and instructional approaches, staff development practices, and data collection and analysis.

The state should also consider giving county offices authority to act as an accountability force. Because county offices have considerable knowledge about local people and problems, they are in a better position than the state to encourage lagging districts to improve. County offices perform this accountability role in school finance and could perform a similar function in the LCAP process.

LCAP has the potential to help districts improve student achievement. The process, however, requires a delicate balance between local autonomy and pressure to improve important student outcomes. LCAP implementation poses major challenges to some districts, and the state should not simply assume that these challenges will be met. Moreover, smaller districts—which tend to have frequent turnover among superintendents and budget officers—will need technical assistance indefinitely. By ensuring that districts can identify educational problems and chart effective responses, the state can take a large step in improving its K–12 system.

Related reports are available on the PPIC website: Laura Hill and Iwunze Ugo, *Implementing California's School Funding Formula: Will High-Need Students Benefit?* and Caroline Danielson, *Low-Income Students and School Meal Programs in California*.

NOTES

1. Edgar Cabral and Carolyn Chu, *An Overview of the Local Control Funding Formula* (Legislative Analyst's Office, December 2013).
2. Caroline Danielson, *Low-Income Students and School Meal Programs in California* (PPIC, March 2015).
3. Very small and very large districts are also represented: eight districts enroll fewer than 5,000 students and four districts enroll more than 40,000 students.
4. While this report was in review, two other studies of LCAP implementation were published: *Toward a Grand Vision: Early Implementation of California's Local Control Funding Formula*, by Dan Humphries and Julia E. Koppich (SRI International, October 2014); and *Building a More Equitable and Participatory School System in California: The Local Control Funding Formula's First Year*, by Carrie Hahnel (Education Trust–West, December 2014).
5. The 15 districts reporting student involvement represent 80 percent of districts in our sample that enroll high school students (the other 5 are elementary districts, which generally include grades K–8). Thus, we assume that most if not all students who participate in the LCAP planning process were enrolled in high school.
6. Other forms of communication include videos or other digital presentations, phone calls, and emails.
7. Many LCAPs reported attendance at input sessions. Because districts vary in size, we calculated attendance at an input session as a proportion of district enrollment. With a couple of exceptions, attendance averaged between 5 and 10 percent of the students enrolled in the district.
8. Advocates of community engagement as a way to improve schools promote a range of support and decisionmaking roles for parents. Parents generally require training to engage at that level, and educators and administrators must facilitate parental participation. See, for example, the Intercultural Development Research Association website.
9. For more about these priorities, please see our 2014 report, *Designing California's Next School Accountability Program*.
10. There are 7 indicators for academic achievement, including standardized test scores; percentage of students determined ready for college by the Early Assessment Program; and English Learner (EL) reclassification rates. The 4 indicators for student engagement focus on attendance, dropout rates, and graduation rates. School climate indicators include suspension and expulsion rates. For more detail, please see *Designing California's Next School Accountability Program*.
11. We counted only the central objective of each goal. For example, 23 of the 25 district plans identified student and subgroup achievement as goals. The other two districts cited achievement as part of other goals—such as increasing graduation rates or implementing the new Common Core State Standards.
12. Common Core activities include teacher training, technology, and instructional materials specifically identified as needed to implement the new standards.
13. Our criteria are similar to a set of goal-setting guidelines known as SMART: Simple, Measurable, Attainable, Reasonable, and Timely. A simple goal has one clear desired outcome. A measurable goal provides a way to determine whether progress is being made toward reaching the goal. A goal is attainable if it is appropriate for the organization and there are resources to pursue it. Reasonable goals are set at attainable levels. Timely goals have clear, reasonable deadlines. There are many guides to using the SMART standards in setting goals for schools. See, for example, the discussion of SMART goals on Consortium for Educational Change website.
14. Laura Hill and Iwunze Ugo, *Implementing California's School Funding Formula: Will High-Need Students Benefit?* (PPIC, March 2015).
15. The goal is only “fairly” clear because it literally proposes to improve the “culture” of the district rather than what we assume is its actual goal: giving students the skills and information needed to attend college or enter the workforce with a good job.
16. State law requires the county office to determine that an LCAP (1) adheres to the template approved by the state Board of Education, (2) includes an expenditure plan sufficient to support the proposed actions, and (3) follows the requirements for the use of state funds that are awarded on the basis of the number of low-income, English Learner, and foster care students. From *Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) Approval Manual*, 2014–15 edition (California County Superintendents Educational Services Association, April 30, 2014).

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OTHER PUBLICATIONS

California’s Future: K–12 Education

California School District Revenue and Student Poverty: Moving Toward a Weighted Pupil Funding Formula

Designing California’s Next School Accountability Program

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