



Getting Down to **FACTS**

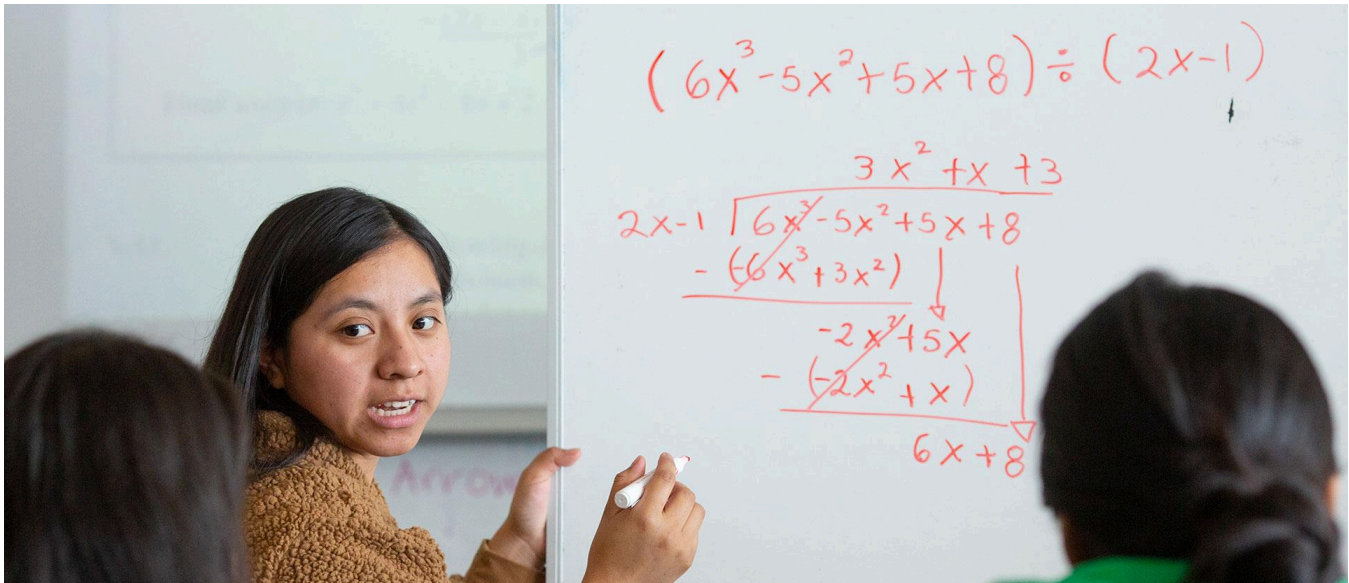
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Goals for Students and Schools in California: Broad Aspirations, Uneven Translation into Practice

Antero Garcia, Andre Anderson-Thompson, Nallely Beulah Aceves-Romero, Linda Darling-Hammond, H. Alix Gallagher, Danielle M. Gomez, Shira Haderlein, Laura E. Hernández, Elizabeth Huffaker, Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, Douglas Knecht, Susanna Loeb, Anna Maier, Beth Meloy, Misbah Naseer, Morgan S. Polikoff, Jeremy Prim, Estefania Rodriguez Sanchez, Deborah Stipek, Walker Swain, Lisa Towne, Maisha Winn, and Lawrence Winn

Stanford | SCALE Initiative
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Introduction



California has developed expansive goals for students. State and local frameworks invoke academic achievement, equity, college and career readiness, civic engagement, and student well-being. Families and communities add their own vision: education as a pathway to opportunity, a space for curiosity and identity, and a place where children feel safe and known. Developmental research reinforces these broader aims, pointing to the importance of relationships, belonging, and meaningful engagement with ideas and the world.

The distance between these goals and how they function in practice is substantial. When researchers examined more than 7,000 goals that California districts set through their Local Control Accountability Plans, the median measurability score was zero. Fewer than 8 percent of goals included explicit numeric targets, and more than 20 percent were duplicated verbatim across agencies. California's formal goal-setting system often produces statements of intent that are weakly connected to measurable outcomes, clear strategies, or the conditions associated with student learning.

This brief draws on multiple Getting Down to Facts III technical reports to examine how goals for students and schools are understood and implemented across California, focusing on five interrelated areas: whole-child development, the connection between goals and measurement, the distribution of educational opportunity, the alignment of instruction with developmental science, and the conditions that enable learning. Across these areas, a consistent pattern emerges. California's goals are often clearer at the level of aspiration than at the level of definition, support, and realization, and the consequences of that gap fall unevenly, with historically underserved students and families bearing the greatest burden.

Findings

1

Current definitions of student success in California are narrower than those reflected in family perspectives and developmental research.

California's current system defines student success primarily through academic indicators. Families and research, however, point to a broader set of conditions associated with learning, including safety, belonging, identity, relationships, and connections to community.

2

California's stated goals are often weakly connected to measurable outcomes and instructional practice.

California has developed multiple mechanisms for articulating goals, particularly through LCAPs and accountability systems, but these often lack specificity, measurability, and alignment with practice. As a result, goals often function more as compliance artifacts than as drivers of instructional improvement or system learning.

3

Educational opportunity and quality remain uneven across student populations and local contexts.

Access to high-quality learning experiences varies significantly across socioeconomic, geographic, and institutional contexts. These disparities are visible in academic outcomes, resource access, and the quality of instructional environments.

4

Research on learning and development emphasizes dimensions of instruction that are not consistently reflected in current practice.

Developmental science and family perspectives suggest that strong learning environments support inquiry, creativity, identity exploration, and engagement with real-world issues, not only content mastery. These dimensions, however, are inconsistently integrated into current instructional models.

5

Many of the conditions associated with student learning are not consistently present across California's schools and systems.

Student success depends on enabling conditions such as safe environments, strong relationships, effective communication with families, and the capacity to deliver on stated commitments. These conditions vary widely across districts and programs, contributing to uneven experiences and outcomes.

The Evidence Behind These Findings

Current definitions of student success in California are narrower than those reflected in family perspectives and developmental research

Evidence across multiple reports shows that families experience schooling as a deeply relational and contextual process. Garcia et al. find that Latine families consistently emphasize safety, belonging, and cultural affirmation as foundational to learning. They also describe how broader sociopolitical conditions, including immigration enforcement and discrimination, shape students' daily experiences in school. In these accounts, schools are places where identity, language, and community are continually negotiated.

Black families, as discussed in Winn et al., place similar emphasis on educators' commitment to students' well-being. They describe education as a pathway to opportunity and as a space for curiosity, intellectual growth, and care. These perspectives align with developmental research showing that learning is shaped by relationships, emotional safety, and opportunities for meaning making.

Across these studies, student success is defined more broadly than it is in California's formal systems for tracking outcomes. Family perspectives and developmental research point to a wider set of conditions and experiences associated with learning than those most visible in current accountability structures.

California's stated goals are often weakly connected to measurable outcomes and instructional practice

Analysis of more than 7,000 LCAP goals shows that many districts articulate goals in broad, non-specific terms without measurable indicators of success. The median measurability score across all goals is zero. Fewer than 8 percent include explicit numeric targets. More than 20 percent of goals are duplicated across agencies, suggesting limited local adaptation or strategic differentiation.

These patterns suggest that California's planning tools often capture goals without creating strong mechanisms for specificity, prioritization, or follow-through. Districts are required to articulate goals, but the system does not consistently ensure that those goals are actionable, measurable, or tied to clear improvement strategies.

The connection between stated priorities and implemented actions is also uneven. In many cases, planning documents and reporting structures function more as compliance mechanisms than as tools for guiding instructional decision-making or continuous improvement.

Educational opportunity and quality remain uneven across student populations and local contexts

Reardon shows that long-term trends in student achievement reflect persistent inequality. California students have improved relative to national averages over time, but gaps between high- and low-socioeconomic-status districts have widened, especially in mathematics, where disparities now approach nearly three grade levels. These gaps are larger than those seen nationally and appear early, with substantial differences already visible by third grade.

These disparities also vary by geography. Students in small and rural districts consistently experience lower outcomes than students in suburban and urban settings. Differences in access to instructional resources, staffing, and system capacity appear to contribute to these patterns.

Variation in quality is also visible in early childhood education. Stipek and Meloy show that monitoring systems are limited, participation in quality improvement systems is low, and existing measures of quality are applied inconsistently. The result is uneven access to high-quality learning experiences across settings, especially for students in underserved communities.

Research on learning and development emphasizes dimensions of instruction that are not consistently reflected in current practice

Developmental science identifies adolescence as a period of heightened capacity for integrating cognitive, emotional, and social learning. Immordino-Yang and Darling-Hammond describe the importance of experiences that involve reflection, identity formation, and engagement with complex social issues. Instructional models that emphasize inquiry, real-world relevance, and civic engagement are associated with stronger developmental and academic outcomes.

Family perspectives reinforce this view. Black parents describe education as a space where students can discover passions and develop curiosity. Latine families emphasize culturally relevant curriculum and representation as important sources of engagement. Across these studies, engagement is described as stronger when instruction connects to students' identities, interests, and lived experiences.

Current instructional systems do not consistently reflect these priorities. Many remain focused on content coverage and test performance, and implementation of approaches such as project-based learning and deeper learning has been uneven. In many schools, the structures and supports needed to sustain these approaches remain limited.

Many of the conditions associated with student learning are not consistently present across California’s schools and systems

Research in the GDTF III technical reports consistently suggests that learning depends on a set of enabling conditions, including physical and psychological safety, strong relationships, and supportive environments. Garcia et al. show that Latine families view safety as central to students’ ability to engage in school, with concerns ranging from school climate to broader sociopolitical threats (see Figure 1). Families also point to the importance of everyday conditions such as access to outdoor space, adequate time for meals and social interaction, and culturally relevant school experiences.

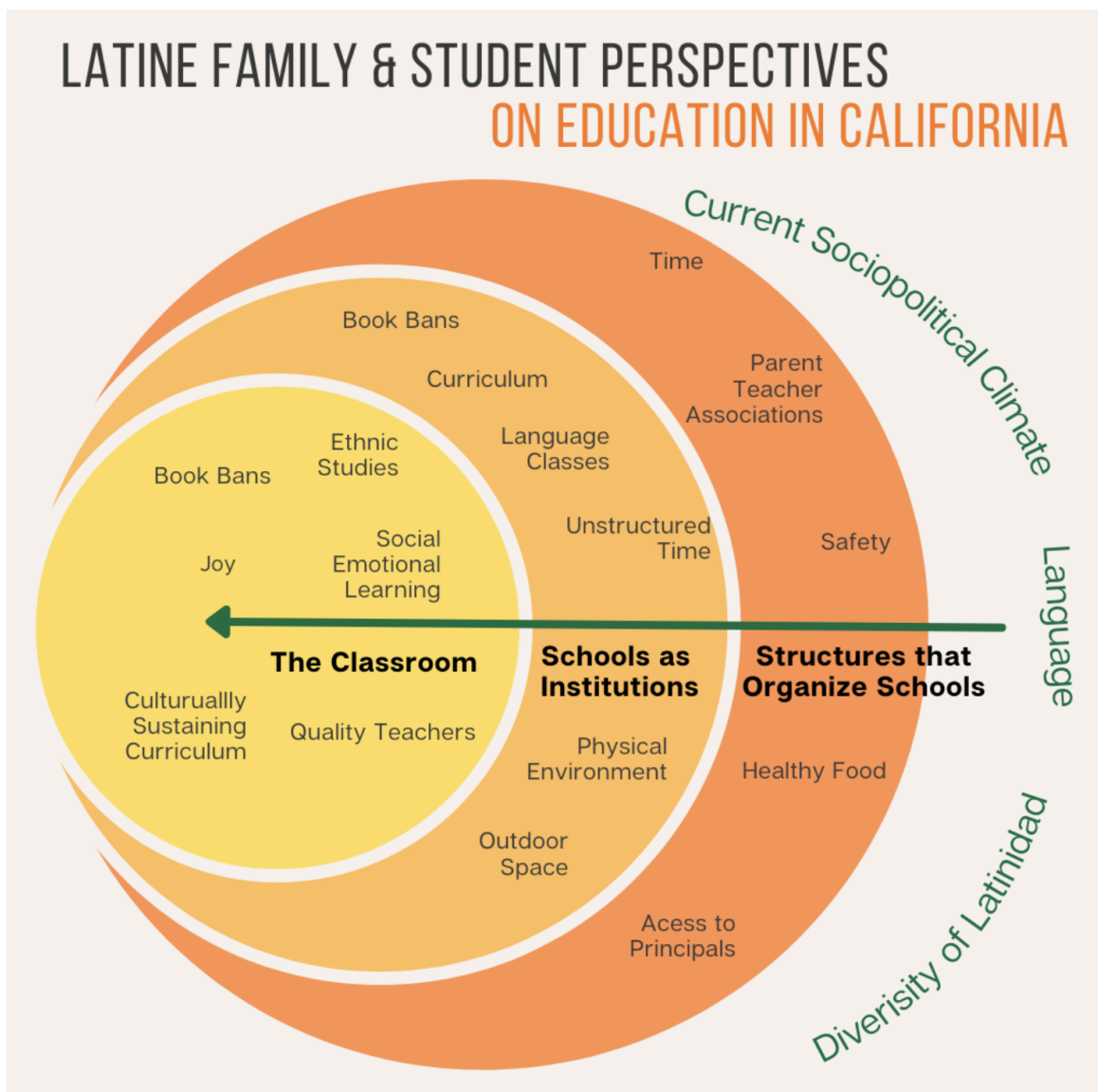


Figure 1: Latine Family and Student Perspectives as shared in Garcia et al.

Variation in these conditions is also visible across systems. In early childhood education, weak monitoring and fragmented quality assurance structures limit the state's ability to ensure consistent program quality. More broadly, differences in district and regional capacity affect how reliably schools can deliver on policy commitments, especially in under-resourced communities.

Across these studies, the conditions associated with student learning appear unevenly distributed across California settings. Many schools provide strong environments for students, but these conditions are not consistently ensured across the state, contributing to uneven experiences and outcomes.

Implications for California

Student success is defined more broadly in the research than in many of California's formal policy instruments

Current policy frameworks place greatest emphasis on academic outcomes, but the evidence reviewed here associates learning with a broader set of conditions, including safety, belonging, identity development, and meaningful relationships. Perspectives from Latine families underscore the extent to which students' sense of safety and cultural affirmation shapes engagement in school, particularly in contexts marked by broader sociopolitical pressures. In this respect, the research suggests a wider understanding of student success than the one most visible in California's formal systems for defining and tracking outcomes.

The relationship between goals, measurement, and improvement is a central point of weakness in the current system

California requires districts to articulate goals, but the evidence suggests that the connection between those goals, the measures used to track them, and the practices used to advance them is often weak. Findings on LCAPs indicate limited specificity, substantial duplication, and uneven connection to implementation. As a result, planning tools often provide a record of stated priorities without consistently creating strong mechanisms for prioritization, follow-through, or continuous improvement.

Unequal access to high-quality learning opportunities remains one of the main ways goals are experienced differently across contexts

Persistent disparities in academic outcomes across socioeconomic and geographic contexts suggest that access to rigorous and supportive learning environments remains uneven. These disparities are especially visible in low-income, rural, and under-resourced communities, where opportunities to learn

are shaped by differences in staffing, instructional resources, and system capacity. The evidence also suggests that variation in opportunity reflects differences in how high-quality learning environments are defined, supported, and made available across settings.

Developmentally aligned forms of learning remain only partially embedded in current instructional systems

Research on adolescent development and family perspectives both emphasize the importance of instruction that supports inquiry, identity exploration, and engagement with real-world issues. Yet the evidence reviewed here suggests that current instructional systems continue to be organized more often around coverage, fragmentation, and test performance than around deeper forms of engagement and learning. California's existing investments in deeper learning, career pathways, and civic engagement indicate that these priorities are present in parts of the system, though not yet consistently reflected in curriculum, assessment, and instructional practice.

The conditions that support learning are unevenly distributed and closely tied to system capacity

The evidence suggests that student learning depends on a set of enabling conditions that are not consistently present across California's education system. These include safe and supportive school environments, effective communication and partnership with families, and sufficient local and regional capacity to translate policy into meaningful student experience. Latine families' emphasis on everyday conditions, such as access to outdoor spaces, adequate time for meals and social interaction, and culturally relevant environments, highlights how these factors shape schooling in practice. Across the studies reviewed here, these conditions appear unevenly distributed across communities, contributing to variation in students' experiences and opportunities.

Conclusion

California's education system reflects an ongoing effort to define ambitious goals for students while preserving local flexibility in how those goals are pursued. The evidence reviewed here suggests that this approach has produced important strengths, but also persistent limitations. Goals are often clearer at the level of aspiration than at the level of measurement, support, and implementation. At the same time, access to the conditions associated with learning remains uneven across communities.

The research also points to a broader and more integrated understanding of student success than the one most visible in California's formal systems. Across studies, families describe education as a pathway to opportunity and as a setting for identity, belonging, curiosity, and intellectual growth.

Developmental science reinforces this perspective, emphasizing the importance of relationships, emotional safety, and meaningful engagement with complex ideas and social realities. Across these studies, academic success emerges as closely connected to a wider set of developmental and relational conditions.

California already includes elements of this broader vision in parts of its education system. Efforts related to deeper learning, civic engagement, and culturally responsive instruction, along with family-based accounts of what students need from schools, show that these goals are present in both policy and practice. At the same time, the evidence suggests that they are not yet consistently reflected in the systems used to define success, guide implementation, or distribute support.

The studies reviewed here point to three persistent challenges: weak connections between goals and practice, fragmentation across initiatives, and unequal access to the conditions that support meaningful learning. The central issue is how clearly California's goals for students and schools are operationalized and how effectively the systems intended to plan for, support, and implement those goals work in relation to one another. The evidence points to the importance of a more aligned and usable system, with clearer connections among goals, planning, oversight, support, and implementation across settings.

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