Getting Down to
FACTS

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Toward a Stronger Next Generation of California Education

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Executive Summary

California is at an inflection point in education. Over the past two decades, the state has built stronger foundations through more equitable school funding, stronger standards and assessments, expanded early childhood education, improved data systems, and investments in community schools, early literacy, and the educator workforce. Yet California now faces a different question: whether those stronger foundations can support a public education system prepared for a very different future. Work is changing quickly, student engagement and well-being remain fragile after the pandemic, and federal commitments to civil rights, student welfare, and accountability have become less certain. California's role has become more consequential as states carry greater responsibility for protecting educational opportunity and advancing equity. California's central challenge is whether it can connect its ambitions, policies, supports, and institutions into a system that delivers strong learning opportunities consistently for students across the state.

This paper synthesizes findings from *Getting Down to Facts III*, a body of work comprising 55 technical reports and 22 research briefs. It draws those findings together to describe California's current reform moment, identify the most important challenges facing the state's education system, and clarify the priorities these findings suggest for policymakers, practitioners, and community leaders. The reports build on earlier *Getting Down to Facts* projects in 2007 and 2018, which helped diagnose major structural problems and informed important reforms, including the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and, later, investments in early childhood education and educator preparation.

What the Research Shows

Progress remains uneven, and the unevenness has a consistent explanation. Three system-level challenges recur across the findings.

Accountability and alignment

California has many accountability tools and data systems, but they are not well connected to one another or to clear guidance and support for practitioners. Governance structures are fragmented and policies have proliferated over time, often creating disconnected, contradictory, and burdensome guidance to schools. The system produces information without consistently turning that information into action.

Balance between state guidance and local control

Districts carry substantial responsibility while facing high ambiguity about effective practice and heavy administrative burden. In areas such as math instruction, tutoring, and curriculum, local district leaders must make consequential decisions with limited clear guidance, even where the research base about what works is strong.

Capacity

California's ambitions depend on a workforce and support systems for school districts that are not yet strong or consistent enough across the state. Teacher shortages, uneven preparation, fragmented support for district staff, and leadership instability make it difficult to deliver high-quality, coherent learning experiences at scale.

California has an opportunity to build a stronger system for learning, improvement, and innovation. The state is not yet organized to learn systematically from its own experience and extend effective practice across diverse settings.

What the Findings Imply - Five implications follow from the research

1	**Maintain and build on the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) while strengthening fiscal stability.** Preserve the equity logic of LCFF while addressing constraints from volatile revenues, pension pressures, and other obligations, and facilities inequities.
2	**Consolidate and align governance and accountability systems.** California's current structures are too fragmented. Stronger alignment across planning, oversight, support, and intervention would reduce duplication and improve coherence.
3	**Build stronger state capacity.** California needs greater capacity to support workforce development, provide clearer instructional guidance for districts, and learn systematically from implementation across the state.
4	**Reduce administrative burden.** Overlapping plans, repeated reporting, and procedural duplication consume time and weaken local capacity for instructional improvement and strategic planning.
5	**Support disciplined innovation.** California should invest in developing, studying, and extending promising models in areas such as high school redesign, tutoring, educator pathways, and the thoughtful use of technology and artificial intelligence.

The Bottom Line

California has strong foundations, ambitious goals, and visible examples of what richer and more coherent educational experiences can look like. The central challenge is whether state policymakers, county support providers, district and school leaders, educators, and education partners can connect policies, supports, and institutions into a system that delivers those opportunities consistently for students. The next phase of reform depends on building coherence through clearer priorities, stronger reciprocal accountability, and a better system for learning from experience, improving practice, and extending the state's strongest examples to the students who need them most.

1. Introduction: Why This Moment Matters

California is at an inflection point in its long arc of education reform. Over the past two decades, the state has built stronger foundations: more equitable school funding, stronger standards and assessments, expanded early childhood education, improved data systems, and new investments in community schools, early literacy, and the educator workforce. Those changes matter. Yet California now faces a different question: whether those stronger foundations can support a public education system prepared for a very different future.

The demands on public education are rising. Work is changing quickly, including through advances in artificial intelligence. Students need stronger preparation for civic participation, judgment, adaptability, and lives shaped by relationships and uncertainty. Student engagement and well-being remain fragile after the pandemic. Federal commitments to civil rights, student welfare, and accountability have become less certain, placing more responsibility on states. For California, the challenge is especially consequential. The state serves more students than any other state and reflects much of the demographic future of the country.

California's central challenge is whether it can connect its ambitions, policies, supports, and institutions into a system that delivers strong learning opportunities consistently. The state has embraced broader expectations for what schools should provide, but it still lacks the coherence needed to improve instruction at scale or respond effectively to change.

California's goals for students have grown broader and more ambitious, and the state is better positioned than before to pursue them. Reflected in the state's eight legislative priorities, these aspirations extend beyond academic achievement and basic services to include implementation of state standards, parent involvement, student engagement, school climate, course access, and other student outcomes. At the same time, the evidence points to persistent inequality in educational opportunities and outcomes, weak coherence across major state policy levers, uneven guidance for local systems, and limited capacity for instructional improvement at scale.

California has enacted many policies, some with demonstrated benefits, but those policies do not yet function as a connected system. The state is also confronting the limits of institutional arrangements built for earlier social conditions and older assumptions about how students learn, at a moment when its goals for schooling have become broader, more relational, and more individualized. California has already done important reform work. Goals, guidance, accountability, and capacity have all advanced, but not yet in ways that are mutually reinforcing.

This paper draws on *Getting Down to Facts III*, a body of work comprising 55 technical reports and 22 research briefs (see Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively; parenthetical report numbers

throughout the paper refer to the reports listed in Appendix A). It synthesizes the findings of that work to clarify California's current reform moment and its implications for the next phase of improvement.

The research points to a central conclusion about what this moment requires. California has made progress, but it remains uneven, and the unevenness has a consistent explanation. Three system-level challenges recur across the findings: weak alignment and diffuse accountability that limit the state's ability to translate evidence into action, a state-local balance that gives districts substantial responsibility while leaving them with high ambiguity about effective practice and heavy administrative burden, and persistent gaps in the educator and institutional capacity needed to carry ambitious goals into classroom practice. Addressing these challenges, which the paper describes as accountability and alignment, balance, and capacity, would help California extend its strongest examples to the students who need them most.

Key Messages

1 California has made substantial progress.

Over the past two decades, the state has adopted stronger standards and assessments, made school funding more equitable and more adequate through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), expanded early childhood education through Transitional Kindergarten (TK), improved data systems, invested in approaches such as community schools and early literacy reform, and improved achievement scores, especially in reading. These changes have not solved California's educational challenges, but they have left the state better positioned than it was fifteen years ago to pursue broader and more ambitious goals for students.

2 California has the assets to build a richer and more meaningful educational future.

The state's diversity, creativity, policy infrastructure, and emerging examples of stronger design create opportunities to expand educational experiences that are more engaging, individualized, relational, and connected to students' futures. Early literacy, community schools, teacher residencies, and promising uses of technology show what becomes possible when guidance, support, and accountability work together more coherently.

3 Three system-level challenges help explain why those assets have not yet produced consistent results across the state.

A. Accountability and Alignment: Weak alignment and diffuse accountability limit system-wide improvement. California has many accountability tools and data systems, but they are not well

connected to one another or to clear goals, guidance, and support, reducing their ability to guide improvement efforts and meaningfully improve educational outcomes.

B. Balance between state guidance and local control: Districts carry substantial responsibility but face both high ambiguity about what constitutes effective practice and heavy administrative burden. In areas such as math instruction, tutoring, and curriculum, local leaders must navigate consequential decisions with limited clear guidance and heavy compliance demands, even where the research base is strong.

C. Capacity: Capacity constraints, including in the educator workforce, limit implementation of ambitious goals. Teacher shortages, uneven preparation, limited instructional support systems, and leadership instability make it difficult to deliver high-quality, coherent learning experiences across schools and districts.

4 California has an opportunity and a need to build a stronger system for learning, improvement, and innovation.

The state's education system is not yet organized to learn systematically from its own experience. Information, initiatives, and local efforts remain fragmented, limiting the state's ability to build cumulative knowledge. Strengthening accountability and alignment, reducing burden and ambiguity, and investing in educator and institutional capacity would create the foundation for a stronger learning system that uses data, evaluation, and shared practice to identify, refine, and extend what works.

2. Looking Back: The History of Getting Down to Facts

California has already moved through one major era of education reform shaped in part by the Getting Down to Facts project. Getting Down to Facts is a series of extensive research efforts designed to help Californians understand the condition of the state's education system and the policy choices needed to improve it. Since the initial project in 2007, the state has identified deep structural problems, enacted significant reforms, and made meaningful progress. Each round of research has also brought the next set of challenges into clearer view. The project first helped California recognize the need for reform and later clarified what it would take for reform to reach classrooms and students more fully.

The *Getting Down to Facts I* project, released in 2007, arrived when California's education system was widely seen as in need of reform. Researchers and stakeholders came together to examine the state's schools comprehensively and provide a research base for policy action. The diagnosis was stark. California's students lagged behind those in many other states in academic learning, and the state

devoted fewer resources per pupil to education than most states. Its finance, accountability, and governance structures were also prescriptive, complex, opaque, and inequitable in ways that concentrated disadvantage and made improvement uneven across the state.

The 2007 work helped inform major reforms, including the Local Control Funding Formula, temporary tax increases that stabilized and later extended education funding through Propositions 30 and 55, and efforts to simplify governance structures in the state. Its influence extended across multiple policy areas, especially by elevating school finance reform, governance alignment and simplification, and a stronger connection between state funding and student need on California's policy agenda.

The first project also helped frame a broader theory of reform. California moved toward a standards-based model that gave districts more discretion, directed more resources toward students with greater needs, and sought to strengthen the connection between state priorities and local action.

By 2018, when Gavin Newsom won the Governor's race in California, the state faced a different question. The reforms of the previous decade had significantly reshaped the education system and contributed to measurable improvement, yet major challenges remained. *Getting Down to Facts II* documented several important gains, including improved standards and assessments, a redesigned finance system with greater transparency and flexibility, and emerging evidence that increased spending on high-needs students was producing benefits. It also found broad stakeholder support for those changes.

At the same time, the second project documented a deeper implementation challenge. Better policies were in place, but the state had not yet developed the knowledge, tools, staffing, and institutional support needed to make those policies work consistently. Data infrastructure remained less connected and accessible than in many other states, especially across preschool, K-12, higher education, and social services. Early childhood education, which was included because disparities were already visible at kindergarten entry, remained fragmented and underdeveloped. *Getting Down to Facts II* identified three broad challenges for the decade ahead: capacity building, finance, and early childhood education. The reforms had produced a stronger platform, though they had not yet yielded a coherent system of improvement. The *Getting Down to Facts II* project also informed later changes, including expanded access to early childhood education through Transitional Kindergarten and progress in whole-child supports, data availability, facilities, and pensions.

Getting Down to Facts III, developed after the COVID-19 pandemic, builds on that accumulated history at a moment when California has more to build from and more at stake than before. The state has broader goals for students, stronger policy foundations, and a richer body of evidence about what supports learning. Yet too many students still do not experience schools as places of strong instruction, meaningful engagement, and sustained opportunity. This report is for policymakers, practitioners,

system leaders, and Californians more broadly, including families and community members, who want to understand why progress remains uneven and what it would take to make California's strongest approaches far more common across the state.

3. The Backdrop: Goals, Outcomes, Finances, and Recent Progress

Goals for Students

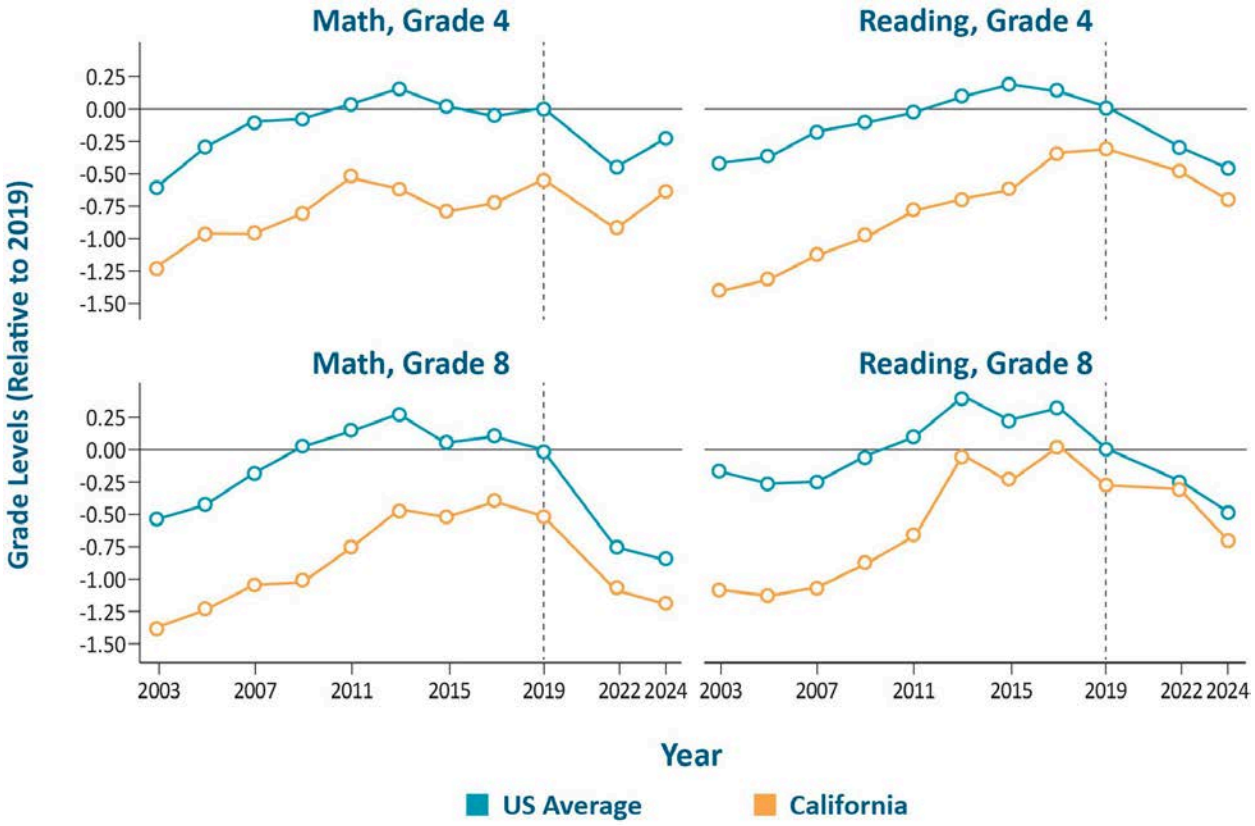
California's goals for students have expanded well beyond academic achievement, creating new demands for coherence that the system is not yet organized to meet. The emerging state vision emphasizes the whole child, joining academic performance with passions, curiosity, trust, care, belonging, safety, relationships, and agency, and treating play, meals, outdoor space, time, communication, and emotional security as core components of educational quality (10). Adolescents develop best in environments shaped by strong relationships, meaningful learning, civic reasoning, and opportunities for reflection and identity formation, making schools developmental environments that shape not only what students know, but also how they build purpose, belonging, and self-understanding (18). Immigrant-origin students bring additional dimensions to this picture, with educational experiences shaped by access to language development and academic opportunity as well as by safety, stability, and family vulnerability (41). Families are central to this vision as partners, advocates, and sources of knowledge (55). Latine families value schools that recognize family knowledge and treat bilingualism and cultural identity as central to belonging (10). Black families describe a desire for education that cultivates curiosity, dignity, cultural affirmation, and the freedom to imagine futures larger than the constraints many children currently face (55). Community engagement, understood as the ongoing participation of families, community partners, and local organizations, is part of this vision as well. Recent evidence also shows how closely educational goals in the early years are tied to family conditions: material hardship and emotional distress remain widespread, and many families view transitional kindergarten as both an educational opportunity and a practical support that eases child care pressures (7).

Current Outcomes

Current outcomes show long-run progress alongside persistent inequality. Achievement gains have occurred while California has continued to serve a large and high-need student population, including 5.8 million public school students, just over 1 million English learners, homeless youth making up

approximately four percent of students,[1] and students with disabilities representing roughly 15 percent of enrollment (2). California students' reading and math scores improved more than the national average on the National Assessment of Educational Progress from 2003 to 2019 and declined less than the national average from 2019 to 2025 during and after the pandemic (as shown in **Figure 1)**. Moreover, the differences in performance between poor and nonpoor students narrowed somewhat in reading. Yet those gains coexist with widening inequality in math. Between 2015 and 2025, the math gap between poor and nonpoor students grew from roughly 2.8 to 3.2 grade levels, an increase of about 13 percent (37). This pattern is especially troubling because the widening gap appears early and persists across grades, pointing to broader weaknesses in instructional opportunity.

Figure 1: NAEP trends, CA and US, by subject and grade, 2003-2024



Successive cohorts of students classified as English Learners showed improvements in English acquisition and 3rd grade ELA and Math scores, from 2006-07 to 2018-19, narrowing the achievement gap with students not classified as English Learners, though approximately 1 in 3 English learner students remain classified for seven or more years (5). Recent California evidence also suggests that reclassification policy can operate as a form of academic gatekeeping, because students who meet

[1] California Department of Education. (2026a). 2024–25 annual enrollment report. California Department of Education. (2026b). Title III English learner student demographics. California Department of Education. (2026c). Homeless youth in California schools.

English proficiency thresholds may still remain in English Learner (EL) status under local academic criteria that delay full access to educational opportunities (52). Dually identified multilingual learners with disabilities face especially persistent barriers. By grade 12, only about 60 percent are reclassified as English proficient, compared with 75 percent of multilingual learners without disabilities, and more than one-third become long-term English learners (2, 5).

Other indicators point to similar patterns of recovery alongside continuing concern. Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school days in which a student is enrolled, peaked at nearly 30 percent in 2021-22 and fell to 19.4 percent in 2024-25, marking substantial recovery. Even so, the rate remains nearly double the pre-pandemic level of 12.1 percent, and the pace of improvement has slowed sharply (11). Among California public high school completers in 2022, 54 percent completed A-G requirements and 53 percent took at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course (25).

Recent California evidence also shows that changes in secondary math pathways shape later opportunities. Between 2012 and 2018, 56 percent of districts (serving 51 percent of ninth graders) adopted an integrated mathematics sequence in place of the traditional Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II core, while the share of 8th graders enrolled in Algebra I or Math 1 fell by about two thirds from over 60 percent to under a quarter. Districts that reduced eighth-grade access to high school math were less likely to send students into advanced math later in high school. Statewide evidence further shows that students who complete four years of math in high school, and those who take advanced courses such as Precalculus, AP Statistics, and Calculus, are more likely to enroll in college, especially in four-year institutions. These differences are especially large for socioeconomically disadvantaged students (6). Access to those opportunities, however, remains uneven by race, ethnicity, English learner status, and socioeconomic status (25).

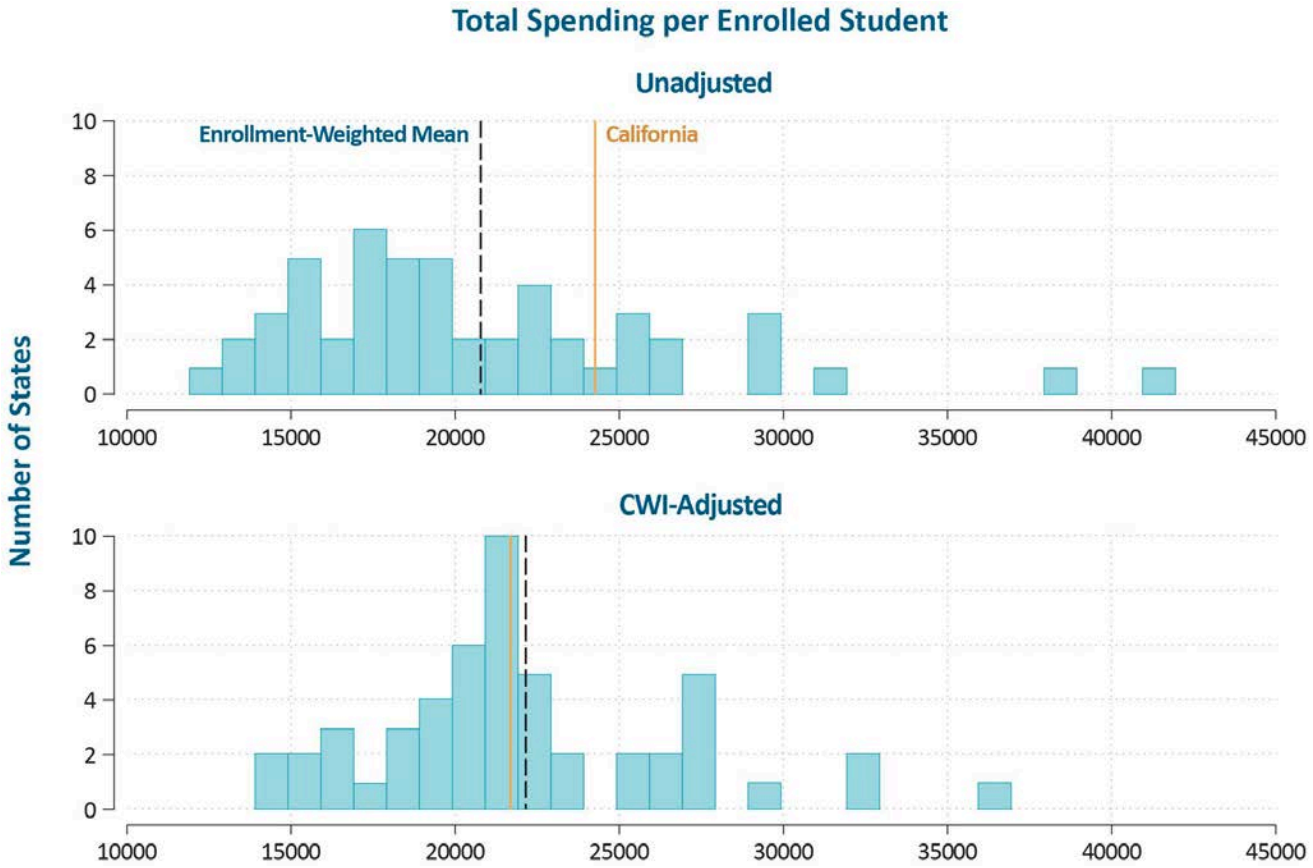
School experience also remains uneven in ways that matter for student development and belonging. Roughly half of California high school students do not feel connected to school or to a caring adult and nearly 80 percent do not feel engaged in meaningful learning (11). Recent California evidence further shows that transgender and gender expansive students report less positive high school experiences, substantially higher rates of identity-based bullying, and greater concern about discrimination in the transition to college, even while many continue to report strong postsecondary ambitions (50).

Current Finances

California's spending on education is now at levels that place the state among higher-spending states in raw dollar terms. Districts in California received $24,690 per student, measured as average daily attendance (ADA), in 2024–25, which, adjusted for inflation, is 75 percent above pre-LCFF levels and 27 percent above the last pre-pandemic year (4). **Figure 2** provides important context for interpreting those increases. California's per-pupil spending is high in nominal terms, but much closer to the

national average after adjusting for the state's higher labor costs (4). That comparison helps explain why higher funding levels have not translated into unusually broad staffing or service capacity. In spite of Proposition 98, which guarantees a minimum amount of funding for schools each year, California employs fewer adults in schools than most other states, which affects class size, supplemental services, and access to supports such as nurses, counselors, and mental health care.

Figure 2: California's Per-Pupil Spending Is High in Raw Dollars but Much Closer to Average After Adjusting for Labor Costs



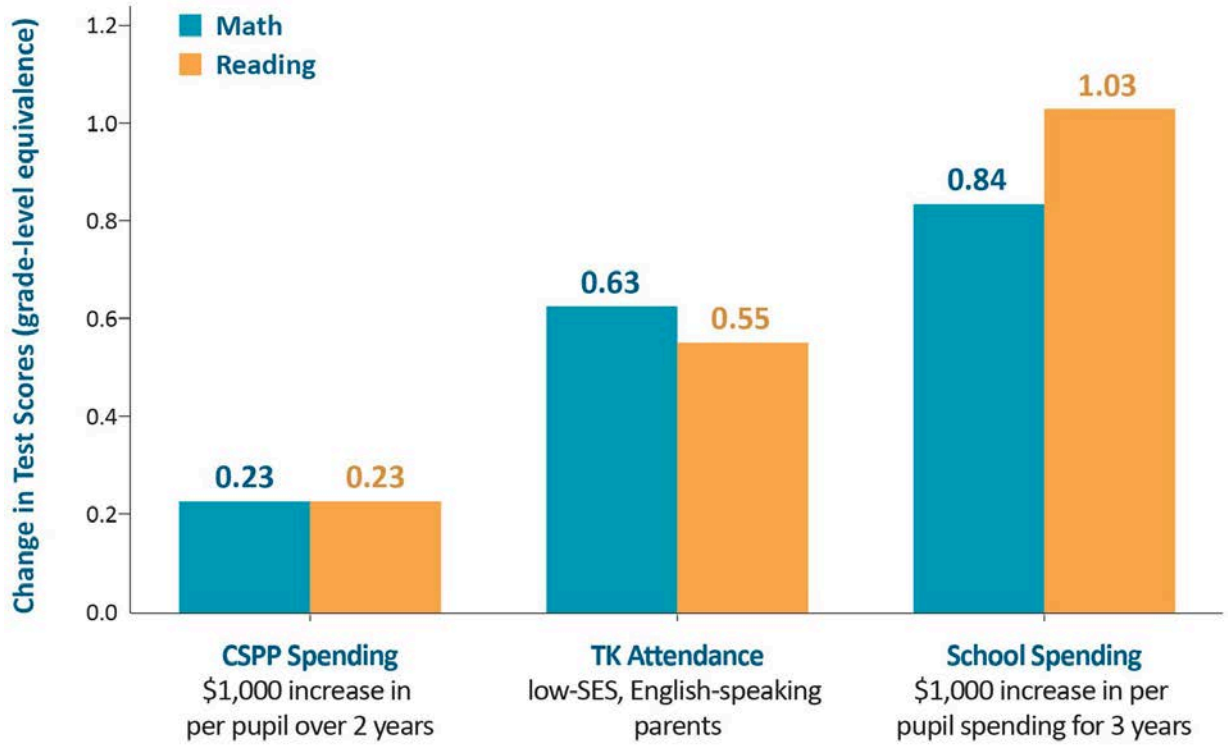
California's finance system also depends heavily on the state General Fund because Proposition 13 sharply constrained local property taxes and shifted school funding toward state revenue sources that are more vulnerable to economic swings (21). Pension obligations, debt, and facilities funding pressures reduce what districts can do with current revenues, and revenue constraints tied to the state General Fund's dependence on personal income taxes create volatility and complicate long-term planning (4, 21). These fiscal pressures are especially significant because pension contribution rates have risen sharply over the past decade, largely to pay down accumulated debt rather than to improve current benefits, leaving districts with a large and inflexible cost that is difficult to absorb when revenues tighten (22). Health insurance liabilities create similar pressures in many districts. Facilities remain a major source of inequality in California because capital funding still depends heavily on local property

wealth, while climate resilience, Transitional Kindergarten expansion, and shifting enrollment patterns are creating new facility demands that many districts are poorly positioned to meet (16, 33). Enrollment decline also creates fiscal pressure because districts may close schools in an effort to manage fixed costs, even though the financial consequences of closure are not always straightforward (35).

Recent Progress

California's education system shows progress and growth in a number of important areas. The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) has made school finance more transparent at the district level and better targeted toward higher-need students, and evidence associates LCFF-induced increases with gains in graduation and achievement for lower-performing groups (4, 19). Transitional kindergarten (TK) expansion is creating real momentum in early childhood. Recent early childhood evidence shows that California's expansion of universal prekindergarten, especially through transitional kindergarten, has substantially changed the state's early education landscape and increased access for preschool-age children, even as the broader mixed-delivery system remains complex and uneven (44). Recent evidence also suggests that early investments paired with support in the following years can reinforce one another. **Figure 3** illustrates this pattern. For socioeconomically disadvantaged students, transitional kindergarten produced larger and more persistent gains in reading and math achievement when students later attended better-funded elementary schools, indicating that early learning opportunities and K–12 investment are more powerful when they work together as a sequence rather than as isolated reforms (19). California's Smarter Balanced assessment can be an asset, because it is more sensitive to meaningful differences in student learning and better aligned to college and career readiness than many alternatives.

Figure 3: Impacts of CSPP Spending, TK Attendance, & School Spending on 3rd & 4th Grade Achievement



Early literacy reform results are especially encouraging and provide one of the clearest examples of a more consistent support strategy in the current studies. State grant programs improved third-grade English Language Arts performance in targeted, high-need schools through combinations of funding, evidence-based professional development, local planning, coaching, and implementation supports (34). Recent state efforts to strengthen the accreditation of teacher preparation programs in literacy instruction also represent a high-leverage strategy for improving the quality of early reading instruction over time. California has visible examples of richer and more connected learning experiences in practice, including community schools, Linked Learning pathways, dual enrollment, and other school designs that show what stronger alignment between student development and school experience can look like. Community schools provide early implementation evidence that California can support more connected school experiences through structures that bring together student supports, family engagement, and school improvement, resulting in stronger attendance and achievement, especially for the most historically underserved students (14). State investments in the educator workforce provide promising examples as well. Teacher residencies and Golden State Teacher Grants reflect a more deliberate approach to recruitment and preparation in shortage areas and high-need schools, within a broader set of state efforts to stabilize the teacher pipeline (29, 43). Research on teacher residencies also suggests that residency completers are more likely to pass the teaching performance

assessment, to enter teaching, to teach in high-need schools and subjects, and to remain in the profession compared to teachers entering through some other pathways (29).

This backdrop points to a system with broader goals, real progress, and persistent unevenness. California also has visible pockets of the kinds of learning experiences and support structures it wants for students. Why do those gains and those stronger examples remain so fragmented and inconsistent across the state? Current findings point most consistently to three answers: (A) accountability and alignment, (B) balance between state guidance and local control, and (C) capacity of educators and institutions to support improvement. These patterns help clarify why progress remains uneven across the state.

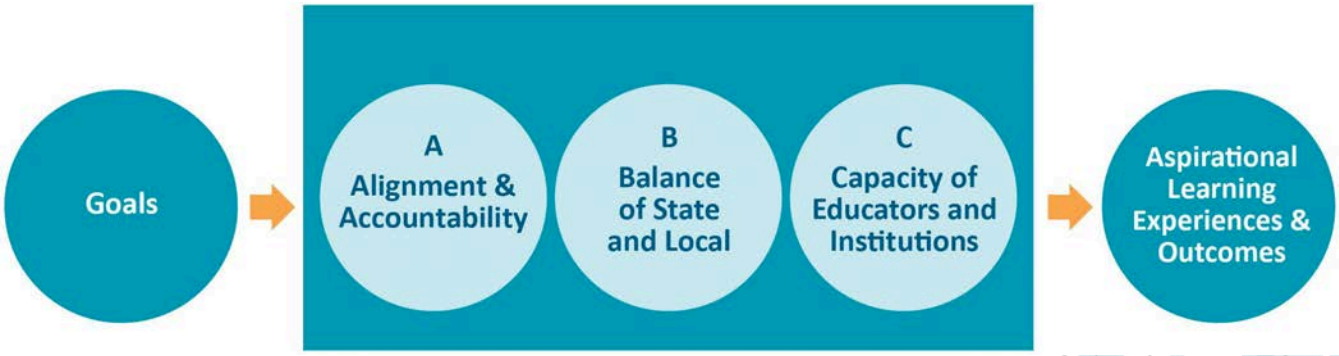
4. The ABCs of California's Current Moment

The findings across the Getting Down to Facts III studies point to a common pattern underlying California's current challenges. In multiple domains, the system includes many of the necessary components for improvement, but those components do not consistently operate as a connected whole. **Figure 4** summarizes this pattern. It shows how goals, guidance, support, and accountability work together to translate policy into consistent learning experiences for students. When these elements are aligned, the system is better positioned to support improvement at scale. When they are weakly connected, even strong individual components produce uneven results.

Three system-level challenges recur across the studies: Accountability and Alignment, Balance between state guidance and local control, and Capacity of educators and institutions. Together, these challenges help explain how California's goals have expanded beyond the system's current capacity to deliver them and why progress continues to vary across reforms.

Figure 4. A Coherent System for Learning and Improvement

Student outcomes improve when goals, guidance, support, and accountability operate as a connected system rather than as separate components.



Each of the sections that follow examines how one or more parts of this system break down in practice.

A: Accountability and Alignment

California has the pieces of a coherent accountability system. The state has strong standards, a richer data environment, and a broad commitment to equity and continuous improvement. The central challenge is having those pieces operate as a connected architecture for improvement. Unclear lines of authority and accountability currently hinder the State's ability to improve educational opportunities for students at scale.

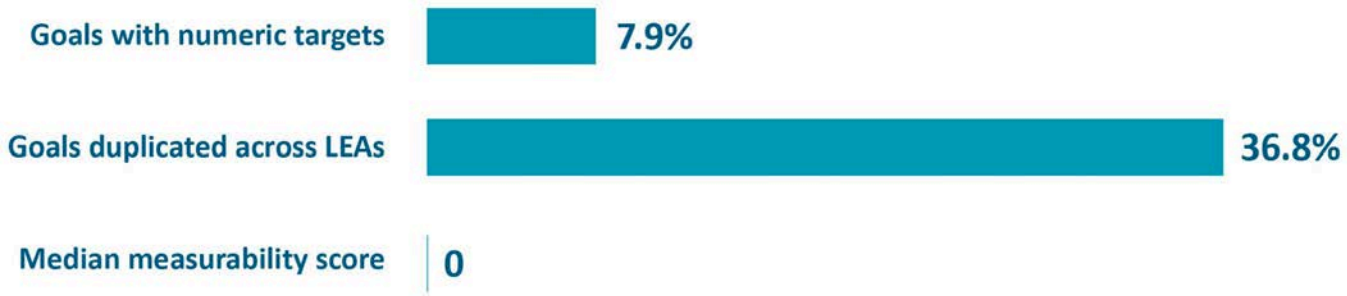
Local control sits at the center of California's reform story. LCFF replaced a more prescriptive and opaque finance system with one that gave districts greater flexibility over spending and planning and created a stronger connection between resources, student need, and local decision-making. The motivating belief was that more equitable funding, combined with local discretion over spending, would allow districts to respond more effectively to student needs. That change addressed real weaknesses in the prior governance model and remains one of the state's most important reforms. California's broader education policy system is not defined by local discretion alone. Districts continue to operate within a state framework that regulates major features of schooling, including instructional time, course requirements, curriculum frameworks, textbook adoption, categorical funding rules, and accountability processes. These state rules shape how schools use time, organize courses, adopt materials, and manage funds, narrowing local flexibility even where districts retain responsibility for implementation and results. California's governance structure is also fragmented across multiple state and quasi-state bodies. Beyond the State Board of Education and the California Department of Education, responsibilities are distributed across entities such as the Commission on Teacher Credentialing, the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, the Department of Finance, public higher education systems, and the Department of Social Services. Cross-state comparisons make this fragmentation especially visible by showing how California spreads supervision, administration, and implementation across a broader set of actors than some other states do (38).

Data capacity sits at the center of the alignment and accountability challenge. California has improved its data infrastructure substantially since the first Getting Down to Facts, yet it still lags other states in accessibility, connection across datasets, and integration across preschool, K-12, higher education, and social services. Early childhood data remain especially fragmented (8, 49). Across early childhood programs, California still relies on multiple disconnected data systems that track enrollment, workforce, child outcomes, and quality separately. That disconnection makes it difficult to understand how services connect across programs or how early investments relate to later student progress (49). Early childhood oversight is also fragmented, with different licensing, monitoring, and quality-improvement

structures across Title 22, Title 5, and transitional kindergarten, and with relatively limited statewide visibility into the quality of children's experiences across those settings (47). These limitations matter because accountability depends on being able to see patterns clearly, connect identification to response, and trace whether supports reach students in the form and intensity intended. More broadly, agencies across sectors do not routinely use or share data for analytic purposes, which limits what the system can learn (8).

California's public accountability system is not working as intended. Researchers assessing California's system against six principles of effective public accountability found that the state partially meets standards on only two and fully meets none. The weakest areas include theory of action, usability, coherence, fair comparison, and actionability (31). The central tools for accountability do not align with system goals. The state's education dashboard serves as the vehicle for communicating districts' progress toward multiple goals and indicators, but only about one-fifth of district leaders interviewed reported that it serves as a major driver of district priorities. The Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) creates cumbersome requirements for districts and offers limited value as a strategic planning tool, pushing districts toward compliance instead (15). The tool often reflects priorities more than it drives them. Evidence from a statewide analysis of more than 7,000 LCAP goals helps explain why. The median measurability score of LCAP goals is zero, indicating that most goals contain no measurement-oriented language, and only 7.9 percent include an explicit numeric target. More than one-third of goals are duplicated across agencies, often verbatim. These patterns suggest that LCAP goals frequently lack the specificity, differentiation, and clarity needed to guide action or support meaningful accountability. See **Figure 5** for a visualization of these findings.

Figure 5. Most LCAP Goals Lack Measurable Targets and Are Frequently Duplicated



Similarly, families interviewed ask for information they can understand and use (15), while district leaders ask for information that connects to planning and for more guidance and support (32). California's Dashboard, School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs), LCAPs, and related platforms each contribute part of that picture, and their combined effect remains diffuse (13, 15). These weaknesses also reflect limited state capacity to identify effective practice, learn from local implementation, and translate evidence into usable guidance across the system. The workforce dimensions of that capacity

gap are taken up more fully in Section C; here the concern is with the state's institutional capacity to learn from and support the field.

Mathematics illustrates how weak capacity, coordination, and focus limit statewide improvement. In contrast to literacy, where California has made multiple connected investments in teacher preparation, professional learning, coaching, screening, and targeted grants, the state has not yet invested in a similarly focused way in mathematics capacity-building. Even as the state has recently adopted a new curriculum framework and instructional materials, the surrounding signals remain too weak and too diffuse to create sustained statewide focus (17). District leaders describe priorities as crowded, the statewide support system as fragmented and inconsistent, and district planning tools as reflecting priorities more than shaping them (9). California's county offices show a parallel pattern, with instructional accountability operating primarily after performance concerns become visible and with limited preventive pressure or systemwide learning (51, 53). They play a well-defined role in monitoring district fiscal solvency through regular review and escalation. No equally routine and clearly specified process exists for identifying weak instructional implementation early and triggering sustained academic support. Although the Differentiated Assistance system is intended to serve this role, in practice, it is poorly designed to focus attention and provide sustained support in future planning or resource allocation for academic improvement.

California's public accountability tools carry substantial information, and their usefulness depends on how well that information is interpreted, connected, and tied to next steps (13). California's public tools would be more useful if they provided trends that are easier to read, platforms that relate more clearly to one another, and stronger connections among performance results, group identification, available support, and local planning. This kind of coherence would give families, educators, and policymakers a more intelligible picture of how the system is working and what different signals mean.

Several parts of California’s system show what stronger alignment and accountability can look like in practice. The state’s fiscal oversight of school districts provides a more developed accountability model. County offices of education monitor district finances through recurring review processes, identify early warning signs of distress, and provide feedback and escalating intervention when districts move away from solvency. California has experience building accountability systems that connect oversight, support, and escalation. Early literacy reform offers a second, more instructional example. As part of a broader set of literacy reforms, including changes to teacher preparation and investments in screening, the Early Literacy Support Block Grant combined guidance, required planning, state approval before spending, and ongoing reporting. These elements created a clearer connection among goals, implementation, and follow through than exists in many other parts of the system (34). Mathematics reflects a different pattern in concentrated form. California has standards, assessments, and declared priorities, and the system still provides limited direction about implementation and limited response when improvement stalls.

Student outcomes are shaped by the actions of institutions throughout the system. Districts, county offices, Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs), and state agencies all influence whether students experience strong instruction, timely support, usable materials, and appropriate services. A more complete accountability structure would make these institutional contributions more visible and more clearly connected to one another. That visibility would connect public expectations more directly to public delivery and clarify where responsibility sits when students are not well served. The charter sector illustrates this point as well, because charter accountability depends on how state policy structures authorizer expectations, renewal decisions, and the relationship between oversight and support. This accountability challenge was partially addressed by recent state policy that requires authorizers to consider school outcomes measured by the Dashboard in renewal decisions, but leaves uncertainty in how schools should be held accountable for outcomes and supported during contract terms (42).

Tutoring shows how alignment and investment problems can emerge even when the evidence base is strong. The features associated with stronger tutoring results are relatively clear: regular dosage, close instructional alignment, and sustained relationships. Other states, including Louisiana and Tennessee, have invested in tutoring as part of broader curricular and instructional reform strategies. California, by contrast, has not yet incorporated tutoring into the state's guidance, support, and capacity-building system in a meaningful way. Districts and principals do not share a common language for identifying high-quality tutoring or distinguishing tutoring from broader intervention activity. These gaps influence how funding is used, how staffing is organized, and how implementation is understood across sites. Tutoring illustrates a broader pattern in California's system: alignment depends on whether the system has shared definitions, clear signals, and structures that help local actors act on strong evidence. Multilingual learner policy provides a related example: statewide goals are ambitious, and uneven reclassification criteria, uneven instructional quality, and limited common signals about effective implementation make opportunity more variable than the policy vision suggests. Weak alignment and diffuse accountability signals limit the system's ability to translate evidence into consistent action.

Accountability and alignment are most effective when goals, guidance, support, and oversight operate as parts of a connected system.

B: Balance Between State Guidance and Local Control

While the state provides local districts discretion in some areas, it continues to apply burdensome administrative and reporting requirements. The compliance research provides systematic evidence of the burden that the current balance imposes. Education administrators devote roughly 19 to 20 hours per week to compliance activities, or more than two full workdays each week. Statewide, that estimate translates into approximately 151,000 hours per week and an annual compensation cost of billions of

dollars for administrators alone. **Table 1** shows that this burden extends across administrative roles. Superintendents report an average of 17.1 compliance hours per week, while managers, administrators, and coordinators report between 22.5 and 25.9 hours. Across roles, actual work hours substantially exceed contracted hours, indicating that compliance demands are layered onto already extended workweeks. Burden is concentrated in special education requirements, fiscal and budget reporting, LCAP development, student support programs, and human resources compliance. Administrators identify the main sources of strain as added requirements without removal of older ones and duplication across overlapping plans such as LCAP, School Plan for Student Achievement, School Accountability Report Cards, and program-specific addenda (54).

Table 1. Describing Education Administrators Contracted, Work, and Compliance Hours

	Supt	CBO	Deputy Supt	Director	Manager	Admin-istrator	Coord-inator	Exec Asst
Individual Respondent Metrics								
Contracted Hours Per Week	41	40	41	40	40	40	39	40
Work Hours Per Week	56	52	55	51	48	49	43	45
Compliance Hours Per Week (FY25)	17	20	21	21	23	23	26	18

California's governance structure also constrains local action in ways that go beyond reporting and compliance documents alone. The state regulates instructional minutes and seat time through an Average Daily Attendance system that is tied to auditing and to detailed rules for how time counts. These rules can make it harder for schools to use technology flexibly, incorporate experiential learning, or redesign schedules around more individualized or interdisciplinary models. State control is also strong in curriculum and course structure. The A-G system prescribes the courses that students must complete for university eligibility and reviews the content of those courses, which makes interdisciplinary design harder and can slow adaptation to new knowledge in fields such as math and science. Categorical funding rules further limit discretion by attaching separate requirements and audit risk to particular uses of funds. California routes state and federal special education funds through intermediary regional agencies that exercise substantial discretion in how resources are allocated, while the state maintains limited visibility into how those decisions are made and what supports LEAs receive in return (39). These features make California difficult to characterize as a largely local-control system, even though districts retain substantial responsibility for implementation. The state constrains much local flexibility over resource allocation without holding districts meaningfully accountable for

outcomes. These constraints also affect staffing flexibility, role design, and workforce deployment, adding to the broader capacity challenges discussed in Section C.

California has relatively tight requirements for reporting and compliance in some areas, but, in other areas it lacks any clear guidance or direction. For example, the state lacks clear, reliable guidance about which instructional materials are actually high quality. State adoption processes and incentives play a limited role in steering districts toward the strongest materials, and many districts are using materials that external reviews rate as not meeting quality standards. Supplemental materials are even more diffuse (34). District leaders report a similar pattern: they want clearer guidance on the strongest TK-8 math instructional materials and more support in adopting them (9). In that setting, districts are often left to conduct their own reviews across a wide range of options, duplicating efforts that could be reduced if stronger public guidance narrowed the field to a smaller set of high-quality materials. Curriculum frameworks, textbook adoption requirements, and course approval systems shape which materials and course designs are easiest to adopt, and those structures can make it more difficult to use interdisciplinary materials, open educational resources, or materials that depart from conventional pacing and subject boundaries.

Administrative burden falls even more heavily on smaller local educational agencies. Smaller systems rely on superintendent-principals and other administrators who carry multiple functions simultaneously. Larger systems can distribute compliance work across more specialized roles. Small and rural districts frequently depend on SELPAs and county offices as extensions of local capacity. Many district leaders report that their county offices and SELPAs provide essential support, but their quality and reach vary considerably across the state (39, 51).

California is a large and diverse state, and communities differ enormously in size, geography, student populations, labor markets, and priorities. Local judgment remains an enduring strength of California's governance model. California's state-local structure works best when local flexibility is paired with clearer guidance in areas where ambiguity and the burden of selecting from a large set of options are high.

Clearer public signals would help in areas where districts are now sorting through too much uncertainty. Mathematics makes that opportunity especially visible. Districts report substantial ambiguity about which of the dozens of state-approved materials and supports are highest quality, and that ambiguity increases search burden in one of the state's most uneven instructional areas (9). Tutoring reflects a similar dynamic in a narrower domain. California's largest tutoring-related funding stream is tied to before-school and after-school use, even though the evidence base points to stronger effects during the school day, when attendance is higher and instructional alignment is easier to maintain. In both areas, districts are making consequential design decisions with uneven guidance, even where the evidence base is strong.

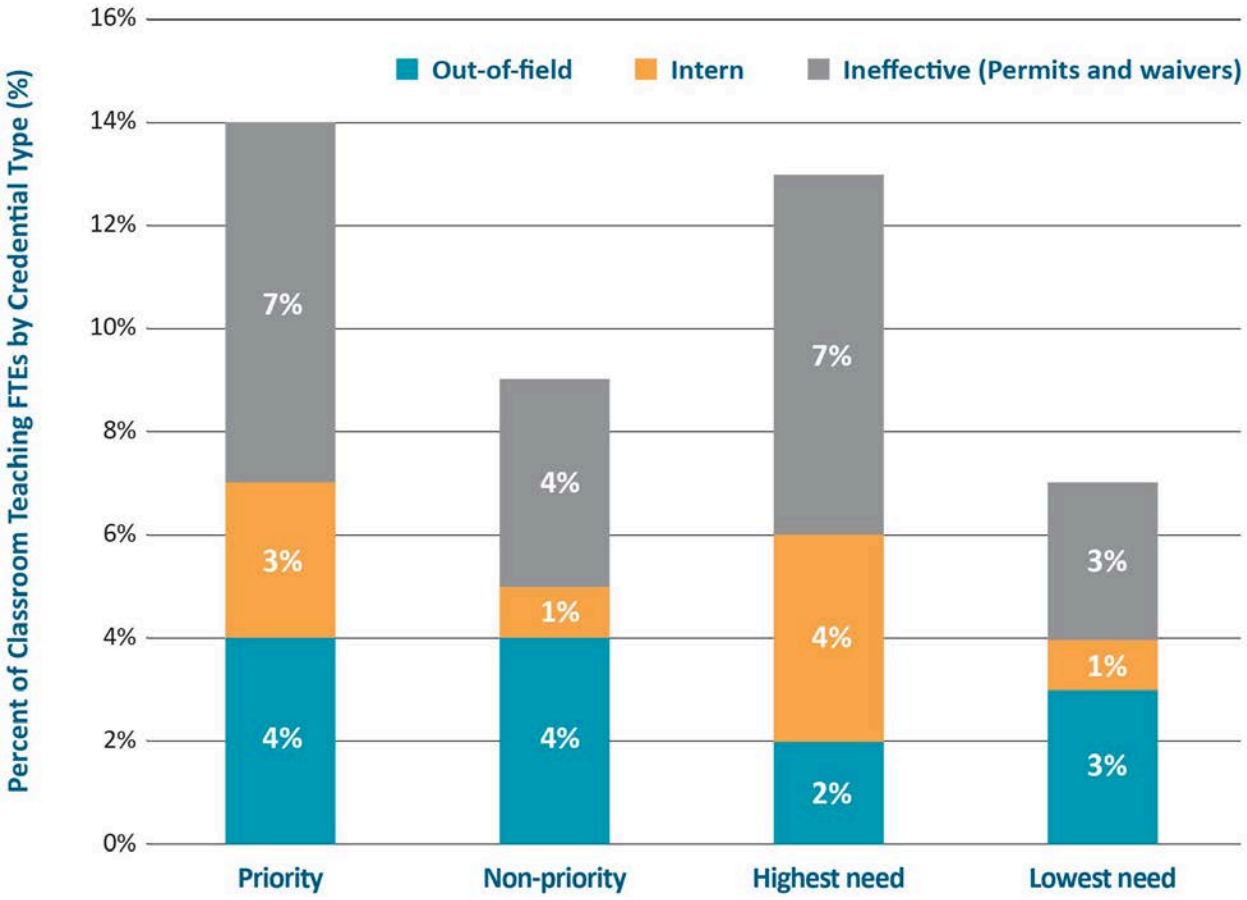
Compliance findings point to another near-term opportunity. Overlapping plans, repeated reporting, and procedural duplication emerge repeatedly as sources of system drag (14). California's state-local balance is shaped by both formal authority and the day-to-day structure of planning and reporting demands. A more navigable governance environment would likely make local discretion more usable in practice (32, 38). The central tension in California's system is that districts have substantial responsibility but often face high ambiguity and burden, limiting their ability to act effectively on that responsibility. Local responsibility is most effective when it is paired with clear goals and guidance, reduced administrative burden, and more coherent expectations across the system. Over time, heavy compliance requirements can also create a cycle in which limited confidence in local capacity leads to more prescriptive rules, while those rules consume the time and professional judgment needed to build and retain strong local capacity.

C: Capacity of Educators and of the System

Persistent gaps separate California's instructional ambitions from the professional and organizational capacity currently available across the system. A central lesson across the findings is that capacity-building depends on stability. California's most promising supports are strongest when they are sustained, job-embedded, and woven into ongoing work, while one-time funding appears more often alongside field fatigue and limited continuity. California has set broad goals for stronger literacy, better math instruction, improved support for multilingual learners and students with disabilities, more effective early childhood education, and richer educational experiences overall. Meeting those goals depends on a workforce that is sufficiently prepared, stable, and supported. It also depends on institutions that can help districts build local capacity over time. Districts rarely improve through state policy alone. They also need intermediary organizations that can interpret guidance, support implementation, and help sustain changes in practice across schools and systems.

These capacity gaps are visible across the educator workforce. California has had substantial teacher shortages over the last decade, resulting in unfilled vacancies, the hiring of teachers on emergency permits and waivers, and difficulties offering a full range of courses. Shortages fall disproportionately on schools serving larger shares of low-income students and Black and Latine students, and they are most severe in fields such as special education, mathematics, science, world languages, and career technical education. Evidence shows that the share of teachers who are underprepared negatively affects student achievement. **Figure 6** shows that these staffing challenges are not evenly distributed: schools serving larger shares of students included in the unduplicated pupil count have lower shares of fully credentialed teachers and higher shares of interns and teachers on permits and waivers. The problem is especially acute in math, where nearly 30 percent of California's math teachers are not fully certified to teach in their subject area, and underprepared math teachers are concentrated in high-needs schools (12, 29).

Figure 6: Distribution of Substandard Teacher Credential Types by School Proportion of Unduplicated Pupil Count, 2023–24



Notes: Includes average of school level credential proportions for all subjects overall. Priority schools are schools serving 55 percent Unduplicated Student Count (UPC) or above; highest and lowest need schools are the top and bottom decile of schools by percent UPC, respectively.
Sources: California Department of Education. Teaching assignment monitoring outcomes [Data set] (accessed 6/4/2025); California Department of Education. California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System [Data set] (accessed 6/4/2025)

California's preparation pipeline has begun to rebound in recent years, helped by state investments in recruitment and preparation. The supply of newly fully credentialed teachers remains only about half of what it was two decades ago, due at least in part to sharp declines in teacher education enrollments in the state public university system during the early 2000s (12, 29, 43). Teacher residencies and Golden State Teacher Grants reflect a more intentional effort to recruit, prepare, and place teachers in high-need settings. These investments illustrate the value of connecting preparation, financial support, and workforce needs more deliberately.

California's changing entry pathways matter for stability. Teachers entering through residencies and student-teaching pathways have the lowest early-career leaving rates. Teachers entering on emergency permits and internship pathways face substantially higher attrition risks and are more likely to begin in high-need schools (43). School leadership is another area of uneven investment. California has recently strengthened principal preparation standards and assessments but provides limited ongoing support for professional development and faces higher principal attrition than the national average (1). These workforce gaps shape what is possible inside classrooms, and the instructional evidence makes the consequences visible across subject areas and student populations.

Capacity gaps are especially visible in three areas:

- Workforce stability,
- Specialized instructional expertise, and
- Uneven availability of sustained support models.

Math illustrates the second challenge clearly. District leaders report limited professional learning in math and weak support for developing a shared instructional vision, especially in one of the state's most uneven instructional areas (9). Teacher-reported evidence from the curriculum paper suggests that these limits are not confined to mathematics: compared with teachers nationally, California teachers report less curriculum-focused professional development, less coaching, and less collaborative learning tied to curriculum (36). Together, these patterns make it harder for schools to build shared instructional practice and to provide instruction that responds effectively to wide differences in student readiness.

Special education reveals a related capacity problem. Teacher shortages are perhaps most stark in special education, with three-quarters of new special education teachers entering the classroom without having completed teacher certification and then leaving quickly at higher rates (43). Moreover, substantial public investment goes into diagnostic assessment and eligibility determination. Much less produces actionable guidance for instruction. The system devotes substantial time and resources to eligibility and compliance processes that often yield limited instructional value in daily classroom practice (23, 20). The SELPA findings also show that regional coordination is essential in California's special education system but varies substantially across contexts, with uneven support for local educational agencies and persistent questions about transparency, alignment, and administrative burden (39). Special education illustrates a broader coherence problem: substantial time, expertise, and funding are absorbed by assessment, compliance, and coordination demands, and the instructional value reaching students is often less clear.

Paraeducators make up a workforce that is growing much faster than the teacher workforce and remains weakly supported. They often provide direct instructional and behavioral support to students

with the most intensive needs, yet training focuses heavily on compliance while instructional and behavioral support receive far less attention. Paraeducators are professionally isolated, with limited collaboration time, unclear role definitions, and supervisors who are often not trained to manage or coach them effectively (28). Moreover, alongside tutors and expanded learning workers, well prepared paraeducators could form an important source of future teachers.

The capacity problem extends into preschool and the early grades, where California's preparation requirements, staffing structures, and support systems still vary substantially across settings even though teaching quality is central to children's early learning experiences (45). The early childhood workforce faces the same fragility, with low wages, high turnover, and preparation requirements that vary substantially across the publicly funded system (46).

Capacity-building works best when professional learning, coaching, planning, and implementation supports operate as a connected system. California has evidence of what stronger capacity-building looks like, especially when those supports are sustained and tied closely to the work itself. The challenge is how consistently those stronger supports are available across the system. California has more small-scale and partial capacity-building efforts than a durable statewide system for supporting instructional improvement at scale.

The state's approach to multilingual learner support illustrates how variability of capacity-building results in variable implementation. While California's policy framework expresses a strong vision for multilingual education, the state does not require nor provide ongoing funding to districts to offer the option of bilingual or dual language programs. Districts, in the absence of consistent instructional guidance, vary widely in how they support multilingual students' language development and academic progress, with differences in access to trained staff, instructional guidance, and organizational support. Bilingual education faces preparation deserts in counties with high multilingual learner concentrations, and schools serving higher shares of English learners, especially long-term English learners, tend to have less well-prepared teaching staff (40). Compared to some states, California relies less on clearly differentiated specialist roles and formally verified competencies for teachers serving multilingual learners (31, 5, 40). Where there are both high-capacity educators who have received effective preparation and systems to translate instructional guidance into practice, multilingual learner opportunities are stronger.

Community schools provide another example of a more connected support model. Early implementation evidence suggests that these models strengthen the alignment among student supports, family engagement, and school improvement when the work is built into school structures rather than added as a separate program (14). California's investment in preschool and transitional kindergarten points in a similar direction. Benefits are most likely to endure when instruction,

curriculum, assessment, and professional learning connect more coherently from preschool through the early elementary grades (48).

Early literacy offers the clearest example of connected capacity-building at the state level. California's approach has included an overhaul of teacher education for literacy implemented through a specialized set of standards and accreditation, a new literacy performance assessment, a set of connected initiatives in seven county offices of education mapped to literacy for different age ranges and populations of students, the creation of the Dyslexia Initiative, and the introduction of the new literacy screener requirements. The Early Literacy Support Block Grant and the Literacy Coaches and Reading Specialists Grant produced measurable gains in third-grade English Language Arts scores in targeted, high-needs settings. Both programs combined expert professional development with flexible funds for school-level supports and planning processes tied to growth strategies. The stronger effects for the Early Literacy Support Block Grant appear linked to its more developed oversight and accountability structure, including required planning, state approval before spending, and ongoing reporting. Capacity improves when instructional guidance, coaching, implementation support, and follow-through are built together rather than offered separately (34).

These examples reinforce a broader lesson about capacity-building. Sustained job-embedded support, structured opportunities for practice and feedback, planning tied to growth goals, and stable funding all appear repeatedly in the more promising examples. One-time funding appears more often alongside field fatigue and limited continuity. The strongest lesson concerns stability: California’s most promising supports are most useful when they continue over time and can be built into educators’ regular planning, instruction, coaching, and improvement routines.

Capacity is a system-wide property that reaches beyond the workforce alone. Families and community partners bring knowledge, relationships, and sustained involvement that can make ambitious learning experiences more possible and more durable across settings.

Capacity gaps also extend across multiple roles and institutions, not only among classroom teachers. Teachers need curriculum-aligned professional learning (12). Principals benefit from coaching and professional learning communities (1). School board member turnover and widespread need for more support add a governance-capacity challenge: political strain, board conflict, and widespread superintendent turnover, with 69 percent of districts experiencing at least one superintendent transition from 2019-20 to 2025-26, can weaken local capacity to sustain direction and respond coherently to multiple challenges over time (32). Many principals want more flexible ways to organize teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school staff around student needs, and they often face state and district constraints that limit role redesign, collaboration, and differentiated staffing models (26).

Stronger accountability, clearer guidance, and greater capacity are what make it possible to extend the system's strongest examples to the students who need them most. That connection raises a more aspirational question: what richer and more equitable educational experiences could California offer if those conditions were stronger, and what would it take to make them common rather than exceptional?

5. From Coherence to Opportunity

The challenges described in Section 4 point beyond questions of alignment, balance, and capacity alone. They also shape what kinds of learning experiences California can offer and how effectively the state can learn from its own efforts to improve. Stronger connections among goals, guidance, support, and oversight would not only make the current system function more effectively. They would also create the conditions for richer educational experiences and for a system that can learn from its own efforts, identify what works, and extend stronger practice across the state.

Extending richer and more equitable student experiences

California's emerging vision for students calls for learning environments that are engaging, relational, and responsive to students' development, including more individualized forms of support that move beyond whole-class instruction as the default model (30). These environments emphasize strong relationships, meaningful and appropriately challenging work, opportunities for collaboration and reflection, and connections to students' interests and future pathways. They treat belonging, agency, and identity development as central to educational quality.

Realizing that vision at scale requires instructional systems that help educators translate those goals into daily practice. Tutoring and other forms of individualized support provide one example of how this translation can occur, especially when schools are organized to move beyond whole-class instruction alone and provide targeted support at scale (30). When tutoring is implemented with sufficient frequency, aligned with classroom instruction, and grounded in sustained relationships, it can support both academic learning and student engagement. Achieving that level of quality depends on clear definitions of effective practice, stable staffing, and structures that connect tutoring to the broader instructional program.

Schools that are engaged in high school redesign efforts provide another example. Schools that organize learning around pathways, integrate academic and career preparation, and create sustained relationships between students and adults offer a more coherent experience for adolescents. These models often include project-based learning, dual enrollment, and opportunities for students to

connect their studies to real-world contexts. Expanding such models depends on flexibility in course design, clearer guidance about quality, and sustained support for implementation.

California already has promising examples across these areas. The central issue is the extent to which the system can make those approaches standard. Stronger alignment and accountability can clarify expectations and signal what high quality looks like. Clearer guidance can reduce the burden on districts to define effective practice on their own. Greater capacity can ensure that educators have the preparation and support needed to carry these approaches into classrooms. When these conditions are present, richer and more equitable student experiences become more feasible across a wide range of settings.

Building a stronger system for learning, improvement, and innovation

Extending stronger practice across the system also depends on California's ability to learn from implementation. Many districts and schools are already adopting new models of teaching and learning. These efforts need to generate shared knowledge that can inform improvement across the state, rather than remaining isolated experiments with limited reach.

A stronger learning system would make it easier to track implementation, study variation, and connect evidence to action. Data systems would support reporting and the kind of analysis that helps educators understand which approaches are working, for whom, and under what conditions. Evaluation would be integrated into ongoing work and treated as a continuous process rather than an episodic review. The goal would be to support improvement that builds on itself over time.

Structured approaches to innovation can support this kind of learning. High school redesign efforts can be organized in ways that allow the state and participating districts to study how different models function across contexts. Tutoring initiatives can be designed to test different approaches to staffing, scheduling, and instructional alignment. The introduction of new technologies, including artificial intelligence, can be accompanied by clear goals, shared measures, and processes for learning from early implementation, especially where AI is used to support more engaging instruction and stronger school and system design (3, 27). Schools and districts are already adopting AI tools, often without clear guidance, shared frameworks, or professional development, and current California evidence points to a growing need for AI literacy and stronger support for educators and school leaders (27). Without clearer goals, shared measures, and support for implementation, those early efforts will be harder to learn from and less likely to build cumulative knowledge. Technology also has potential to support more flexible and equitable special education through better coordination of supports, more adaptive scheduling, and improved access to services when implementation is paired with strong guidance and capacity-building (24).

Workforce development is part of this system as well. Educator preparation, professional learning, and career pathways can be designed to align more closely with the instructional approaches the state is trying to expand. Stronger connections among community colleges, undergraduate and post-baccalaureate preparation programs, districts, and intermediary organizations can help ensure that educators are equipped to implement new models and to contribute to ongoing learning about practice. Paraeducators, who now make up a growing share of the school workforce and often support students with the most intensive needs, represent an underdeveloped pathway into teaching that structured investment could strengthen (28). Certification structures could be redesigned to create more coherent undergraduate pathways and streamlined dual certification options, particularly in special education (12).

These efforts depend on cumulative learning. Individual districts and schools will continue to develop and adapt new approaches, and a more effective state system would create the conditions for those efforts to inform one another and contribute to a growing body of knowledge about what works across California's diverse contexts. Building this kind of learning system is what would allow California to move from a state with pockets of strong practice to one where strong practice defines the system.

6. Conclusion: From Reform to Coherence and Discovery

California has done important reform work. Over the past two decades, the state has simplified school finance, expanded local control, adopted stronger standards and assessments, improved parts of its data infrastructure, and brought early childhood closer to the center of the state's education agenda. These changes matter. They leave California with a stronger foundation than it had in earlier reform periods, and they also create the conditions for a more ambitious next phase: building a public education system that prepares students for changing work, strengthens civic life, supports belonging and engagement, and advances opportunity at a time when state responsibility has grown.

The Getting Down to Facts III findings show that a stronger foundation is only part of what California needs. The next phase of reform centers on creating coherence and investing in evidence-based innovation. California's goals, guidance, accountability systems, governance structures, and support systems need stronger connection to one another. California has a set of reforms that demonstrate how stronger design and sustained support can produce meaningful progress. LCFF, transitional kindergarten, targeted educator-pipeline investments, and community schools each reflect efforts that connect policy design, implementation support, and long-term commitment. The state's current tools produce large amounts of information and uneven amounts of direction. California’s state-local structure gives districts meaningful responsibility alongside substantial ambiguity, broad search burdens, heavy administrative demands, and important state constraints on time, course design, curriculum materials, and funding administration. Capacity-building exists in meaningful pockets and does not yet define the system as a whole.

The ABCs of the current reform moment, Accountability and Alignment, Balance between state and local control, and Capacity of educators and institutions, provide the clearest frame for understanding California's next phase of reform. Stronger accountability depends on tools that are more usable and more clearly connected to support, and on systems that make institutional responsibilities more visible alongside student outcomes. A stronger state-local balance requires less system drag, clearer guidance in areas where local actors face persistent ambiguity, and closer review of state rules that constrain flexibility over time, course design, curriculum materials, and funding use. The capacity findings consistently point to the importance of the human and institutional infrastructure that allows state priorities to reach classrooms and shape students' daily experience of school. The contrast between mathematics and early literacy makes this broader argument concrete. Mathematics reveals the costs of weak coherence. Early literacy shows the promise of stronger support design.

The current studies make the main obstacles to further progress clear. Stronger data systems, more flexible school designs, and better coordination tools may make a richer and more individualized California education system more feasible in practice. The findings suggest that the next phase of reform will depend on improving the current system and on creating conditions under which broader and more meaningful educational experiences can be developed, tested, and expanded. California now has broader goals, a stronger evidence base, and more policy infrastructure than in earlier reform periods. The central challenge is coherence, including a tighter connection between what the state says it values, how the system is organized to deliver it, and whether the supports reach the educators and students who need them most. Mathematics shows the cost of that gap. Early literacy shows that stronger coherence can support more promising results. Special education and multilingual learner policy show the same challenge from another angle: broad commitments are easier to state than to carry coherently into instruction, staffing, and student opportunity. The larger implication is that California's next phase depends on whether the state can connect its ambitions for students to classrooms, relationships, and learning opportunities that reflect those ambitions in practice.

Key Implications

The findings of the *Getting Down to Facts III* studies suggest five implications for California's next phase of reform:

1 Maintain and build on LCFF while strengthening fiscal stability and support for districts facing the greatest challenges.

The evidence in this review strongly supports retaining LCFF's core theory of action: directing more resources to students with greater needs while giving districts meaningful flexibility over how to use those funds. LCFF remains one of California's most important reforms and should be strengthened. However, the state's finance system introduces instability that undermines long-term improvement. Heavy reliance on volatile General Fund revenues means that economic downturns can erase revenue gains quickly. Rising pension obligations, health benefit spending, and special education costs, and continued reliance on local property wealth for facilities, further constrain district flexibility. These pressures weaken the stability that LCFF's equity logic requires, especially in districts serving the highest-need students. The next phase of reform should therefore preserve LCFF's equity foundation while improving fiscal stability and targeting additional support to districts facing the greatest challenges.

2 Consolidate and align governance structures and accountability systems across the state.

California's governance and accountability systems are too fragmented to support coherent improvement. The state's primary accountability tools, including the Dashboard, SARCs, LCAPs, and SPSAs, often require districts to report similar information through separate processes, generating compliance more reliably than direction. Researchers find that California fully meets none of the core principles of effective accountability, with particularly weak performance on usability and actionability. County offices provide structured fiscal oversight but lack comparable routines for identifying and supporting weak instructional practice. These are not separate problems. They reflect a broader governance structure in which oversight, support, and accountability are not designed to work together. A next step for California is to better align and simplify these structures so that goals, planning, oversight, support, and intervention operate as parts of a connected system. This would likely involve fewer overlapping tools, clearer distinctions among their purposes, and planning and accountability documents that are more usable for districts and communities. This work should extend across state agencies, county offices, SELPAs, and early childhood systems. Stronger alignment and simplification would reduce duplication, improve clarity, and increase the system's ability to respond when students and districts are not well served.

3 **Build stronger state capacity to support workforce development, instructional guidance, and system learning.**

A recurring finding across this review is that California needs a stronger state role in supporting improvement. The state must be able to develop, distribute, support, and retain an educator workforce capable of meeting its ambitions for students, and to provide clearer curricular and instructional guidance in areas where districts now face high ambiguity, including literacy, mathematics, multilingual learning, and tutoring. Early literacy and mathematics together illustrate what is at stake. In literacy, coordinated state action combining accreditation reform, performance assessments, county-level initiatives, and targeted grants with real oversight produced measurable gains in high-need schools. In mathematics, new frameworks and materials have been introduced without the surrounding guidance, support, and accountability needed to shift practice at scale. Building stronger state capacity therefore requires strengthening the California Department of Education and related institutions so they can do more than administer programs. Building state capacity means committing to ongoing, embedded efforts, rather than adding one-time programs. It also requires the ability to learn from the field: to track implementation, commission and use research and evaluation, identify effective practices, elevate exemplars, and translate evidence into usable guidance across the system.

4 **Reduce administrative burden and remove requirements that weaken local capacity for improvement.**

California's current system places substantial administrative demands on districts and schools. Education administrators spend roughly 19 to 20 hours per week, about half of a standard work week, on compliance activities. Much of this burden results from accumulation: new requirements added without removing older ones, and overlapping plans such as the LCAP, SPSA, SARC, and program-specific addenda that require similar information through separate processes. These demands fall most heavily on smaller and more capacity-constrained districts and reduce the time available for instructional leadership, community engagement, and strategic planning. A more effective accountability structure would be clearer, more coherent, and more useful for improvement. Reducing burden would involve removing duplicative reporting requirements, consolidating planning expectations where possible, and distinguishing more clearly between requirements that support improvement and those that primarily add procedural work. Reducing system drag would allow school leaders to use their time and capacity more strategically.

5 **Support disciplined innovation in school design and in the organization of teaching and learning.**

California's future goals for students require stronger coherence in the current system and greater capacity to develop, study, and extend new models of schooling. The state should support innovation in areas such as high school redesign, tutoring, educator roles and career pathways, and the thoughtful use of technology, including artificial intelligence. These efforts should be disciplined: grounded in clear goals, supported by strong data and evaluation, and designed to generate shared learning about what works, for whom, and under what conditions. High school redesign efforts point to the potential of models that integrate pathways, dual enrollment, project-based learning, and sustained relationships, and also highlight the difficulty of building such models within existing structures. AI and tutoring are already being adopted across districts, often without the guidance or evaluation needed to learn from early implementation. Structured approaches to innovation would allow California to build cumulative knowledge rather than rely on uneven local experimentation. Given its scale, diversity, and policy infrastructure, California is well positioned to lead in developing and studying models that advance both educational quality and equity.

Appendix

Appendix A. Getting Down to Facts III Technical Reports

1	California Principals: Trends in Supply, Preparation, Distribution, Retention, and Turnover	Nicole Arshan, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Wesley Wei
2	Multilingual Learners of English with Disabilities in California: Patterns in Enrollment, Opportunities, Outcomes, and County-Level Variation	Alfredo J. Artiles and Joao M. Souto-Maior
3	The Learning Experiences that Matter and AI's Role	Cristina Barnard, Chris Agnew, and Susanna Loeb
4	District Dollars 3: Recent Patterns in California School District Finances, Trends in Teacher Compensation, and Within-District, Between-School Spending	Paul Bruno
5	Multilingual Learners of English: Progress of California's English Learners and the Resources That Support Their Educational Achievements	Dion Burns and Heather Price
6	Does Your Math Pathway Make a Difference? High School Mathematics and College Outcomes	Kramer Dykeman, Jacob Jackson, Michal Kurlaender, Beryl Larson, and Sherrie Reed
7	Material Hardship, Emotional Distress, and Early Learning Supports Among California Families with Young Children: Evidence from the RAPID California Voices Survey	Philip Fisher, Monica Arpino, and Sihong Liu
8	Education Data Needs, Availability, and Access in California	Jon Fullerton
9	The California State Role in Supporting District Capacity for TK-8 Math Improvement	H. Alix Gallagher, Lisa Towne, Danielle M. Gomez, and Susanna Loeb
10	What California's Latine Students, Families and Communities Want From and For Their Schools	Antero Garcia, Nallely Beulah Aceves-Romero, and Estefania Rodriguez Sanchez

11	The State of Chronic Absenteeism in California: Projections, Reasons, and Solutions	Kevin Gee and Peter Yu
12	Teacher Certification Policies: Balancing Quality and Access in the Teaching Profession	Pam Grossman and Maya Kaul
13	Public Accountability in California: Evaluating the SARCs and the California School Dashboard	Shira Haderlein and Morgan S. Polikoff
14	California Community Schools: Past, Present, and Early Impacts of the California Community Schools Partnership Program	Laura E. Hernández, Walker Swain, and Anna Maier
15	Assessing Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) Using Generative AI	Jacob Hibel and Xander Beberman
16	California's School Facilities in a Changing Climate: Funding, Equity, and Resilience	Sara Hinkley and Jeff Vincent
17	Adoption Windows and Reform: California's Math Pathways in the Post-Common Core Era	Elizabeth Huffaker
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46	Early Childhood Education - Section 3: The ECE Workforce	Deborah Stipek and Beth Meloy
47	Early Childhood Education - Section 4: Quality Assessment &	Deborah Stipek and Beth

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49	Early Childhood Education - Section 6: Data & Data Systems	Beth Meloy and Deborah Stipek
50	Navigating the Transition to College: LGBTQ+ Students' High School Experiences and Academic Plans	Christina Sun, Alexandria Hurtt, and Michal Kurlaender
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Appendix B. Getting Down to Facts III Research Briefs

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4	**Special Education** in California: Growth, Capacity, and Equity

5	Student **Well-Being** in California's Current Context: Policy, Conditions, and Supports
6	Successes, Challenges, and Opportunities in California School **Finance**
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13	**Leadership** Stability in California: Capacity, Continuity, and System Coherence
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18	From Expansion to Excellence: Addressing Systemic Challenges to Better Serve California's **Youngest Learners**
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Appendix C. Terms

- A-G Requirements
- Advanced Placement (AP)
- Average Daily Attendance (ADA)
- California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE)
- Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC)
- English Learner (EL)
- Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT)
- Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP)
- Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)
- National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP)
- School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs)
- School Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA)
- Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs)
- Transitional Kindergarten (TK)