

FactSheet

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The Power of Networks:

Accelerating Collaborative Learning to Improve Student Success

by Susan Lovenburg and Kathy Armstrong

“The LCFF presents school boards and school districts a renewed opportunity to focus on improving student outcomes, closing achievement gaps, and increasing the level of communication between our schools and communities.”

—CSBA CEO & Executive Director
Vernon M. Billy

“In the public sector, the competitive advantage that we have is the opportunity to share secrets since we are not competing for market share. The opportunity to collaborate is the competitive advantage of the public sector.”

—CA Fwd President & CEO
Jim Mayer

Introduction

The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) was signed into law in California in July 2013 to give school districts and county offices of education (collectively known as local educational agencies or LEAs) greater discretion in how they allocate funds to more effectively direct resources to the state’s most vulnerable student populations. LCFF also changed how LEAs are held accountable for improvement. All LEAs are now required to create a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), in consultation with their communities, which details how they will use funds to improve outcomes for students.

The governance implications of these changes are significant, reflecting the recognition that excellence has not been achieved through compliance-oriented structures and systems, and an understanding that public agencies need to work differently to deliver better results. LCFF presents a renewed opportunity to focus on improving student outcomes, to increase the level of communication between schools and communities, and to close opportunity and achievement gaps. Keys to achieving this potential are for governance teams and educators to transform the way they

make decisions, listen and learn from each other, and interact more collaboratively with the state.

In their paper *None of Us Are as Good as All of Us: Early Lessons From the CORE Districts*, researchers Joel Knudson and Mark Garibaldi note the growing importance of purposeful cross-district collaboration as an approach to improvement: “The literature on organizational learning has long recognized the power of communities of practice for stewarding knowledge. These social structures bring members together around a sense of joint enterprise, facilitate regular interactions that enhance members’ abilities to do their jobs better, and produce a shared repertoire of communal resources through their joint work.”¹

The CSBA/CA Fwd Collaborative Working Group

Understanding this potential, the California School Boards Association (CSBA) launched the LCFF Collaborative Working Group (CWG) in 2014 in partnership with California Forward (CA Fwd)² to provide the collaborative space and technical

support needed by governance teams to successfully navigate this transformation. Over the project's three years, board members and superintendents from 20 school districts and four county offices of education convened quarterly to participate in facilitated sessions focused on improving LCFF implementation, informing LCAP development, and sharing peer practices.

The project's specific objectives, underwritten by a grant from the Stuart Foundation, included:

- » Developing an in-depth understanding of the opportunities and challenges of designing, implementing, managing, evaluating, and governing under the LCFF approach to funding and accountability
- » Providing timely access to data, trends, and analysis
- » Working with recognized experts to assist in identifying and addressing challenges
- » Sharing best practices and strategizing together how to solve systemic challenges
- » Increasing transparency of LCAP processes and strategies to promote civic engagement and public trust

The objectives of the project were achieved through the following activities:

- » Collaborative group discussion sessions
- » Subgroup deeper-dive discussions and collaboration
- » Presentations from subject matter experts
- » Documentation and sharing of promising practices
- » Engaging policymakers on LCFF implementation
- » Engaging equity groups on LCFF transparency and student outcomes

One result of these activities was the development of tools and materials to provide board members with foundational resources. These include a brief written by Dr. Michael Fullan on designing effective LCAPs based on his Coherence Framework; a report and a brief sharing promising practices used in the LCAP process based on an analysis of participants' LCAPs and interviews about their LCAP experiences; a document with CSBA recommendations for strengthening the LCAP template that was shared with the State Board of Education; and a soon-to-be released archive of peer practices related both to the LCAP process and to programs that promote student achievement that can be included in

LCAP strategies. (For links to these materials, please see the CSBA Resources section at the end of this factsheet.)

The CWG was purposefully diverse, including both district and county office of education superintendents and board members from LEAs of different sizes, demographics, and geographic regions throughout the state. In pre-selection interviews, members were asked to make a long-term commitment to regular and meaningful participation.

In the summer of 2017, at the conclusion of the group's three years of work together, a final assessment was conducted to evaluate achievement of the original goals for the CWG: to contribute to the body of knowledge about collaborative learning and problem-solving, and to inform the design of future CSBA and CA Fwd activities. The assessment included a web-based survey of all current and former CWG members, telephone interviews with 11 of the most active members, and a focused discussion during the final meeting of the CWG. Key learning is distilled below, intended both to convey what worked effectively for this group and to encourage and accelerate the success of future networks. The full evaluation report includes greater detail.³

Effective Collaboration: What We Learned About What Works

Participants must own and drive the agenda from the beginning. The CWG was intended to serve as a "living laboratory" for participants to share their challenges, opportunities, and ideas in the governance, management, and implementation of LCFF. From the start, the conveners believed that this goal could only be achieved if the members fully owned and drove the agenda. This expectation of member leadership was clearly communicated when original members were selected in 2014, and sustained through regular surveys of and communication with the group. Periodically discussing how that theory worked in practice helped keep the approach fresh and assisted in acclimating new members.

Engaging together on shared challenges builds bridges. The CWG met over the course of three years during which LEAs, the state, and stakeholder groups were all struggling to understand and implement this monumental policy change in California. Initially, perceptions of differing priorities created tense relations between some of these groups. The CWG provided the opportunity for these groups to come together in extended dialogue around shared implementation challenges, such as the redesign of the LCAP template and the roll out of the California School

Dashboard. The members, especially those who were most engaged, came to appreciate more deeply that all of the stakeholders shared a common goal of achieving the best outcomes for California's children, and they came to see the particular challenges experienced by other groups from a more constructive vantage point. Thus, facilitating dialogue among state policy leaders, equity advocates, and other education experts and stakeholders during CWG meetings provided an important avenue for LEAs to inform the work of these individuals and organizations and vice versa—resulting in increased coherence across the entire system.

Similarly, the CWG was purposefully designed to include a diversity of district experiences, including those of large versus small districts, rural versus urban districts, and districts with large versus small underserved populations. The inclusion of both school board members and superintendents also brought different viewpoints into the group. Participants indicated that hearing a breadth of perspectives opened up their thinking in a way that a more homogeneous group composition could not have.

The convener role is critical to help participants build trust, clarify their needs and priorities, and take ownership of their learning. While an important design element of the CWG was the commitment to having both a designated board member and superintendent from each LEA consistently in attendance, this proved challenging for some LEAs, given that many board members have other jobs, and superintendents have many demands on their time. Therefore, a key role for conveners is to help participants quickly begin to experience a strong return on their investment of time in the group, making it as easy as possible for members to participate and actively engage. The following are suggestions offered by CWG members on some of the ways that conveners can best support the group in “getting to value”:

- » As one participant expressed, learning and growth happen “at the speed of trust.” Conveners can help participants build trust as quickly as possible through intentional design of interactive activities that offer opportunities to gain deeper mutual understanding.
- » A regular practice of soliciting feedback and input after each meeting helps the conveners monitor the collective pulse of the group, anticipate needs, and build this understanding into agendas for future meetings.
- » Conveners must invest staff time to coordinate communications with the group and help ensure that

group members come to meetings fully informed and with the information they need to participate actively. While participants must be encouraged to own the direction of the group and drive the group outcomes, conveners help enable participant leadership by providing strong project management, organization, and administrative support. This includes the heavy lifting associated with drafting deliverables when the group wishes to produce a product.

Conclusion

Professional learning networks can be an effective way to improve understanding and capacity. In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, these networks offer superintendents and board members the opportunity to grow stronger together. The CWG experience offers valuable lessons to accelerate and deepen future collaborative efforts, which in turn can accelerate realizing the promise of LCFF—to better serve the students of California.

CSBA Resources

The Coherence Framework in Action <https://www.csba.org/GovernanceAndPolicyResources/~media/CSBA/Files/GovernanceResources/GovernanceBriefs/201710CoherenceFramework-PromisingPracticesLCAPs.ashx>

Increasing LCAP Transparency and Reaffirming California's Commitment to Local Control Experiences of District and County Leaders https://www.csba.org/~media/CSBA/Files/GovernanceResources/Researchpapers/061406LCAP-Year3_Analysis.ashx

Promising Practices for Developing and Implementing LCAPs <https://www.csba.org/GovernanceAndPolicyResources/~media/CSBA/Files/GovernanceResources/GovernanceBriefs/201611GBLCAPPromisingPractices.ashx>

Strengthening the LCAP: Recommendations for improving the template, process and state supports https://www.csba.org/GovernanceAndPolicyResources/~media/CSBA/Files/GovernanceResources/EducationIssues/FairFunding/061416Strengthening_LCAP_CSBA_Recommendations.ashx

Endnotes

- 1 Knudson, J. and Garibaldi, M. (2015). *None of us are as good as all of us: Early lessons from the CORE districts*. American Research Institute. San Mateo, CA
- 2 California Forward (www.CAFwd.org) is a bipartisan, nonprofit organization that advocates for moving government closer to the people, and encourages integration of efforts and data-informed decision making to improve results. CA Fwd supports the enactment and implementation of significant efforts to create cost-effective public services at the state and regional levels.

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