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# Governance Brief

## School Board Members Get Down to Facts:

*Results of a CSBA Survey of Trustees on Key Education Topics*

by Julie Maxwell-Jolly, Mary Briggs, and Manuel Buenrostro

### Introduction

Board members are a key part of the California education landscape. They are the most direct connection to the local community and often provide the greatest continuity in the system, generally remaining in their positions longer than district administrators. Therefore, the board member perspective is essential to understanding the current state of California education.

The 2018 Getting Down to Facts (GDTF) II project was designed to provide a broad picture of the education landscape in California. Nonetheless, the project neglects an important part of that system: school district and county office of education trustees. The original project was to include the trustee perspective; however, the final reports omitted the results of a survey administered to board members. The results of that survey are reported in this brief, adding to a comprehensive understanding of the current California education system by including the experiences and perspectives of trustees of school districts and county offices of education.

To gather the views of board members on key education issues, CSBA, in collaboration with GDTF II researchers, administered a survey in March 2018 to randomly selected school district and county office of education board members. The survey had an approximately 25 percent response rate and the local educational agencies (LEAs) represented by the 260 board member respondents reflect a range of geographic locations, enrollment, and student demographics.

### Local Control Funding Formula

In 2013, policymakers reshaped California's K-12 public education system with the Local Control Funding

Formula (LCFF), which is based on three fundamental principles:

- » **Equity:** the knowledge that some students and schools have greater needs than others, and therefore require more resources to meet those needs;
- » **Multiple measures:** the importance of measuring school achievement more broadly than the heavy reliance on test scores under No Child Left Behind; and
- » **Subsidiarity:** the notion that local decision-makers know their communities and students best and therefore are better equipped to make decisions in support of these students.

School boards are essential in California's complex education system, especially in the context of local control. They are key participants in decisions about resources and policies that are central to the health of their LEAs and the success of the students they serve. This makes their experiences and perspectives necessary for a complete portrait of public education in California. School boards do not implement education strategies and approaches. Rather, they set the vision, goals, and direction of the LEA; establish policy to help carry these out; rely on the superintendent and LEA staff to use their professional expertise to apply strategies that will achieve the stated goals; and monitor the ongoing success of these strategies.

### *LCFF Benefits Underserved Students*

LCFF was structured to provide districts with supplemental funding for the additional resources required to educate students from several high-need groups: low-income students, homeless students, foster youth, and students identified as

English learners. LEAs receive supplemental funding for the “unduplicated” count of students that meet any of these criteria.

The survey asked board members to share their perceptions about the impact of LCFF on their district’s or COE’s ability to serve students from high-need groups. For the most part, participants felt that LCFF was positive for these students. Seventy-four percent of board members *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that LCFF had enabled their LEA to improve services and programs for their unduplicated students.

### *Greater Alignment between Resources and Local Priorities*

Prior to LCFF, critics noted that the state’s reliance on general purpose block grants and more than 60 categorical funding programs contributed to a fragmented educational system and made it difficult for LEAs to respond to the needs of their local context.<sup>1</sup> With LCFF, districts and county offices have greater flexibility to spend their funding in a manner consistent with local priorities. Policymakers and practitioners hoped that this approach would lead to greater alignment among LEA goals, strategies, and resource allocation decisions. Reflecting that goal, 73 percent of board members completing this survey said they *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that LCFF had fostered this type of alignment. A majority also noted an increased local role in resource allocation decisions after LCFF. Fifty-nine percent *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that LCFF had given them a stronger voice in the way resources are allocated in their LEAs than under the prior finance system of revenue limits and categorical programs.(n=222).i

### *LCAP Board Role and Preparation*

With LCFF, more educational decision-making has been returned to the local level, including an increased emphasis on seeking and incorporating stakeholder feedback in setting goals and selecting improvement strategies. The LCFF statute identifies the board of education as the body responsible for seeking stakeholder input and identifies which groups, at a minimum, must be consulted. The board is also responsible for final approval of the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), but the state offers little guidance about the role of the board beyond those areas.<sup>2</sup> To better understand the ways in which boards have been involved in LCFF decision-making, the survey asked board members a series of questions related to LCAP development.

The development of the LCAP is supervised by the superintendent, who oversees the district’s administrative

activities on a day-to-day basis. For the most part, these board members felt supported by the superintendent and staff regarding LCFF. Most said that their superintendent and LEA staff reinforced their understanding of LCFF and the LCAP: 84 percent *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that their superintendent encouraged board member involvement in the LCAP process. The same percentage (84 percent) *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they had received adequate support and guidance on LCFF/LCAP matters.

The survey, however, did not capture how extensively superintendents believe the board should be involved in the LCAP process, how strongly they encouraged board member involvement, or how often they provided opportunities for engagement about the LCAP. Overall, 84 percent of respondents said that they saw a draft of the 2017–18 LCAP before it was brought to the board for public comment (n=218).<sup>3</sup> This runs counter to concerns that the board would be relegated to merely rubber-stamping the LCAP at the end of its development. To understand the LCAP activities in which board members engaged, participants were asked about several roles related to the LCAP. Of those who reported involvement in LCAP development beyond approving the final draft (a legal requirement outlined in LCFF), board members reported participating in several aspects of the process (n=219). For example, to some extent (from great to small) 87 percent of these trustees participated in board meetings to develop LCAP goals and resource priorities; 82 percent provided feedback on the LCAP as it was being written; 70 percent attended meetings devoted to receiving stakeholder feedback on the LCAP; and 53 percent served on a stakeholder committee with non-board members who provided LCAP input (see Figure 1).

### **Instructional Investments and LCFF**

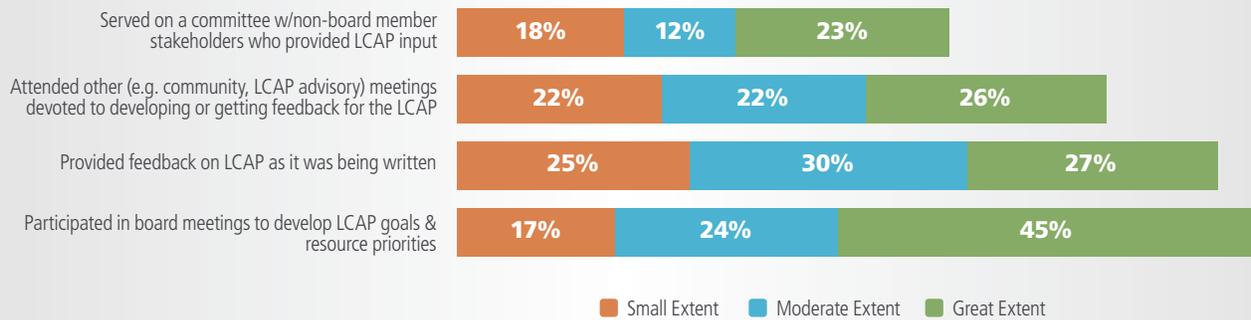
LCFF allows for greater flexibility in the way that districts invest in instruction. The survey included questions about two specific areas of instruction that are associated with the success of California students: implementation of California’s grade-level standards and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).

### *Grade-Level Standards*

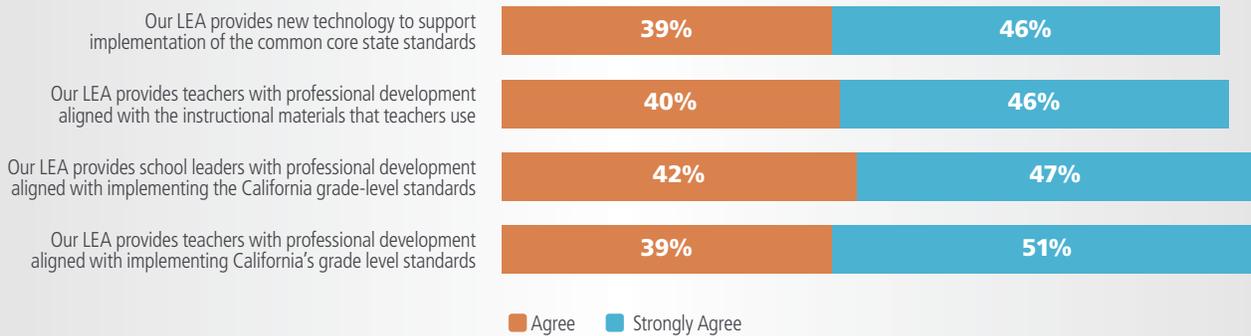
Nine in 10 board members reported that their districts or county offices of education have invested in professional learning associated with implementation of the state’s grade-level standards. Of 260 respondents, board members overwhelmingly reported that they have also provided

i. Because not every survey participant answered every question, these numbers indicate how many board members responded to a particular question.

**Figure 1: Degree of Involvement 2016-17 in LCAP Development**



**Figure 2: Implementation of Grade-Level Standards**



new technology for implementation of the Common Core State Standards and professional development related to instructional materials that teachers use (see Figure 2).

### Social and Emotional Learning

Social and Emotional Learning is associated with positive health, societal, and economic outcomes, and research suggests it is also a critical support for student learning, school climate, and safety.<sup>4</sup> While there is no single definition for SEL, the widely cited Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning identifies five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.<sup>5</sup> In recent years, California state educational policies and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) have encouraged investments in school climate and other SEL-related areas. Board members reported their LEAs supported SEL (n=246):

- » 73 percent set clear goals for development of students' SEL skills
- » 72 percent provided professional learning to teachers to support students' development of SEL skills
- » 54 percent said their LEAs measure and report on success of support for development of students' SEL skills

Among these LEAs (n=239), board members said the most frequent measure of SEL was student behavior data. However, surveys were popular indicators as well. Indicators from most-to-least often used were:

1. 85 percent used student behavior data
2. 62 percent used student surveys
3. 59 percent used teacher surveys
4. 54 percent used parent surveys

## Teachers

Access to staff—particularly teachers—with the necessary qualifications and preparation is fundamental to student success. Research has shown that teachers are the most important in-school contributors to student achievement.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the impact of quality teachers goes beyond academic achievement. One study found that students of effective teachers are more likely to attend college, attend higher-ranked colleges, earn higher salaries, and have lower rates of teen pregnancy.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, California schools are experiencing a serious teacher shortage.<sup>8</sup> While recruitment is an important aspect of this challenge, the Learning Policy Institute affirms that retention continues to have a major impact on the shortage as well. This issue is particularly acute in certain school districts—about half of new teachers in California’s urban, low-income, and high-minority districts leave the field within five years.<sup>9</sup> In addition, while there is strong evidence that diversifying the teacher workforce benefits students and schools, retaining teachers of color is especially challenging.<sup>10</sup>

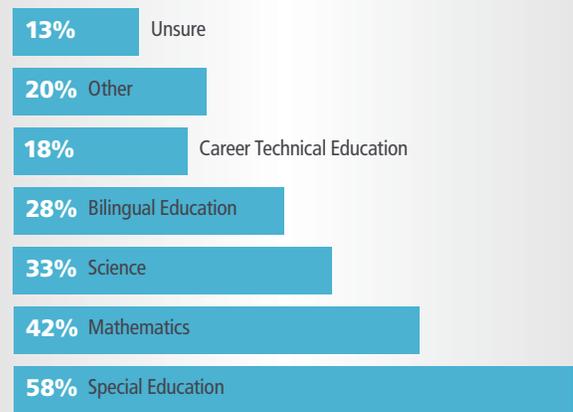
### Teacher Shortage

A 2016 survey of human resources directors by CSBA and the Learning Policy Institute found that 75 percent of surveyed LEAs (211 total) reported having a shortage of qualified teachers to fill their teaching vacancies.<sup>11</sup> A 2018 follow-up survey of district and county office of education human resources directors conducted by CSBA for the GDTF II report had similar findings.<sup>12</sup>

The survey of board members on which this brief is based focused on the severity of those shortages. In this survey, 78 percent of board members indicated that the teacher shortage was a serious issue to some degree—a percentage in keeping with surveys of HR directors in 2016 and 2018. Of the 235 board members who responded to the current survey, 38 percent said that the teacher shortage was serious or very serious in their LEA, while an additional 40 percent said the issue was a little serious.

Of 212 board members who responded to the question about areas of teacher shortage, special education and math were cited as the greatest shortages in their LEAs. Figure 3 indicates the areas in which board members reported a shortage in the 2017–18 year. This response should be understood as the board members’ perception of shortages. It is reasonable to assume most respondents did not have employment data readily available while they completed the electronic survey. The data, however, is consistent with the above-mentioned surveys of HR directors.

**Figure 3: Teacher Shortages, by Specialty Area (2017–18)**



These shortage areas closely mirror those from the GDTF II report, where shortages in special education, mathematics, and science account for half of California’s teacher vacancies.<sup>13</sup>

### Teacher Recruitment Efforts

Efforts by LEAs to address teacher shortages are important for board members to consider. Out of 229 respondents to this survey, 57 percent said their LEA had put in place new efforts to recruit and retain teachers in the past three years. Moreover, respondents from LEAs that implemented strategies were more likely to be those who indicated that the teacher shortage was a more serious issue in their districts. For example, out of 131 respondents from LEAs that implemented strategies, 45 percent thought the issue to be serious or very serious. By comparison, out of 71 respondents from LEAs that had not implemented strategies, only 35 percent thought the issue was serious or very serious.

Board members also cited various strategies for addressing shortages in their LEAs. When asked to select *up to three* promising strategies for addressing teacher shortages, the majority of the 215 board members who responded to this question cited increasing salaries or improving teacher working conditions as the most promising strategies (see Table 1).

However, there are several constraints faced by LEAs that might be impeding their efforts to implement new teacher recruitment and retention strategies. Out of the top challenges to implementing strategies to address teacher shortages, 215 respondents cited lack of finances as the greatest challenge. From most-to-least cited, the greatest challenges were:

**Table 1: Promising Strategies for Addressing Teacher Shortages**

Strategy	Agreement
Increase salaries	60%
Improve working conditions (e.g., providing time for collaboration)	54%
Develop alternative pathways into the profession	45%
Revise salary schedules, including in areas of need	42%
Partner with preparation programs to communicate hiring needs	31%
Increase marketing efforts	26%
Revise timelines for voluntary transfers or resignations so hiring processes take place earlier	16%
Signing bonuses	14%
Other	20%

1. Insufficient money (62 percent)
2. Collective bargaining restrictions (32 percent)
3. More pressing concerns in the district (25 percent)
4. Insufficient information about the effectiveness of strategies or models (16 percent)
5. Other (12 percent)

## Financial Constraints

Financial constraints have an impact on more than just teacher retention, and they also result from a variety of factors that include increasing financial costs, such as those for pensions.

### Rising Pension Costs

When LCFF was passed in 2013, the state promised to restore funding to 2007–08 levels, the year prior to the Great Recession. Yet passage of the STRS and PERS Reform Acts in 2014 required that employees, LEAs, and the state substantially increase their contributions to pension plans. By 2021, LEAs will be required to contribute 19.1 percent towards CalSTRS and 24.9 percent towards CalPERS. This is an increase from 8.3 percent and 11.4 percent, respectively,

from 2013–14 levels. While the state has essentially returned funding to 2007–08 levels, the state did not increase base funding to compensate for more than doubling the pension contribution rates.<sup>14</sup>

In per-pupil terms, LEAs spent, on average, \$497 per student on pensions in 2013–14. By 2023–24, these pension costs will rise to \$1,476 per student.<sup>15</sup> Rising costs outpace revenues, particularly for pensions and health care expenditures. While this brief does not present data on the fiscal impact of increased pension costs on participating LEAs, our survey sought to understand how board members perceived the potential impact on their LEAs’ ability to serve their students.

Of the 203 board members who answered an open-ended question on the impact of pension costs nearly all (88 percent) answered that pension costs were affecting their district or COE budgets and many added comments about the extent of this impact in their LEAs. The two comments below are representative of sentiments expressed by board members who indicated that pension costs were negatively impacting their district or COE budgets.

*“Pensions are eroding our ability to serve students. Also, the public has the impression that there is more money available for local needs when there isn’t. Pension costs should be paid before LCFF reaches the district.”*

*“Rising pension costs are making us feel like we are in a recession despite being in a strong economy! Limits our ability to negotiate effectively with bargaining units.”*

Of the 24 board members (12 percent) who said that pensions were not currently impacting their budgets, several said they had anticipated the rising costs and had reserves, a few others said that they anticipate it will be a problem in the future, and others noted that it “is just part of the budgeting process and the cost of doing business.”

### Securing Additional Resources

Given these financial constraints, LEAs have continued to seek additional resources beyond what is provided through their general funds. Out of 221 board members, 94 percent cited that their LEAs secure outside resources.

- » A majority of board members cited that their LEAs secured additional resources from grants (85 percent), community partnerships (63 percent), and their Parent Teacher Association (61 percent).
- » Nearly half cited resources from their district foundation (48 percent).
- » Out of those respondents that cited “other” (14 percent), many cited parcel taxes or bonds as sources of revenue.

## Conclusion

The results of the survey reported in this brief help round out a comprehensive understanding of the current California education system by including the experiences and perspectives of trustees of school districts and county offices of education, perspectives that the GDTF II project omitted in the final project papers.

Over 260 board members responded to this survey designed to gather their views and perspectives on a range of education issues. Most of these board members reported that LCFF is enabling LEAs to improve services and programs for unduplicated students and fostering greater alignment of spending with LEA goals and strategies. Trustees noted that they are involved in developing their LEAs' LCAPs and that district superintendents and staff have been helpful in that regard. They reported that they have made significant investments in two key areas to support student learning: implementation of California State Standards and social and emotional learning. Furthermore, most of these trustees said that their LEAs are experiencing teacher shortages—and in many cases these shortages are serious, particularly for special education, science, and math teachers. However, lack of funding remains a barrier for many LEAs. The majority indicated that the most successful strategies for addressing teacher shortages involved increasing salaries but reported that finding the funds to do this was challenging. Compounding the funding issue, rising pension costs are affecting the budgets of virtually all LEAs represented by these board members. Finally, while most districts supplement their funding through additional sources, they report concern that revenues, outpaced by rising costs, will negatively impact their ability to serve their students.

## Endnotes

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- 6 Hanushek, E. A. (2002). Teacher quality. In L. T. Izumi & W. M. Evers (Eds.), *Teacher Quality*. Hoover Press. Retrieved from <http://hanushek.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Hanushek%202002%20Teacher%20Quality.pdf>
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- 10 Hollinside, M. (2017) African-American Students in Focus: Supporting African-American Teacher Retention CSBA Governance Brief. [https://www.csba.org/~media/CSBA/Files/GovernanceResources/GovernanceBriefs/201710\\_AfricanAmericanStudentIssue3.ashx?la=en&rev=0a2aa02c9ca9470f8aba0b4a55c964d0](https://www.csba.org/~media/CSBA/Files/GovernanceResources/GovernanceBriefs/201710_AfricanAmericanStudentIssue3.ashx?la=en&rev=0a2aa02c9ca9470f8aba0b4a55c964d0)
- 11 Podolski, A., & Sutchter, L. (2016). California teacher shortages: A persistent problem. Learning Policy Institute and California School Boards Association. [https://www.csba.org/Advocacy/LegislativeNews/~media/CSBA/Files/Advocacy/LegislativeAdvocacy/201611\\_LPI-CSBA\\_California\\_Teacher\\_Shortages\\_BRIEF.ashx](https://www.csba.org/Advocacy/LegislativeNews/~media/CSBA/Files/Advocacy/LegislativeAdvocacy/201611_LPI-CSBA_California_Teacher_Shortages_BRIEF.ashx)
- 12 Darling-Hammond, L., Goldhaber, D., Strunk, K.O., & Sutchter, L. (2018). Teacher supply falls short of demand in high-need fields, locations. Getting Down to Facts II Research Brief. [http://gettingdowntofacts.com/sites/default/files/2018-09/GDTFII\\_Brief\\_TeacherSupply.pdf](http://gettingdowntofacts.com/sites/default/files/2018-09/GDTFII_Brief_TeacherSupply.pdf)
- 13 See endnote vi. (GDTF 2)
- 14 Krausen, K., & Willis, J. (2018). Silent Recession: Why California School Districts Are Underwater Despite Increases in Funding. San Francisco: WestEd. Retrieved from <https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/resource-silent-recession-2.pdf>.
- 15 Behind the Numbers: The cold, hard facts of California public school funding. CSBA Report. [https://www.csba.org/GovernanceAndPolicyResources/FairFunding/~media/CSBA/Files/Advocacy/LegislativeAdvocacy/010818\\_Behind-the-Numbers-SchoolFunding-Jan082018.ashx](https://www.csba.org/GovernanceAndPolicyResources/FairFunding/~media/CSBA/Files/Advocacy/LegislativeAdvocacy/010818_Behind-the-Numbers-SchoolFunding-Jan082018.ashx)

**Julie Maxwell-Jolly**, Ph.D., is Senior Director of Policy and Programs for the California School Boards Association

**Mary Briggs** is an Education Policy Analyst for the California School Boards Association

**Manuel Buenrostro** is an Education Policy Analyst for the California School Boards Association.