

A Synthesis of Recent California Education Reform Recommendations

policy TRENDS

In 2006 and 2007, four prominent initiatives recommended fundamental reforms to California’s education system. Written by policymakers, educators, advocates, and scholars, the summary reports that were produced addressed some of the most challenging issues facing the state.

- The **Governor’s Committee on Education Excellence** focused on four inter-related topics: governance, finance, teacher recruitment and retention, and administrator preparation and retention.
- The **California Dropout Research Project** investigated the state’s dropout problem from multiple angles, from cost implications to school-level strategies for ameliorating the problem.
- The **Superintendent’s P-16 Council** explored strategies for closing the gaps in achievement among students of different socioeconomic and ethnic groups.
- The **Getting Down to Facts** research project studied the overarching issues of education governance and finance in the state.

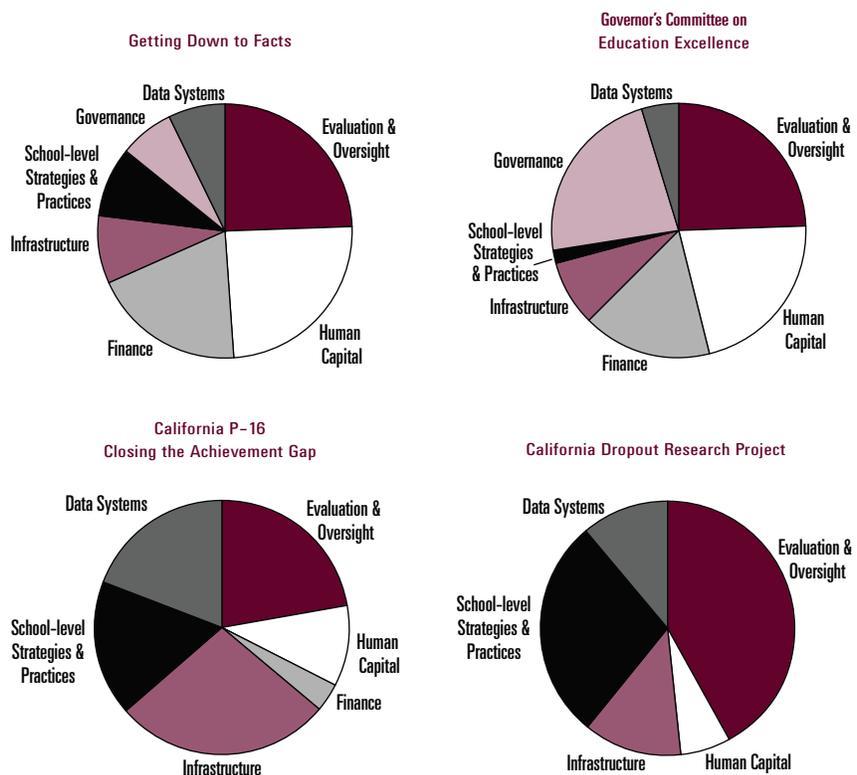
Each summary report was based on the work of an expert panel or research project, and offered a series of recommendations for improving education in California. Most recommendations sought large-scale changes to statewide systems, but others called on county offices, districts, or schools to take action and initiate reforms. Some recommendations even touched on specific classroom practices.

To help the Governor’s office, policy-makers, and other stakeholders access the various reform proposals generated by these projects, the Stuart Foundation asked WestEd to analyze and synthesize the summary reports.¹ This brief summarizes the common themes found across the recommendations, and — in consideration of the state’s challenging 2008–09 budget environment — addresses the extent to which those recommendations will require new funds.

A common focus on evaluation, oversight, and data

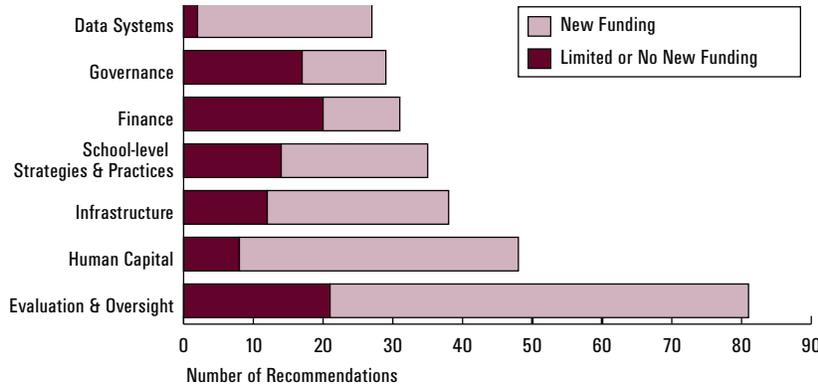
A significant portion of the recommendations in each report focused on improved evaluation and oversight — that is, improving the supervision of student, school, or district performance, or better determining whether a public program or activity is meeting specified criteria (see figure 1). These recommendations advised the state to be more strategic and systematic in planning, implementing, and evaluating

FIGURE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF RECOMMENDATIONS BY CONTENT AREA*



* Reported in terms of the number of recommendations extracted from each report.

FIGURE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM ALL FOUR REPORTS, BY CONTENT AREA AND FUNDING IMPLICATION*



*Reported in terms of the number of recommendations in each content area.

its education policies and programs. Since this type of work tends to rely heavily on data, it follows that all of the reports also included recommendations for improving data systems, by suggesting ways to better collect, use, and share information to monitor progress.

Together the reports featured over 80 recommendations in the category of evaluation and oversight; human capital was the second most prevalent topic, with close to 50 recommendations. The remaining five content areas that reviewers identified — infrastructure, school-level strategies and practices, finance, governance, and data systems — included 25 to 40 recommendations each.

In general, the Governor’s Committee on Education Excellence report and the Getting Down to Facts report emphasized governance- and finance-related recommendations, while the Superintendent’s P–16 Council’s Closing the Achievement

Gap report and the California Dropout Research Project report focused more on recommendations related to school-level strategies and practices.

New funding needed for most recommended reforms

Across the four reports, most recommendations would require new funds if implemented (see figure 2 above). These include reforms that involve the implementation of new programs, services, research efforts, or data structures (i.e., vertically scaled student data). However, some recommendations would require only nominal costs for staff time or materials, such as those involving collaborations or partnerships, or those requiring only modest changes to existing policies, programs, or practices.

WestEd policy analysts identified and categorized all official recommendations from the four reports, as well as recommendations that were proposed in other sections of the reports or were implied clearly by specific research findings. For the resulting list of nearly 200 recommendations, reviewers noted the grade span that would be impacted by the proposed reform (e.g., elementary school, high school, postsecondary), and whether implementation would involve significant new funding. The methodology is described in detail in the original project paper, available at http://www.WestEd.org/online_pubs/WestEd.CaliforniaPolicySynthesis.v2.pdf

All together, WestEd estimated that about a third of the reports’ recommendations would not require significant new state or local funds.² Compared to the other content areas, fewer of the proposed governance and finance reforms would incur new costs: over half of the recommendations in these two areas would require limited or no new funding, reviewers concluded.

More specific details about the recommendations from the four summary reports are available in the original synthesis paper prepared for the Stuart Foundation, which is accessible online at http://www.WestEd.org/online_pubs/WestEd.CaliforniaPolicySynthesis.v2.pdf.

Reports

Governor’s Committee on Education Excellence. (2008, March). *Students first: Renewing hope for California’s future*. Sacramento: Governor’s Office. Retrieved May 14, 2008, from <http://everychildprepared.org/docs/summary.pdf>.

Loeb, S., Bryk, A., & Hanushek, E. (2007, March). *Getting down to facts: School finance and governance in California*. Stanford University: Institute for Research on Education Policy & Practice. Retrieved May 14, 2008, from <http://irepp.stanford.edu/documents/GDF/GDF-Overview-Paper.pdf>.

Rumberger, R. (2008, February). *Solving California’s dropout crisis: California Dropout Research Project Policy Committee report*. University of California: Linguistic Minority Research Institute. Retrieved May 14, 2008, from http://www.lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts/pubs_policyreport.htm.

Superintendent’s P–16 Council. (2008, January). *Closing the achievement gap: Report of Superintendent Jack O’Connell’s California P–16 Council*. Sacramento: California Department of Education. Retrieved May 14, 2008, from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/pc/documents/yr08ctagrpt0122.pdf>.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS: KEY THEMES AND EXAMPLES OF LOW-COST PROPOSALS

	Key themes across report recommendations	Notable examples of low-cost recommendations (report, page number)
EVALUATION AND OVERSIGHT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Approach policies and programs more thoughtfully and strategically, by collecting more data, adopting better indicators of progress, and using data-driven evaluations to inform high-stakes decisions. ■ Align standards, assessments, and requirements across the education system, from preschool through higher education and into the workforce. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Adopt the National Governor’s Association’s four-year high school graduation rate (CDRP, 9). ■ Require Distinguished School applicants to describe their efforts to close the achievement gap (CTAG, 46).
HUMAN CAPITAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Manage the skills, knowledge, and career paths of teachers and principals better by, for example, ensuring that teachers regularly work with mentors, providing more training on data collection, analysis, and distribution, and exploring alternate certification pathways for teachers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Eliminate generic requirements for teacher professional development credits or unspecific master’s degrees (GDTF, 23). ■ Allow counties and districts to offer principal training programs (GCEE, 20).
INFRASTRUCTURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Expand prekindergarten access for disadvantaged students. ■ Support stronger school-community partnerships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Coordinate youth services better across various agencies (CDRP, 16). ■ Conduct better community outreach to support students (CTAG, 27).
SCHOOL-LEVEL STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Improve student engagement via more rigorous and relevant curriculum, personalized supports and counseling, and instruction that addresses the needs of diverse learners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Raise expectations for students (CTAG, 38). ■ Modify school policies and schedules (CTAG, 26). ■ Reach out to parents (GDTF, 39).
FINANCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Restructure the state finance system to stabilize education funding and shift away from categorical requirements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Set aside unexpended funds into an education finance reserve (GCEE, 25). ■ Provide schools and districts with more flexibility to allocate funds according to their needs and proven ability to raise student achievement (CTAG, 56).
GOVERNANCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Review and potentially revise the state education code. ■ Promote school choice for families through better disclosure of information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Make the Superintendent of Public Instruction an independent education inspector responsible for accountability (GCEE, 31).
DATA SYSTEMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Expand the data elements included in CALPADS and CALTIDES. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Determine which data elements in CALPADS and CALTIDES are most associated with academic achievement and can offer insights into promising practices (CTAG, 49).

Summary Reports

GDTF = Getting Down to Facts

GCEE = Governor’s Committee on Education Excellence

CDRP = California Dropout Research Project

CTAG = P–16 Council Closing the Achievement Gap

Endnotes

1 These four initiatives have produced extensive material beyond the summary reports synthesized here. For example, the Getting Down to Facts project yielded 23 original research studies, the California Dropout Research Project will produce 15 separate studies, and the Governor's Committee on Education Excellence published a 280-page technical report. However, in order to represent each initiative equally and to fulfill the policy-synthesis goals of this project, the WestEd team chose to analyze the summary report that resulted from each initiative. All interpretations were thus drawn solely from these four summary reports and should

not be construed as representative of the initiatives' entire body of work.

2 Determinations about whether recommendations would require new funds were not based on detailed cost analyses, but instead represent "best guess" predictions of future implementation costs. Reviewers assumed that the recommended changes would be implemented in the least intensive manner, and also made a determination of "Limited or No New Funding" in cases where there was not enough information about future implementation to determine a priori whether the actions involved would require reimbursement from the state. To wit, if the California

state government mandates that a local government provide a new program or a higher level of service, Article XIII B Section 6 of the state constitution requires the state to provide reimbursement. However, increased costs, without a new required activity or program, are not generally eligible for reimbursement.

Source: California Legislative Analyst's Office, December 2006 PowerPoint presentation, "What Is a Mandate? An Overview" (http://www.lao.ca.gov/2007/whats_a_mandate/Acro/What_Is_a_Mandate.pdf).

This *Policy Trends* piece is produced by the WestEd Policy Center, directed by Paul Koehler. It was authored by Reino Makkonen and Camille Esch of WestEd. The Policy Center is grateful to WestEd Chief Policy and Communications Officer Max McConkey for his assistance in developing this paper; and also to Fredrika Baer, WestEd Graphic Designer, who designed the paper's layout. For more information about WestEd's policy work, call 415.615.3356 or visit www.WestEd.org/policy.

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730 Harrison Street
San Francisco
California 94107-1242

Address service requested