

# Effective District Planning and the Required Local Educational Agency Plan (LEAP)

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Insights from Successful Districts

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Districts, whether improving or not, are at the crux of our American system of education. The district sits at the intersection of state policy and the work of schools. They are the classic middle in education policy, residing between federal and state policies above and local school practice below. (Supovitz, 2006, p. 11)

## Introduction

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Improving student academic achievement is central to the work of school districts (Fullan, 2001; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008; Supovitz, 2006); yet many districts do not succeed at significantly improving the low performance of their students, and, in some instances, student achievement actually decreases (Fullan, 2001; Payne, 2008). What districts can and should do to improve student achievement appears to be neither obvious nor easy.

District work on improving student achievement occurs through policies and programs that develop in response to changing federal and state mandates as well as within or in response to the district's own existing practices, traditions, and culture (Rorrer et al., 2008). Currently, district work is often conducted with insufficient and/or decreasing resources (see, e.g., Center for Public Education, 2011). Thus, for a district to successfully plan, implement, and sustain programs and policies that improve student achievement, district leadership must be adept at managing its own locally developed goals and practices, along with state and federal mandates, to create a coherent process that results in an effective plan for improving student achievement—often with a budget that is smaller than needed.

This study examines the planning and implementation of district improvement efforts in general and also focuses on the influence of one related federal requirement: use of the federally required Local Education Agency Plan (LEAP). All districts receiving funds under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Title I, Sec. 1112) had to develop a LEAP. The first set of California plans were completed and submitted to the California Department of Education (CDE) in 2003. The districts were then expected to review and update them annually and to revise or rewrite them in subsequent years. The federal LEAP requirements were broad, and all departments of education in states required to complete a LEAP developed guidelines that turned the federal requirements into actionable plan elements. For its part, CDE created a plan template of actionable elements that address all of the federally required elements (CDE, 2011), and all subject districts in California submitted their LEAPs as required.

## Problem

How does a school district develop and manage its action and improvement processes in the current context—that is, with multiple and changing federal and state mandates and declining resources—so that student achievement for all students meets or exceeds expectations? For currently underperforming districts, meeting these required or intended levels depends on an increase in student achievement.

## Significance

This research study provides data on how successful districts—those whose student scores on the California Standards Test showed that the district added greater value to their schools over a four-year period (2005–08) compared to the average gains made by districts with similar demographics—developed and implemented their action and improvement plans. Of particular interest is how these districts addressed the required elements of the LEAP within their own action and improvement plan processes and contexts.

## Related Research

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Districts are central to enabling high student achievement because schools within a district system cannot develop and/or sustain high student achievement by themselves (Fullan, 2001, p. 165). Districts have the authority to control resources and set goals for their schools. If all students are to succeed, a district must articulate, plan for, and enact its vision for instructional quality and student achievement across multiple school contexts (Supovitz, 2006).

In their review of the research literature on the district role in supporting student achievement, Rorrer et al. (2008) found four essential roles districts must play:

1. Providing instructional leadership,
2. Reorienting the organization,
3. Establishing policy coherence, and
4. Maintaining an equity focus to improve achievement of all students.

Rorrer et al. conclude that when the exercise of these four district roles occurs within a “loosely and tightly coupled” organizational system as described by Weick (1976), districts are more likely to be successful at reaching high levels of student achievement than districts that use other organizational systems. This organizational system incorporates tight couplings (i.e., less flexibility) in some instances and loose couplings (i.e., greater flexibility) in others, across the four district roles (Weick, 1976). For example, once district goals are set, increased flexibility in how individual schools reach those goals would be accompanied by tighter accountability for results (Rorrer, 2002). A loose-tight organizational structure, which Marzano and Waters (2009) refer to as “defined autonomy” (p. 8), involves different levels of flexibility across the list of activities in which Marzano and Waters recommend that districts engage:

1. Ensuring collaborative goal setting among the district office and the schools for achievement and instruction,
2. Formalizing the collaboratively reached goals as non-negotiable, districtwide goals,
3. Creating alignment between board policies and district goals,
4. Monitoring districtwide achievement and instruction goals, and

5. Allocating district and school resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction. (p. 6)

On their face, activities 1, 3, and 5 appear to be looser couplings, and activities 2 and 4 appear to involve tighter couplings; however, the actual practice of these activities within a district's particular context determines whether an activity is a loose or tight coupling.

In addition, Rorrer et al. (2008) note that research has consistently shown that positive change is complex and nonlinear, especially in loosely-tightly coupled organizational systems. Districts that operate as a loose-tight organizational system should expect to co-evolve with their schools in a system of continuous improvement that cannot be fully determined or planned in advance.

However, districts that follow this research advice about district roles and activities and the use of a loose-tight organizational system are not guaranteed success. According to Fullan (2001), improvement plans and processes are often unsuccessful, usually due to three interrelated "faulty assumptions": (1) they are "hyperrational," meaning there is an inflexible reliance on a predetermined reform method; (2) they fail to truly take into account local context and culture; and (3) they are "dangerously seductive and incomplete" because they use a simplistic, silver-bullet approach to solve difficult, multifaceted problems (p. 96). Further, "commitment to *what should be changed* often varies inversely with knowledge about *how to work through a process of change*" (p. 96; italics in original). Fullan concludes these remarks with a cautionary note about the likelihood of successful improvement through deliberate change processes. In his view, educational reform successes do occur; however, they are rare, and those rare successes are often superficial and therefore not sustainable over the long term.

In sum, achieving and maintaining high student achievement across a district is a difficult task that must, nevertheless, be undertaken. There is evidence that some districts and other large-scale reform efforts have beaten the long odds that Fullan (2001) sets out and have implemented successful, sustained reform efforts (Grimes, Kurns, & Tilly, 2006; Hill, Campbell, & Harvey, 2000; Sofo, 2008). For any district to be successful, especially those districts that need to generate significant and lasting improvement in student achievement, its organizational structure, its improvement plan and process, and the programs and policies it implements must be of high quality, and the district must make an active, positive contribution to what occurs in its schools.

Given the challenges of maintaining high levels of student achievement and, to a greater degree, of developing and carrying out effective district reform efforts to increase student achievement, there is more to be learned and shared about what it takes to achieve and sustain districtwide action and improvement plans that result in high student achievement. Because they have succeeded where others have not, the districts in this study provide some valuable insights about effectively developing and implementing action and improvement plans.

## Research Questions

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1. What do successful California school districts report as key elements in their planning and implementation of action and improvement efforts?
2. What do these successful districts report about the role that California's version of the federally required LEAP played within their own locally developed action and improvement processes and contexts?

## Methods

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### Participants

The authors interviewed a purposive sample (Patton, 2002) of 18 districts that added greater value to their schools compared to districts with similar characteristics, as assessed using the American Institutes for Research (AIR) Value Added Index (VAI) of California districts. The VAI was developed to quantify the cumulative academic performance of all schools in a given district for comparison to the performance of other districts with similar student populations. It uses a fixed-effects regression analysis and enables comparisons between similar schools by controlling for the following school-level variables: percentages of students who are English language learners, in poverty, in different ethnic categories, with disabilities, and the percentage of parents with a degree higher than a high school diploma. Student achievement is determined using four years (2005–2008) of English language arts and mathematics scores on the California Standards Test. A positive VAI indicates that a district is likely adding to its schools' performance; a negative VAI indicates that the district is likely detracting from its schools' performance. Thirty-one districts met the "added greater value" level and were asked to participate in the study. Eighteen (58 percent) agreed to participate.

Of the 31 districts that likely added value to their schools ( $VAI > 0$ ), only four were considered large districts, with more than 20,000 students. The other 27 districts all had less than 10,000 students. Similarly, of the 18 districts that agreed to participate in this study, 17 had less than 10,000 students, while one had more than 20,000. Across all 31 districts, the average VAI across the four years of English language arts and mathematics scores ranged from 0.01 to 1.35. For the 18 districts that participated in this study, the VAI range was 0.24 to 1.12. Across both all 31 districts and the 18 districts that participated in the study, the largest district in each group had the lowest VAI.

See appendix 3 for the list of participating districts and their characteristics.

### Data Collection

The data for this study are participants' responses to a phone interview that used a semi-structured protocol (Kvale, 1996) and included both general questions about planning processes and specific questions about the LEAP (see appendix 1 for the interview protocol). District superintendents participated directly and/or selected other district personnel to participate. Each interview had multiple respondents from a single district

on the call and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

## Analysis

The authors used an open-coding constant comparative methodology consistent with grounded theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Codes were created that were then sorted into groups, until categories, then themes, and finally guiding principles emerged, so that the groups were homogeneous internally (i.e., similar terms were grouped within each category, theme, and principle) and heterogeneous across groups (i.e., terms were not in multiple groups at the category, theme, or principle levels) (Patton, 2002). The analysis occurred through a four-step process, with all decisions reached by consensus.

In the first step, four of the five authors, each with district reform experience, read each interview transcript individually and coded the key ideas that emerged. As a group, these four authors then discussed the key idea codes and consolidated them into 35 categories composed of multiple related codes for each district interview.

In the second step, one of the authors reviewed the district interviews for the 35 numbered categories, created identical wording for similar categories in each of the districts, and listed which districts had which categories. This author then reduced the categories to 28, which were approved by the other four authors.

In the third step, all five authors working together further narrowed the categories to 22, combining and rewriting similar categories. The four authors who did the initial coding were then divided into two-person teams, with each team reading transcripts of nine of the district interviews and coding specific quotes to the 22 categories.

In the fourth step, all five authors met together for three full-day sessions to organize the categories and their specifically coded quotes into thematic statements (themes). The end result was agreement on six themes, two of which emerged directly from single categories. Then the specifically coded quotes for each category under each theme were read, by category, to reassess the levels of data supporting each theme. This part of the analysis was iterative: the authors removed quotes that they determined no longer supported a theme, highlighted quotes that strongly supported a theme in number or impact (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and made revisions to the wording of the themes. The authors then organized the six themes into two guiding principles, one for each research question, using an iterative process similar to the process used to develop the themes.

Finally, the authors conducted a member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to gather the reactions of some of the participating districts to the findings. The member check took place as part of a symposium on September 15, 2011, that included personnel from CDE and from five of the participating districts, as well as members of the research team. The entire symposium was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

For the symposium, the five participating districts were given a previous draft of this report, and during the symposium district personnel described the extent to which the findings laid out in the draft represented the experience of their individual districts. The

draft report and the district responses to it were then used to prompt and inform discussion between CDE and the districts about how to better promote district planning and reform efforts, and also about the use of the LEAP in such efforts.

For the member check, the district responses during the symposium were compared to the initial findings from this research. The district responses supported all of the initial findings in the report. However, districts participating in the symposium emphasized two points in the findings more strongly than the draft report had emphasized them. These district emphases are discussed at the end of the Findings section of this report. All findings in that final “Symposium Member Check” section, including the quotes, are taken from the analysis of the symposium transcripts.

### **Limitations**

The findings from this study describe themes across the reported experiences of 18 California school districts in conducting the planning and implementation of their action and improvement efforts, with specific emphasis on the influence of the LEAP in these efforts. Specifically, the 18 California school districts were purposely selected because they are part of a group identified as higher-performing districts, and their experiences are not intended to represent the experiences of all California districts. For example, the extent to which, if at all, any of the lower-performing districts in California might have taken similar approaches to action and improvement planning, but with different results, is not known. Thus, the findings in this report are not intended to be directly generalizable to other school districts. Rather, these findings are intended as data to aid others in their understanding of district planning and improvement issues and to assist them in related activities, to the degree that the findings resonate with them and their individual contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

In the following section, the two guiding principles and six themes (four under the first principle and two under the second principle) are discussed, with supporting quotes. The final list of the two guiding principles, six themes, and 22 categories is included in appendix 2.

## Findings

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This section presents data from the district interview transcripts that address this study's research questions, which, in brief, examine (1) the planning and implementation of improvement efforts by successful school districts and (2) how these districts integrated the LEAP into their individual action and improvement processes. For each research question, the guiding principle is first presented, followed by the themes and discussion of the given quotes from the supporting categories.

*Research Question 1. What do successful California school districts report as key elements in their planning and implementation of action and improvement efforts?*

**Principle 1: The studied districts reported the following as key elements that enabled them to effectively plan for and implement actions to improve student achievement:**

- a. *Focus,*
- b. *Communication,*
- c. *Overcoming Resistance, and*
- d. *Loose-Tight Leadership.*

**Theme 1a. *Focusing on a limited number of goals and activities with regular data analyses and student assessments tied to them. This focus on a limited number of goals and on regularly following up by examining data on the progress toward meeting them enabled constituents to understand, buy into, and implement their improvement plan.***

Fourteen of the 18 districts (78 percent) stated that limiting the number of their improvement goals was central to their improvement planning and implementation process, as were their decisions to target time, resources, energy, and written plans for achieving those goals. The districts described this more intense focus on a more limited number of goals as a change from how they had previously operated. One superintendent's response typifies the districts' reasoning about the importance of this new, narrower focus:

[W]e needed to change our planning process to focus more on what [our schools] were going to be asked to do regardless of whether we [had] a long-range plan or not ... [Our improvement plan] was focused primarily on instruction and learning—you know, our key role—not a bunch of ideas that a lot of well-meaning people wanted to add to an already pretty burdened system.

Another superintendent described the extended effort needed to change a district's thinking and action to support a focus on fewer goals:

I had a conversation early on with the Board about the fact that, if they wanted me to implement the most important work, I needed to know from

the board standpoint and from ... the whole learning community what that most important work *is* because the [improvement] plan was too broad... It took me a year to get them to really focus on [the most important work].

Seventeen of the 18 districts (94 percent) stated that they used student assessments and regular analyses of student data as a means of keeping district and school personnel focused on meeting the district goals. One district representative explained it this way:

The introduction of analysis and data conferencing has been key to our success in terms of getting the teachers to really dig down into the data and look at how these kids are succeeding or not succeeding, and having those courageous conversations among the teachers at the site level to say, “This is the direction we need to go in order to improve the instructional system.”

Twelve of the 18 districts (67 percent) noted the importance not just of analyzing student data in the aggregate, but also of analyzing individual student achievement. This ongoing attention to the progress of individual students—“kid by kid,” as one respondent put it—helped these districts meet their improvement goals in two related ways. First, it helped teachers to better understand when and how to intervene with students and to determine how they could “tweak” their teaching approach on an ongoing basis. Key to effective and timely intervention, noted one district respondent, was identifying “the array of programs or people that we can use” to help students, rather than discovering the need for additional help only at the end of the year, when the opportunity for more assistance was “lost” until school started again in the fall. Second, analyzing data on the progress of individual students kept teachers and schools focused on every student and continually prompted them to get each student the support he or she needed. This minimized the possibility of ignoring struggling students. Describing the intensity of districts’ focus on individual students, district staff used phrases such as “really and truly ... looking at individual students,” “looking at the kid—what’s his particular experience,” “somebody has to watch [every child],” and “every child every day.” In one district, some principals “developed little note cards [with] the name of the child and the face and then something about that child [and his or her] data.”

One district statement typifies the responses related to focus on the individual student:

I think what we have really tried to do is connect the data to real kids, [so] that it’s not just a number on a page, that it really is a student—focusing on every child by name ... I should be able to ask the principal which of the kids in 5th grade are struggling with both English language arts and math, which of the kids are not progressing with English language development and are struggling academically.

However, another district respondent warned that a focus on individual student data is only as useful as the action or decision informed by that student-specific information: “It is not ‘having data’ ... that’s important; it’s responding to the data that’s the key.”

**Theme 1b. *Communicating the improvement plan often and widely to ensure that multiple constituents, from the Board to parents, remained engaged with and committed to the plan.***

Fourteen of the 18 districts (78 percent) stated that an important element in their improvement efforts was communication with the various constituent groups, from the district school board to parents, that make up their district's community. They indicated that communication was key to getting the various groups not only to "understand" the improvement plan, but to "buy in" to or "embrace" their plan goals and activities. A representative statement from one district summed up this approach:

I think that this planning process has resulted from a dialogue of more honest communication between administration and [the district school] board and parents and teachers ... and I think it's paying big dividends.

One district response indicated that having different constituent groups work together on the improvement plan created understanding and a sense of shared ownership:

An outside consultant came in and worked with the district, and there were teachers, administrators, school board members, and a couple of parents on the committee that helped develop [different parts of the improvement plan]. Teachers [were] very much involved in identifying areas of need and growth ... so it was definitely a school district and community endeavor.

Some districts specifically named the school board (10 of 18; 56 percent) and parents (7 of 18; 39 percent) as constituent groups targeted by the district with ongoing communication in an effort to encourage their support for their district's improvement plan.

**Theme 1c. *Making specific efforts to overcome resistance to the improvement plan. These efforts included promoting a sense of urgency for improvement and using public displays of data to highlight student achievement progress or lack thereof.***

All 18 districts described making efforts to get members of the various constituent groups to support their district improvement plan. The districts viewed these communication efforts as a way to preempt or reduce resistance. One district superintendent described what appears to have been a common experience across the districts as they developed their improvement plan: "With very few exceptions, everything we talked about [needing to do] was resisted at some point."

Eight of the 18 districts (44 percent) stated that they made specific efforts to overcome resistance to their improvement efforts. Five districts (28 percent) specifically described their improvement efforts as a change in "culture." One of the district responses described it this way:

That's when we put [the improvement plan activities] into our culture, if you will. Then, everything we added to that culture, whether collaboration time on Fridays [or anything else], was focused on data, focused on what

you teach and how you teach it and how you assess it and then how do you adjust [your work accordingly]. With that cultural change, less and less resistance took place, and, quite frankly, many of the assessments and many of the innovative things that we have done came from [school] staff; it didn't come [from the district office]—but once we [the district office] saw that it was a good idea, we drove it and we pushed it, but it actually came back [to us from the school staff].

All 18 districts described the use of student data as a key element of their improvement efforts, and six districts (33 percent) specifically pointed to the public display of student data as an effective strategy for moving their improvement activities forward, including overcoming resistance. One district response described why data use in general was an effective tool for creating improvement:

When you use data to drive your conversation, then it automatically builds system coherence, because all of our schools face the same challenge to some degree or another.... [Using data] gives you the opportunity to work as a system and to provide the system support that you need to provide to move us all along.

Five districts (28 percent) stated that creating a sense of urgency around the improvement efforts was fundamental to the improvement process and overcoming resistance, both preemptively and in response to specific acts of resistance. These responses used the word “urgent” directly, including “create urgency” and “our urgent message,” as well as phrases that embodied the sentiment, such as districts moving away from their mediocre “academic destiny” and making sure their “eyes are always on the push” for improvement.

**Theme 1d. *Leading through loose-tight direction, monitoring, and support of schools.* Districts prioritized goals and set strategies for reaching those goals, while providing sufficient monitoring and support to ensure that individual schools reached the goals in a manner that was effective in their own contexts.**

Fifteen of the 18 districts (83 percent) described having a loose-tight relationship between their district office and the district's individual school sites, with two of these 15 districts explicitly describing their relationships with school sites as “loose-tight.” Overall, the 15 districts described this loose-tight dynamic in a number of ways, with the common elements being that the overarching improvement goals were intended to be districtwide, that the goals had been established in collaboration between the district and its schools, and that each school had the flexibility to determine the means to achieve the goals. The following five district responses are representative:

[P]retty much, the schools have autonomy as long as they follow sort of the broad direction [of the district improvement plan].

What we learned was [that] each school site had to fill in [its] own step[s] as to how to get to where we wanted to go. What was right for one school was not exactly the same for another.

[W]e set broad goals and then we give the sites the autonomy to design the packets [of school activities] that best meet their needs.

[T]here is always a give and take [between district and schools] and a relationship that goes back and forth.

It is a top-down and a bottom-up concept of planning, but I would have to say that it's really been more bottom-up in the system [in terms of] getting the results that [the schools] have gotten.

The districts described three keys to making these loose-tight relationships work:

- District monitoring of and support for school progress toward achieving the districtwide goals (15 of 18; 83 percent), including district and school administrators performing regular walkthroughs of schools and classrooms to look for tangible evidence of the implementation of agreed-upon improvement activities and best practices and providing constructive feedback on what was observed (8 of 18; 44 percent);
- Having or developing principal competency so that principals can lead effective improvement efforts at their schools (9 of 18; 50 percent); and
- Having superintendents who understand and are involved in the improvement process (10 of 18; 56 percent).

Individual districts reported different levels of emphasis on each of these three keys; however, across the districts, responses included strong statements of the necessity of each one.

Regarding the importance of walkthrough monitoring, one district respondent, a superintendent, explained:

[District staff] go through every classroom. Weekly, I visit a school. I go through every classroom at that school and I respond back to the principal and to the entire staff in a letter showing them what I saw, what I thought was really good evidence of them heading toward their goals, and areas of concern or recommendations for them. That process is ongoing. I have a team of ... [district] people that do that. We go after the schools constantly and provide feedback to the principal and the staff.

Regarding the importance of principal competency, one respondent stated the following:

Principal competency is ... the absolute critical component for this whole system. It is having your principals become extremely confident in all areas of instruction. [Principals] knowing and understanding the goals and their [school's] current reality is everything.... They have been through every end service [i.e., professional development] that our teachers have been through, sitting in the front row, learning.

Regarding the importance of superintendent leadership, one respondent stated the following:

I just want to be very open about this: We could not have achieved the kinds of things that we have achieved in the last five years without [the superintendent's] leadership and ... extraordinary ability to work with the wide range of people [in our district]. So I really attribute the superintendent's talents and skills and ability as a huge contributor to our work.

*Research Question 2. What do these successful districts report about the role that California's version of the federally required LEAP played within their own locally developed action and improvement processes and contexts?*

**Principle 2: Although state reform principles (e.g., California's Essential Program Components) were evident in the studied districts' descriptions of their action and improvement plans, the districts reported that the LEAP often hindered their action and improvement efforts. This may be due to the tension between the state compliance requirements and district action and improvement planning. Two specific concerns—redundancy and lack of adaptability—were frequently raised.**

**Theme 2a. The LEAP is long and redundant with other required plans.**

Reform principles promoted by CDE were present in all 18 studied districts' descriptions of their LEAPs and of their action and improvement plans generally. This speaks to CDE's success in providing districts with technical assistance related to effective practices (e.g., importance of core curricular materials, use of data, and intervention programs). It appears that CDE, through its own efforts and the use of statewide networks, has communicated a set of practices that are building program coherence across the state.

Despite the widespread use of CDE reform principles, all 18 districts reported that the LEAP, in the form currently required by CDE, hindered their action and improvement efforts more than it helped them. For example, 15 of the 18 districts (83 percent) reported that the LEAP was long and also redundant with other required plans. The following two statements are representative of the overall experience reported across these 15 districts:

I will use the goals—performance goals 1 through 4—the way they are laid out ... but the mere fact that you have a 100-page document and it's supposed to help districts improve achievement, it sometimes can be quite prohibitive. Then you look at the SARCs [School Accountability Report Cards] and then you look at the Single Plan [for Student Achievement] and then you have board directives and whatnot. [The LEAP] just becomes another plan at times, and then of course you have your technology plan, EL [English learner] Master Plan, Special Education Plans, [and] so on and so forth.

So you spend more time putting in information they [CDE] already have. That takes away from your thinking about what the data really means for you in your planning process or in student achievement.

Based on their experience with the LEAP, some districts viewed it as a “compliance” exercise and treated it that way. Statements from two districts present this view:

[The LEAP is] more or less a compliance issue. We are just using that and compiling our information and completing it, so we can put a check by it, rather than, I think the intent is for the LEA plan to be developed first, and then maybe [develop the district’s action and improvement plans, but that] ... process we have already got in place with the continuous improvement efforts that we do.

I will be honest: The LEA plan for us is pro forma. We do it because we have to do it, but it’s not our change lever in the district.

The prevailing viewpoint evident across the statements from these 15 districts was summed up by this interaction:

*Interviewer:* So, how does the LEA plan relate to what you are actually doing? Is it a guiding force at all in what you are doing?

*Respondent:* Probably not, to be honest.

One district response made an interesting point about the LEAP as a compliance document, stating that, even if compliance reporting were its only purpose, it should still be shortened and/or restructured:

It seems like there must be [a] fairly straightforward way for us to be able to tell [CDE and the federal government] what we are doing without having to spend days and days and days doing some sort of state-formatted, fill-in-the-blanks type of a plan ... it’s frustrating.

### **Theme 2b. The LEAP could be more useful if it were more adaptable.**

With their LEAP experience in mind, 12 of the 18 districts (67 percent) stated that the LEAP could be more useful if districts were able to adapt it to align with their existing improvement processes. Multiple districts made the following suggestions for improvement:

- Permit districts to include their own goals,
- Limit the number of goals or allow prioritizing of goals,
- Employ more realistic timelines,
- Align the LEAP format with the format of school plans, and
- Coordinate LEAP timing with planning needs and when districts receive achievement and financial data.

## Symposium Member Check

As noted earlier, the comments by representatives of the five districts participating in the symposium supported the content of all the findings presented in the previous section; however, the district representatives also emphasized two points in the findings more strongly than the authors of the symposium draft of the report had. The two points the symposium participants thought warranted greater emphasis were (1) data use across all four themes of the first principle and (2) having a vision that was greater than the LEAP or districts' annual planning efforts. These topics emphasized by the districts that participated in the symposium are presented in this section. Please note that the findings described in the previous section are from the district interview transcripts only.

### *Emphasis on Data Use*

The five districts stated that they used data to promote all four themes of the first principle: (1) to enhance focus; (2) to aid communication with the different groups in their community; (3) to overcome resistance to reform efforts; and (4) to maintain what they consider to be the right balance between loose guidelines and tight rules in their relationships with their schools. Below are representative quotes from the symposium describing the use and importance of data within each theme.

For enhancing focus:

Anytime when you plan, every element in that plan should be driven by keeping us focused on the student learning: every student, every day, every classroom.... Data has to be a key to that. The data has to be the evidence of what did students learn.

For communication:

You need to communicate with [the entire school community] what the goals are of the district and also the data. You've got to communicate the data. We communicate it with everyone.

For overcoming resistance:

So then, we move on to a little bit more of overcoming resistance, but that's a part of communication in that we began to create a districtwide urgency statement based on the data ... and [that statement says] 73 percent of our students are proficient in reading, 17 percent are not ... and we have an achievement gap, we have groups scoring up here and we have a group in the very same [school] that's scoring down here, and we have to close that gap ... it always started out with a positive ... because we do have some very strong data that we are doing well in many areas.

For maintaining the right loose-tight balance:

The schools get to set their specific goals based on the data. So again, that's where the autonomy comes in. There [are] some basic structures that we [the district] say that everyone has to have.... What you do within

those structures is up to you based on your individual school data and how you choose a leadership team to move forward.

### *Big-Picture Thinking*

Each of the districts participating in the symposium described their visions of what high-quality teaching and high student achievement look like and how they were going to reach the goals they set for teaching and learning. In each of their descriptions of their action and improvement planning and implementation efforts, these districts described developing and promoting visions of teaching and learning that were above and beyond the LEAP or annual reform initiatives. Three of the five districts referred to this vision as the “main thing.” As one district representative put it,

The main thing is that you’ve got to keep the main thing [as] the main thing ... [and that] main thing is student learning.... See, our work is driven by answering four questions. What do we want our students to learn? How do we know they’ve learned it? How do we respond when learning did not take place? And how do we respond when the learning has already occurred? And if you think about it, that really frames the work. So if we’re really going to rethink this whole issue of planning, then I’d suggest we really need to define what is [the main thing that] we plan around.

In effect, the participating districts described their annual reform initiatives and the LEAP (to the extent that they were able to incorporate it into the reform process) as the *means* to achieve the “main thing,” their core vision for high-quality teaching and learning.

## Implications and Next Steps

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The districts’ responses in the study interviews and statements during the symposium are consistent with the research advice on how districts can promote improvement planning and implementation that result in increased student achievement. In general, these districts reported—either directly or indirectly by means of the activities they reported emphasizing (e.g., focusing on a limited number of districtwide goals, allowing schools to meet the goals in their own ways, and monitoring progress through data collection and analysis and site visits)—that their action and improvement planning and implementation efforts were effective because they were based on a loose-tight organizational structure; that these efforts were grounded in an articulated vision of high-quality teaching and learning; and that progress toward specific goals within that vision was assessed by regularly gathering and analyzing data. In addition, a number of districts reported using data to focus on the needs of individual students, rather than solely on aggregate trends across all the students. This focus on the individual student enabled teachers to intervene in a timely, targeted manner throughout the school year.

Many districts reported that this approach was a significant, even cultural, change for their schools and communities, and that they had to take specific actions to overcome initial resistance. These actions included the public display of data used to track student

achievement progress and proactive communication with multiple constituent groups, from the school board to parents, to create buy-in for district goals and activities. These districts appear to have acted on both improvement prongs identified by Fullan (2001): they knew what should be changed to improve student achievement, and they knew how to effectively work through the change process. These findings suggest that federal and state policies that promote loose-tight district structures and supporting activities should enable more district improvement plans to succeed in raising student achievement.

The districts participating in this study also made several suggestions for how the LEAP could better support their improvement efforts. These suggestions include

- aligning the LEAP format with school plan formats;
- allowing districts to formulate their own goals, within defined state guidelines; and
- limiting the number of goals to be addressed.

Allowing districts to formulate their own goals within defined state guidelines might lead to other related changes in the LEAP. For example, the planning and compliance aspects could be made distinct, with the compliance requirements addressed in assurances or the Consolidated Application or as part of the evidence for program monitoring, among other possibilities. Alternatively, the goals themselves could be restructured: rather than focusing on whether a district has implemented required program elements, the LEAP might focus on whether a district is meeting student achievement targets. Changes such as these could, in effect, change the LEAP compliance dynamic from a tight-tight relationship (i.e., required program elements to meet required program implementation goals) to one that is more loose-tight (i.e., individually determined program elements to meet required student achievement goals).

The improvement processes of these successful districts require further study. Additional research questions related to these processes include: Regarding the improvement process generally, what were the similarities and differences in how these districts conducted their loose-tight structures? Which activities were “loose” and which ones were “tight”? Were there differences, for example, in how high- and low-poverty districts (or large, medium and small districts) conducted their district improvement efforts? And, if changes are made in the LEAP, how will the changes affect district improvement processes and student achievement? Answers to these additional questions could assist in scaling up the effective practices discussed in this report to more districts in California.<sup>1</sup>

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## Appendix 1: Integrated Plan District Interview Protocol

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### Introduction

The California Comprehensive Center at WestEd would like to find out about your planning process to inform what the California Department of Education asks districts to do in their LEA plans. We are contacting you because the California Comprehensive Center (CACC) at WestEd conducted an analysis of the California Standards Test results in English language arts and math over the last 4 years. Our analysis showed that schools in your district are performing above expected achievement levels when compared to schools in other districts with similar student populations. The purpose of this interview is to find out about the process you have used in your district to determine what actions your district takes to increase student achievement. We will need to understand the basics of what you did to sustain the level of achievement across your district that you have, but our primary focus is to explore how you made the decisions about what to do and then how you implemented the plan.

### Logistics

*Let participants know we will be recording the call and begin recording. Make sure we get the name and title of all participating.*

### Overall

- How long have you been a superintendent in this district?
- What is the name of the main planning document in your district?
- Please tell us about how that works.
- We would love to have you share with us how you created focus in your district that increased your students' achievement. Our interest is in planning. We are specifically interested in how you determined what was needed and how you planned for that needed change.
- *(If, as we expect will happen sometimes, a superintendent says that it was pretty much a "top-down" directive, we then ask something like:)*
  - o How did you help everyone be on the same page with your decisions?
  - o Who was involved?
  - o How do you monitor?

### Needs Assessment

- What kind of data do you use?
- How do you use data to inform the planning process?
- How do you gather all the information from schools, and how does that inform the plan?
- How do you ensure the plan is addressing the needs of all students in the district?

### **Planning Team**

- Who is involved in the planning process?
- How do you meaningfully involve different departments such as HR, Fiscal, Building/Operations, Curriculum & Instruction, and Student Services?

### **Communication**

- How do you communicate the process and the plan to district staff and school sites?

### **Implementation and Monitoring**

- How do you monitor and support the district office's implementation of its responsibilities?
- How do you monitor and support implementation of responsibilities assigned to school sites?

### **School-Level Planning**

- How does your school-level planning process (e.g., SPSA) relate to your district-level planning process?
- How much flexibility do you give your schools in developing a schoolwide plan?
- Do you help your schools identify local goals?
- How do you help your schools analyze data?

### **LEA Plan**

- Who is responsible for the completion of the LEA plan?
- Are there parts of the current LEA plan that are clear and that make it easy to record what you have determined through your planning process?
- What kind of LEA plan would be helpful to your district? What could make it feel more like a useful tool and less like a compliance measure? What kind of format would be useful?

## Appendix 2: Final Codes, Themes, and Guiding Principles

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**Principle 1: The studied districts reported the following as key elements that enabled them to effectively plan for and implement actions to improve student achievement:**

- a. *Focus,*
- b. *Communication,*
- c. *Overcoming Resistance, and*
- d. *Loose-Tight Leadership.*

**Theme 1a. *Focusing on a limited number of goals and activities with regular data analyses and student assessments tied to them. This focus and follow-up enabled constituents to understand, buy into, and implement the improvement plan.***

- C4. Focus on a limited number of goals and activities resulted in constituents understanding, buying into, and implementing the plan
- C6. Frequent, common district- and site-level assessments
- C7. Staff come together to analyze data
- C10. Data analyzed at individual student level
- C11. Districts use online data management system

**Theme 1b. *Communicating the improvement plan often and widely to ensure that multiple constituents, from the Board to parents, remained engaged and committed to the improvement plan.***

- C5. Multiple constituents know and understand the plan
- C19. Districts communicate to parents
- C20. District school board understands and supports the work

**Theme 1c. *Making specific efforts to overcome resistance to the improvement plan, including promoting a sense of urgency for improvement and using public displays of data to highlight progress or lack thereof.***

- C12. Public display of data
- C17. Sense of urgency
- C21/22. Move past resistance/cultural change

**Theme 1d. *Leading through loose-tight direction, monitoring, and support of schools. Districts prioritized goals and set strategies to reach those goals, while providing sufficient monitoring and support to ensure that individual schools reached the goals in a manner that was effective in their own contexts.***

- C3. District goals/priorities and SPSAs (Single Plan for Student Achievement) are reciprocally linked
- C13. Superintendent is key
- C14. District office monitors and supports schools
- C15. Principal competency
- C16. Walkthroughs used for monitoring and support
- C18. Loose-tight structure

**Principle 2: State reform principles (e.g., EPCs) were present in the studied districts' improvement plans. Still, the studied districts reported that the LEAP often hindered their action and improvement efforts. This may be due to the tension between the state compliance requirements and district action and improvement planning. The following specific concerns were frequently stated:**

**Theme 2a. The LEAP is long and is redundant with other required plans.**

C1. The LEAP is too long and compliance-oriented; redundant with other required plans

**Theme 2b. The LEAP could be more useful if it were more adaptable. Areas of suggested adaptability included permitting districts to include their own goals, limiting the number of goals or prioritizing all goals, and employing more realistic timelines.**

C2. The LEAP could be more useful if it were universal/flexible/adaptable so that districts can easily incorporate their own planning processes:

- a. universal, flexible
- b. includes their own goals
- c. timing needs to be addressed (get achievement and financial data too late; plan is due too soon)
- d. realistic timelines for goals
- e. alignment with the school plan in format
- f. differentiated by performance criteria
- g. SMART goals
- h. needs to reflect what districts are actually doing
- i. focuses on a limited number of goals and activities

Two categories did not have sufficient supporting interview statements to be included as reliably representing views across multiple districts:

C8. Principals regularly meet with individual teachers to go over classroom and student-level data

C9. Principals required by districts to give presentations of data and plan progress

## Appendix 3: Participating School Districts

## Eligible and Participating School Districts Listed by Study Participation and by Enrollment Size

District	Average of ELA and Math 4-Year Averages	Number of Schools	Enrollment	% Poverty	% African-American	% Asian	% Hispanic	% English Learners	% Disabilities	% Parent Greater than HS Degree
<i>Alview-Dairyland Union</i>	<b>0.42</b>	2	273	66	2	0	58	44	2	24
<i>Cardiff Elementary</i>	0.66	2	516	18	0	2	20	12	12	85
<i>Portola Valley</i>	1.24	2	519	4	2	6	8	2	14	97
<i>Evergreen Union</i>	1.35	2	764	48	0	0	6	2	8	42
<i>Las Lomas Elementary</i>	1.25	2	838	2	0	12	6	8	12	97
<i>Riverdale Joint Unified</i>	0.79	3	1203	78	2	0	78	22	8	28
<i>Carmel Unified</i>	0.66	5	1606	10	0	4	14	6	10	87
<i>Orinda Union</i>	1.24	5	1941	0	2	14	4	0	8	99
<i>Livingston Union</i>	0.29	4	2005	84	0	12	80	54	12	25
<i>Solana Beach</i>	0.79	6	2020	8	0	16	8	8	16	93
<i>Delhi Unified</i>	<b>0.35</b>	5	2111	68	0	4	82	50	8	15
<i>San Rafael City</i>	<b>0.47</b>	8	2627	54	4	6	58	44	14	49
<i>Delano Joint Union High</i>	0.29	3	3118	78	0	0	80	40	6	21
<i>Sanger Unified</i>	<b>0.34</b>	15	7084	78	2	12	70	24	8	49
<i>Palo Alto Unified</i>	0.71	18	8393	6	4	30	10	10	10	94
<i>Irvine Unified</i>	0.31	31	20103	6	2	42	8	14	8	73
<i>Glendale Unified</i>	<b>0.25</b>	28	21361	40	2	14	22	26	8	61
<i>Fremont Unified</i>	0.01	38	24173	18	6	48	16	16	8	81
Owens Valley Unified	0.61	2	55	26	0	6	16	0	8	39
Sausalito Marin City	1.11	3	174	80	52	8	18	10	4	68
Rancho Santa Fe	1.10	2	658	0	0	6	6	4	6	97
Hermosa Beach City	0.48	2	777	2	0	8	10	0	8	96
Calipatria Unified	0.77	4	911	92	6	0	78	36	8	29
Golden Plains Unified	0.67	5	1384	100	0	0	96	50	8	8
Los Gatos–Saratoga Joint Union High	0.43	2	2358	0	0	28	4	4	10	97
Del Mar Union	0.85	8	2807	4	2	26	6	10	10	98

<b>District</b>	<b>Average of ELA and Math 4-Year Averages</b>	<b>Number of Schools</b>	<b>Enrollment</b>	<b>% Poverty</b>	<b>% African-American</b>	<b>% Asian</b>	<b>% Hispanic</b>	<b>% English Learners</b>	<b>% Disabilities</b>	<b>% Parent Greater than HS Degree</b>
<i>Los Altos</i>	<i>1.12</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>3224</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>98</i>
<i>Acalanes Union High</i>	<i>0.78</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>4311</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>95</i>
<i>Manhattan Beach Unified</i>	<i>0.90</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>4697</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>97</i>
<i>Las Virgenes Unified</i>	<i>0.80</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>9336</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>69</i>
<i>Saddleback Valley Unified</i>	<i>0.24</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>26042</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>76</i>

The 18 districts that participated in the study are above the horizontal line and in italics.

The five districts that also participated in the symposium on September 15, 2011, are in bold.