

A Golden Opportunity:

The California Collaborative for Educational Excellence as a Force for Positive Change

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Introduction

This document, prepared by Michael Fullan and California Forward (CA Fwd), proposes a course of action for the recently created California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE). It seeks to build upon existing structures and the good work already in progress, and to capture the best ideas and advice from leaders in California with deep knowledge of the system and a proven record of success mobilizing whole system reform. After briefly presenting the larger context of changes in governance underway in California and the current move towards local control, it delineates some of the key actions CCEE, county offices and districts could champion to become forces for positive change in California's education sector.

Governance in California is undergoing tectonic changes. Some of these changes are the result of deliberate policies to shift authority and responsibility to community level governments with the expectation that those agencies will deliver better results. The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and Public Safety Realignment are two highly visible examples of what Governor Jerry Brown has termed *subsidiarity*.

Other state innovations – including the requirement for Sustainable Community Strategies and Integrated Water Management Plans – explicitly encourage local governments to work together to accomplish multiple goals that cannot be achieved without cooperation, innovation and learning. And still other changes – including self-initiated alliances among K-12 schools and county offices of education, community colleges, and four-year universities – are examples of community-level leaders responding to needs unmet by higher levels of government. These trends are not unique to California, and reflect a new way of advancing the public interest with leadership emerging at an optimal decision making level to address public needs.

These changes are instigated and reinforced by several factors and trends. Among them: Public agencies are facing fiscal pressures requiring them to control costs and improve results. Integrated services – including educational and social services – have been proven to be cost-effective, but are hard to engineer at the state or federal levels. Distinct cultural needs of communities and regions require tailored approaches, even to achieve common statewide outcomes. And civic involvement and public support are both critical to improvement efforts, and best incorporated at the community level.

In this context, the creation of the CCEE is an important opportunity to advance the successful implementation of K-12 educational reforms, as well as to model a new and essential function for better state governance.

A New State Interest: Improving Capacity at the Local Level

The early implementation of both educational and public safety reforms has revealed some of the concerns associated with shifting from state-centered to community-centered governance. Many of those concerns relate to the varying capacities of local government to make good use of their new authority. While capacity-building efforts have emerged – involving regional collaborations, professional associations, nongovernmental organizations, and philanthropy – the state has an interest in accelerating capacity building to demonstrate the potential of the reforms, and to replace the distrust that underlies many of the concerns regarding subsidiarity with confidence in community decision-makers.

The Governor and the Legislature recognized this new state interest in establishing the CCEE. Now, the leadership of the CCEE has the opportunity to operationalize the new entity in a way that further defines and advances this interest, while simultaneously fortifying implementation efforts, establishing momentum, and solidifying support for the overall reform.

As the CCEE proceeds, it will be important to promote “systemness,” a concept emerging in the field of whole state change. Systemness can be defined as a growing awareness at all levels that people are involved in a transformation whereby they are contributing to the larger system, as well as personally gaining value from it. This collective realization that people are part of a new fundamental change that benefits both them and the state can be quite powerful.

The Opportunity for the CCEE: Accelerating Learning

The CCEE has the opportunity to become an agile learning organization that builds capacity in local school districts. That mission should be informed by the new ways that successful public agencies more generally are working to improve results across the spectrum of public outcomes.

At its essence, this new governance model relies more on data to understand issues, craft strategies, assess progress and make refinements. Exemplar public sector organizations assertively look to adapt proven practices. They document and share

their setbacks and successes to accelerate their own learning. They proactively collaborate with other public agencies, nonprofit and civic entities to assemble resources and expertise, and develop the more comprehensive responses that are required to improve results – responses, for example, that address issues outside of the classroom that inhibit learning. In short, these agencies and alliances are developing internal capacity and commitment to continuous improvement to yield better results.

New policies, such as the requirement to develop Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs), and new support agencies, especially the CCEE, offer rare opportunities to define new organizational norms, build new capacities, and encourage a culture of learning in organizational design and operations. The CCEE can make the most of that opportunity by modeling a learning organization from the start, as well as supporting the efforts of local agencies to develop that capacity and culture.

California's governance challenges are compounded by the size and diversity of the state's regions and communities. Taking improvements to scale in California has often been as challenging as identifying potential reforms. The strategies and tactics that will be proposed here – such as developing a deep understanding of needs, developing networks of expertise at the county or regional level, and connecting districts with similar challenges – are the only practical way to have a positive influence across the spectrum of local educational agencies and breadth of the state.

The governance changes underway in California are profound. They reflect a mature understanding by civic leaders that public agencies need to work differently to deliver better results. They also create opportunities to incorporate public sector innovations, especially those focused on the drivers of positive change and the capacity to manage change. Through the LCFF and the CCEE, the Governor and the Legislature have created a foundational opportunity to replace compliance-based oversight with an excellence-oriented strategy intended to inspire, inform and connect professionals throughout California.

Creating a Force for Positive Change

Over the next few years California's education sector can successfully fulfill its promise of delivering high quality education to all students and become one of the most improved systems in America and internationally. Forces at all levels are aligning in ways that are seen only once in a generation.

There is increasing consensus about the importance of moving away from the wrong drivers for school reform - high stakes accountability, technology, human capital solutions, and ad-hoc policies - named "wrong" because they do not produce the desired outcomes of improved learning for all students. There is increased agreement about the need to shift toward the right drivers - capacity building, pedagogy, social capital solutions, and system coherence – "right," because they are proven to produce the intended outcomes.

This important change in direction requires fundamental shifts in how individuals across the entire system fulfill their professional roles. Additionally, clarity and precision is needed to mobilize the right drivers thoughtfully, strategically, and continuously.

The CCEE has enormous potential to become a trusted and effective ally in the effort to create capacity and ownership of a right-drivers agenda in school districts. As importantly, the CCEE can help prevent a return to a wrong-drivers mindset.

There is increasingly precise knowledge about what it takes to develop effective education reform, and there is abundant internal expertise within California that can be mobilized to make CCEE an effective force of positive change.

Effective change is a process of shaping and reshaping ideas while building capacity, ownership, and shared mindsets. In this spirit, the following ideas are presented as a work in progress, open to be reshaped and refined through interaction with key stakeholders in ongoing dialogue.

California Education Code Section 52074

- (a) The California Collaborative for Educational Excellence is hereby established.
- (b) The purpose of the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence is to advise and assist school districts, county superintendents of schools, and charter schools in achieving the goals set forth in a local control and accountability plan adopted pursuant to this article.
- (c) The Superintendent shall, with the approval of the state board, contract with a local educational agency, or consortium of local educational agencies, to serve as the fiscal agent for the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence. The Superintendent shall apportion funds appropriated for the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence to the fiscal agent.
- (d) The California Collaborative for Educational Excellence shall be governed by a board consisting of the following five members:
- (1) The Superintendent or his or her designee.
 - (2) The president of the state board or his or her designee.
 - (3) A county superintendent of schools appointed by the Senate Committee on Rules.
 - (4) A teacher appointed by the Speaker of the Assembly.
 - (5) A superintendent of a school district appointed by the Governor.
- (e) At the direction of the governing board of the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, the fiscal agent shall contract with individuals, local educational agencies, or organizations with the expertise, experience, and a record of success to carry out the purposes of this article. The areas of expertise, experience, and record of success shall include, but are not limited to, all of the following:
- (1) State priorities as described in subdivision (d) of Section 52060.
 - (2) Improving the quality of teaching.
 - (3) Improving the quality of school district and schoolsite leadership.
 - (4) Successfully addressing the needs of special pupil populations, including, but not limited to, English learners, pupils eligible to receive a free or reduced-price meal, pupils in foster care, and individuals with exceptional needs.
- (f) The Superintendent may direct the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence to advise and assist a school district, county superintendent of schools, or charter school in any of the following circumstances:
- (1) If the governing board of a school district, county board of education, or governing body or a charter school requests the advice and assistance of the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence.
 - (2) If the county superintendent of schools of the county in which the school district or charter school is located determines, following the provision of technical assistance pursuant to Section 52071 or 47607.3 as applicable, that the advice and assistance of the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence is necessary to help the school district or charter school accomplish the goals described in the local control and accountability plan adopted pursuant to this article.
 - (3) If the Superintendent determines that the advice and assistance of the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence is necessary to help the school district, county superintendent of schools, or charter school accomplish the goals set forth in the local control and accountability plan adopted pursuant to this article.

Envisioning the Mission

The CCEE can be a light, agile learning organization that builds capacity in districts by:

- constantly **reading the landscape** of district performance and needs
- **collaborating with districts** to identify the needs that, if addressed, can maximize impact on the learning of students, the professional capacity of teachers, and the learning leadership of school and system leaders
- **matching learning needs of districts** with individuals, local education agencies, or organizations with the expertise, experience and a record of success building capacity for system improvement (referred to as “assistance providers”)
- **coordinating precision of collaboration efforts** between districts and assistance providers to produce valuable organizational learning and capacity at the district, county and state levels

Creating Capacity for Transformational Change

The CCEE will become a valued asset to the system if it:

- successfully **identifies key areas of need in districts** with regards to capacity building for improvement of teaching practice and student learning
- establishes a valued **repository of current, proven expertise and resources** available to develop those capacities
- effectively **brokers capacity building resources** adequate to the context and learning needs of districts, to increase their ability to improve from within
- **monitors progress, identifies and builds success around district improvement** and makes it visible across the state

These key areas of activity are further described below.

Identifying capacity needs involves gaining as precise a picture as possible of the district performance landscape and engaging with the field to identify the most prominent areas of need where assistance can maximize impact on teacher professional capacity, learning leadership, and student learning. Examples of possible areas of need are: Learning and Pedagogy in the Language Arts and Social Sciences, Learning and Pedagogy in Math and Science, College Readiness, Systemness, Common Core Standards Implementation, LCAP Development, and Parent Engagement. This

activity also involves constant monitoring of progress on key, meaningful indicators to identify needs as they evolve over time.

Establishing a repository of proven expertise/capacity is crucial if CCEE is to become an effective, trusted partner in supporting district improvement. First priority as potential assistance providers should be given to school districts and practitioners with strong credentials developing capacity for system improvement. Expertise and success supporting other systems to improve can be considered a plus. External providers should be assessed very carefully to include only those willing and able to listen to and learn from the supported system, capable of catalyzing the internal capacity of the district to improve itself, and committed to the deep collaboration and involvement needed to get the work of improvement done.

Brokering assistance involves supporting those districts who request assistance as well as those identified in need of improvement (whether or not they request support). At minimum, CCEE can facilitate contact between districts in need of support with assistance providers. Perhaps more importantly, CCEE could also ensure the effectiveness of assistance by building buy-in on both sides (matching interest with capacity) and supporting districts in:

1. developing a focus on needs identified by districts yielding the highest impact on student learning and teacher and leadership capacities
2. developing strategies that have a defensible theory of action explaining the steps to be taken to improve district capacity and their intended impact student learning, teacher practice, and school leadership
3. establishing clear expectations regarding content, process, duration and intensity of assistance
4. defining and tracking ambitious target goals related to student learning

It is likely that some districts who need assistance won't want it. In such cases, the state should define mechanisms to require the district to take part in an assistance partnership. However, it will be crucial for CCEE to cultivate relationships of trust and support as early in the process as possible. This could involve, for example, engaging with districts in analyzing data on performance, offering a range of options for assistance, establishing conditions for trust and effective collaboration, and making visible and celebrating early success.

Analyzing existing measures of performance and engaging with districts in need of support to gain an accurate understanding of the capacity needs of the district will be key to identifying the most effective assistance options. Methods/levels of assistance for consideration are:

- A. *District-to-district.* This may involve existing or new district collaboratives or pairings between districts. It will be crucial to create conditions for focused, results-oriented, and sustained collaboration. A format worth exploring is one where two or more districts face a similar challenge and devise a solution collectively.
- B. *District success coaches.* This involves identifying and nurturing a cadre of proven individuals or teams – including educators and school and district leaders – with proven capacity and reputation as effective practitioners and leaders who immerse as coaches on loan in supported districts. This strategy simultaneously builds capacity and develops future system leaders.
- C. *External providers.* It is crucial to identify providers willing and able to differentiate assistance based on district needs, capable of building the internal capacity of districts, and committed to the deep collaboration and involvement needed to successfully improve. The CCEE can serve as a highly selective filter of assistance providers, cautious of vendors with a record of one-time, one-size-fits all solutions and a default stance of intervention over capacity building.

Effective Collaborations: Emerging Knowledge

Authentic match of learning interest of supported district with capacity of assistance provider: A necessary implication is the importance of taking the time to thoughtfully identify, in collaboration with districts, capacity needs and best available assistance.

Clear definition of a problem of practice with three key features: the problem of practice is of interest to the district, it is precise and small enough to be workable, and important enough to yield considerable improvement if solved, and the assistance provider has a proven record of success in building capacity around that or similar problems of practice.

Shared commitment to sustained collaboration: This includes creating a cross-sectional leading team in the supported district that will ensure that the hard work of improvement gets mobilized across the system; ensuring follow up capacity on the part of the assistance provider; and developing clear agreed upon strategies, timelines, roles, responsibilities and norms of collaboration.

Valuable learning for both parts: It will be important to be cautious of an external intervention mindset taking over the provision of assistance. No assistance providers can fix a district. They can engage in collaboration with the district so that it changes from within. As a general principle of mutual learning, assistance providers should have the right answers at the end of the meeting, not at the beginning.

Shared development of a thoughtful strategy for action with a clearly formulated and testable theory of action that explains which actions will lead to which outcomes.

Definition of key observable/measurable indicators to know whether and how the desired changes are happening. It will be crucial to constantly monitor progress, identify areas of struggle, and re-shape the strategy and associated theory of action as needed.

To encourage ownership for engagement and solutions, it may make sense to develop a shared cost model to which districts contribute, similar to the functioning of California's Fiscal Crisis & Management Assistance Team (FCMAT).

Monitoring progress on key, meaningful indicators will be crucial to inform action, reshape strategies as needed, and identify success. Strategic communication to make success visible to the system and the larger public - for example, media illustrating effective pedagogy, leadership, and whole system reform - will develop a shared mindset of hope, efficacy, and support. In this way, CCEE will simultaneously develop a positive discourse around the right drivers, build desire, ownership and capacity to improve, and stay accountable to the system and the larger public.

Critical Considerations

Light, Flat Learning Organization

Effectiveness does not require complex structure. A small, flat organization that identifies key needs, connects demand with high quality supply, and monitors quality of assistance and collaboration is the best solution. If CCEE moves ahead with the strategy of deploying district coaches, the organization can serve as the convener of these coaches, bringing them together with some regularity to discuss progress, identify key obstacles and collectively re-shape strategies.

High-Profile, Active Advisory Board

Clarity about what CCEE should do and how it should conduct operations will emerge from doing and learning from the work. CCEE would greatly benefit from getting some of the best minds – nationally and internationally – in the education reform field to serve as small and active advisory board. A small group of outstanding and respected leaders with a strong record of leading and executing successful whole system reform at the district, county, state or national level could serve as a corporate board who meets with some periodicity to help shape CCEE's strategy, monitor progress, and re-shape the approach in the process of building capacity and ownership. The advisory board would also serve as a live repository of knowledge and resources that could be deployed to facilitate CCEE's capacity building efforts, while building capacity within CCEE itself.

If the idea of an advisory board is adopted, it will be important to build a simple accountability structure to ensure ownership and engagement of board members.

Some ideas include: explicitly establishing that collaboration should prevail over individual contributions; creating two year terms with the possibility of extension based on previous involvement and performance of the advisor; developing clear terms with regards to time commitment, dates and content of activities expected from board members; and establishing that any compensation would be based on delivery of commitments as an active advisor.

Start Slow To Get Far and Deep

It will be worth CCEE's time to take at least six months working with its advisory board to take the pulse of the system, visit successful systems to learn what it takes to get the work of improvement done, and devise CCEE's strategic plan - what to do first?, how to support it?, who will do it? An effective approach is to start small, get some success, learn in the process, re-shape the approach to incorporate the learning, and gradually evolve a strategy to disseminate the work of improvement to a larger number of districts.

If, for example, 300 districts were identified in need of serious improvement, CCEE should consider starting with twenty, rather than trying to reach all 300 at once.

Do's and Don'ts for CCEE

Explicitly formulating what not to do and how not to do it can be a helpful guide when there is risk of flipping back into old habits despite the intention to do things differently.

- Don't create a new bureaucracy – **keep a small, flat, agile organization** that can learn and adapt quickly
- Don't make the hard work of improvement complicated - **keep it simple**
- Don't try to come up with answers or solutions too quickly – **start slow to get deep and far**
- Don't assume the same solution will work for all districts – **differentiate support**
- Resist anything that can be turned into a compliance exercise – **learning is the work**
- Don't try to do it without the districts – **engage in a learning partnership** with them
- Don't try to do it *to* districts - **help them improve from within**
- Don't assume you can find the best solutions on your own – **leverage the best available minds and expertise**
- Don't let distractors run the show – **help districts maintain focus on a small number of ambitious goals**

Think Sustainable from the Start

Sustainability should be one of the first things to think about, not the last. It is crucial to think of sustainability in two ways:

1. Ensuring a clear link between assistance and collaboration between districts that **positively impacts the people doing the work in schools and classrooms** - school leaders, teachers, and students. Capacity and ownership are the foundation for sustainability.
2. Strategizing from the start to **secure an ongoing budget** will be crucial to create a structure of state-wide improvement with staying power.

Conclusion

California's education sector has a golden opportunity to fulfill its promise of delivering high quality education to all students and become one of the most improved systems in America over the next few years. The ideas outlined here are offered to contribute to making California Collaborative for Educational Excellence a trusted and effective ally in the quest for substantial improvement across the educational system in California.