

FEBRUARY 21, 2019 | FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Is the “California Way” the Right Way? New Report Shows Gains, Areas of Challenge for Education in California

Research highlights major shifts in state policy under Brown administration and their effects

[The California Way: The Golden State’s Quest to Build an Equitable and Excellent Education System](#)

PALO ALTO, CA — California’s massive overhaul of its education finance and accountability systems since 2012 has begun to increase supports and improve outcomes for historically marginalized students, according to a report released today by the Learning Policy Institute (LPI). That overhaul, in concert with the state’s implementation of new content standards aligned to the Common Core State Standards, has impacted every level of the k–12 education system, requiring changes in both culture and practice at the classroom, school, district, county, and state levels. The state’s equitable funding plan, together with its move towards a more holistic—and less punitive—accountability system has come to be known as the “California Way.”

The [Local Control Funding Formula](#) (LCFF) replaced the previous k-12 finance system, which experts described as “highly centralized, complex, irrational, and inequitable by any measure.” LCFF allocates funds based on pupil needs—including the number and percentage of students who are English learners, from low-income families, or foster youth. LCFF eliminates many limitations on the use of funds, allowing “local control” over spending decisions, as long as they address a set of eight state priorities for educational opportunities and outcomes and focus resources and supports on high-need students.

This approach has shifted billions of dollars to districts serving high-need students and provided them with broad flexibility to develop spending plans aligned with local priorities and needs in partnership with parents, students, and staff. Groundbreaking community engagement provisions require districts to engage parents, students, teachers, and other stakeholders in their efforts to develop plans and evaluate progress.

LPI’s report, [The California Way: The Golden State’s Quest to Build an Equitable and Excellent Education System](#), analyzes trends, elevates promising practices, and explores the next steps on California’s path to building an equitable and excellent education system. LPI researchers supplemented an exhaustive review of LCFF studies with 34 interviews with a broad cross-section of policymakers, analysts, advocates, and education stakeholders to tell the still-evolving story of California’s effort to advance a holistic vision of student and school success.

“California is seeing a real shift in funding, community engagement, and instructional practice,” said LPI President Linda Darling-Hammond. “Outcomes are improving, and a strong foundation for progress has been laid, but deepening and strengthening the reforms will be key to realizing the new vision for California’s students and schools.”

Use of the new funding and accountability system establishing multiple measures to assess and improve students and schools has coincided with improvements in student achievement and graduation rates, reduced suspensions, and increased school safety. Whereas California once ranked in the bottom five of states on every achievement measure on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, it has shown some of the greatest gains of any state in the last few years, and now typically ranks between 25th and 35th among the states.

“While there is much to celebrate, there are ongoing areas for improvement and persistent hurdles, such as teacher shortages and the need to build capacity at every level,” said report lead author Roberta C. Furger. “While California is no longer at the bottom, there is still ample room for improvement overall and in closing the still-large gaps in performance between students of color and White students. Addressing these and other challenges will be key to the success of all students—and to the success of the California Way.”

The report was released at a [meeting in Sacramento](#) convened by the Learning Policy Institute and EdSource, and is authored by Roberta C. Furger, Laura E. Hernández, and Linda Darling-Hammond.

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About the Learning Policy Institute

The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.

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