



# California's Local Control Funding Formula

Next Steps Toward Equity

Jonathan Kaplan

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# Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	iii
California’s Local Control Funding Formula: A Stride Toward Equity.....	1
Key Features of the LCFF.....	2
The Base Grant.....	2
The Supplemental Grant.....	2
The Concentration Grant.....	3
How School Funding Matters: LCFF Successes and Challenges.....	4
Success of the LCFF.....	4
The LCFF: Challenges Persist.....	7
Adequacy of the LCFF: How Does California Compare?.....	9
The Supplemental Grant Falls Short of Many States’ Adequacy Levels.....	9
The LCFF Supplemental Grant Weight Is Less Than Many Other States.....	11
California’s Method for Counting Students With Additional Needs Is an Outlier.....	12
Strategies for Strengthening the LCFF.....	14
Support Students Not Currently Targeted by the LCFF.....	14
Increase Supplemental Grant Funding.....	14
Increase Funding to School Districts Not Currently Eligible for Concentration Grants.....	15
Leveraging the LCFF’s Success to Improve the Formula.....	18
Endnotes.....	19
About the Author.....	21

## List of Figures

Figure 1	Funding Formula Amounts Before (2012) and During (2013–2018) the Rollout of LCFF....	5
Figure 2	Increase in Math Achievement Before and After LCFF, by Year, Grades 3–5.....	6
Figure 3	Increase in Reading Achievement Before and After LCFF, by Year, Grades 3–5.....	7
Figure 4	Recommended Additional Funding for English Learner and Low-Income/At-Risk Students...	10
Figure 5	States’ Additional Weightings for At-Risk Students.....	11
Figure 6	States’ Additional Weightings for English Learners.....	12
Figure 7	Example of Progressive Concentration Grants for School Districts Serving 45% or More Students With Greater Needs.....	16



# Executive Summary

In 2013, California enacted an ambitious school funding reform—the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). The LCFF fundamentally overhauled the state’s prior K–12 education finance system, which studies found to be inequitable, irrational, and highly centralized. The formula distributes state grants to K–12 school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools based on student characteristics, including both grade level and whether they belong to groups identified for additional support: those from low-income families, English learners, or foster youth.

More than a decade after its enactment, a growing body of research indicates the LCFF has helped to improve student outcomes, especially in K–12 school districts that enroll large shares of students with greater educational needs. However, as might be expected with a policy reform as ambitious as the LCFF, research also points to challenges in its fiscal design and opportunities to strengthen it. This report intends to establish a conceptual framework that California policymakers and education stakeholders may consider for potential adjustments to build on the solid foundation the LCFF created and continue to improve outcomes for students throughout the state.

## Key Features of California’s LCFF

The LCFF distributes roughly \$4 out of every \$5 that K–12 schools receive from the state budget and local property tax revenue. The remaining 20% of these funds supports special education, before- and after-school care, summer programming, state preschool, and other programs such as child nutrition. The LCFF reaches all K–12 school districts except approximately 130 districts that are designated as “basic aid” because their level of local property tax revenue is high enough to exceed their LCFF target allotment without state aid. Basic aid districts serve approximately 5% of the state’s students.

Nearly all LCFF dollars are allocated through three per-pupil grants: the base, supplemental, and concentration grants that are calculated based on student characteristics.

- The **base grant** portion of the LCFF provides K–12 school districts grants per the average daily attendance of their students, adjusted to reflect the number of students at various grade levels. The base grant accounts for approximately 80% of LCFF dollars and is the main source of funding for California schools.
- The LCFF **supplemental grant** targets additional funding to school districts that enroll students from low-income families, English learners, or foster youth. K–12 school districts receive a supplemental grant equal to 20% of the base grant for each student who falls into at least one of these three categories; students cannot be counted multiple times.
- In recognition that students face greater educational challenges when they attend schools with high concentrations of students with greater needs, the LCFF’s **concentration grant** targets additional funding to school districts that enroll large shares of students from low-income families, English learners, or foster youth. The LCFF concentration grant initially provided 50% of the base grant for school districts that enrolled more than 55% of students from these categories. This value was increased to 65% of the base grant as part of 2021–22 state budget legislation.

## LCFF Successes

Over the past decade, a growing body of rigorous research has shown an association of higher spending with better student outcomes—especially for students from low-income families—in many states. Analyses in California have found that LCFF-induced increases in per-pupil spending have:

- improved students' math and reading achievement;
- reduced the probability of grade repetition;
- increased the likelihood of high school graduation and college readiness; and
- decreased suspensions and expulsions.

Moreover, improvements in student outcomes have been more pronounced for cohorts exposed to funding increases for more of their school-age years.

## The LCFF: Challenges Persist

The LCFF has been successful, but it was not designed to solve all the challenges that face the state's schools and students, and its goals for equitable opportunity and outcomes remain unmet. A 2023 Learning Policy Institute report found that improvements in math and reading achievement for school districts just below the concentration grant's 55% high-need student enrollment threshold lag districts above the threshold. This is especially true of districts that enroll between 40% and 55% of their students who are identified for additional support. One in five California students eligible for the supplemental grant is enrolled in a school district ineligible for the concentration grants.

The supplemental grant centered equity in the state's K–12 education finance system and helps support students in school districts ineligible for concentration grants. However, the supplemental grant weight of 20% was not designed to provide the level of funding required to support students with greater needs. Moreover, because the LCFF only identifies students from low-income families, English learners, and foster youth as belonging to categories targeted for additional funding, the supplemental grant does not provide resources to support other students who likely require greater support.

Even if the LCFF identified additional groups of students for support, students categorized in more than one group targeted for supplemental grants generate the same amount of funding as students who belong to only one group. The use of unduplicated counts to calculate supplemental grants means students with multiple needs may not receive the support they require to achieve desired outcomes.

## Adequacy of the LCFF: How Does California Compare?

Another question is how adequate and equitable California's school funding system is, now that the LCFF has been in effect for a decade.

Since the LCFF's enactment, the state has increased funding significantly. As of 2021–22, the most recent school year of cross-state data available, California per-pupil spending ranked 18th in the nation, up from 36th in 2012–13. However, California's high cost of living affects what these dollars can buy.

Taking into account cost-of-living differences, the Education Law Center’s 2024 *Making the Grade* report ranked California K–12 per-pupil spending 28th in the nation in 2021–22, up from 46th in 2012–13, the year prior to LCFF’s enactment.

The same analysis examines the equity of states’ K–12 education funding allocations. Based on the distribution of funding among its high- and low-poverty school districts, California has improved significantly since the enactment of the LCFF, jumping from 22nd in the nation in 2012–13 to 6th in 2021–22. However, California ranks 34th in the nation when comparing the effort it makes relative to each state’s capacity to support its schools. While California’s rank for effort improved from 43rd in the nation in 2012–13, the *Making the Grade* report gave the state a grade of D, reflecting the state’s low level of K–12 education funding relative to the size of its economy.

Based on five adequacy studies conducted in other states, California’s LCFF supplemental grant weight of 20% is at the lower end of the recommended range for English learners (from 15% to 40%) and below the recommended range for at-risk students (from 30% to 81%). These studies’ recommended weights translated into nearly \$6,500 in additional funds per pupil in the District of Columbia and more than \$9,900 per pupil in Delaware and Maryland for students who are *both* English learners and at-risk. California’s 20% supplemental grant weight translated into additional funding of about \$2,100 per student, substantially below the level of recommended additional funding in these other states.

Similarly, LCFF’s 20% supplemental grant weight is at the lower end of the range of the other 20 states that provided a flat weight to support English learners and the 19 that do so for at-risk students. In addition, most of these states allow weighted funding based on the duplicated counts of students categorized as both at-risk and English learners.

California’s supplemental grant funding falls well below both adequate funding recommendations and actual grants in other states not only because of its relatively low weight but also because California provides supplemental grants to school districts based on their *unduplicated* enrollment of students in categories that generate the grants. In 2023–24, 37 of 42 states that provided funding to support students categorized as English learners *and* being at-risk allowed the funding to be duplicated for students who met both criteria. California is one of only five states that provides funding based on the unduplicated number of students in these groups.

## Strategies to Strengthen the LCFF

### Support Students Who Are Not Currently Targeted by the LCFF

While the LCFF’s supplemental and concentration grants target funding for students from low-income families, English learners, or foster youth, there are other groups of students who require additional resources. To strengthen the LCFF, California policymakers could consider whether the formula is providing the investments required to help districts meet a range of student needs, which may include students experiencing homelessness, newcomer and migrant students, and students with special education needs.

## Increase Supplemental Grant Funding

Recent adequacy studies conducted by other states suggest that California's supplemental grant weight of 20% is not sufficient to support English learners or students considered "at-risk." Policymakers could consider increasing the supplemental grant weight. That alone, however, would not recognize the needs of students who are categorized within more than one group identified for additional support and the compounded challenges they face. California could use duplicated student counts to determine school districts' supplemental grants, which would target increases in supplemental grant funding to school districts that enroll students who face multiple challenges and better align California with the majority of states that provide this type of additive funding to address the distinct needs of different student groups.

## Increase Funding to School Districts Not Currently Eligible for Concentration Grants

Policymakers could consider different options for increasing funding to support students with additional needs in school districts not eligible for concentration grants by:

- **Strengthening the Supplemental Grant.** This could be done by increasing the weight of the LCFF supplemental grant or by allowing duplicated counts for students who are categorized within multiple student groups eligible for the supplemental grant, or both.
- **Lowering the Eligibility Threshold for School Districts Receiving Concentration Grants.** For example, concentration grants could be allocated to school districts that enroll more than 45% of their students with greater needs, or another enrollment threshold could be considered. One method to address the funding cliff that results from concentration grant funding as currently designed would be to progressively increase concentration grants so that they gradually ratchet up for these newly eligible districts to reach the funding level currently allocated to K-12 school districts with enrollment of more than 55% of their students with greater needs.
- **Increasing the Base Grant.** Boosting support for students with greater needs enrolled in school districts ineligible for concentration grants can also be achieved by increasing the LCFF base grant. This approach would not improve LCFF equity as much as funding targeted through the supplemental or concentration grants. However, increasing the LCFF base grant would mean school districts that do not receive concentration grants would receive additional funding that could be used to support students with greater needs.

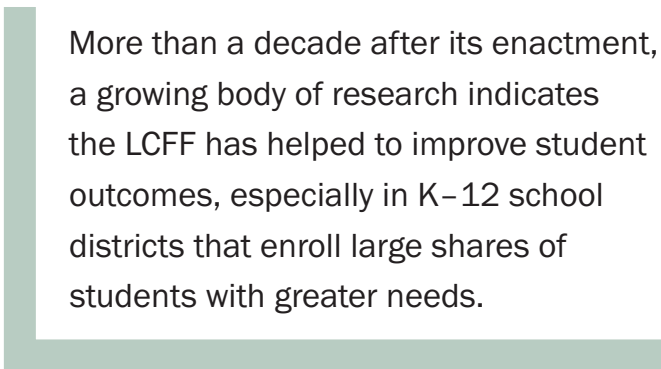
Strategies for strengthening the LCFF base grant could also include addressing the wide variation in costs across California and, while we do not treat this in detail in this report, policymakers could also consider whether special education students would be better supported by integrating this funding within the LCFF. Whatever strategies policymakers may consider will likely depend on the availability of state and local tax revenue to ensure all school districts receive additional funding to help provide equitable opportunities for their students.

# California's Local Control Funding Formula: A Stride Toward Equity

In 2013, California enacted an ambitious school funding reform—the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). The LCFF fundamentally overhauled the state's K–12 education finance system, which a key series of studies had found to be inequitable, irrational, and highly centralized.<sup>1</sup> The LCFF established equity at the foundation of California's K–12 education finance system by allocating the single largest amount of state and local funding to local educational agencies (LEAs) based on student needs. The formula distributes grants to K–12 school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools based on student characteristics including their grade level and whether they are categorized within specific groups that are targeted for additional support: those from low-income families, English learners, or foster youth.

Governance over the use of LCFF resources is centered with the LEAs, which have a significant amount of flexibility in using LCFF grants. The LCFF also established a new accountability system that charges LEAs, in consultation with local stakeholders, to create Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs). While LCAPs and the state's broader accountability system and systems of support are beyond the scope of this report, they are essential to the advances California has made over the past decade toward the goal of continuous student improvement.

The LCFF created a strong foundation for the state's education finance system. More than a decade after its enactment, a growing body of research indicates the LCFF has helped to improve student outcomes, especially in K–12 school districts that enroll large shares of students with greater needs (which the formula targets for additional funding). However, as might be expected with a policy reform as ambitious as the LCFF, research also points to challenges in the fiscal design of the LCFF and



More than a decade after its enactment, a growing body of research indicates the LCFF has helped to improve student outcomes, especially in K–12 school districts that enroll large shares of students with greater needs.

to opportunities to strengthen it. This report intends to establish a conceptual framework that California policymakers and education stakeholders may consider for potential adjustments to build on the solid foundation the LCFF created and to continue to improve outcomes for students throughout the state.



## Key Features of the LCFF

The LCFF is the main source of funding that pays for K–12 school districts’ operating expenses, including staff salaries and services to support students.<sup>2</sup> The LCFF comprises roughly \$4 out of every \$5 that K–12 schools receive from the state budget and local property tax revenue. (Of the remaining 20% of state and local revenue K–12 schools receive, approximately half supports special education and before- and after-school and summer school programs. The other half is provided through several other programs including child nutrition and the state preschool program.) Nearly all LCFF dollars are allocated through three per-pupil grants: the base, supplemental, and concentration grants that are calculated based on student characteristics in each K–12 school district and charter school.<sup>3</sup>

### The Base Grant

The LCFF provides K–12 school districts a base grant per their students’ average daily attendance, adjusted to reflect the number of students at various grade levels. The base grant accounts for approximately 80% of LCFF dollars and is the main funding source for California schools.

When the LCFF was enacted in 2013, it established aspirational funding targets for the base grant. At that time, the estimated cost for reaching the targeted level of funding for the base grant was \$18 billion more than the state spent on K–12 education in 2012–13. The LCFF, being an allocation formula, did not generate additional dollars, and estimates at the time of its enactment projected that it would take 8 years for funding to become available to reach base grant targets. However, larger than expected revenue increases in the initial years of LCFF implementation meant that base grant targets were met in 2018–19 and the LCFF was fully funded 2 years earlier than initially projected.

Despite reaching this milestone, the LCFF base grant target did not reflect the cost of providing an adequate education for the state’s students. In fact, an adequacy study published just before the state reached the LCFF’s base grant target indicated that in 2016–17 California would have had to provide an additional \$25.6 billion—38% above spending that year—to ensure all students had the opportunity to meet the state’s goals.<sup>4</sup>

### The Supplemental Grant

The LCFF identifies students from low-income families, English learners, and foster youth as student groups that require additional support to meet their educational needs. To help provide this support, the LCFF supplemental grant targets additional funding to school districts that enroll students categorized within these groups.

K–12 school districts receive a supplemental grant equal to 20% of the base grant for each of their students with greater needs (those in the three categories noted above).<sup>5</sup> Unlike a school district’s LCFF base grant that is determined by student *attendance*, supplemental grants are provided to school districts based on the number of students they *enroll* who are from low-income families, English learners, or foster youth. However, a school district that enrolls a student who is categorized in more than one of these groups receives the value of the supplemental grant for that student only once—not for each category they are eligible for. For this reason, the count of these students is referred to as the unduplicated pupil count.

## The Concentration Grant

In recognition that students face greater educational challenges when they attend schools with high concentrations of students with greater needs, the LCFF's concentration grant targets additional funding to school districts that enroll large shares of students from low-income families, English learners, or foster youth. To support school districts with large shares of these students, the LCFF concentration grant initially provided 50% of the base grant in additional funding for school districts that enrolled more than 55% of students from low-income families, English learners, or foster youth, in addition to the supplemental grants allocated to support these students. The value of the concentration grant was increased to 65% of the base grant as part of 2021–22 state budget legislation, which specified the increase in funding must be used by school districts to increase the number of staff in schools that enroll more than 55% of their students from the identified categories: students who are from low-income families, English learners, or foster youth.

# How School Funding Matters: LCFF Successes and Challenges

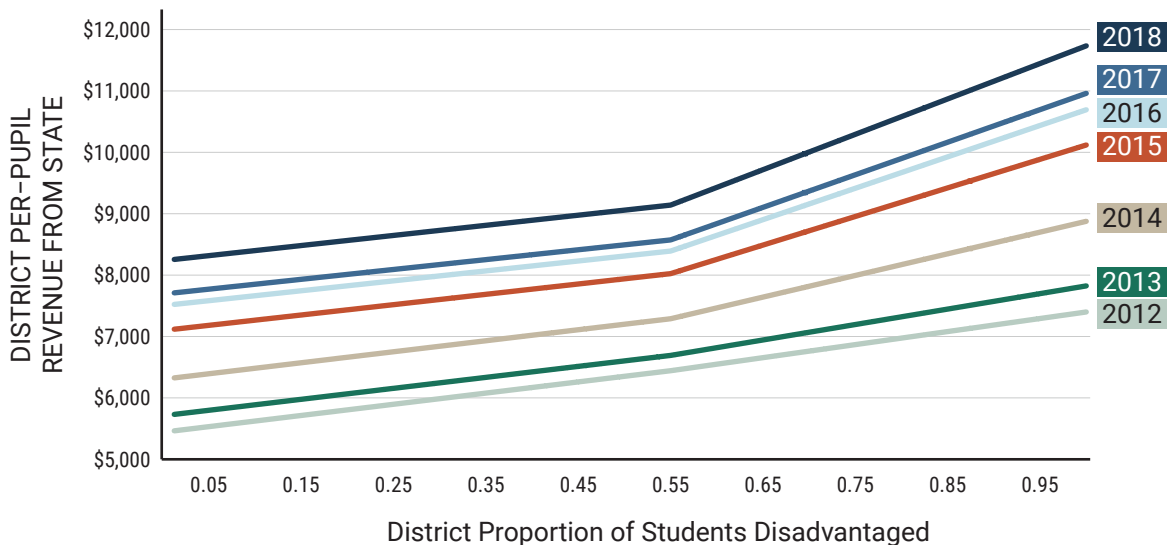
A key principle that underpins the LCFF is the importance of school spending for achieving desired student outcomes. Prior to the LCFF’s enactment, research about the relationship between spending and student learning was inconclusive, as the limitations of data sets and statistical methods made it difficult to isolate the effect of resource allocation from other factors such as family income or parental education. Over the past decade, however, a growing body of research using robust data sets and methodologically sophisticated statistical approaches has shown a consistent association of higher spending with better student outcomes across many states, especially for students from low-income families. This research has also highlighted the importance of how school dollars are spent and found improved student outcomes to be associated with spending that reduced class sizes and increased teacher compensation.<sup>6</sup>

## Success of the LCFF

The LCFF has provided additional opportunities for research on the effects of school spending. Changes made by the LCFF have allowed researchers to show how increased spending due to the new funding formula led to improvements in student outcomes. Learning Policy Institute Senior Fellow Rucker Johnson used the changes caused by the LCFF to analyze its impacts. Examples of these changes include the staggered rollout of funding increases after LCFF’s enactment and the significant funding boost allocated to K–12 school districts eligible for the concentration grant.

Figure 1, drawn from Johnson’s 2023 report, depicts both these changes.<sup>7</sup> First, the lines in the figure represent the change between school districts’ annual per-pupil revenue before the enactment of the LCFF (2012) and inflation-adjusted increases in that revenue during the first 6 years of its implementation (2013–2018). Second, because school districts receive LCFF concentration grants only if high-need students comprise more than 55% of their enrollment, the change in funding produces a “kink” at the 55% threshold above which the increased slope of the line represents a progressively greater amount of funding targeted to school districts.

**Figure 1. Funding Formula Amounts Before (2012) and During (2013–2018) the Rollout of LCFF**



Notes: Figure 1 was constructed by computing per-pupil revenues for each school district in each year based on the funding formula and its elements before and after LCFF-induced formula changes. This figure excludes Basic Aid districts, which are not subject to the LCFF funding formula. Total per-pupil revenue from the state is defined as the total revenue from all state sources, divided by enrollment and adjusted for inflation to represent 2015 dollars. Pre-LCFF is 2012, and post-LCFF is 2013–2018.

Source: Johnson, R. C. (2023). *School funding effectiveness: Evidence from California’s Local Control Funding Formula*. Learning Policy Institute.

The kink in funding at the 55% concentration grant threshold created an opportunity for researchers to demonstrate the effectiveness of school funding that resulted from changes made by the LCFF. Because no kink in funding existed before the implementation of the LCFF, researchers can point to similar kinks in the relationship between student outcomes and the proportion of students with greater needs in school districts that receive LCFF concentration grants to show how additional concentration grant funding has caused improvements in outcomes for students.

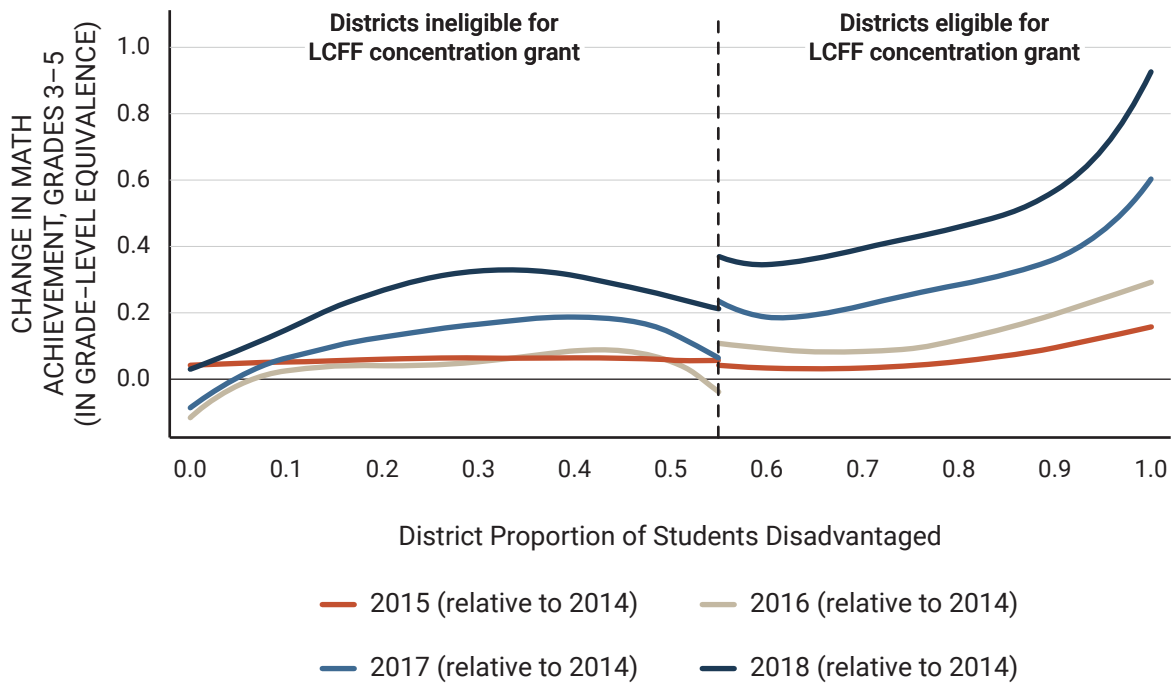
Johnson’s analyses found that LCFF-induced increases in per-pupil spending:

- improved students’ math and reading achievement;
- reduced the probability of grade repetition;
- increased the likelihood of high school graduation and college readiness; and
- decreased suspensions and expulsions.

The study found that per-pupil funding increases in school districts that received LCFF concentration grants caused improvements in both math and reading achievement (see [Figure 2](#) and [Figure 3](#)). Moreover, the study demonstrated that improvements in student outcomes were more pronounced for cohorts that were exposed to funding increases for more of their school-age years. Specifically, the study showed that “a \$1,000 increase in per-pupil spending experienced in 3 consecutive years led

to roughly a full grade-level increase in math achievement in grades 3–8, relative to what the average student achieved prior to the funding increases.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a \$1,000 increase in per-pupil spending over 3 consecutive years also resulted in a full grade-level increase in reading for students in elementary and middle school grades. A similar analysis by the Public Policy Institute of California also showed improved test scores for school districts that received concentration grant funding. These test score improvements became larger as spending accumulated over time and continued through 2021–22, persisting beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 2. Increase in Math Achievement Before and After LCFF, by Year, Grades 3–5**

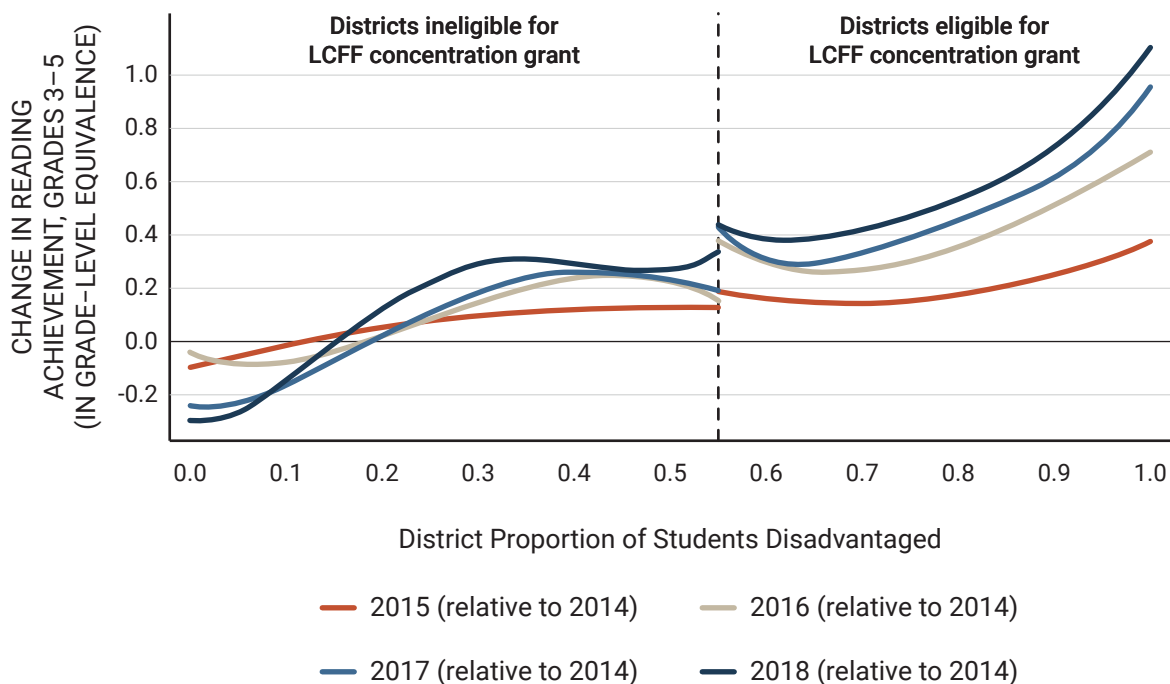


Note: Lines represent the change in math achievement relative to 2014.

Source: Johnson, R. C. (2023). *School funding effectiveness: Evidence from California’s Local Control Funding Formula*. Learning Policy Institute.



**Figure 3. Increase in Reading Achievement Before and After LCFF, by Year, Grades 3–5**



Note: Lines represent the change in reading achievement relative to 2014.

Source: Johnson, R. C. (2023). *School funding effectiveness: Evidence from California’s Local Control Funding Formula*. Learning Policy Institute.

## The LCFF: Challenges Persist

The success of the LCFF has improved educational outcomes for millions of California students. Despite the LCFF’s success, however, it was not designed to solve all of the critical challenges that face the state’s schools, and its goals for equitable opportunity and outcomes for all students remain unmet.

The analysis in the 2023 LPI report that showed how LCFF-induced spending increases caused improvements in student outcomes uncovered one of these challenges: Improvements in math and reading achievement for school districts just below the 55% concentration grant threshold lag districts above the threshold. While 3rd- through 5th-grade students in school districts ineligible for LCFF concentration grants also experienced improvements in math and reading achievement, those improvements often lagged those of districts that received concentration grants. In fact, as [Figure 2](#) and [Figure 3](#) illustrate, the lag is especially apparent for K–12 school districts that enroll between 40% and 55% of their students who are identified by the LCFF as requiring additional support (i.e., the unduplicated count of students who are from low-income families, English learners, or in foster care).

This challenge may relate to the LCFF's fiscal design. The concentration grant targets funding to districts with larger shares of students with additional needs, but around 1 in 5 California students identified by the LCFF to have these additional needs is enrolled in a school district ineligible for concentration grants.<sup>10</sup> The LCFF supplemental grant applies to these students, but not the much larger concentration grant.

The supplemental grant helps address the challenge of improving equity in the state's K-12 education finance system. However, especially for districts that do not receive concentration grant funds, there are several reasons the LCFF supplemental grant may fall short of achieving equity. First, because the LCFF only identifies students from low-income families, English learners, and foster youth as belonging to categories targeted for additional funding, the supplemental grant fails to provide resources for other groups of students who likely require additional support, such as students experiencing homelessness and migrant students. Moreover, the design of the LCFF means students categorized in more than one group targeted for supplemental grants generate the same amount of funding as students who belong to only one group. The use of unduplicated counts to calculate supplemental grants fails to recognize that students with greater needs are diverse and have distinct requirements for achieving desired outcomes. It also does not take into account that students in more than one group identified as requiring additional support may face challenges that are compounded by each category.

The use of unduplicated counts to calculate supplemental grants fails to recognize that students with greater needs are diverse and have distinct requirements for achieving desired outcomes.

The supplemental grant helped center equity in California's K-12 education finance system, but its limitations reveal a foundational question the LCFF did not address: What is an adequate level of funding for students with different needs to achieve desired outcomes? In addition to the LCFF's supplemental grant weight of 20% not being designed to provide the level of funding required to support students with greater needs, the LCFF base grant also was not designed to provide an adequate level of funding for students to achieve the state's academic standards.

# Adequacy of the LCFF: How Does California Compare?

How adequate and equitable is California’s school funding system now that the LCFF has been in effect for a decade? While California has not conducted a study recently to determine an adequate level of funding that would allow California’s students to meet academic standards, we can begin to assess the questions of adequacy and equity by comparing California K–12 school spending before and after LCFF was enacted, as well as looking at how that spending compares to other states that have conducted such studies.

California’s K–12 education spending has increased significantly since the LCFF was enacted, causing its rankings relative to other states to climb. California spending per K–12 student ranked 18th in the nation in 2021–22, the most recent year of cross-state data available, a significant improvement from 2012–13, the year prior to LCFF’s enactment, when it ranked 36th in the nation.<sup>11</sup> The 2024 *Making the Grade* report published by the Education Law Center showed a similar jump after adjusting for differences in costs of living in each state, ranking California’s K–12 per-pupil funding 28th in the nation in 2021–22, up from 46th in 2012–13.<sup>12</sup>

The same analysis examines the equity of states’ K–12 education funding allocations. Based on the distribution of funding among its high- and low-poverty school districts, California has improved significantly since the enactment of the LCFF, jumping from 22nd in the nation in 2012–13 to 6th in 2021–22. However, in 2021–22 California ranked 34th in the nation when comparing the effort it makes relative to each state’s capacity to support its schools, earning it a D grade in the *Making the Grade* report. California’s rank for effort improved from 43rd in the nation in 2012–13, showing progress, but the state has room to improve its low level of K–12 education funding relative to the size of its economy. Moreover, rankings do not reflect the amount of funding California’s schools need for its students to reach the state’s learning standards.

## The Supplemental Grant Falls Short of Many States’ Adequacy Levels

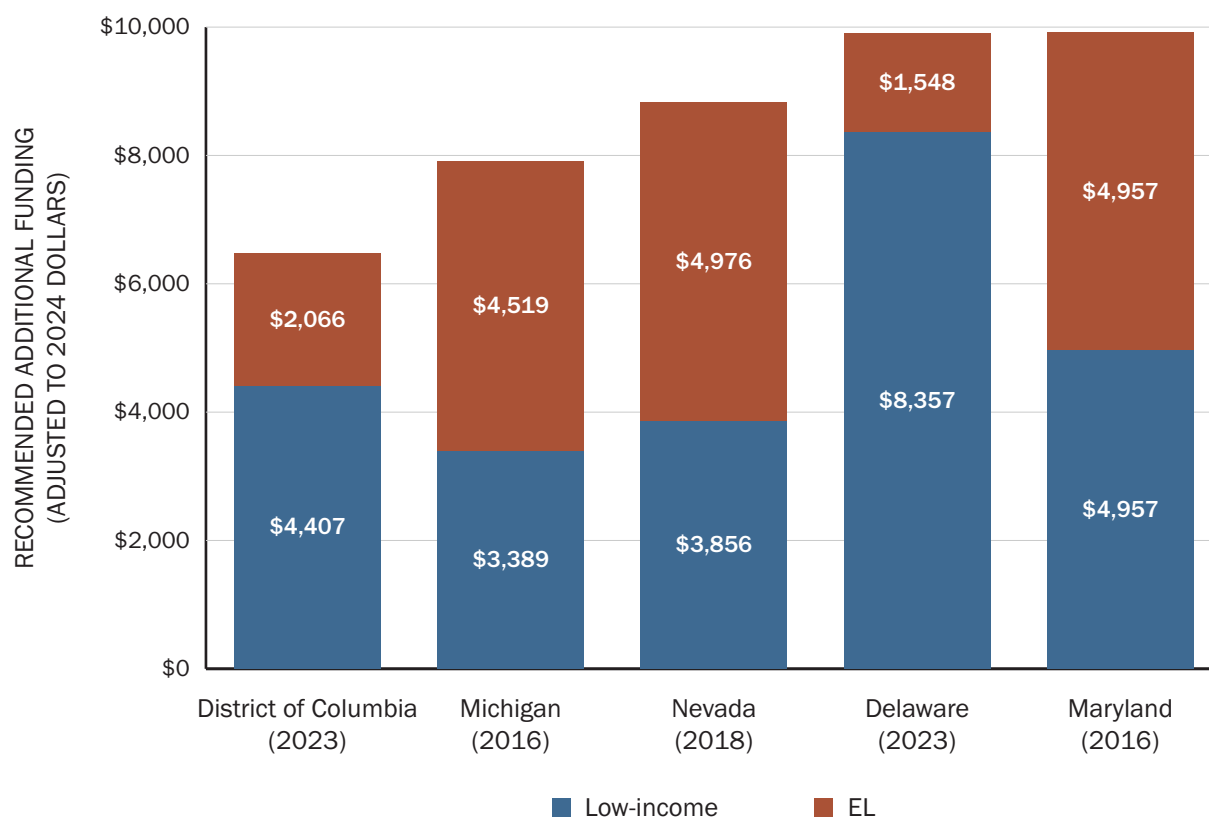
The LCFF supplemental grant has helped make the state’s K–12 education finance system more equitable. However, questions remain about the amount of supplemental grant funding needed for students to achieve desired outcomes. One way to assess whether California’s supplemental grant is providing the level of funding required to support students’ needs is to look to other states’ efforts to determine funding levels adequate to meet the needs of similar students.<sup>13</sup>

States often commission cost studies to establish the level of funding required to help students meet state standards. LPI analyzed five of the more recent of these studies, conducted between 2016 and 2023, commissioned by the District of Columbia, Maryland, Michigan, Nevada, and Delaware.<sup>14</sup> All of these studies recommended additional weighted funding to support English learners and students considered “at-risk,” which was most often defined by a measure of family income and also included other factors such as students experiencing homelessness, in foster care, or who are migrant students.

The recommended weights for English learners in these studies ranged from 15% to 40% of the base grant level in each state.<sup>15</sup> The recommended weights for at-risk students ranged from 30% to 81%.<sup>16</sup> Compared to the recommended funding in these states, the LCFF’s supplemental grant weight of 20% is at the lower end of the recommended range of weights for English learners and below the range of weights for at-risk students. These recommended weights translated into additional funding of nearly \$6,500 per pupil in the District of Columbia, and more than \$9,900 per pupil in Delaware and Maryland for students who are *both* English learners and at-risk (see Figure 4).<sup>17</sup>

California’s 20% supplemental grant weight translated into additional funding of about \$2,100 per student, substantially below the level of additional funding recommended by studies in these other states. California’s supplemental grant funding falls far behind adequate funding recommendations in other states not only because of its relatively low weight but also because California provides supplemental grants to school districts based on their unduplicated enrollment of students in categories that generate the grants.

**Figure 4. Recommended Additional Funding for English Learner and Low-Income/At-Risk Students**



Source: Griffith, M., & Burns, D. (2025). *Funding student needs: A review of state funding policies for English learners and students from low-income backgrounds*. Learning Policy Institute.

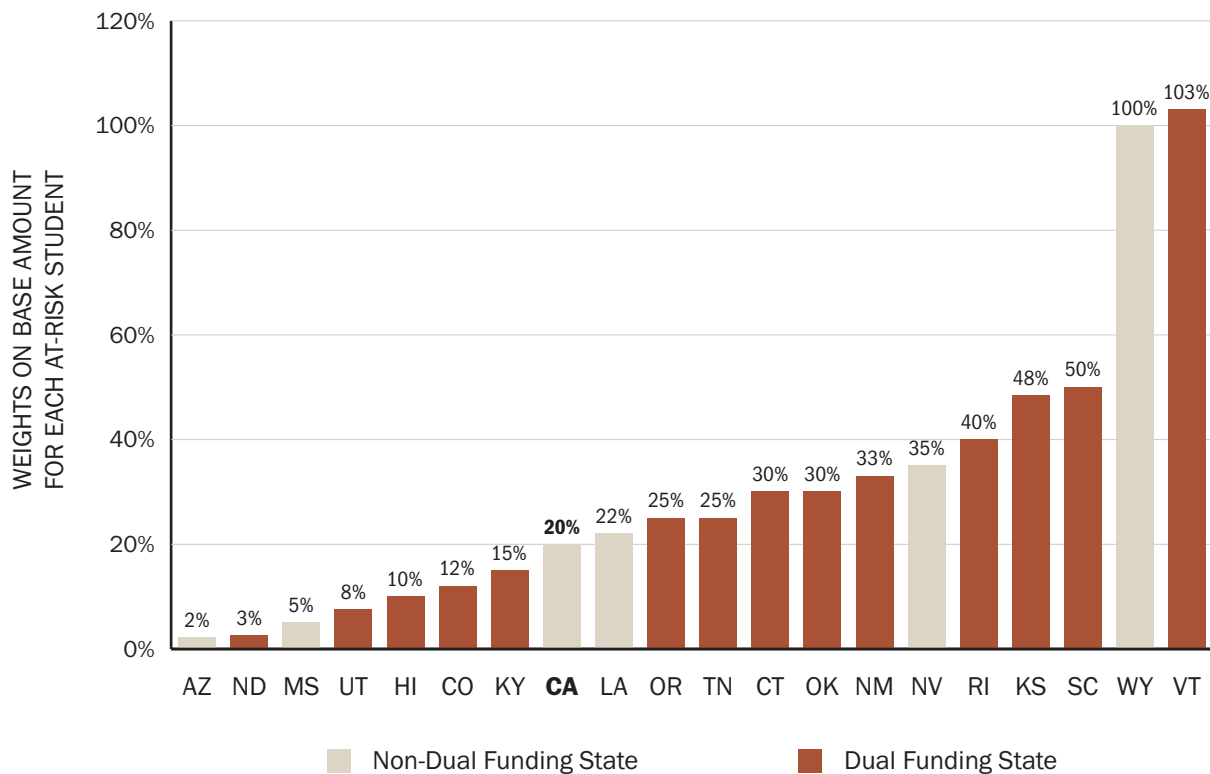
## The LCFF Supplemental Grant Weight Is Less Than Many Other States

While the previous section compared the LCFF supplemental grant amounts to those determined by adequacy studies, a different way to examine whether the LCFF supplemental grant is providing the funding required to support students' needs is to compare its 20% weight to the weights currently used by other states to support similar students.

### Comparing Funding for “At-Risk” Students

In 2023–24, 44 states provided additional funding for “at-risk” students, which was most commonly defined as students from low-income backgrounds who qualify for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program. To compare the LCFF supplemental grant with the grant levels in these states, it is easiest to look at the 19 states in addition to California that used a flat weight to provide additional funding to support at-risk students.<sup>18</sup> The LCFF’s supplemental grant weight of 20% is toward the lower end of the range, with 12 of these 19 states implementing weights greater than California (see Figure 5). Of the 7 states that had weights lower than California, 5 provide weighted funding based on the duplicated counts of students who are categorized as both at-risk and English learners (i.e., a dual funding state).

**Figure 5. States’ Additional Weightings for At-Risk Students**



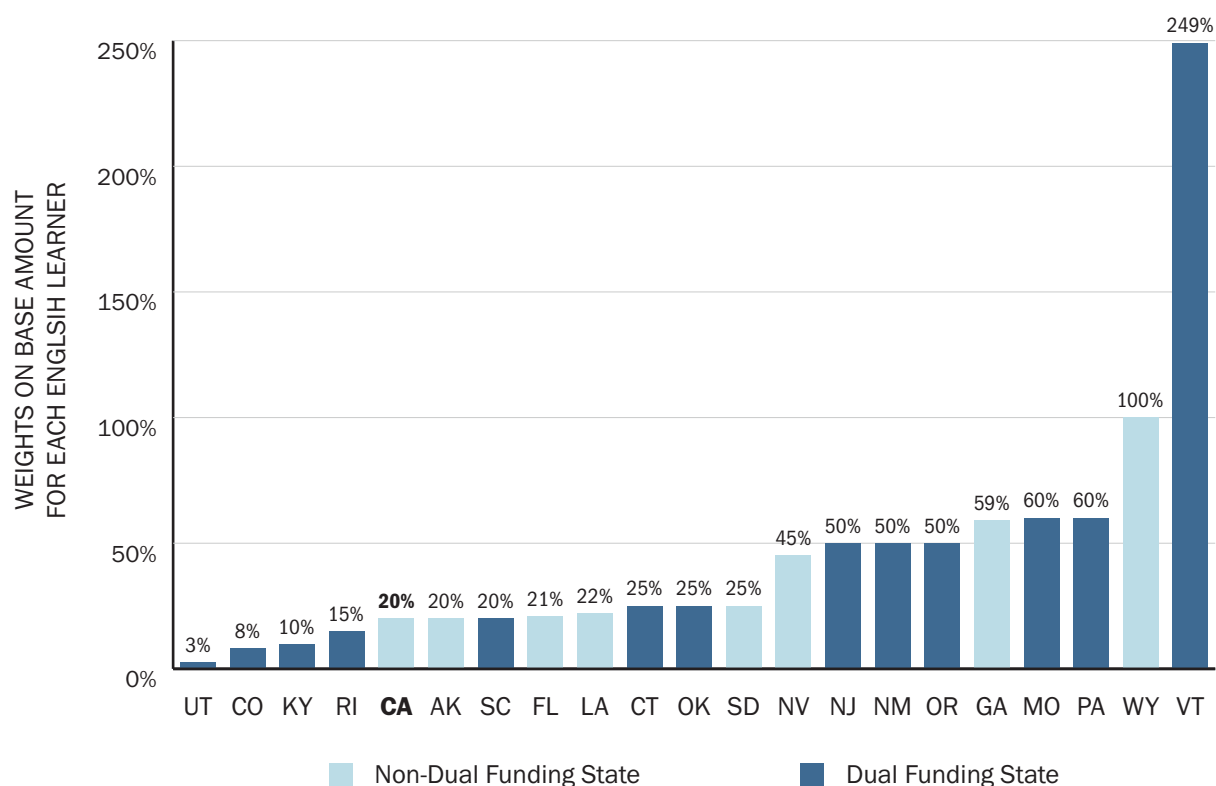
Source: Griffith, M., & Burns, D. (2025). *Funding student needs: A review of state funding policies for English learners and students from low-income backgrounds*. Learning Policy Institute.



## Comparing Funding for English Learners

In 2023–24, 49 states provided separate, additional funding for students categorized as English learners on top of base funding for schools. To compare the LCFF supplemental grant with the grant levels in these states, it is easiest to look at the 20 states in addition to California that also used a flat weight to provide additional funding to support English learners.<sup>19</sup> The LCFF’s 20% supplemental grant weight is at the lower end of the range of these 20 states, with 14 states implementing weights greater than California (see Figure 6). Only 4 states had weights lower than California and 2 states had the same 20% grant weight for English learners. However, 5 of the 6 states that had the same or lower weight than California provided weighted funding based on the duplicated counts of students who are categorized as both at-risk and English learners (i.e., a dual funding state).

**Figure 6. States’ Additional Weightings for English Learners**



Source: Griffith, M., & Burns, D. (2025). *Funding student needs: A review of state funding policies for English learners and students from low-income backgrounds*. Learning Policy Institute.

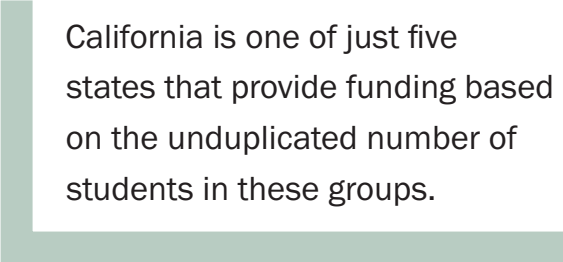
## California’s Method for Counting Students With Additional Needs Is an Outlier

Funding to support many of California’s students who have greater educational needs relies on the LCFF supplemental grant. While the supplemental grant is helpful, there are several ways it could be made more effective in meeting student needs. One could be to increase the size of its weight, which is lower than those of most other states. Another would be to change how California counts students with greater

needs for the purpose of generating supplemental grants. Even if students have multiple needs that require support, California counts them only once in an unduplicated fashion to determine the weight of the supplemental grant. This method contrasts with most other states that provide cumulative weights by counting students more than once if they are identified within more than one category targeted for additional funding.

In 2023–24, 42 states provided funding to support students categorized as English learners and those categorized as at-risk. Thirty-seven of these states provided dual funding to address the specific learning needs of being *both* an English learner *and* at-risk. Notably, California is one of just five states that provide funding based on the unduplicated number of students in these groups. This method for counting students

who require additional learning resources fails to recognize the multiple challenges they face. This is one reason the level of funding provided by the LCFF supplemental grant falls short of other states' support for English learners and students considered "at-risk." Importantly, California's English learners comprise a far larger share of its students than English learners do in the four other states using an unduplicated count. Moreover, California's English learners and students considered "at-risk" are two groups that have considerable overlap. In 2023–24, 18% of the state's students were English learners and 85% of them were socioeconomically disadvantaged. As a result, nearly 1 out of every 6 California students is categorized as both an English learner and at-risk, but these students do not generate additional funding that most other states provide to support their unique learning needs.



California is one of just five states that provide funding based on the unduplicated number of students in these groups.

# Strategies for Strengthening the LCFF

The LCFF has created a strong foundation for the state's K–12 education finance system. One of the LCFF's strengths is its simplicity. The structure of three basic grants allows the public to easily understand how the LCFF works. Meeting the funding targets initially established for the base grant, which increased resources for all California schools, solidified the LCFF's foundation. The supplemental and concentration grants are also critical parts of the structure that have helped make the finance system more equitable. Research findings indicate outcomes have improved for many of the students whom the LCFF's supplemental and concentration grants target for additional support. Yet the same research also indicates some students are not advancing as far as others, and the fiscal design of the LCFF fails to identify for additional support certain student groups who need it. To address these challenges, policymakers should assess which parts of the LCFF have improved outcomes for students, especially those with additional needs; prioritize sustaining these improvements; and use what we have learned to extend the LCFF's success to more students and strengthen the state's educational system.

## Support Students Not Currently Targeted by the LCFF

The LCFF's supplemental and concentration grants target funding to support students from low-income families, English learners, or foster youth. However, there are other groups of students who also require additional resources. To strengthen the LCFF, California policymakers could consider whether the formula is helping districts meet the full range of student needs that may require greater investments. For example, the LCFF does not specifically target funding to support students experiencing homelessness, despite the fact that these students have additional resource needs beyond those of other students from low-income families.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the LCFF does not identify newcomer and migrant students among the categories of students specifically targeted for additional funding support.<sup>21</sup> The LCFF supplemental grant does not take into account that these students may need different services than English learners to achieve desired outcomes.

To strengthen the LCFF, California policymakers could consider whether the formula is helping districts meet the full range of student needs that may require greater investments.

A large group of students the LCFF does not target for additional funding are those who require special education services. Special education funding exists outside of the LCFF and reflects various complexities, but given persistent concerns about California's funding system for special education, the challenges of special education delivery in the state, and the inclusion of students with disabilities in LCFF's accountability systems, policymakers could consider whether special education students would be better supported by integrating this funding within the LCFF or whether other funding strategies should be explored.<sup>22</sup>

## Increase Supplemental Grant Funding

By targeting additional funding to support students with greater needs, the LCFF supplemental grant established equity as a key principle of the state's K–12 education finance system. However, the amount of funding the supplemental grant provides may not be adequate. Recent studies conducted by other

states to determine the cost of adequately supporting students with additional needs indicate that California's supplemental grant weight of 20% is not sufficient to support English learners or students considered "at-risk" (i.e., students who come from low-income families) in achieving the state standards. Strategies policymakers may consider for increasing supplemental grant funding include increasing the supplemental grant weight and changing the method for counting students with unique educational needs.

### **Increasing the Weight of the Supplemental Grant**

One strategy for increasing LCFF supplemental grant funding would be to increase the value of its weight. California policymakers could conduct an adequacy study or look to other states' adequacy studies to help determine the weight required to support students targeted for additional funding by the supplemental grant.

### **Duplicating Counts of Students With Greater Needs**

Increasing the supplemental grant weight alone, however, would not recognize the needs of students who are categorized within more than one group identified as requiring additional support and the compounded challenges they face. To address these challenges, policymakers could consider changing how these students are counted for purposes of generating supplemental grants. For example, California could use duplicated student counts to determine school districts' supplemental grants, which would target increases in supplemental grant funding to school districts that enroll students who face multiple challenges. If policymakers changed the LCFF's fiscal design and implemented this additive funding for students who meet the criteria of multiple groups funded by the supplemental grants, it would join the majority of states that provide this type of additive funding to address the distinct needs of different student groups.

## **Increase Funding to School Districts Not Currently Eligible for Concentration Grants**

The LCFF concentration grant provides a sizable amount of additional funding to school districts that enroll more than 55% of their students from low-income families, English learners, or foster youth. Research shows increased spending due to the concentration grant has caused a significant improvement in math and reading achievement for students in school districts that meet the concentration grant threshold. However, gains in math and reading achievement for school districts just below the 55% concentration grant threshold lag the gains in districts above the threshold. Moreover, around 1 in 5 California students identified by the LCFF to have additional needs is enrolled in a school district ineligible for concentration grants. Policymakers could consider different options for increasing funding to support students with additional needs who are enrolled in school districts ineligible for concentration grants, including lowering the eligibility threshold for such grants, strengthening the supplemental grant, or increasing the base grant.

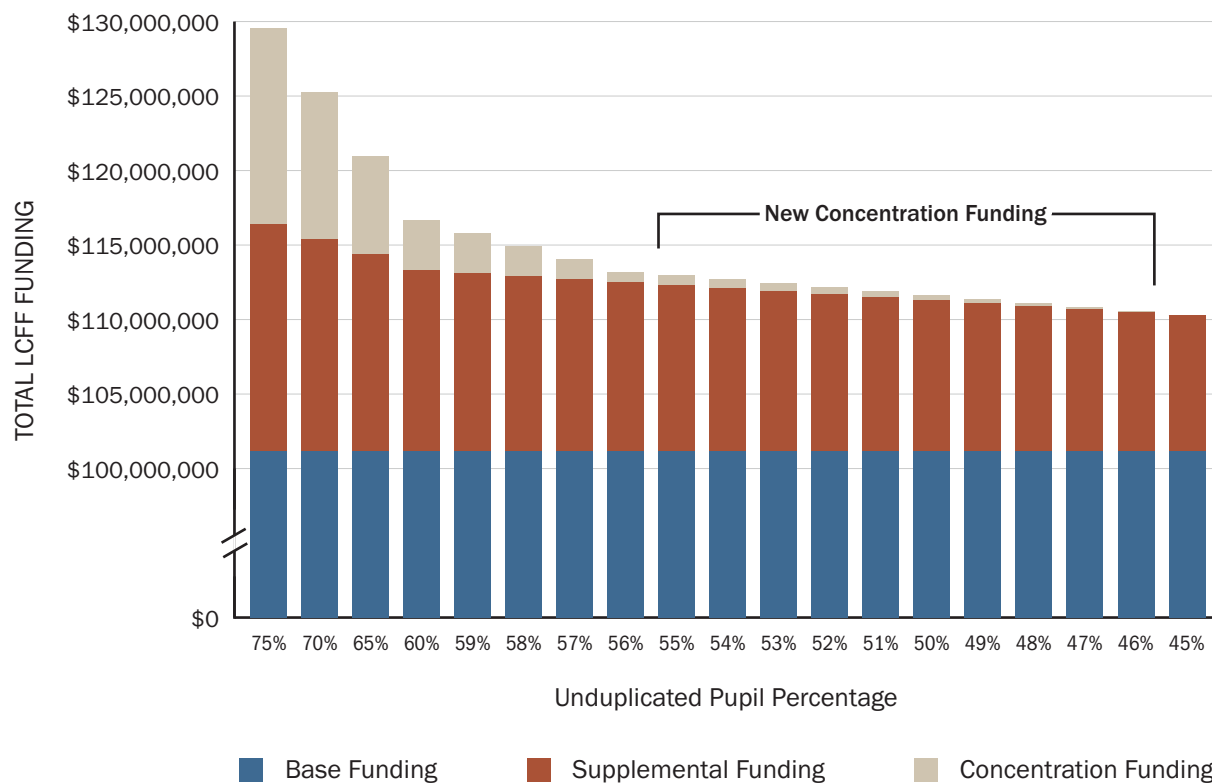
### **Lowering the Eligibility Threshold for Receiving Concentration Grants**

One strategy to increase support for students with greater needs who are enrolled in school districts ineligible for concentration grants would be to lower the eligibility threshold for districts to receive concentration grants. For example, concentration grants could be allocated to school districts that enroll more than 45% of their students who meet the concentration grant criteria, or another threshold could be considered. Lowering the enrollment eligibility threshold for concentration grants could help support students with additional needs in school districts currently ineligible for concentration grants. To the

extent policymakers lower the 55% enrollment threshold for concentration grant eligibility, they would need to consider the appropriate level of eligible student enrollment for generating concentration grants. Moreover, policymakers would need to consider how much it would cost to lower the enrollment threshold for concentration grant eligibility.

Lowering the eligibility threshold for concentration grants would also provide an opportunity to address the current funding cliff that results from the LCFF’s concentration grant funding, where school districts below the 55% enrollment threshold receive significantly less funding than those above it. One method for both limiting the potential costs of reducing the eligibility threshold for concentration grants and mitigating the funding cliff would be to progressively increase concentration grants allocated to K–12 districts above a newly established enrollment eligibility threshold. Under this method, concentration grant funding could gradually ratchet up to reach funding levels currently allocated to K–12 school districts with more than 55% enrollment of students with greater needs. Figure 7 displays a visual example of what this method might look like.

**Figure 7. Example of Progressive Concentration Grants for School Districts Serving 45% or More Students With Greater Needs**



How to read this graph: To illustrate the concept of a progressive allocation of concentration grants, the bars in this graph represent total LCFF funding for hypothetical school districts of equivalent size (10,000 students) serving different proportions of eligible unduplicated pupils. “New Concentration Funding” represents hypothetical additions of concentration grant funds for districts with unduplicated pupil percentages between 46% and 55%, which would increase gradually. Different assumptions can be made about the size of grants and how they graduate along the continuum of concentrated student needs.

Source: Learning Policy Institute calculations. (2025).



## **Strengthening the Supplemental Grant**

Another strategy policymakers could pursue to address the needs of students targeted by the LCFF but enrolled in school districts ineligible for the LCFF concentration grant would be to increase funding allocated through the supplemental grant. To pursue this strategy, policymakers could increase the weight of the LCFF supplemental grant. This approach would mean all school districts that enroll students with greater needs would receive additional funding, including districts that do receive LCFF concentration grants.

Increasing supplemental grant funding to support students with greater needs in school districts ineligible for concentration grants could also be achieved by counting students for each targeted student group in which they are categorized to calculate supplemental grants. Duplicating counts of students with greater needs in K–12 school districts that enroll students who are categorized in more than one group would increase funding for these districts by increasing the size of the grants associated with students who have these needs. If additional categories of need were added to the formula (for students experiencing homelessness, migrant students, or special education students, for example), this would also increase support, especially for districts that serve many of these students. Duplicated counts of students with specific needs could be used to calculate concentration grants or, to mitigate costs, duplicating counts could be restricted for purposes of calculating the supplemental grant alone.

## **Increasing the Base Grant**

Boosting support for students with additional needs who are enrolled in school districts ineligible for concentration grants can also be achieved by increasing the LCFF base grant. Allocating dollars to all school districts regardless of how many students with greater needs they enroll means this approach would not improve LCFF equity as much as funding targeted through the supplemental or concentration grants. However, increasing the LCFF base grant would mean school districts that do not receive concentration grants would receive additional funding that could be used to support students with greater needs.

One strategy for increasing the LCFF base grant would be to establish new aspirational base grant targets that could be reached over a period of years. In many states, these targets (along with supplemental weights) are established through adequacy studies that evaluate the amount of funding that would be needed for students in the state to meet the state's academic standards.

Other strategies for increasing the base grant could address challenges that were not tackled when the LCFF was enacted more than a decade ago. For example, the LCFF base grant provides the same amount of funding to all school districts based on the characteristics of the students that attend their schools. However, costs such as housing and labor vary considerably across a state as large as California, which affects school districts' ability to attract and retain educators and meet the educational needs of their students. One measure of these regional variations indicates labor costs for California's LEAs are more than 65% higher in the most expensive areas of the state compared with those costs in the least expensive areas.<sup>23</sup> Policymakers could establish measures to adjust base grant funding to address these differences in California's regional costs as part of an effort to increase the LCFF base grant.

Whatever strategies policymakers may choose to increase the LCFF base grant would likely depend on the availability of state and local tax revenue. The ability of the state to increase revenue is a question of the health of the state's economy as well as the political will to tap the state's considerable wealth. California mustered the political will to access additional revenue just before the enactment of the LCFF and can look to that history as a model for increasing funding to support the state's students.

## Leveraging the LCFF's Success to Improve the Formula

California enacted the LCFF when the state was emerging from the Great Recession. Several years of state budget cuts to K–12 education spending had led to significant staffing and programmatic reductions in California schools. Facing the specter of even more cuts in state spending for K–12 education and other vital services, California voters approved a ballot measure in the fall of 2012 that raised taxes to shore up the state budget. Proposition 30 increased the state sales tax and the income tax for California's highest earners. The revenues from these tax increases were used to help smooth the path toward enactment of the LCFF in 2013.

California's ability to rise to the challenge of the Great Recession helped create the opportunity to fundamentally change the state's K–12 education finance system. The key factor that facilitated legislative approval of the LCFF was ensuring that no school district would receive fewer resources under the new funding formula. Provisions that held funding for all school districts harmless gave legislators political leeway to include funding for the LCFF's supplemental and concentration grants. The additional revenue produced by Proposition 30 and a growing state economy provided the resources needed to fulfill assurances that all school districts would receive at least the same level of funding as they had prior to the LCFF.

Proposition 30 revenue also helped California reach the LCFF's funding targets, which were created when the new formula was initially approved, 2 years earlier than anticipated. However, the year prior to the LCFF's enactment inflation-adjusted state K–12 education spending per student dropped to a more than 2-decade low, and reaching these funding targets did not reflect the level of support California's students actually needed to reach academic standards. Nonetheless, the political will to tap the resources of California's residents and high-income earners allowed the state to climb out of a deep funding hole and helped build the foundation of the state's new K–12 education finance system.

Now that California has established a stable foundation for its K–12 education finance system, there is an opportunity to renew the state's efforts to face persistent challenges and reflect upon how LCFF's successes can help address them. This report highlights some of those successes, including how spending increases for school districts that have large shares of students with greater needs caused improved student outcomes. The report also points to challenges that have been revealed by sophisticated analyses of years of LCFF implementation data. These analyses make it possible for policymakers to use the LCFF as a roadmap to improve students' educational opportunities, especially for students who require additional support.

The report provides a framework that California policymakers and education stakeholders may consider for adjusting the LCFF to leverage its successes. Additional funding may be required to again ensure that all California K–12 school districts will gain resources from potential changes to the LCFF. The state's abundant resources and history of raising revenues to overcome even more daunting challenges should embolden California policymakers to build on the LCFF's strong foundation and meet the opportunity to improve the lives of millions more of its students.

## Endnotes

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15. The recommended weight for English learners was 15% in the District of Columbia and 40% in Michigan and Nevada.
16. The recommended weight for at-risk students was 30% in Michigan and 81% in Delaware.

17. Griffith, M., & Burns, D. (2025). *Funding student needs: A review of state funding policies for English learners and students from low-income backgrounds*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/471.440>. To calculate the amount of additional funding, LPI multiplied the weights by each study's recommended base amount and then adjusted the additional amounts for inflation to 2024 dollars.
18. In addition to the 20 states that provided a flat weight in their formula to support at-risk students, 11 states used variable weights, 10 states provided funding by allocating a dollar amount per student, 2 states used counts of at-risk students in each district to determine the amount of base funding, and 1 state provided funding for additional staff positions based on their number of at-risk students.
19. In addition to the 21 states that provided a flat weight in their formula to support English learners, 12 states used variable weights, with 7 of those states varying their weights based on a student's English proficiency, 3 using the percentage or number of English learners in a district, and 2 basing the additional weight on a student's grade level. In addition to the 33 states that provided additional weights in their formulas to support English learners, 10 states provided funding for English learners by allocating a dollar amount per student, 3 states provided funding for additional staff positions based on their number of English learners, 2 states used counts of English learners in each district to determine the amount of base funding, and 1 state made use of a hybrid system that provides an extra weight of 58.9% per English learner and funds additional staffing positions for programs that support English learners.
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