

ADVANCING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE IN CALIFORNIA:

THE EDUCATION TRUST—WEST 2012 POLICY AGENDA

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The Education Trust—West

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This year, 2012, promises to be a pivotal one for California's students. From Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal to reform our education finance system, to competing ballot initiatives to raise more funds for schools, to efforts to change the school accountability system, our elected officials will grapple with a host of high-stakes decisions with long-term impact.

At risk is our state's economic future. To meet the demands of our economy, California will need one million more college graduates by 2025 than our education system is on track to produce. We cannot achieve this target without dramatically expanding college and career opportunities for the students of color and low-income students who are the overwhelming majority in California's classrooms. As state leaders make critical choices about the future of our education system, they must correct the inequities that have led to unacceptable gaps in opportunity and achievement.

Children facing poverty need additional resources to catch up to their more affluent peers. Yet, evidence shows that rather than providing high-need students with extra resources, California provides them with less of everything that matters. Low-income students and students of color are less likely to be taught by the best trained, most effective teachers than their more advantaged peers. High-poverty school districts receive fewer dollars than more affluent communities, even though it costs more to educate students who start off behind and have greater educational needs. Low-income, African-American, and Latino students are less likely to have access to rigorous, college-ready coursework while in high school, and therefore less likely to succeed in higher education.

These inequities are not inevitable, BUT ADDRESSING THEM WILL TAKE COURAGE.

Against a backdrop of state education budget cuts and a precarious economy, our leaders will once again be tempted to push important decisions into the future. This would be a mistake. California's 6 million students deserve a better future, which must begin with better schools. To build a more equitable education system that can transform the lives of our students, we urge our elected leaders to commit to the following agenda:

1 IMPROVE TEACHER AND LEADER EFFECTIVENESS.

Parents and researchers agree that teachers are the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement. For this reason, we must better identify effective teachers, support all teachers so they can grow professionally, address ineffective teaching, and ensure that our highest need students have access to our best teachers and leaders.

2 REFORM THE SCHOOL FINANCE AND FUNDING SYSTEM.

Our existing system is opaque, irrational, and unfair. We must reform our education finance system so it makes sense to all stakeholders and adequately and equitably supports the diverse needs of California's learners. Districts must ensure the bulk of the funds are spent at the school level and should be held accountable for both equitable spending and results.

3 OFFER RIGOROUS STANDARDS, CURRICULUM, AND ASSESSMENTS.

We must prepare our students for the demands of college and 21st-century careers. This means establishing college preparatory graduation requirements, offering a challenging curriculum that integrates college and career preparation, and ensuring equitable access to the Common Core State Standards.

4 STRENGTHEN SCHOOL AND DISTRICT ACCOUNTABILITY.

To strengthen school performance, we must set clear, ambitious performance and gap-closing targets that are aligned with college and career readiness. We must take decisive action where schools, especially the lowest performers, fall short of those goals and offer tailored supports to all schools needing an extra boost to reach their targets.

In this publication, we recommend state policy reforms in each of these areas. We urge our state's leaders to act boldly to close the opportunity and achievement gaps that have long plagued our schools, ensuring that every child in California receives a high-quality education.



IMPROVING TEACHER AND LEADER EFFECTIVENESS

**“A GREAT TEACHER
CAN OFFER AN
ESCAPE FROM
POVERTY TO
THE CHILD WHO
DREAMS BEYOND
HIS CIRCUMSTANCE.”**

– PRESIDENT OBAMA
2012 STATE OF THE
UNION ADDRESS

Effective teachers have an enormous impact on the lives of their students. Great teachers can help students who are behind academically catch up to grade-level expectations. By accelerating student performance, they can help close the opportunity and achievement gaps that cut short the college and career dreams of so many low-income students and students of color.

But sadly, research, including our own, demonstrates that low-income students and students of color are disproportionately taught by the least effective teachers.¹ Meanwhile, despite the best intentions of many district leaders and educators, a host of state and district policies and decisions exacerbate existing inequities.

There are opportunities to do things differently. We recommend a number of state policy changes that can expand access to effective teaching and help all teachers improve.

STATE LEADERS SHOULD TAKE THE FOLLOWING STEPS:

1

OVERHAUL THE TEACHER AND PRINCIPAL EVALUATION PROCESS.

Invest in evaluation systems that can help identify both effective and ineffective teachers, and use these evaluations as part of a broader system of teacher feedback, development, and support. These evaluations should be conducted annually by trained evaluators and should include multiple measures, with student achievement playing a prominent role. The evaluations should result in multiple rating categories (such as highly effective, effective, satisfactory, and ineffective), and districts should use these results when making decisions about tenure, compensation, professional development, promotion, assignment, layoff, and dismissal. As districts build their teacher evaluation systems, they also should develop and implement a system for evaluating principals. Principal evaluations should be based primarily on student outcomes, while also considering how the principal has shown leadership to drive better results at the school site.

2

PROVIDE THE OVERSIGHT NECESSARY TO ENSURE THAT LOW-INCOME STUDENTS AND STUDENTS OF COLOR ARE NOT DISPROPORTIONATELY TAUGHT BY INEFFECTIVE TEACHERS.

Current federal laws require that adequately prepared and certified teachers are equitably distributed among schools. In keeping with this law, California should continue to ensure that its highest need students have access to “Highly Qualified Teachers” who are appropriately prepared for the job. At the same time, it should develop teacher-quality measures that go beyond preparation and look at effectiveness on the job, with a focus on student achievement. With these measures, the state should set annual targets for equitable teacher assignment within and across districts and hold districts accountable for meeting these targets.

3

GIVE STRUGGLING TEACHERS SUFFICIENT OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE; IF THEY CAN'T, PROMPTLY REVOKE TENURE.

Too often, ineffective teachers are allowed to linger in California's classrooms because of our state's lengthy, expensive, and cumbersome dismissal process. When teachers are identified as low performing, they should enter into a comprehensive remediation plan to improve instruction and performance. Teachers receiving an overall unsatisfactory rating should have one year to significantly improve their performance, with remediation provided, or return to probationary status.

4

REFORM STATE LAWS GOVERNING “LAST IN, FIRST OUT” LAYOFFS.

California is just one of 11 states that require school districts to use seniority as a primary criterion when making decisions on teacher layoffs.² It is time for California to repeal this outdated, bureaucratic, and harmful state mandate, replacing it with a broader law that ensures use of more relevant factors, including employee performance, when deciding on reductions in force.

5

EXPAND THE STATE'S TEACHER AND STUDENT LONGITUDINAL DATA SYSTEMS TO HELP IDENTIFY, RECRUIT, RETAIN, AND PROMOTE EFFECTIVE TEACHERS.

To provide district leaders with better information on trends in teacher effectiveness and data on how individual teachers contribute to student learning, the state should build its capacity to link teachers to the students they educate. Specifically, the state should continue to develop its longitudinal and student data systems so as to identify “teachers of record.” By having data on such factors as how teachers are contributing to student achievement, where they are teaching, where they received their teacher preparation, and how they are progressing on the job, the state can better evaluate and support teacher preparation programs, identify promising practices in teacher professional development, and monitor the equitable distribution of effective educators.



REFORMING THE SCHOOL FINANCE AND FUNDING SYSTEM

**“THE STATE’S
CURRENT
K-12 FUNDING
SYSTEM IS
COMPLEX,
INEQUITABLE,
AND
INEFFICIENT.”**

— CALIFORNIA
LEGISLATIVE
ANALYST’S
OFFICE, IN ITS
ANALYSIS OF THE
GOVERNOR’S
2012-13
EDUCATION
BUDGET
PROPOSAL

California’s system for funding schools is fundamentally unfair. Not only does California inadequately fund its schools, it also fails to equitably allocate existing dollars. California ranks near the bottom when it comes to K-12 funding, with 42 states spending more per student.³ We have fewer teachers, guidance counselors, and librarians per student than any state in the nation.

Two separate lawsuits have been filed against the state claiming inadequate funding for schools, and advocates have introduced ballot initiatives to boost education funding. However, it will take more than just extra dollars to fix California’s education finance system.

A better system would offer districts and schools with large concentrations of high-need students the extra dollars they need to achieve. Currently, we do just the opposite. In fact, California’s highest poverty districts—those with the largest concentrations of low-income students—receive \$620 less per student from state and local sources than the state’s wealthiest districts.⁴ Further, there are no assurances that the dollars districts do spend will make their way to the school level in an equitable fashion, and limited fiscal transparency and accountability make it hard to tell where districts and schools have spent their money. In 2005 we estimated that California’s high-poverty schools spent tens of thousands of dollars less on teacher salaries than low-poverty schools of similar size and in the same school districts every year.⁵

State policymakers should resolve the inequitable aspects of the state's school finance system to ensure that California's highest need students get the resources they need.

OUR LEADERS SHOULD TAKE THE FOLLOWING STEPS:

1 SHIFT TO A WEIGHTED STUDENT FORMULA MODEL THAT PROVIDES ADDITIONAL DOLLARS TO STUDENTS WITH GREATER EDUCATIONAL NEEDS.

The current system, which funnels the bulk of funding to districts through a base "revenue limit" allocation and a collection of categorical programs, is complex, irrational, and inequitable. Many of the existing formulas result from historical precedent and opaque, subjective decisions. Developing a new set of simpler, transparent rules to guide resource allocation would demystify the system and could better target dollars according to student needs. A weighted student formula would ensure that those districts whose students have greater learning needs receive more funds. At the same time, state leaders should build better reporting systems that allow the public to see the sources of a district's revenues, the formulas used to generate these allocations, and revenue comparisons by district.

2 ENSURE THAT STUDENTS RECEIVE THE FUNDS INTENDED FOR THEM.

Under the current system and in the governor's proposed weighted student formula model, districts are the recipients of state and local funds, even those funds targeted to specific student populations. Too often, these funds can be diverted for other uses. Instead, the bulk of per-pupil funding should follow the student to the school level and should not get spent on other schools, district-level needs, or programs. This means requiring that districts account for actual versus average teacher salaries, so that high-poverty schools, which often employ more junior, lower salaried teachers, do not end up subsidizing schools with more experienced and higher paid teachers. In addition, principals, faculty, and parents should be involved in site-level spending decisions.

3 REQUIRE DISTRICTS TO REPORT TRANSPARENTLY ON DISTRICT AND SCHOOL-LEVEL SPENDING.

Parents, community members, and taxpayers should be able to see how education dollars are being spent. This is currently almost impossible, because each district accounts for spending differently. Require school districts to adopt a common accounting system and report data on district and school-level spending, including actual teacher salaries, through a state website and standard reporting format. Such a system would allow the public to see whether the district is making equitable spending decisions across all its schools and will allow stakeholders to compare spending priorities across districts.

4 MONITOR THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FINANCIAL INPUTS AND ACADEMIC RESULTS.

The state should build reports that allow the public to view school and district expenditures alongside student achievement measures derived from a strong accountability system. This would provide information about what investments seem to be paying off when it comes to student learning. Such information can foster cross-school and cross-district dialogue about strategies and investments that most positively impact students, particularly high-need learners.



OFFERING RIGOROUS STANDARDS, CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENTS

**“WE NEED TO MAKE
HIGH-QUALITY
COLLEGE-PREP
COURSES PART OF
EVERY HIGH SCHOOL’S
CURRICULUM,
SO THAT ALL STUDENTS
— NOT JUST A SELECT
FEW— ARE PREPARED
FOR THE FUTURE.”**

— KATI HAYCOCK,
PRESIDENT OF
THE EDUCATION TRUST,
FEBRUARY 2005

To fill workplace needs over the next two decades, California will need 1 million more college graduates than our education system is on track to produce.⁶ Sadly, our high school to college pipeline is broken, with too few students completing high school, enrolling in postsecondary institutions, and completing degrees. The leaks in this pipeline disproportionately hurt low-income students and students of color.

California’s high schools must dramatically increase not only the number of students who are earning diplomas, but also the number of students who graduate with meaningful preparation. This means ensuring that students have the skills, knowledge, and coursework necessary for college and career. And it means eliminating the systematic tracking that exacerbates differences among student subgroups: Low-income students and students of color receive less demanding coursework, limiting the scope of both their education and their future college and career options.

All California students should be well prepared for both college and the workforce.

CALIFORNIA POLICYMAKERS SHOULD TAKE THE FOLLOWING STEPS:

1 ESTABLISH COLLEGE-PREPARATORY GRADUATION STANDARDS.

California must strengthen its graduation requirements and align them with college-ready expectations. All students ought to graduate with the courses needed to enter California's public universities. In 20 states across the country and the District of Columbia, students are already required to complete a college-preparatory curriculum to earn a diploma, in recognition that a rigorous course of study is necessary for both college and career.⁷ Until California's default graduation requirements are strong enough to make a student eligible for the University of California (UC) and the California State University (CSU) systems, we must continue to expand access to the "A-G" course sequence required by our state's public university systems.

2 ENSURE HIGH-QUALITY IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS.

Without a well-designed implementation plan, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are unlikely to lead to improvements in classroom instruction and educational outcomes. To ensure all students have access to and learn content aligned to the CCSS, the state must accelerate and expand its efforts to provide tools, resources, and professional development for educators. To this end, the state should take the following steps:

- a. Review and adopt materials aligned to the CCSS with timelines to support implementation; make available to California educators online the best materials created by other states.
- b. Provide guidance and support to districts as they transition to the new standards and redefine instructional priorities.

- c. Ensure that all districts, especially those with the highest poverty, have the technology and know-how needed to administer new online "adaptive" assessments, which adjust up or down in difficulty in response to student answers.
- d. Empower teachers and educators to use the assessments to track and improve student learning once new assessment data is available.

3 OFFER CAREER-READY OPPORTUNITIES THAT ARE FULLY INTEGRATED WITH A COLLEGE-READY COURSE OF STUDY.

The state must ensure that high school programs and curriculum focused on career preparation also equip students for college success. Linked Learning illustrates one approach that, when implemented well, joins strong academics, demanding technical education, work-based learning, and student supports. In expanding and implementing college and career-preparation programs, the state must ensure that districts and schools have incentives to offer equitable access to this coursework and are held accountable for equitable outcomes, including high school graduation and A-G rates.

4 COLLECT AND USE DATA TO INFORM DECISION-MAKING.

California must continue to fund, develop, and implement the state's student data system (CALPADS) so that all stakeholders have the data they need to evaluate and support student learning and system improvement. A system that tracks individual student progress from early childhood through the K-12 system, into postsecondary education, and then into the workforce, will allow the state to determine which programs yield the most results. Further, such a system will help educators work with parents to support each student's progress.



STRENGTHENING SCHOOL AND DISTRICT ACCOUNTABILITY

**“WITHOUT
ACCOUNTABILITY
IT IS TOO EASY TO
RETURN TO A TIME,
PRIOR TO NCLB, WHEN
STUDENTS’ ACTUAL
PERFORMANCE WAS
MASKED BY AVERAGES.”**

– U.S. REP. GEORGE MILLER,
OPENING STATEMENT FOR A
HEARING BY THE U.S. HOUSE
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
AND THE WORKFORCE,
*EDUCATION REFORMS:
EXAMINING THE FEDERAL
ROLE IN PUBLIC SCHOOL
ACCOUNTABILITY,
SEPTEMBER 2011*

Parents want to know how their schools are performing, and communities demand that we improve our state’s lowest performing schools. Yet our current state accountability system offers confusing information on school performance and schools face few consequences for persistent failure to improve.⁸

Most troubling is the fact that the state’s expectations for progress are far too low. For instance, the High Priority Schools Grant Program, targeted at the lowest 10 percent of all schools statewide, required that schools demonstrate growth of just a single API point each year in exchange for significant funding. And in 2010, we found that 70 percent of the California schools targeted for federal School Improvement Grants, a turnaround program for the state’s lowest 5 percent of schools, had already received substantial state funds for improvement in the preceding years, but had failed to improve.

California should set clear college and career-ready expectations for our schools, take decisive action when those expectations are not met—especially in the lowest performing schools, and offer tailored supports to all schools needing help reaching their targets.

STATE LEADERS SHOULD DO THE FOLLOWING:

1

USE SEVERAL VALID, RELIABLE MEASURES OF SCHOOL PERFORMANCE TIED TO COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS.

When making accountability determinations, the state should use a mix of valid, reliable measures that parents and community members can easily find and understand. To identify both high-performing and persistently underperforming schools, California should expand its accountability system to include other metrics in addition to absolute student performance. These could include individual student growth rates, graduation rates, and A-G graduation rates. All indicators used to make high-stakes decisions should conform to robust data-quality standards and protocols. The state must therefore have processes for validating all data used to make accountability determinations.

2

SET MORE AMBITIOUS LONG-TERM GOALS AND INTERIM TARGETS.

Goals that are meaningful, challenging, and achievable will guide the work of schools and districts and inspire educators to aim high. State leaders should set goals to increase achievement for all students and close gaps between groups of students. The current statewide goal, 800 on the Academic Performance Index (API), has not been revised since its inception in 1999, and schools can achieve 800 even if a substantial percentage of their students are not at grade level. A more ambitious goal, such as an API of 875, would ensure that more students are achieving proficiency. Further, the state's current expectations for the annual growth of schools and their student subgroups are far too low. These annual targets should be accelerated.

3

BUILD A DIFFERENTIATED SYSTEM OF REWARDS, SUPPORTS, AND CONSEQUENCES.

California leaders should reward schools and districts that consistently meet or exceed their goals with resources, recognition, and autonomy. As part of this, the state should arrange for others to learn from schools and districts that

demonstrate sustained high performance and improvements. Meanwhile, those that struggle to meet their goals should receive differentiated interventions and supports and face meaningful consequences, including complete school redesign, if they consistently fail to improve.

4

SUPPORT DISTRICTS IN SUPPORTING THEIR SCHOOLS.

The state should target school improvement efforts at the lowest performing schools. Yet in most cases, districts can serve as a first-line of support for schools that need extra help in meeting their targets. District leaders, in partnership with the school community, can diagnose and address a school's unique challenges. However, district administrators cannot make significant improvements if their hands are tied on key personnel or curriculum choices. Therefore, the state should require districts engaged in school improvement efforts to do the following:

- a. Let principals in high-need schools staff their sites as they see fit. Specifically, the state should require that such school leaders be allowed to select their staffs, decline forced teacher placements, and protect their staff from layoffs during budget cuts.
- b. Give principals leeway to make decisions about curricula, instructional strategies, and the use of time, such as a redesign or extension of the school day or year.

5

AGGRESSIVELY TURN AROUND ITS MOST STRUGGLING SCHOOLS.

For persistently low-performing and slowly improving schools, and their districts, the state must take decisive action, implementing comprehensive, systematic, and effective approaches to school improvement, coupled with strong accountability for meeting aggressive targets. These improvement efforts should start by staffing those schools with strong school leaders empowered to make important staffing and instructional decisions.

CONCLUSION

In the face of tough economic times and tight budgets, California leaders should move boldly to create long-term prosperity for our state. That means summoning the political will to put equity and excellence in our schools at the top of the policy agenda.

Policymakers often say that California's children are our future. Yet to turn that vision into reality, our leaders must commit to building opportunities for success at every level of our education system. Every student deserves an effective teacher. Every school and district should receive adequate and equitable funding based on their students' needs, and should be held accountable for results. And every high school should prepare its graduates to attend college, pursue a fulfilling career, or both.

Achieving these goals will take more than just rhetoric and good intentions. It will take the political courage to fundamentally reform key aspects of California's education system, so that it truly serves our low-income students and students of color, and allows all our students to achieve their college and career dreams.

NOTES

1. Carrie Hahnel and Orville Jackson, "Learning Denied: The Case for Equitable Access to Effective Teaching in California's Largest School District," (Oakland, Calif.: The Education Trust—West, January 2012). See also: Tennessee Department of Education, "Tennessee's Most Effective Teachers: Are They Assigned to the Schools That Need Them the Most?" research brief (Nashville, Tenn.: Tennessee Department of Education, 2007). Tim Sass, Jane Hannaway, Zeyu Xu, David Figlio, and Li Feng. "Value-Added of Teachers in High-Poverty Schools and Lower Poverty Schools," (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, National Center for the Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, working paper 52, November 2010).
2. National Council of Teacher Quality, "2011 State Teacher Policy Yearbook: National Summary," (Washington, D.C.: NCTQ, 2012).
3. Brian Edwards, "How California Ranks," (Mountain View, Calif.: EdSource, 2010). This reflects 2007-2008 per-pupil spending, adjusted for labor costs and other cost-of-living differences between states.
4. Heather Baronciss, Laura Schroeder, and Carrie Hahnel, "The Cruel Divide: How California's Education Finance System Shortchanges its Poorest School Districts," Oakland, Calif.: The Education Trust—West, February 2012).
5. The Education Trust—West, "California's Hidden Teacher Spending Gap: How State and District Budgeting Practices Shortchange Poor and Minority Students and Their Schools," Oakland, Calif.: The Education Trust—West, 2005).
6. Hans Johnson, "Educating California: Choices for the Future," (San Francisco, Calif.: Public Policy Institute of California, 2009).
7. American Diploma Project, "Closing the Expectations Gap 2011: Sixth Annual 50-State Progress Report on the Alignment of High School Policies with the Demands of College and Careers," (Washington, D.C.: Achieve, February 2011).
8. The Education Trust—West, "Keeping the Promise of Change: Why California's Chronically Underperforming Schools Need Bold Reforms," Oakland, Calif.: The Education Trust—West, May 2010).

The Education Trust—West works for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, pre-k through college. We expose opportunity and achievement gaps that separate students of color and low-income students from other youth, and we identify and advocate for the strategies that will forever close those gaps.



The Education Trust—West

1814 Franklin St., Suite 220, Oakland, Calif. 94612
T 510/465-6444 • F 510/465-0589
www.edtrustwest.org