

2011 Policy Agenda



The Education Trust—West

www.edtrustwest.org

As 2011 begins, California faces significant challenges that threaten the future of its students. California ranks in the bottom 15 percent of the nation in reading and math on national assessments, and wide opportunity and achievement gaps persist in our schools. Governor Jerry Brown's new budget projects a \$25 billion shortfall and proposes significant cuts to the state's universities and community colleges. While the governor seeks to spare K-12 education from cuts of more than \$2 billion, spending levels will still fall in 2011-12 as one-time federal stimulus money dries up.

At the same time, there is reason for hope. Governor Brown and the new legislature have the potential to usher in an era of change in Sacramento, removing the political gridlock that has stalled passage of key education reforms. As the most diverse state in the nation, one in which students of color make up 73 percent of California public schools, California is well positioned to leverage its great linguistic and cultural diversity when competing in an increasingly global economy. And with public universities and a technology sector that are the envy of the nation, California must be at the forefront of producing the next generation of this nation's leaders and innovators.

Now is the time to leverage California's assets and push for change that will accelerate the pace of progress in the state's public schools. The status quo is no longer acceptable. Therefore, we must focus on reforms in four critical areas:

- 1. Ensure access to effective teachers for every student.** While teachers and principals are the most valuable resources in our schools, we need to find new ways to support and leverage our precious human capital—and ensure that our highest-need students have access to our very best teachers and leaders.
- 2. Ensure accountability for student performance and the equitable use of education resources.** As we confront the dual challenges of budget

deficits and persistent achievement and opportunity gaps, we must maintain high expectations for student performance while ensuring that scarce dollars benefit the students of color and students in poverty who have been traditionally underserved by our education system.

- 3. Support access to and success in college and career, from K-12 through higher education.** We need to raise expectations, prevent students from being “tracked” into lower level courses and programs based on perceived ability, and ensure accountability for student attainment, so that all students are eligible to attend college and are prepared for both college and career success.
- 4. Implement statewide data systems that support teaching and learning at the local level.** Our state must have a longitudinal data system that provides critical information to decision-makers at all levels to address student needs and improve education systems.

Here, we lay out the targeted policy recommendations that we believe will promote positive change in each of these areas. We encourage our state's leaders to take bold, reform-minded actions to close the achievement and opportunity gaps that have long stifled the promise of so many of our state's students of color and students in poverty—thereby ensuring that every child in California receives a high-quality education.

Ensure Access to **Effective Teachers** for Every Student

The single most important school-based factor in improving student academic performance is the quality of the teacher in the classroom. Effective teachers and school leaders not only raise achievement, but they also have the potential to close long-standing achievement gaps for the Latino and African-American students who are nearly 60 percent of our state's student population. Research makes this clear: students who have a series of strong teachers will soar academically, while those who have weak teachers simply fall further and further behind.

However, without a robust evaluation system that emphasizes the impact of a teacher in improving student performance, it is impossible to ensure our highest-need students have access to effective teachers. It is also impossible to identify those teachers who are ineffective at their job.

California needs to strengthen its policies regarding teacher evaluation and ensure school districts use the results of evaluations when making high-stakes staffing decisions, with a focus on ensuring that the highest-need students have access to the best teachers.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **OVERHAUL THE TEACHER AND SCHOOL LEADER**

EVALUATION PROCESS. Current evaluation systems do a poor job of measuring teacher and principal quality, making it difficult to spot top performers or identify those who are struggling and in need of support. School districts must develop and implement robust teacher and principal evaluation systems to assess performance. These systems should use multiple measures to evaluate effectiveness, with at least 50 percent based on student academic performance.

2. **MAKE STAFFING DECISIONS BASED ON**

EFFECTIVENESS, NOT SENIORITY. School districts must have the flexibility to assign, reassign, layoff, and transfer teachers and administrators based on their effectiveness, school need, and subject-matter needs—without regard to years of service. This recommendation includes repealing “last-hired, first-fired” laws. California is just one of 12 states that requires school districts to use seniority as the primary criterion when making teacher layoff decisions. It is time for California to repeal this dated, bureaucratic, and harmful state mandate, replacing it with a broader law that ensures that other factors, including employee performance, are used when making tough staffing decisions.

3. **PROTECT HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS FROM THE**

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT OF LAYOFFS. Until all layoff decisions can be made on the basis of

teacher quality (as measured by evaluations that include student performance data), school districts must be given the explicit flexibility to deviate from the process of seniority-based layoffs. Our research has shown that the state's reduction in force process and the resulting staff churn can result in a disproportionate impact on high-poverty schools. To mitigate potential negative impacts, schools must also be allowed to use existing evaluation data when making layoff decisions. And principals and school communities must also be provided with additional authority to protect their students and instructional programs from involuntary transfers.

4. **EXTEND THE REDUCTION IN FORCE DEADLINE.**

District leaders must currently make reduction in force decisions early in the year, before accurate financial and budgetary data is available. As a result, many more notices are issued than are necessary. California should extend the March 15 notice date so that district leaders can make more accurate layoff estimates and avoid the damage caused by over-noticing.

5. **COLLECT AND REPORT TEACHER LAYOFF DATA.**

The state should collect and share data on teacher dismissals, by school and by district, so that policymakers and local communities have accurate data to monitor and address reduction in force patterns.

Ensure **Accountability For Student Performance** and the **Equitable Use of Education Resources**

Over the last several years, local education improvements have been imperiled by budgetary dysfunction at the state level. Because California’s leaders have failed to develop a stable long-term budget solution, and because they have depended on gimmicks and short-time budget fixes, the state faces a massive 18-month budget deficit of \$25 billion.

The state’s education system has suffered an escalating series of budget cuts in recent years. However, in his January budget, Governor Brown spared K-12 education from over \$2 billion in additional cuts, instead calling upon taxpayers to pass an initiative extending personal income and sales taxes, as well as the vehicle license fee rate, which are otherwise due to expire.

While we applaud the governor’s commitment to limiting education budget cuts, taxpayers deserve the assurance that their money will be spent wisely and on behalf of students. Over the past three years, too many school districts have cut learning time and programs and services for the state’s high-need students while maintaining salary, benefit, and pension levels for their longest-tenured employees. In fact, California’s teachers are the highest paid in the nation, even though per-pupil funding, when adjusted for labor costs, ranks in the bottom 10 percent. In a state where overall spending is low but salaries are high, students lose out.

Clearly, the state budget crisis requires us to be nimble with our existing resources and do more with less. While reductions in spending are looming, this must be done against a backdrop of accountability for performance and equitable funding for the state’s highest-need students. Educational reforms are possible in tough budget times, but our state leaders must first create the right incentives and remove barriers to change.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. ENSURE EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF SCHOOL

FUNDING. California should shift toward a school funding system based on student needs. Such a system will allow for greater equity while also simplifying an overly complex and inefficient system, which currently results in broad funding variations between districts, even those with similar student demographics.

2. PUBLICALLY REPORT INFORMATION ON SPENDING AND RESOURCE USE.

California needs to allow for transparency into the resource decisions made by districts, so that communities know where dollars are going. The state should highlight spending on personnel, including teacher salaries and benefits, student-to-teacher ratios, administrative costs, support services and class sizes. In particular, districts should be required to transparently share teacher expenditures on a per-school basis, providing data on “real” teacher

salaries rather than average district pay ranges—the current practice in many districts. If high-need schools with less senior, lower paid teachers are receiving fewer total resources, the public ought to know.

3. CREATE CONDITIONS AND INCENTIVES FOR

PERFORMANCE. Districts and schools should be held accountable for student performance and improvement, particularly in struggling schools. Incentives can be as important as consequences, however, and strong student outcomes should lead to increased flexibility over how funds are spent at the local level. That way, schools and districts will be motivated to innovate and use human and financial resources more effectively on behalf of students.

Support Access to and Success in College and Career, From K-12 Through Higher Education

Recent projections suggest that California will face a shortage of one million bachelor's degree holders for the workforce by 2025. Further, 41 percent of jobs will require at least a bachelor's degree, but only 35 percent of adults in California will hold that credential. Clearly, the shortage of college graduates in our state is a critical issue that we cannot afford to ignore.

In a 21st century economy, access to and success in college and career require the same foundation: (1) strong academic preparation via access to rigorous curriculum at all levels of the education pipeline, and (2) statewide policies that ensure all students are given the support needed to successfully reach their college and career goals.

However, far too frequently, students of color and students in poverty are systematically denied access to rigorous coursework and continue to be adversely and disproportionately affected by policies and practices that discourage the successful completion of their college and career aspirations. Our goal is to ensure that all California students have access to a rigorous curriculum, as well as college and career-ready opportunities, from K-12 through the higher education pipeline.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. ESTABLISH COLLEGE-PREPARATORY GRADUATION

STANDARDS. California must strengthen its graduation requirements so that its standards meet the high expectations set out by the K-12 Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and so that all students graduate with the courses needed to enter California's public universities. In 21 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 success. California must continue its commitment to the CCSS and raise its expectations so that all students graduate college-ready. 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. EVALUATE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CAREER PREPARATION PROGRAMS.

California's high schools are increasingly offering an array of programs and courses aimed at preparing students for career success. We must evaluate whether investments in career pathway programs that are inclusive of Career Technical Education courses, such as the California Partnership Academies (CPAs), Regional Occupational Centers and Programs (ROCPs), and Linked Learning are contributing to positive college and career outcomes, particularly for low-income students and students of color. In addition, we need to evaluate whether these programs have the unintended, negative consequence of tracking low-income students and students of color into less rigorous courses.

3. STRENGTHEN HIGHER EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY.

We need to hold higher education institutions (e.g., community colleges, the UC and CSU systems, private institutions, and for-profit institutions) accountable for ensuring that all students, including students of color and students in poverty, successfully complete their post-secondary goals. The state should adopt funding models that tie funding to evidence-based milestones of student success.

Implement **Statewide Data Systems** that Support Teaching and Learning at the Local Level

In a state of more than 1,000 school districts and 6.2 million students, the easy exchange of information is imperative. Without good data, the state's most vulnerable students—many of whom are highly mobile—fall through the cracks. A high-functioning, statewide longitudinal data system will ensure that data on students and their achievement follows them as they move from grade to grade, across campuses and between school districts. With such a system in place, every teacher will be armed with information to more effectively meet their students' needs.

Unfortunately, California's K-12 data system (California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System, or CALPADS) is not yet sufficiently functional, nor does it link into other agency systems. Although California boasts Silicon Valley and prides itself on technical innovation, its education data system is lagging behind most other states in the nation. According to the Data Quality Campaign, California is behind 24 other states when it comes to implementing the critical baseline elements needed in a longitudinal data system. When it comes to building a system that allows people to effectively use data, the state has taken only two of 10 recommended actions, placing California behind 40 other states.

While momentum toward a statewide longitudinal education data system has been building over the last decade, technical snags, the state's budget crisis, and shortsighted decisions have slowed the pace of progress. Despite the current economic climate, California must not delay completing the system and making the best use of the data it collects.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. CONTINUE BUILDING CALPADS.** California must continue to fund, develop, and implement the state's student and teacher data systems (CALPADS and CALTIDES) so that educators and policymakers have access to the data needed to make informed decisions. This includes affirming the California Department of Education (CDE) as the CALPADS management entity so that data reporting continues and ongoing development stays on track.
- 2. USE DATA TO INFORM DECISION MAKING.** California needs to expand the use of data to inform decisions at the school, district, and state levels. By building interactive, dynamic query tools and reports—and offering accompanying professional development—educators can access the data needed to make decisions on behalf of students. In building these solutions, we recommend reviewing the promising practices from California districts and other states—many of whom have built best-in-class systems for putting actionable data into the hands of educators and decision-makers.
- 3. BUILD PRESCHOOL THROUGH COLLEGE DATA LINKAGES.** State agencies should be encouraged to link and use data beyond K-12, from preschool through college, and across sectors such as workforce and social services. The effective exchange of data between agencies can ensure that students are supported from preschool to college, and that students with special needs and students receiving social services are supported by adults who can make well-informed decisions on their behalf. The SB 1298 Working Group report can be used as a starting point for resolving issues of governance and data sharing across state agencies so that data is linked and exchanged properly and expeditiously.
- 4. ENSURE DATA QUALITY.** The state can enhance the reliability and accuracy of CALPADS data by providing districts with ongoing resources and guidance to support local data management practices, so that data is reliably collected, maintained, and reported. Further, the state needs to ensure that districts are incentivized to provide accurate data to the state, and held accountable for doing so. Until districts have incentives to provide accurate data, and until they get something back from the state in exchange for reporting, data quality will flounder and decision-making on behalf of students will suffer.

Mission:

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.

What We Do:

The Education Trust—West is a statewide educational policy, research and advocacy organization. We use a three-pronged approach to advance our mission:

- **Policy and Research** – We identify and analyze data related to the achievement and opportunity gaps impacting students in poverty and students in color in California schools. We work to expose these gaps and understand the underlying causes. We find success stories and try to understand how success can be replicated at scale. We translate complex education data into easily understood and actionable information for education advocates.
- **Equity Initiatives and Practice** – We work directly with schools and districts to understand and evaluate the impact and effectiveness of public school reform strategies in areas such as human capital, access to and success in college and career preparation, and other major initiatives intended to reduce and eliminate achievement and opportunity gaps for students of color and students in poverty. We seek real world examples supported by qualitative and quantitative research at the district, school and classroom levels.
- **External Relations** – In seeking to influence education policy in California, we engage key education stakeholders, including policymakers, thought leaders, practitioners, community groups, civic organizations, parents and youth. Our goal is to drive a state and national conversation about how our educational system can better serve all students.

**For more information,
please contact:**

External Relations

(510) 465-6444

information@edtrustwest.org



The Education Trust—West

1814 FRANKLIN STREET, SUITE 220

OAKLAND, CALIF. 94612

(510) 465-6444

www.edtrustwest.org