ENSURING PROP 47 FULFILLS ITS GOAL: KEEPING STUDENTS OUT OF THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

The Education Trust–West

Introduction

The passage of Proposition 47 has brought additional funding to California public schools, with the explicit purpose of supporting vulnerable students, keeping them in school and out of the school-to-prison pipeline. Coupled with other investments that districts make to reduce chronic absenteeism and engage students in their learning, these resources can help close opportunity and achievement gaps for underserved students.

Importantly, Proposition 47 is being implemented at the same time as the state is further developing and establishing a new accountability system. California is in its fourth year of implementation of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and is currently designing its State Plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Under this new accountability system, a high priority has been placed both on equitable spending and transparency, so that communities and stakeholders can understand strategies and decisions being made at the local level. Used well, the funds from Proposition 47 can not only support vulnerable students, but also strengthen local processes for transparently and effectively developing Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs).

This memo provides concrete suggestions to the California Department of Education (CDE), the Governor, and the legislature for ensuring that Proposition 47 meets its full equity potential.

CONTEXT: PROPOSITION 47 AND THE LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS PROGRAM (LCSSP)

Proposition 47, also called the Safe Neighborhoods and Schools Act (SNSA), includes an important provision related to K-12 public education in California. Specifically, it directs the Governor to (1) provide an annual estimate of the savings generated by the Act's implementation, (2) direct those savings to a dedicated fund called the Safe Neighborhoods and Schools Fund (SNSF), and (3) dedicate 25% of that Fund to the CDE to administer a grant program to local education agencies "aimed at improving outcomes for public school pupils by reducing truancy and supporting pupils who are at risk of dropping out of school or are victims of crime."[1] This provision first took effect with the 2016-17 enacted budget, which includes the Department of Finance's estimate of Proposition 47 savings of $39.4 million. Of that, 25% will be transferred to the CDE ($9.9 million). In addition, the budget includes a one-time supplemental allocation of $18 million to the CDE, for a total allocation of $27.9 million.[2]

The implementation of Proposition 47 will be affected by AB1014/SB527, which the California legislature passed in September 2016 to create the Learning Communities for School Success Program (LCSSP).[3] The legislation reinforces the expectation that the CDE will use the funding from the SNSF to build the capacity of local education agencies (LEAs) to implement *evidence-based, non-punitive* strategies consistent with their Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs). The LCSSP calls for the CDE to award three-year competitive grants, with priority given to LEAs with: above-average rates of chronic absenteeism, out-of-school suspension, or school dropout for the overall school population or significant subgroups; high rates of crime in the community; or a significant number of foster youth. The CDE is charged with designing and administering the grant program, as well as seeking stakeholder input into the program's design and implementation.

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[1] https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB527.
[2] http://www.ebudget.ca.gov/FullBudgetSummary.pdf, p.45.
[3] https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB527.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The SNSF and LCSSP together present the State of California with an opportunity to advance educational equity goals and send more resources to students that are underserved and are at risk of being pushed out of school. Implemented effectively, the programs can improve outcomes for these students—but any number of things, from under-investment in the Fund to poorly designed strategies, could easily derail the program. We offer several recommendations to help state leaders take full advantage of the opportunity before them.

FOR THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS

As the CDE designs the details of the LCSSP grant program, we recommend that it follows these guidelines as it requests and prioritizes grant proposals:

1. TARGET STUDENT POPULATIONS WITH THE HIGHEST NEED

Districts are eligible for grants under the LCSSP if their rates of chronic absenteeism, suspensions or school dropout "exceed the state average" either for the entire population of students or for subgroups of students. While this is an acceptable minimum requirement for participation, the CDE should prioritize high-quality proposals from LEAs that explicitly describe how they will direct services or resources to the *specific schools* in their district that have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism, suspensions, or school dropout or to the *specific students* who are most vulnerable. Especially given the limited funds available under the program, the State needs to prioritize communities with the highest concentrations of high-need students. This is consistent with the logic of the Local Control Funding Formula and it ensures that the LCSSP funding is equitability distributed.

Consider the variation in graduation rates between districts and between schools within a single district. In 2014, 81% of California students who started high school in 2010 graduated with their class.[4] It follows that the LCSSP could provide resources to any district with a 4-year cohort graduation rate lower than 81%, but that would include districts with a wide range of needs and performance. For example, Compton Unified School District has a 4-year cohort graduation rate of 60%--which means it has nearly 3,000 more at-risk students than Antioch Unified School District (a similarly-sized district with a 4-year cohort graduation rate of 77%).[5]

In addition to the differences between districts, the rate of chronic absenteeism, suspensions and/or school dropout can also vary widely across schools within a single district. For example, in San Bernardino Unified School District, dropout rates ranged across schools from 2.6% to 13.9% in 2014-15. In San Diego Unified School District, that range was 0.3% to 12.6%.[6] Generally, research shows that secondary schools tend to have higher rates of chronic absenteeism than elementary schools, and that specific student populations (e.g. Native Americans, students with disabilities, and African American students) have higher rates than others.[7]

Because of the huge variation in school dropout, chronic absenteeism, and suspension rates across schools and communities within districts and between districts, the CDE should prioritize grant proposals that specifically explain how funds will be targeted to the specific schools and students most in need.

2. CONCENTRATE FUNDING AND FOCUS ON THE POTENTIAL TO CREATE SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The allocation to the CDE to administer the LCSSP grant program pales in comparison to the state's overall education budget. At the same time, addressing the school-to-prison pipeline and closing opportunity and achievement gaps for our most vulnerable students

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[4] http://www.kidsdata.org/topic/753/highschoolgraduates.
[5] https://public.tableau.com/profile/california.dropout.research.project#!/vizhome/CDRPStatBrief19/Dashboard1 (In 2010, 1,497 students started 9th grade in Antioch and 1,544 students started 9th grade in Compton. Four years later, Antioch graduated 228 more students from this cohort than did Compton. Extrapolating out across all grades, that represents a difference of nearly 3,000 at-risk students between these two districts).
[6] California Department of Education, Data Reporting Office, 2016. Retrieved 21 November 2016.
[7] https://edtrust.org/students-cant-wait/chronic-absenteeism/.

require systemic change. As such, we recommend that the CDE maximize the impact of these limited funds in two ways: (1) by making fewer, larger grants and (2) by prioritizing proposals from districts that demonstrate a commitment to broader systemic change. While the grants will necessarily be time-limited, they should lead to or be accompanied by additional changes in how districts use other state and local resources to support high-need students. Ultimately, proposals should describe shifts in LCAP expenditures, beyond the funding from the LCSSP program, toward evidence-based strategies to engage and support students who are chronically absent or truant, victims of crime, and students who are on probation or have been referred to law enforcement.

3. FUND EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES

A strength of the authorizing legislation for the LCSSP is that it usefully identifies research-backed, non-punitive strategies for combatting chronic absenteeism and the school-to-prison pipeline. These include full-service community schools, early intervention programs, restorative justice models and practices, social-emotional learning practices, and positive behavior interventions and supports. Importantly, the legislation promotes non-punitive approaches and collaboration with community-based organizations to support the implementation of strategies.

We would additionally highlight the need for inter-agency partnerships to ensure that system-involved youth receive the case management and support they need to stay on track both in and out of school, as well as strategies explicitly designed to increase student engagement. Focusing on student engagement has been shown to positively impact absenteeism and student persistence in school.[8] Such strategies include:

- Ensuring students are able to apply what they learn in a real-world context. When students perceive their work as relevant, they are more likely to be engaged.[9]

- Ensuring teachers get the professional development they need to engage all students meaningfully with rigorous, relevant curriculum and to address gaps in students' academic skills.[10]

- Engaging parents and forging strong home-school connections. For example, many schools support students with faculty advisors (i.e., a teacher who knows them well and is responsible for fostering and nurturing strong family/school connections).[11]

4. FUND PROPOSALS THAT EXPLICITLY AND THOROUGHLY DESCRIBE HOW IMPACT WILL BE MEASURED AND EVALUATED

The CDE should prioritize proposals with strong plans to measure and evaluate the impact of the funding. Specifically, districts receiving funding should be required to track the following outcomes in their LCAPs, both for all students and all subgroups, including racial and ethnic subgroups, English learners, low-income students, and foster youth: chronic absenteeism rates, dropout rates, suspension rates, expulsion rates, violent incidents and referrals to law enforcement, and other indicators of positive school climate. In addition to committing to tracking these outcomes, districts should set targets in their LCAPs for how much they intend to decrease or increase these rates for specific subgroups during the grant period—and the actions and services they will provide to meet those targets.

In addition, the CDE should require that districts evaluate their progress based on these outcomes—and on other, more qualitative and interim outcomes. Since strategies will likely target student engagement as well as the practice of teachers and principals, interim measures can focus on the number of students, teachers, and principals reached—and on their satisfaction, measured through surveys, interviews, etc.

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[8] Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., & MacIver, D.J. (2007). Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grades Schools. Educational Psychologist, 42(4), 223-235. See also Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. Review of Educational Research, 74, 59–109.

[9] The Education Trust–West. (2015). Pathways to College and Career Readiness: Bringing the New California Standards to Life Through Linked Learning. Oakland, CA: The Education Trust—West, p. 8.

[10] Hahnel, C., Wolf, L., Banks, A., LaFors, J. (2014). The Language of Reform: English Learners in California's Shifting Education Landscape. Oakland, CA: The Education Trust—West, p. 15.

[11] *Ibid*, p. 3.

5. USE THE LCSSP AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO STRENGTHEN TRANSPARENCY IN DISTRICT FUNDING

California is in its fourth year of implementing LCFF, which distributes dollars to school districts more equitably. LCFF centers on the idea that districts should have more flexibility for how to use state dollars to address local priorities and, in exchange, should be transparent about how they use funds and should be held accountable for results. Unfortunately, most district LCAPs lack transparency.[12] They are often confusing and they give an incomplete picture of district spending in relation to the districts' priorities.

The LCSSP presents an opportunity to take a small step in improving the LCAP process. Here's how:

Priority 5 of the LCAP focuses on pupil engagement, as measured by school attendance rates, chronic absenteeism rates, dropout rates, and high school graduation rates. The LCSSP has precisely the same focus. Additionally, the authorizing legislation requires districts applying for grants to connect their proposed LCSSP spending with their LCAP priorities. Specifically, applicants will need to describe how proposed activities "support the local educational agency's goals for pupils contained in its local control and accountability plan." The CDE can implement this objective well by judging proposals based on:

- *The strength of the proposed activities to increase pupil engagement in conjunction with all other district expenditures focused on pupil engagement*. Districts applying for the LCSSP should be required to lay out all of their strategies focused on pupil engagement and indicate all funding directed to this priority. This would give the CDE a strong sense of the district's level of priority on pupil engagement, the coherence of district strategy, and the particular ways that new funding would augment or support that strategy.

- *The clarity with which the district can articulate its efforts to increase pupil engagement* – Having a strategy for increasing pupil engagement is one thing. Effectively communicating it to families and community stakeholders is quite another thing. A few districts have developed innovative approaches to communicating their LCAP priorities, strategies and expenditures to the public. Districts applying for the LCSSP should be required to articulate how, as part of the LCAP process, they engaged stakeholders in the area of pupil engagement. Specifically, they should describe how they (1) engaged families and stakeholders in developing their pupil engagement strategies; (2) utilized stakeholder feedback to shape or change those strategies; (3) intend to communicate progress on all strategies; and (4) intend to allocate funding specifically for the purpose of engaging stakeholders and incorporating stakeholder feedback on an ongoing basis.

FOR THE GOVERNOR AND/OR THE LEGISLATURE

While we are primarily concerned with the implementation of the LCSSP, we also recommend that the Governor and/or the Legislature take steps to:

6. ENSURE ADEQUATE AND STABLE REVENUE FOR THE SNSF

The Department of Finance's (DOF) estimate of savings from the implementation of Proposition 47 fell well short of expectations from the 2014 campaign. While voters expected savings in the hundreds of millions of dollars, the DOF estimate came in well below that expectation. Only after sustained pressure from advocates did the Governor's budget include augmented funding for the SNSF, including for education-related priorities.

This experience presents two related problems for districts and communities committed to the objectives of Proposition 47. First, it makes funding highly unstable, subject to the political whims of the annual budget process. Second, the overall level of funding remains inadequate to the task at hand. As a result, districts will be reluctant to make the kind of long-term investments that will be most impactful for students, or they may simply lack the resources to do so.

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[12] Chen, T. (2016) *Puzzling Plans and Budgets: Making Sense of California's Second Year Local Control and Accountability Plans.* Oakland: The Education Trust-West, April 2016.

To ensure stable and adequate funding for SNSF, we recommend the establishment of some guardrails around the DOF's process for estimating savings from the implementation of Proposition 47. Specifically, the DOF's analysis should be subjected to *binding* external review, either by an independent panel of experts or by the Legislative Analyst Office. Such a step would maintain the Governor's ability to make an initial determination while preserving the spirit and intent of Proposition 47.

Conclusion

Proposition 47 was a watershed moment for California, creating an opportunity to address the school-to-prison pipeline that has been so damaging for communities of color in the state. But, fulfilling the promise of Proposition 47 depends on increased commitment and effective implementation of the LCSSP. The CDE can promote strong implementation and help close opportunity and achievement gaps by targeting the highest need students, funding proposals focused on demonstrable, systemic impact, and increasing transparency.