

February 7, 2019

Dear CA Collaborative for Educational Excellence Board:

The Opportunity Institute has come to the Board before to describe our commitment to advancing stakeholder engagement in education policy decision-making and to advocate for a strategic focus on equity.

We appreciate the invitation to take part in the Community Engagement Initiative (CEI) Advisory Board. The inaugural meeting last month was a well-planned opportunity to hear from the CEI consortium leads and to connect with other advocacy voices on how we could work together to best support the Learning Network, and the broader challenge of strengthening meaningful engagement in schools across California.

We are optimistic that the CEI PLN is a promising first effort to address capacity-building needs of district and school leaders to develop and strengthen authentic positive relationships with families and community. We ask the Board and the CEI PLN consortium to consider some of our observations as we reflect and refine our work.

1. The burden of capacity-building to support authentic and meaningful engagement must not and cannot be shouldered by the CEI PLN alone.

Meaningful engagement in schools is not something that is relevant only to the development of Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAP), but must be rooted in proactive and trusting relationships between teachers, students, and their families. As Julie Marsh et al.'s 2018 research of LCAP engagement efforts from Getting Down to Facts II finds: "...all of the districts that demonstrated broader engagement either had **pre-existing climates of trust** or used the mandate for engagement to **promote trust through open engagement** and identifying how feedback is incorporated" (p. 41, emphasis added; also see attached).

System-wide capacity building to strengthen and sustain meaningful engagement will require strategic shifts in the way the CCEE and all of its learning network approach its commitment to engagement. For example, we have encouraged the CCEE to think about how all of its PLNs can build in engagement as a core design principle in their work.

2. Equity is not just an engagement principle, but a set of actions that strategically prioritize those that are least served.



One of the topics of robust discussion at the CEI Advisory Meeting was on clarifying a specific scope and focus for the CEI PLN so that it was not overly diluted but also addressed the practical challenges of engagement that prioritize equity. I offered that we might look to the concepts of Universal Design. That is, thinking about the design of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their background, and not as a special requirement for the benefit of a targeted subgroup.

To this end, we encourage the CEI PLN to consider having a preliminary focus on a particular subgroup, e.g. English Learners or Foster Youth, as they identify the process conditions and organizational conditions that support meaningful engagement. By focusing on the diverse abilities and barriers for the most marginalized and least engaged, the CEI PLN will be able to articulate the design conditions that districts must consider in assessing and improving their practices and cultures of building trusting relationships.

3. Continuous improvement requires an investment in research and analysis.

There are a four CCEE PLNs that were part of the first cohort of the CCEE's learning networks that support a select group of districts and charters around engagement. However, there is not a structure or process for them to share information across the networks about what they are doing, what they are finding, and common challenges and themes. Learning from this missed opportunity, it is important that the CEI PLN to have dedicated funding and partners to study the development of the network and the work of participating districts. Researchers like Julie Marsh or others from the LCFF Research Collaborative would be well-positioned to support the CEI, and provide timely feedback and reflection as the consortium partners model a process of continuous improvement.

Respectfully,

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Stakeholder Engagement in LCFF

— LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS BASED ON EXPERIENCES SO FAR —

Stakeholder engagement is central to the vision for how California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), with its Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), can improve outcomes for K-12 students.

Two core ideas of LCFF related to engagement are:



Shifting resource decisions to local communities will result in decisions that better reflect local contexts and needs, leading to better outcomes for students.



Public understanding of and contributions to school district goal and budget decisions will serve to hold district leaders accountable for distributing resources equitably.

In a study published as part of *Getting Down to Facts II*, researchers find strong support for those ideas and mixed evidence on implementation. Most districts currently fall well short of the state's vision but the exceptions suggest leverage points for improvement.

"Most districts are complying with the letter of the LCFF policy but not the full spirit of democratic engagement ... Districts do appear to be learning from and improving their practices over time."

Engagement, equity, and resource allocations are related

Three processes appear to be mutually reinforcing:

- The breadth and depth with which district leaders engage stakeholders in LCAP development.
- Clarity and coherence in district leaders' beliefs about equity.
- More strategic targeting of funds based on perceptions of student need.

Some districts have created positive conditions for improving equity by encouraging the participation of historically underserved families, focusing LCAP discussions around the common good of the district, and developing participants' capacity for two-way conversations.

Conditions that constrain engagement:

Most districts struggle to attract LCFF/LCAP participation, particularly among non-parent community members and traditionally underserved individuals. The research identified four key barriers that involve stakeholders in ways that are more shallow.

1

Community members may have limited awareness, fatigue related to engagement activities, or feel like they can't participate in a meaningful way.

2

A lack of trust might exist between district leaders and stakeholders.

3

Districts lack a prior history of community engagement or a well-established strategic planning process.

4

District leaders' beliefs and "taken-for-granted" ways of operating conflict with the idea of increased parent and community involvement.

"...all of the districts that demonstrated broader engagement either had pre-existing climates of trust or used the mandate for engagement to promote trust through open engagement and identifying how feedback is incorporated."

Leverage points for improvement:

Both district leaders and the public want to make stakeholder engagement work and some practices show promise.

1

Most district leaders express support for LCFF stakeholder engagement components.

2

Public polls show support for LCFF goals and 84% of voters with children want to engage with local education decisions.

3

Superintendents say communicating about LCFF through existing advisory groups, at school sites, and through informal means is more productive than broad community meetings.

4

Districts that enacted deeper forms of engagement:

- engaged stakeholders in two-way conversations,
- focused on collective interests that would benefit the district as a whole,
- expanded the data provided to stakeholders about programs, services and budgets, and
- invested in the skill and knowledge of community members as partners.

5

Districts that work with external partners can enhance both district and community capacity for engagement.

6

Local school board members could participate more fully in engagement, helping weigh the needs of interest groups including those that are under-represented.

“Transparency and open sharing of data drove the engagement process and priority-setting in this district.”

Policy goals to support meaningful engagement:



Improve public awareness of LCFF and its equity goals.



Clarify expectations for engagement related to frequency and purpose.



Build district capacity to conduct stakeholder engagement in meaningful ways.



Build community members' capacity to engage in local decision making.



Clarify the role of school board members and incentivize deeper engagement.



Support deeper thinking among local leaders about the meaning of equity and how it relates to meaningful engagement.

“...more than 60% [of voters with children] said they wanted to be involved in setting goals and reviewing progress made by their public schools and/or deciding how to allocate resources ...”