

Frequently Asked Questions about California’s System of Support, Differentiated Assistance, and Federal School Improvement Requirements

System of Support Overview

What is the System of Support?

California’s public school accountability system is based on the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which overhauled public school finance and accountability in 2013. A key part of California’s approach is a refocused system of support for local educational agencies (LEAs) (school districts, charter schools, and county offices of education [COEs]), which is based on a three-level framework:

- **Support for All LEAs and Schools (Level 1):** Various state and local agencies provide an array of resources and voluntary assistance that **all** LEAs may use to improve student performance at the LEA and school level and narrow disparities among student groups across the LCFF priorities, including recognition for success and the ability to share promising practices.
- **Differentiated Assistance (Level 2):** County superintendents, the California Department of Education (CDE), and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) provide **differentiated assistance** for LEAs, in the form of individually designed assistance, to address identified performance issues.
- **Intensive Intervention (Level 3):** The State Superintendent of Public Instruction may require more **intensive interventions** for LEAs with persistent performance issues over a specified time period.

Each of the three levels represents a ***type of assistance*** available or provided to LEAs, ***not*** a status or label applied to LEAs. Additional information about the System of Support and lead agencies is available at: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/csss.asp>

What is the goal of the System of Support?

The goal for support at all levels is to assist LEAs and their schools to meet the needs of each student served, with a focus on building capacity to sustain improvement and effectively address inequities in student opportunities and outcomes.

Is this different from California’s past approaches to assistance and intervention?

Yes. Support under the LCFF is intended to be tailored to locally identified needs, rather than imposed as a one-size-fits-all solution. Table 1 below identifies several key changes in California’s approach to supporting LEAs and schools to improve.

Table 1. Shifts in California's Approach to Improvement

| Education Improvement Before the LCFF | Education Improvement After the LCFF |
|--|--|
| Top-down transactional exchanges focused on schools in isolation | Support providers work alongside LEAs and their schools to identify key challenges and opportunities |
| Packaged approaches for interventions | Systemic approach tailored to locally identified needs and strengths |
| Isolated team decision making | Engaging with local educators and communities as part of decision making |
| Redundancy and contradictions across state and federal programs | Streamlined and coherent expectations for LEAs across state and federal programs |
| Assistance disconnected from local priorities and focus | Assistance supports LEAs in aligning, prioritizing, and using resources to meet student needs identified in their Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) |

How is the System of Support organized? What resources are available within it?

State law, as amended by the 2018 Budget Act, creates a structure with specifically defined roles and responsibilities that is intended to ensure that a base-level of support is available statewide and that relevant expertise can be leveraged regardless of where a school district is located.

The 2018 Budget Act clarified the roles and responsibilities and provided ongoing funding for the agencies responsible for providing differentiated assistance to school districts, specifically COEs and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence.

The 2018 Budget Act also established and provided funding for new roles with specific responsibilities aimed at developing the capacity of agencies responsible for providing differentiated assistance and ensuring access to a broad range expertise within the system of support. These include geographic lead agencies, special education resource leads, and expert leads that can be funded through specific provisions included in the annual budget. These agencies will work closely with the California Department of Education and California Collaborative for Educational Excellence.

These investments ensure there are people or roles within the system whose duties specifically include supporting coordination and communication to connect LEAs to relevant resources or expertise. Additional information about the System of Support and lead agencies is available at: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/csss.asp>

Support for All (Level 1)

What is Support for All (Level 1)?

As noted above, various state and local agencies provide an array of resources and voluntary assistance that **all** LEAs may use to improve student performance at the LEA and school level and narrow disparities among student groups across the LCFF priorities, including recognition of success and the ability to share promising practices.

Support providers play a critical role in helping LEAs access resources that are responsive to their local needs and adapt those resources to fit the local context. Accordingly, work to further develop Support for All is focused on the “supports” that are used or referenced by assistance providers when working with LEAs and ensuring those supports are relevant, targeted, and reliable in responding to a locally identified need in order to assist in effective implementation of the state priorities and improved outcomes for all students

What are examples of Support for All?

California provides numerous resources and supports that are available to all LEAs and schools. These include curriculum frameworks, practice guides, assistance from regional lead agencies, professional learning opportunities, individual coaching, grants, and resource clearinghouses that have been created through various state and federal programs.

More detailed information about Support for All is provided in a June 2017 memorandum available at:

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/pn/im/documents/memo-exec-oed-jun17item02.doc>.

Differentiated Assistance (Level 2)

What is the goal of differentiated assistance?

As noted, California’s public school accountability system is designed to reinforce the expectation that everyone can improve while also ensuring additional support is provided to LEAs that are struggling. It also includes an intentional focus on providing assistance in a manner that builds capacity of the LEA receiving assistance.

Differentiated assistance is therefore intended not only to help the LEA address the underlying causes that led to its eligibility for assistance, but also to strengthen the LEA’s overall ability to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies and programs and make adjustments as appropriate. This approach equips the LEA to improve in areas that were not the focus of differentiated assistance and increases the likelihood that improvements will be sustained when the differentiated assistance ends.

Why do certain LEAs receive differentiated assistance?

Eligibility for differentiated assistance is based on performance criteria set by the State Board of Education (SBE), which are described below. Although this system continues to evolve, the criteria are currently based on performance within the eight state priorities under the LCFF, measured through both the state indicators (color-coded rating) and local indicators (met, not met rating) that are reported annually in the California School Dashboard (Dashboard).

Note that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, state law allows the 2022 Dashboard to only display the most current year of data (also known as Status). For this year only, performance levels will be reported using one of five Status levels (ranging from Very High, High, Medium, Low, and Very Low) for state measures.

More information on the Dashboard, including the state and local indicators, is available on the California School Dashboard Communications Toolkit web page at [Dashboard Communications Toolkit - California School Dashboard and System of Support \(CA Dept of Education\)](#).

What are the eligibility criteria for differentiated assistance?

State law required the SBE to adopt the California School Dashboard. One purpose of the Dashboard is to determine whether LEAs are in need of additional assistance:

- COEs must offer differentiated assistance to a school district if any student group meets the criteria for two or more LCFF priorities. [California Education Code \(EC\) Section 52071\(c\)](#)
- The CDE must offer differentiated assistance to a COE if any student group meets the criteria for two or more LCFF priorities. [EC Section 52071.5\(b\)](#)
- As the accountability system moves forward, the SSPI, with approval of the SBE, may intervene in a school district or COE if three or more student groups (or all the student groups if there are less than three) meet the criteria for two or more LCFF priorities in three out of four consecutive years. [EC sections 52072](#) and [52072.5](#).

Eligibility Criteria for Differentiated Assistance within the System of Support

How are LEAs eligible for Differentiated Assistance within the System of Support?

For 2022, please see the updated CA School Dashboard Technical Guide: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/dashboardguide22.asp>.

How do school districts move out of differentiated assistance? Do school districts that are currently receiving differentiated assistance ever stop being eligible for differentiated assistance?

Differentiated assistance is a type of support provided to school districts within the system of support. It is not a label applied to school districts or a status that they enter and exit.

Eligibility for differentiated assistance is determined annually when the Dashboard results are released. If performance improves so that the school district no longer meets the criteria, the school district will no longer be eligible for differentiated assistance.

Does the state post information about school districts identified for differentiated assistance?

Yes. This information is posted in the data file on the LCFF webpage (see below) in conjunction with the release of the Dashboard each fall. It shows all school districts, organized by county and what type of assistance they are receiving. For those school districts receiving differentiated assistance, it also identifies how the school district met the eligibility criteria (i.e., the student group[s] and relevant indicators). A link to the information from the Fall 2023 Dashboard is available on the CDE LCFF web page at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/>.

Do LEAs have an opportunity to review the Dashboard data before the Dashboard is publicly released?

Yes. The Dashboard is based on data submitted by LEAs to the California Department of Education. LEAs have the opportunity to review their data on a regular basis to determine the potential impact to student groups. Prior to the release of the Dashboard, the California Department of Education provides information on each indicator and time for LEAs to ask questions about local and state data submissions. Dashboard coordinators assigned to LEAs have an opportunity to preview the Dashboard data before the public release.

What will differentiated assistance include?

The statute, amended as part of the 2018 state budget process, describes what differentiated assistance may entail through four examples, all of which reflect an intent that agencies providing differentiated assistance work collaboratively with the LEA receiving assistance and that the assistance be flexible and context-specific.

Consistent with the intent under the LCFF that differentiated assistance be tailored to locally identified needs rather than imposed as a one-size-fits all solution, the approach to providing differentiated assistance has the following features:

- Support providers work alongside LEAs and their schools to identify key challenges and opportunities

- A systemic approach tailored to locally identified needs and strengths connected to the LEA's annual LCAP process
- Engagement with local educators and communities as part of decision making
- LEAs retain control to select the improvement strategies and actions they will implement to address identified challenges and opportunities

All COEs have committed to working with their districts to facilitate a collaborative review of their Dashboard and other local data and a discussion of underlying causes of performance challenges. COEs have developed common tools and protocols for the facilitated process grounded in improvement science. Additional information on improvement science is available at: <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/our-ideas/>.

Additional information about the System of Support and lead agencies is available at: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/csss.asp>

A summary of the overview, including specific examples of what differentiated assistance may entail based on local circumstances, is provided in the November 2017 SBE Item 4 available at:

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/yr17/documents/nov17item04.doc>.

Do school districts receive additional funding as part of differentiated assistance?

No. Differentiated assistance is intended to support school districts in building their capacity to improve student outcomes through the LCAP process, which includes deciding how to use resources provided through the LCFF and other state, local, and federal funding sources to meet the needs of students and the local community. As noted, COEs must provide differentiated assistance to eligible school districts. School districts also have the choice of working with another agency or provider.

COEs receive state funding to support their school districts, this includes an add-on tied to the number of school districts within their county identified to receive differentiated assistance. The funding COEs receive is intended to develop their capacity to support their school districts, which includes providing differentiated assistance. Additional information on COE funding is available at:

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/pa/pa2223rates.asp>.

Is additional support available for COEs providing differentiated assistance or districts receiving differentiated assistance?

Yes. As noted, in the System of Support section above, the expectation is that the geographic lead agencies will work together, and in conjunction with CDE and CCEE, to provide the statewide backbone of the system of support. A key role of geographic leads is to coordinate support available statewide. It is neither realistic nor fair to expect all COEs know of every resource, service or support that exists across the state or have

appropriate expertise and capacity to respond to every locally identified need. Geographic leads are expected to help COEs access relevant services or expertise responsive to needs identified by school districts the county offices of education are supporting.

COEs are expected to continue directly supporting their school districts and to provide differentiated assistance to their eligible school districts. The geographic leads will primarily focus on supporting their peers at COEs in that work. Geographic leads, however, may also directly provide differentiated assistance to a school district if a COE or school district believes that having a third party engaged would be helpful. If this occurs, the COE is expected to remain involved to build its capacity to support the school district in the future.

Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs), Educational Partner Engagement, and Differentiated Assistance

How does differentiated assistance fit into the development of LCAPs?

The “LCAP process” is an annual cycle that includes development of the LCAP and ongoing implementation of the actions and services included in the approved LCAP.

As part of developing the LCAP and annual update, every LEA is expected to review its data, including performance on state and local indicators in the Dashboard and the effectiveness of actions and services included in the LCAP, and engage with educational partners when developing and/or updating goals, actions, and services that are ultimately included in the locally approved LCAP.

This is reflected in the current LCAP template, which includes a plan summary with prompts requiring LEAs to reflect annually on strengths, areas of low performance, and performance gaps as reflected in the Dashboard and other local data. Ongoing implementation and progress monitoring throughout the year is expected to inform the development/update of the goals, actions, and services included in the LCAP for the following year.

Differentiated assistance provides support to LEAs to build their capacity to improve student outcomes through the LCAP process. “[D]ifferentiated assistance exists within the LCAP process. There is no statutory requirement for developing a new ‘improvement plan’” separate from the LCAP (November 2017 SBE Meeting, Item 4, Attachment 1: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/aq/yr17/documents/nov17item04.doc>).

LEAs identified for differentiated assistance continue to complete their LCAPs and annual updates. A key element of differentiated assistance is the review of data and analysis of underlying causes, which all LEAs are expected to complete as part of developing an LCAP, with additional support from the county office of education (COE).

What is the role of educational partners in the differentiated assistance process?

As noted, school districts do not have to develop a new improvement plan as part of differentiated assistance. Instead, the insights and conclusions gained from differentiated assistance should be reflected in the school district's ongoing LCAP process, which requires educational partner engagement.

School district superintendents, or their designees, are responsible for engaging with their COEs and local educational partners in the differentiated assistance process. COEs are required to provide differentiated assistance to eligible school districts. The initial step is a management consultation between the COE and school district leadership. The school district superintendent, or his or her designee, is responsible for determining who participates in the meetings with the COE staff.

Local educational partners have critical insights on strengths/weaknesses and underlying causes of low performance that will strengthen the differentiated assistance process. COEs should offer to assist districts in thinking through how to engage local educational partners in the differentiated assistance process and to integrate feedback into the district's LCAP development process.

The insights and conclusions gained from differentiated assistance should be reflected in the district's LCAP process, which requires educational partners' engagement. Engaging educational partners in the decision-making process is a central principle of the Local Control Funding Formula. Districts should engage local educational partners before reaching definitive conclusions or settling on specific strategies. This is true regardless of whether a district elects to work primarily with a COE, a partner agency such as the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, or another provider.

COE Funding, Support for All, and Differentiated Assistance

COEs received additional funding annually, through the Budget Act. What are the requirements around how COEs can use these funds?

Although sometimes described in short-hand as "funding for differentiated assistance," these are unrestricted funds (i.e., not a categorical) intended to ensure COEs have resources to support their school districts. These funds are an add-on to the existing LCFF formula for COEs (which is also unrestricted funding), recognizing that the differentiated assistance work resulting in additional workload. Specifically, [EC 2575.2](#), which creates the add-on, includes a base allocation for each COE and then the rest of the formula is tied to the number of districts receiving differentiated assistance within each county.

Additionally, pursuant to [EC 52066\(i\)](#), COEs must annually develop a summary in conjunction with their LCAP that describes how the COE is supporting its districts in general and includes a more specific description of the supports provided to districts receiving differentiated assistance (including source of funds for those activities). So COEs are expected to transparently explain how they are supporting their school districts in general and more specifically for those receiving differentiated assistance.

These summaries are compiled and publicly posted by the CDE (e.g., [County Superintendent of Schools Summary 2019](#)).

Accordingly, while LCFF funds are unrestricted, COEs will have to annually document the support provided as part of differentiated assistance and more generally to school districts. While COEs should prioritize these funds to enhance the support they provide to school districts in differentiated assistance, there is no limitation of making those supports more broadly available within the county.

Can COEs support school districts that have not been identified to receive differentiated assistance?

Yes. Since LCFF's enactment COEs have used unrestricted funding through the LCFF COE formula to provide support to school districts. For example, some COEs have realigned the professional learning opportunities they provide to their districts or supported job-alike meetings or networks for staff across school districts within their county to support focus on LCFF priorities and/or student groups central to the LCAP and the new accountability system. Finally, COEs review and approve LCAPs for their school districts and offer assistance throughout that process.

Through California's System of Support, there are many opportunities for COEs and school districts to work collaboratively to address locally identified needs, regardless of whether a school district has been identified to receive differentiated assistance, through the LCAP development process. For example, the same protocols that COEs and school districts use for differentiated assistance (investigation of data, analysis of underlying causes, etc.) can be incorporated into ongoing conversations and coaching around LCAP development.

Federal School Improvement Requirements

Where can I find the school improvement requirements under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)?

Under the ESSA, the state must identify schools in need of additional assistance based on various criteria. This requirement went into effect for the first time in 2018–19, so schools were selected for the first time in January 2019 based on their 2018 Dashboard data.

Additional FAQs and resources are under development to provide more information on the criteria and timelines for identifying schools in the different categories required under federal law—comprehensive support and improvement (CSI), (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/csi.asp>) and additional targeted support and improvement (ATSI)/targeted support and improvement (TSI) (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/tsi.asp>).

How does school identification under ESSA fit into differentiated assistance for LEAs?

LEAs will be responsible for developing and/or approving school-level improvement plans for identified schools. As described in more detail below, California will use the existing LCAP and school level planning processes to meet these federal requirements, with the state providing general resources and technical assistance to support LEAs.

Consistent with the System of Support's focus on increasing the capacity of LEAs to meet the needs of all students, these resources will focus on building the capacity of LEAs to support their schools and differentiate those supports as appropriate based on data about opportunities and outcomes within the LCAP process. These resources will be available to all LEAs, i.e., they are Support for All (Level 1), and LEAs with identified schools will be responsible for using those resources to meet ESSA's school improvement requirements.

ESSA's school identification requirements intersect with Differentiated Assistance (Level 2) only when a school has been identified for CSI and has not met exit criteria within four years. In that circumstance, federal law requires more rigorous state-determined intervention. California's more rigorous intervention is to identify the LEA to receive differentiated assistance based on the persistent low performance of one of its schools.

How will California use the existing LCAP and school level planning processes to meet the federal requirements?

The ESSA requires the development of school improvement plans for schools identified in ESSA school support (i.e., CSI, TSI, ATSI) with the planning requirements differing somewhat for each category.

California will utilize an existing school planning process for LEAs and schools to address the federal school planning requirements. Legislation enacted this year redesignated what was formerly known as the Single Plan for Student Achievement to the School Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA) and updated statute to ensure this plan and the educational partner engagement process for its development to address federal planning requirements. Additional information, including updated guidance is located on the CDE webpage (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/tsi.asp>)

Additionally, for CSI schools, the SBE must ultimately sign-off on the plans developed by the LEAs for these schools. To address this requirement, a CSI prompt form is included with the LCAP Plan Summary template that LEAs with CSI schools must complete. COEs complete this form, applying criteria under development to ensure responses address all federal requirements, prior to final SBE approval of the plans. Additional information and future updates are available at: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/csi.asp>.

Small Districts, Single-School Districts, and Charter Schools

Do charter schools and single school districts have to create an LCAP and a SPSA?

Yes, please visit the CDE CSI web page under the Technical Assistance tab for FAQs on this topic (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/csi.asp>).

Communication Resources and Additional Questions

How can LEAs share this information with their local educational partners?

A communications toolkit, which includes resources about the Dashboard, differentiated assistance, and the system of support is available at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/dashboardtoolkit.asp>. COEs can also support school districts in determining how to communicate with local educational partners.

Who should I contact if I have questions or concerns about the differentiated assistance process or a specific situation related to differentiated assistance being provided to a school district?

You can contact your county office of education team if you have any questions or concerns.