



California Statewide System of Support Geographic Lead Agencies Evaluation Report 2025–2026

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Introduction

Within the Statewide System of Support (SSOS) are seven Geographic Lead Agencies housed within nine county offices of education (COEs): Santa Clara COE, Kern County Superintendent of Schools, Placer and Sacramento COEs, Riverside and San Diego COEs, Shasta COE, Sonoma COE, and Tulare COE. Assembly Bill 1808 (Statutes of 2018) appropriated \$4 million to establish the California Geographic Leads to build the capacity of COEs. Geographic Leads ensure that counties are equipped to build the capacity of their local educational agencies (LEAs) to support the continuous improvement of student performance within the state priorities as defined in California Education Code and address the gaps in achievement between student groups.¹

RTI International is the external evaluator of the Geographic Lead work. This report spotlights four aspects of the evaluation that provide insight into Geographic Lead roles and impact areas. We provide survey findings, highlight key Geographic Lead activities, and share illustrative quotations from COEs about their experiences with Geographic Leads. The four areas highlighted in this report are facilitating partnerships, building capacity, engaging in continuous improvement, and providing universal and targeted supports.

This report is based on an annual survey sent to staff in COEs who work with their Geographic Leads. In 2026, 204 COE staff responded to the survey, a response rate of 72%.² Staff from 56 out of the 58 counties in California responded to the survey, providing insight into the impact of the Geographic Lead work across the state.³

¹ See the appendix for the California Education Code related to Geographic Leads.

² The survey asks respondents to rate their level of involvement with their Geographic Lead. Responses presented in this report are based on results from participants who rated their involvement as “medium” or “high,” a total of 174 respondents. Participants who rated their involvement as “low” were routed to an open-ended question asking them to describe their interactions with their Geographic Leads and to provide information about the quality of those interactions.

³ Survey findings focus on data from the 2026 survey because the findings are consistent with data collected in earlier years. Instances where data changed substantially are highlighted in the text.

Facilitating Partnerships

Geographic Leads **facilitate partnerships that support coordination and alignment** in a number of ways. One such way is by **creating structured spaces for collaboration** across COEs, enabling shared learning, joint problem-solving, and the exchange of practices. Survey responses indicate that Geographic Leads convene collaborative learning structures (such as communities of practice or “huddles”) where participants “share best practices and learn from one another” and collaboratively address common challenges. These collaborative structures also support the development of trusting relationships, reinforced by high levels of agreement that Geographic Leads help build trust and provide safe spaces for brainstorming around difficult challenges.

“I appreciate that our Geographic Lead strives to create meaningful and relevant opportunities for the COEs to share information and experiences and learn from and with each other.”

Geographic Leads also function as **coordinators and connectors across the broader system of support** by linking COEs to resources, expertise, and external partners. Respondents describe Geographic Leads as thought partners who provide consultation, facilitate access to technical assistance, and connect COEs to other agencies or networks when needed. This coordination role extends to differentiated assistance work, where Geographic Leads collaborate with COEs and other system partners (e.g., CCEE, SSOS providers) to align supports, co-develop strategies, and monitor progress with districts.

Finally, Geographic Leads facilitate partnerships by **supporting more coherent and aligned work** with LEAs through collaborative planning and implementation. This includes engaging COEs and districts in joint data analysis, co-designing support plans, and aligning improvement efforts (e.g., LCAP, differentiated assistance) across agencies. Many responses highlight that partnership-based approaches—such as regular check-ins, co-planning meetings, and shared accountability structures—help ensure coordinated, responsive support for districts. Together, these roles position Geographic Leads as intermediaries that strengthen regional networks, align efforts across agencies, and build collective capacity to support LEAs.

Survey Findings

- ▶ 87% of COE respondents in 2026 agreed or strongly agreed that their Geographic Lead has helped **facilitate trusting relationships** among COEs in their geographic area.
- ▶ 82% of COE respondents in 2026 agreed or strongly agreed that they have felt safe and **comfortable going to their Geographic Lead** for assistance and brainstorming regarding difficult challenges.

Quotations

“ The current work around elevating the Multilingual systematic supports has greatly supported our COE. Having an intentional space each month to discuss the Roadmap and the element 3.2 that we are all working on, has shaped the development of a cohesive approach within our COE on how we are supporting our Districts in their journey to meet the needs of the Multilingual learner.

“ Through the UDL huddle, we developed a structured process for county offices to share implementation efforts and identify different entry points for supporting LEAs with Universal Design for Learning. The group has begun examining evidence such as student perception data, instructional practices, and equity-focused outcomes to better understand where UDL is making a difference. These conversations are helping county offices refine how we support districts and schools in designing learning environments that expand access to grade-level learning, strengthen student engagement, and create more inclusive learning experiences for a wider range of students.

“ The Network Improvement Communities facilitated by the Geographic Lead were helpful in growing stronger relationships with the districts and schools that participated and coached. Additionally, the two-day implementation science training gave us some new tools to use with our districts.

“ One practice that has been strengthened through our work with our Geographic Lead Agency is the intentional alignment of Differentiated Assistance conversations with LEA improvement planning and the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) and an alignment with Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA). Through this collaboration, we refined our process for engaging district teams in structured data conversations that center on root cause analysis and identifying actionable strategies tied directly to student outcomes. As a result, our team now facilitates more focused improvement planning sessions with LEAs that connect state indicators, local data, and student group performance to specific actions and progress monitoring. This process has helped districts move beyond compliance toward meaningful continuous improvement, ultimately supporting more targeted strategies to address inequities and improve outcomes for students who have been historically underserved.

Building Capacity

Geographic Leads build capacity primarily by providing **sustained professional learning opportunities** that strengthen the skills, knowledge, and approaches of County Office of Education (COE) staff. Survey results show high levels of agreement that Geographic Leads provide access to professional learning, technical assistance, and training (e.g., improvement science, implementation science, systems transformation), which respondents frequently cite as directly shaping their ability to support LEAs. These learning opportunities are often reinforced through follow-up support, helping COEs apply new strategies in practice rather than treating training as a one-time event.

In addition, Geographic Leads build capacity by **equipping COEs with tools, resources, and data-use practices that strengthen how they support districts**. Respondents describe increased use of dashboards, logic models, data protocols, and other analytic tools to guide decision-making, alongside enhanced capacity to analyze student data and identify gaps across student groups. This resource provision is closely connected to capacity development, as tools are typically introduced through training and then integrated into ongoing work with LEAs.

Finally, capacity building is facilitated through collaborative and ongoing processes that extend beyond individual **skill-building to organizational and regional capacity**. Geographic Leads support continuous improvement cycles, co-develop practices (e.g., differentiated assistance processes, LCAP alignment), and provide coaching, consultation, and structured opportunities for reflection and refinement. Many respondents emphasize that capacity is built “collaboratively,” with Geographic Leads and COEs working together to refine systems, align supports, and strengthen their collective ability to serve LEAs. This positions Geographic Leads not only as providers of training, but as partners in long-term capacity development across the system.

“I believe there is much more intentionality around sharing best practices in terms of the four principles of the CA EL Roadmap from teacher toolkits to admin toolkits and to district office tool kits. This awareness is leveraging growth and strength across the Geographic Region.”

Survey Findings

- ▶ 82% of COE respondents in 2026 agreed or strongly agreed that their Geographic Lead **understands their needs**.
- ▶ 83% of COE respondents in 2026 agreed or strongly agreed that their Geographic Lead provides access to **high-quality professional learning opportunities** that enable them to effectively support their LEAs.

- ▶ 79% of COE respondents in 2026 agreed or strongly agreed that their Geographic Lead provides **access to technical assistance** that enables their COE to effectively support LEAs to improve student outcomes.
- ▶ 83% of COE respondents in 2026 agreed or strongly agreed that their Geographic Lead provides access to **high-quality tools or resources** that enable their COE to effectively support LEAs to improve student outcomes.

Quotations

“ We are working with our geographic leads in targeted work to develop capacity at COEs and in districts around Multilingual learners. We have started sharing resources and targeting professional development in this area for our groups. Our geographic lead has been key to pushing this work. It has been beneficial for my team to work with other COEs in this area and share what we are doing, share resources, and focus on a problem of practice together.

“ Our Geographic Lead has provided us with access to high-quality data tools and expertise in analyzing our data. Bringing experts in data to our rural county has led to an improvement in the use of data by many of our LEAs. While still an area for growth, specifically on utilizing and analyzing local measurements, the work so far in analyzing our state data and using that to determine areas of improvement has helped to improve several of our LEAs supports for students.

“ Most specifically, our team has truly created and implemented a true Improvement Science Cycle in our work with our schools and LEAs around student improvement. Our Geographic Lead has been hands-on, provided excellent support, professional learning, and team time. Additionally, they have followed up with us throughout our process, providing additional in-person support, resources, and multiple opportunities to collaborate with them as well as other agencies that have or are implementing the same work.

Engaging in Continuous Improvement

Geographic Leads support continuous improvement primarily by **modeling and reinforcing a system-wide mindset focused on ongoing learning, reflection, and adaptation**. Survey responses indicate that Geographic Leads not only promote continuous improvement conceptually but also embed it in how they facilitate regional work—through regular convenings, reflection cycles, and responsiveness to COE needs. There are high levels of agreement that Geographic Leads understand COE needs, foster trust, and provide safe spaces for problem-solving, suggesting that they create the conditions necessary for continuous improvement to occur in practice.

In addition, Geographic Leads operationalize continuous improvement by introducing and **supporting the use of structured methodologies** such as improvement science, implementation science, and systems transformation approaches. Many respondents describe adopting practices like root cause analysis, PDSA cycles, logic models, and structured data protocols because of Geographic Lead support. These approaches enable COEs to move beyond compliance-oriented work toward more intentional, iterative processes for improving outcomes, particularly in areas such as differentiated assistance and LCAP-aligned planning.

Finally, continuous improvement is sustained through collaborative structures that allow COEs to jointly test, refine, and scale effective practices. Geographic Leads convene communities of practice, networks, and workgroups where participants collectively analyze data, share strategies, and learn from one another's implementation experiences. This collaborative approach not only **strengthens individual COE practice but also promotes regional coherence, enabling improvement efforts to be continuously refined across contexts**. Together, these elements position Geographic Leads as key drivers of continuous improvement by integrating mindset, methods, and collaborative infrastructure.

Survey Findings

- ▶ 76% of COE respondents in 2026 agreed or strongly agreed that their geographic lead agency **provides ongoing support for implementation of activities** based on the professional learning or technical assistance.
- ▶ 61% of COE respondents in 2026 agreed or strongly agreed that their geographic lead agency **helps their COE monitor the progress of their work** to support LEAs, schools, and students.

Quotations

“ Through collaboration with our Geographic Lead Agency, we have strengthened our use of structured continuous improvement processes to support district teams in aligning LCAP goals, actions, and metrics with identified student needs. This work has informed the design of communities of practice and targeted Differentiated Assistance supports, helping district teams focus on high-leverage instructional and student support strategies that are more likely to improve outcomes for historically underserved student groups.

“ I have used a variety of strategies that I have learned from our Geographic Lead teams: affinity protocol, empathy interviews, fishbone diagrams, and driver diagrams. I am especially appreciated for the improvement/implementation playbook. It has been a wonderful reference for guiding the next steps in our teams.

“ Grounding our work in data and triangulating multiple points of data for multilingual learners has been a result of our Geographic Lead work. Understanding the full picture of the student experience and grounding effort in student voice has been impactful. This has led us to do very focused and intentional work and see impact.

Providing Universal and Targeted Support

The California Statewide System of Support is designed to provide varying levels of assistance to meet the unique needs of school districts, charter schools, and COEs. Geographic Leads are key providers of both universal and targeted support for LEAs.⁴ Universal support is a foundational level of support available to all districts, charters, and COEs. Targeted support (commonly referred to as Differentiated Assistance or DA) is offered to districts, charters, and COEs that meet specific criteria based on data from the California Dashboard.

Survey findings show that Geographic Leads widely **provide access to professional learning, technical assistance, and resources** that enable COEs to support LEAs. Geographic Leads play a key role in coordinating targeted supports for districts identified for additional assistance. Responses describe Geographic Leads working collaboratively with COEs, CCEE, and other System of Support leads/partners to review data, co-develop support plans, and align strategies for districts. This includes serving as thought partners, helping analyze strengths and needs, facilitating connections to additional resources or providers, and ensuring clarity around processes and next steps. In some cases, Geographic Leads act as an “accountability partner,” providing regular check-ins and helping monitor progress over time.

Beyond initial support, Geographic Leads sustain both universal and targeted supports through ongoing engagement and follow-through. Respondents frequently reference regular meetings, check-ins, and continued access to expertise that help maintain momentum and adapt supports as needs evolve. This ongoing involvement ensures that support is not episodic, but instead part of a continuous, responsive system that integrates professional learning, technical assistance, and collaborative problem-solving to strengthen outcomes for LEAs.

Survey Findings

- ▶ 76% of COE respondents in 2026 agreed or strongly agreed that they have collaboratively built their organization’s capacity to **provide targeted/supplemental support** (inclusive of DA) through their work with their Geographic Lead. Agreement with this statement has shown a significant upward trend, from 64% in 2023 to 73% in 2024.
- ▶ 85% of COE respondents in 2026 agreed or strongly agreed that their Geographic Lead has provided resources or training to **support their COE’s work with LEAs in using data to identify gaps** in the performance of students in different demographic groups. Agreement with this statement has shown a significant upward trend, from 63% in 2023 to 80% in 2024 and 85% in 2025.

⁴ See the Statewide System of Support website at <https://systemofsupport.org> for descriptions of support offered through the system.

- ▶ 84% of COE respondents in 2026 agreed or strongly agreed that, overall, the work that their COE has been doing with their Geographic Lead is **helpful in building their capacity to work** more effectively with their LEAs.
- ▶ 71% of COE respondents in 2026 agreed or strongly agreed they have **collaboratively built their organization's capacity to provide universal support** to LEAs in their county through their work with their geographic lead agency.

Quotations

“ Our systematic approach to Differentiated Assistance is a direct reflection of the **support and guidance** we have received from our Geographic Lead.

“ We were able to present to our Geographich Lead partners on our work supporting intensive Differentiated Assistance districts, and **we incorporated some best practices from other county offices** shared at that presentation.

“ Our SOS Geographic Lead group has created **multiple resources for schools/LEAs** in differentiated assistance status. I have used these tools in my own trainings, and LEAs have reported that they find them to be a valuable resource in helping them improve their systems.

“ As a result of participating in workgroups facilitated by our Geographich Lead, one process that has been particularly beneficial to my work is the **collaborative calibration protocols** used in the DA/Data/LCAP workgroup. These protocols have strengthened our team's ability to analyze data consistently, align actions with identified needs, and ensure greater coherence across our continuous improvement efforts with districts in DA.

“ Not only does our Geographich Lead provide resources, tools, and trainings, but the teams are just phenomenal to work with! **I so appreciate the workgroups and the time to connect with other COEs** for thought partnerships, which has led to additional discussions on our team for how to support districts in DA. We've been able to hear other models (coaching vs. PD sessions vs. COPs) and we've incorporated a bit of this into a process that's more flexible for our districts. I also think just having our Geographic Lead team members available to chat with and ask questions has helped to clarify policies or timelines and has also helped with navigating tricky situations with districts. I'm so grateful not only for their expertise, but also their willingness to always help and collaborate.

Appendix

ED Code 52073 subdivision B

- (b) (1) A geographic lead agency shall have all of the following responsibilities:
- (A) Assist in building the capacity of county offices of education within the geographic lead agency's defined geographic area to provide effective assistance and support to school districts under the state priorities identified in subdivision (d) of Section 52060 and federal programs.
 - (B) Coordinate and calibrate assistance and support provided to local educational agencies within its defined geographic area and with other geographic lead agencies, expert lead agencies identified pursuant to Section 52073.1, special education resource leads identified pursuant to Section 52073.2, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, and the department.
 - (C) Provide assistance and support if another county office of education within the geographic lead agency's defined geographic area is unable to provide appropriate assistance and support to one or more school districts in that county office of education's boundaries, or at the request of a school district or county superintendent of schools pursuant to subdivision (d) of Section 52071.
 - (D) Identify existing resources, professional development activities, and other efforts currently available within its designated geographic area to assist school districts and county offices of education to improve outcomes under the state priorities identified in subdivision (d) of Section 52060 and subdivision (d) of Section 52066, and upon request, share information about these existing resources.
 - (E) Upon request by the department and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, develop new resources and activities, designed to build capacity within school districts and county offices of education across the state under the state priorities identified in subdivision (d) of Section 52060 and subdivision (d) of Section 52066 or other areas of identified need.
 - (F) Other duties as specified by the department and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence as part of the process to select geographic lead agencies.