

Educating California's Disadvantaged Children: Lessons from Colombia

Tom Luschei
Claremont Graduate University

Despite California's great wealth, child poverty places a drag on the state's educational performance. Disadvantaged children—including English learners, foster children, and the poor—do not receive the educational attention and services that they require to be successful. Although California's Local Control Funding Formula recognizes this challenge, schools and districts have struggled to identify effective solutions to educate disadvantaged children. In this brief, Tom Luschei describes an approach that has been successful in educating and empowering one of South America's most marginalized populations—children living in conflict-afflicted rural areas of Colombia. Since 1975, Colombia's *Escuela Nueva* (New School) model has raised academic and non-cognitive outcomes of students in tens of thousands of Colombian schools and has been adopted in over a dozen countries, reaching approximately seven million children worldwide. This brief describes how *Escuela Nueva* works, provides evidence of its success, and discusses how California's schools and districts might implement core aspects of the *Escuela Nueva* model.



California's new accountability and continuous improvement framework relies on district and school leaders using multiple measures of school performance to identify where change is needed, and to monitor carefully the development, testing, and evaluation of improvement strategies over time. This process of continuous improvement requires that local leaders have access to research-based evidence and strategies that they can implement in their schools and opportunities to learn from one another about what works, under which conditions, and for which students. PACE's series of Continuous Improvement Briefs aims to support education leaders at all levels in learning how to improve the performance of their schools and students.

Introduction

If California were a country it would rank among the world's wealthiest nations, with the sixth-largest economy in the world. At the same time, though, inequality in California would be far greater than in most other developed countries. Thirty-six percent of California's children live in poverty, far more than in other countries with comparable wealth.

High levels of inequality and child poverty take a toll on the educational success of California's children. Although our state boasts some of the best public schools and universities in the world, California educators have struggled to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for disadvantaged children.

The adoption of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) marked an important step forward by shifting the way resources are distributed in the state's education system, and devoting extra funds to three key student populations: English learners, children living in poverty, and foster children. The LCFF also directed new responsibility and autonomy to local actors, including county offices of education, charter management

organizations, school districts, and schools, to work in consultation with their local communities to address the challenge of educating disadvantaged children.

Where should these stakeholders look for solutions? In our view California should look to international models, but not to the international educational superstars that feature so prominently in reform discussions. Child poverty and inequality are much less severe in Finland and Singapore than they are in California. California should instead look to a country that has met the challenges of widespread poverty and deep inequality with a strategy for reform that has empowered and raised achievement among its most marginalized children. California should look to Colombia.

Colombia's *Escuela Nueva* (New School) rural school improvement model was developed in 1975 to combat school failure in the country's remote rural areas. Since then it has achieved success in Colombia and in over a dozen other countries spanning North, Central, and South America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia. *Escuela Nueva's* child-centered, cooperative, and active model has been credited with raising children's academic achievement and other key outcomes like

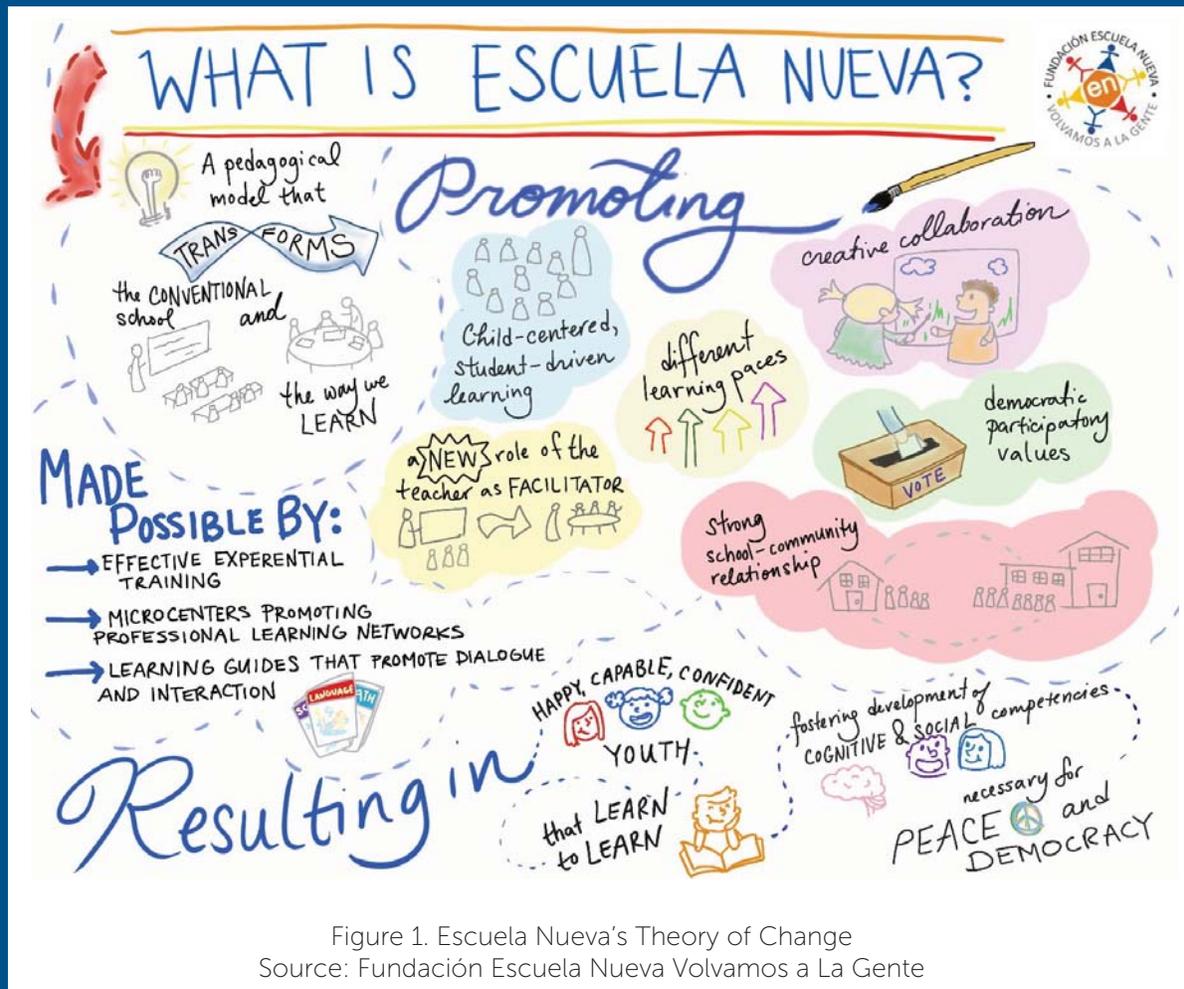


Figure 1. Escuela Nueva's Theory of Change
Source: Fundación Escuela Nueva Volvamos a La Gente

self-confidence, girls' participation in school, leadership skills, and peaceful interactions among children. California's unique educational context, which features both tremendous challenges and resources, could make the state fertile ground for implementing the *Escuela Nueva* model. Both rural and urban schools and school districts have much to learn from Escuela Nueva's experiences with cooperative learning and student empowerment.

In this brief, I describe the *Escuela Nueva* model and international evidence of its success. I then map several features of *Escuela Nueva* on to California's context to explore key considerations for implementation of the model in California.

The Escuela Nueva Model

Escuela Nueva was designed for rural Colombian schools, where children of different ages studied together in multigrade classrooms. Using student-centered, self-paced learning guides, children in *Escuela Nueva* schools engage cooperatively in small groups according to their learning needs, allowing the teacher to work individually with students (Figure 1). Children are encouraged and empowered to collaborate, talk, conduct research, present information, and monitor their own learning. *Escuela Nueva* classrooms promote a child-friendly learning environment through the use of hexagonal tables that facilitate collaboration, as well as "learning corners" and libraries that provide resources to support student research. Through "friendship mail," students send friendly and supportive messages to each other. A classroom suggestion box enables students to express their concerns or suggestions to improve the teaching and learning environment.

To address the needs of local communities, *Escuela Nueva* learning guides can be adapted to specific contexts, and classroom activities are designed to relate directly to the lives of children in their communities. Parents participate in activities like the creation of community maps and family histories. In rural areas, parents assist in the development of local agricultural calendars and the design and maintenance of school gardens. Families contribute to "traveling notebooks," which are passed from home to home as families add entries that are then shared in the classroom.

Students in *Escuela Nueva* schools play key roles in school governance through democratically elected student councils. Students also form committees to address local challenges like school cleanliness, inter-student relationships, and peace building. For teachers, *Escuela Nueva* offers extensive, sequenced

initial training that follows the experiential and collaborative methodology they will apply in their classrooms. Teachers also participate in continual professional development through "microcenters," where they meet regularly to support each other and discuss problems of teaching and learning.

Escuela Nueva's Growth and Success

From a small pilot in 1975, *Escuela Nueva* grew rapidly across rural Colombia to reach over 20,000 schools and 700,000 students by 1992. In 1985, the Colombian government adopted Escuela Nueva as official public policy for its rural schools. In 1989, schools in urban areas of Colombia began to adopt the *Escuela Nueva* methodology. This urban version, known as *Escuela Activa Urbana*, or "Urban Active School," translates Escuela Nueva's flexible and cooperative approach from multigrade to single-graded classrooms. In 2001, *Escuela Nueva* was adapted to meet the educational and socio-emotional needs of children displaced by Colombia's long-standing civil conflict. This "Learning Circles" program accelerates learning and supports displaced children until they are ready to reenter the formal school system.

The successful expansion of *Escuela Nueva* in Colombia led to endorsements and support from organizations like the United States Agency for International Development, UNESCO, and the World Bank, which catalyzed global expansion of the model to over a dozen countries across Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia. To date, *Escuela Nueva* has reached an estimated seven million children across the globe.

Evaluations have found that children in *Escuela Nueva* schools score consistently higher on tests than children in traditional rural schools. According to a cross-national assessment conducted by UNESCO in 1997, Colombia was the only country in Latin America and the Caribbean where rural children outscored urban children on tests of reading and math, an exceptional result that UNESCO attributed directly to *Escuela Nueva*. Evidence also suggests that the model has made a positive impact on key non-cognitive or "soft" skills like school persistence, girls' participation in school, self-esteem, democratic attitudes and behavior, leadership skills, and peaceful interactions among students.

Opportunities for Escuela Nueva in California

As Table 1 illustrates, *Escuela Nueva* addresses many of California's challenges and contexts. Most importantly, Escuela Nueva is uniquely designed to address the

Table 1. Mapping Escuela Nueva to the California Context

California	<i>Escuela Nueva</i>
High degree of child poverty; LCFF focuses on poor, English learners, and foster children	Designed for and succeeded in poor rural areas; access to rich resources in Spanish for English learners; Learning Circles program could serve as a model for foster youth.
Key challenges in poor rural areas; migrant and immigrant student populations	Flexible multigrade model designed for rural areas where children often leave schooling for long periods of time.
Growing interest in bilingual education and Spanish dual immersion programs	Learning guides offer rich resources in academic Spanish across many subjects.
Adherence to Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics	Like CCSS, <i>Escuela Nueva</i> stresses collaborative, student-centered inquiry and problem solving.
New School Dashboard requires multiple measures of school effectiveness	Linked to peaceful interaction, leadership, and persistence in school; emphasis on student governance builds student buy-in and empowerment, contributes to positive school climate.
School violence and conflict	Linked with peaceful interaction of students and Colombia's emerging transition toward peace.
Tremendous wealth and philanthropy	Succeeded in a context of scarce resources, but could thrive with greater support.

needs of disadvantaged students targeted for additional resources under LCFF. The model's success among Colombia's rural poor demonstrates that a whole-school, systemic model aimed toward educating the disadvantaged can support these children academically, emotionally, and socially. There is also a natural link between the needs of California's English learners, most of whom speak Spanish in the home, and the rich Spanish resources available in *Escuela Nueva* learning guides. As the passage of

Proposition 58 in November 2016 increases options and demand for bilingual instruction in California, *Escuela Nueva*'s rich and comprehensive Spanish learning materials can serve as a resource for teachers working in dual immersion, English/Spanish schools. Further, as districts focus new attention on foster youth, they can look to *Escuela Nueva*'s Learning Circles program as a model. The Learning Circles were designed to support and educate Colombia's internally displaced children and youth, who share several experiences with foster children, including dislocation, trauma, and educational underperformance.

Escuela Nueva Learning Circles

Escuela Nueva's Learning Circles were created in 2001 to address the needs of children and youth displaced by Colombia's longstanding civil conflict. Through the use of trained tutors, interactive learning materials, and flexible multigrade methodology, Learning Circles provide a safe, informal environment that supports displaced children and accelerates their learning until they are ready to transition to the formal education system. Children participating in Learning Circles also build skills to help them manage conflict and interact peacefully with peers. Displaced children participating in Learning Circles have identified warm and caring treatment from their tutors as a key to their success in school. In 2006, the government of Colombia adopted the Learning Circles program as official national policy for integrating displaced children into formal schools.

Making Escuela Nueva Work in California

The history of *Escuela Nueva*'s implementation in Colombia and beyond teaches us that where adequate local will, capacity, and resources are in place, the model succeeds. If one of these elements is missing, the model will have difficulty taking root and flourishing. Although our state enjoys tremendous wealth, limitations in local capacity and will could impede the deployment of adequate resources to ensure success. Teachers and school principals may be disinclined to make classrooms more student-centered and collaborative. They may also be reluctant to cede aspects of school governance to students, who are key stakeholders in *Escuela Nueva* schools. Accountability rules could weaken *Escuela Nueva*'s flexible and student-centered approach. In *Escuela Nueva* schools for example, students monitor their own attendance; in California, rules related to average daily attendance and school funding might weaken this practice.



Despite these challenges, *Escuela Nueva*'s long history of success in extremely resource-constrained environments suggests that it can surely thrive in our nation's wealthiest state. But successful implementation of *Escuela Nueva* in California will require time, resources, and care. Traditionally, the introduction of *Escuela Nueva* in a new setting begins with awareness building, which includes a study trip of key stakeholders to Colombia to see the model in action. Once a school or district decides to pilot *Escuela Nueva*, teachers and school leaders receive intensive sequenced training to build capacity and support for the model. Training begins with an initiation workshop focused on making the classroom and school more child-friendly and building relationships with the local community. This is followed by a workshop introducing teachers to the *Escuela Nueva* learning guides and methodology, and to their role in supporting student-centered teaching and learning. Once teachers become familiar with *Escuela Nueva*'s methods and materials, they work with curriculum specialists to adapt learning guides to the local curriculum as needed. Successful implementation and scaling up also require establishing and learning from demonstration sites, the creation of teacher support microcenters, evaluation, and adaptation. Interested schools or districts would not make this journey alone; Colombia's Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN), a non-profit organization that promotes the global implementation of *Escuela Nueva*, has supported the adoption of the model in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. FEN USA, a non-profit organization based in California, was recently founded to promote and support *Escuela Nueva* in the United States.

As a system of school and community resources and processes, *Escuela Nueva* works best when adopted systemically. However, a small-scale implementation of *Escuela Nueva* could involve the adoption of some of the model's key tenets and practices. Three elements comprise *Escuela Nueva*'s essence: self-study learning materials that allow students to work at their own pace, active and cooperative learning groups, and authentic student governance. *Escuela Nueva* demands a steadfast focus on children's learning needs, relationships, and voice to build cooperation, empathy, and empowerment among students. These outcomes interact with opportunities to participate in school governance to build efficacy among students, convincing them that they can and should participate positively in their schools and communities.

Conclusion

California shares many characteristics with our Latin American neighbors, including a shared culture and language on the positive side, and inequality and child poverty on the other. As local stakeholders mobilize the LCFF's new resources and autonomy to address the needs of California's most disadvantaged students, they would be well served to look to the South for ideas. Colombia's *Escuela Nueva* reform, which has succeeded in some of the world's most marginalized environments, provides many lessons for California. And although *Escuela Nueva* has traditionally focused on educating the poor, the model is based on educational ideas like cooperative learning and multigrade teaching that have succeeded in some of the most exclusive and high-achieving schools in the world. *Escuela Nueva* introduced these ideas to the most marginalized children in Colombia, demonstrating that effective educational approaches work for rich and poor alike. With additional support from our state's vast resources and strong philanthropic community, there is strong potential for *Escuela Nueva* to thrive in California, even beyond its remarkable global achievements to date.

About the Author

Tom Luschei is an associate professor in the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University. He holds a PhD in International Comparative Education and an MA in Economics from Stanford University. In 2013 he was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia, where he studied the urban implementation of *Escuela Nueva*. He is a founding member of FEN USA's Advisory Council. Prior to pursuing academia, he worked as a bilingual elementary, high school, and adult education teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

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Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is an independent, non-partisan research center based at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, and the University of California – Davis. PACE seeks to define and sustain a long-term strategy for comprehensive policy reform and continuous improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. PACE bridges the gap between research and policy, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local policymakers to increase the impact of academic research on educational policy in California.

Founded in 1983, PACE

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- Convenes seminars and briefings that make current research accessible to policy audiences throughout California
- Provides expert testimony on educational issues to legislative committees and other policy audiences
- Works with local school districts and professional associations on projects aimed at supporting policy innovation, data use, and rigorous evaluation

PACE Continuous Improvement Publications

PACE. *2020 Vision: Rethinking Budget Priorities Under the LCFF*. 2014

Heather Hough, Jason Willis, Alicia Grunow, Kelsey Krausen, Sylvia Kwon, Laura Steen Mulfinger, Sandra Park. *Continuous Improvement in Practice*. 2017

Katie Brackenridge, Jessica Gunderson, Mary Perry. *Expanding Learning: A Powerful Strategy for Equity*. 2017

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Stanford Graduate School of Education
520 Galvez Mall, CERAS 401
Stanford, CA 94305-3001
Phone: 650 724 2832
Fax: 650 723 9931