



PACEsetters at 25

Research Center Celebrates a Quarter Century as Leader in Legislative Policy Analysis

By Steven Cohen

When Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) was founded in the early 1980s, the state's schools were in turmoil following the passage of Proposition 13, which indirectly limited public education funding.

In 2008, 25 years later, Proposition 13 is still intact, the state's schools are still in turmoil following the prematurely declared "Year of Education," while California's continuing budget crisis directly limits public education funding and per-pupil spending has dropped below levels never dreamed of in the '80s.

Proverbially speaking, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The good news is that PACE has grown substantially in size and stature since then-GSE Professor James Guthrie, who taught in the School of Education for 27 years; Stanford Professor Michael Kirst; and then-chancellor of the California Community Colleges Gerald Hayward founded PACE (originally called Policy Alternatives for California Education). And the other good news is that the independent policy center has remained true to its pioneering mission, principles and strategies.

"I guess that it shows that every year should be the 'Year of Education' until we keep the promise of excellent education for all of California's young people," says PACE Executive Director David Plank, who joined the PACE team two years ago from Michigan State where he founded and directed the Education Policy Center.

Plank is not about to declare PACE's mission accomplished — 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. But the three principles guiding the model policy center's strategies remain intact: to target resources to schools and students who need them the most; to empower local schools and districts with more autonomy and flexibility; and to rigorously evaluate what is working and what is not.

Bridging Two Worlds

From its earliest days, PACE directors recognized that the gap between the disparate needs of researchers and legislators was wide.

"For policy research to have an impact, academics need to be familiar with the world where policymakers live," says PACE Director Bruce Fuller, who served as a special assistant to then-California Governor Edmund "Jerry" Brown and as education adviser to two state Assembly education committees. "I tell my students that getting public officials to be responsive requires putting yourself in their place. Having been there can help a lot as scholars try to figure out what kinds of research policymakers will find useful."

Professor Fuller, who joined PACE a decade ago, preaches what he practices. While trained in sociology, the GSE professor takes a pragmatic approach to education policy analysis. He and other PACE directors have a clear sense of the requisite legislative compromises and machinations that take place. In former lives, Kirst served as president of the State Board of Education; Guthrie was an education specialist for the U.S. Senate and Department of Education, as well as a member of the

PACE was honored with a California Legislature resolution in recognition of their 25 years of service to the state. Above, from left, PACE director Dominic Brewer (USC), executive director David Plank (UC Berkeley), director Susanna Loeb (Stanford), State Senator Tom Torlakson, founding director Gerald Hayward (Sacramento) and director Bruce Fuller (UC Berkeley)

Berkeley School Board; and Hayward worked as the education policy wonk for the State Senate.

It's a critical difference that's not lost on former State Senator, Assemblyman and Secretary of Education Gary Hart. While Sacramento now swarms with educational think tanks, lobbyists and organizations from every political and ideological stripe, Hart says that in the early '80s PACE was the first one at the table, ready to bridge the worlds of research and practice for policymakers.

"PACE was clearly the pioneer in this effort," says Hart, who served as the Chairman of the Senate Education Committee from 1983 to 1995. "The idea that they were here to help us rather than the academy was a really welcome breath of fresh air... The collaboration between two premier research institutions, Cal and Stanford, the superb academic credentials and background of the PACE directors; and the clarity and recommendations in their publications was a very powerful combination... If PACE hadn't dropped into the fray, a lot of the good educational work would not have gotten done or be as far along as it is now."

Hart believes that PACE's work stood out in four areas during his 20 years in Sacramento: school finance, vocational education, preschool education and childcare, and the ability to "take the long view," as exemplified by PACE's premier publication, "Conditions of Education," first published in 1984.

"Conditions" was resurrected for the PACE 25th anniversary symposium of education researchers and policymakers in Sacramento on October 2, that Hart and other prominent state legislators attended. Produced and authored by current PACE directors Fuller, USC's Dominic Brewer and Stanford's Susanna Loeb, with additional support from others, "Conditions of Education in California 2008" offers a sobering status report on the lack of educational opportunity in the Golden State.

"Lifting Low-Achieving Students and Schools," a chapter co-written by Fuller and Policy, Organization, Measurement and Evaluation (POME) doctoral student Lynette Parker, examines five different state and federal tests of student progress that provide inconsistent barometers of student progress and show contradictory results.

GSE Professor Norton Grubb authored a chapter called "The Transition from High School to Postsecondary Education," that spells out several improvements and recommendations that — like the other chapters in the publication on English Language Learners, teachers, school finance and governance — can be addressed, at least in part, without infusions of new money.

Luis Huerta, who co-authored papers with Grubb and Fuller as a doctoral student in POME and is now an assistant professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, says that he and several other graduate students who have worked with PACE

honed their policy analysis skills of timely education reform issues that have "impacted both the applied context at the state legislature and the wider research and academic community."

Besides publishing policy briefs, research reports and working papers that address key policy issues, PACE convenes monthly seminars and briefings — most often in the State Capitol — bringing together leading scholars, practitioners and policymakers to discuss current educational issues. In November, Jorge Ruiz-de-Velasco from UC Berkeley's Earl Warren Institute, Patricia Rucker from the CTA, and Ed Voice Policy Director Bill Lucia joined Fuller in Sacramento to examine the federal role in school reform.

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With a prescience for the most pressing issues in education, Fuller, Plank, other PACE directors and education policy researchers from across the country also provide expert testimony to legislative committees and other policymakers; team with local school districts and professional associations on projects aimed at supporting policy innovation, data use and rigorous evaluation; and command headline-grabbing coverage in key media outlets on a host of education policy and political stories such as No Child Left Behind, school finance and preschool.

Recently PACE teamed with six of California's largest urban school districts — Fresno, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Diego and San Francisco — to form the Partnership for Urban Education Research in order to increase data availability, enhance internal research capacity and promote collaboration and information sharing across district lines.

One of the partnerships' first bombshells was to address California's dropout crisis. While researchers in political and academic circles have traditionally struggled over various methodologies, exact numbers and the true dimensions of the dropout problem, nothing could obscure the fact that the total of the somewhat conflicting data meant a turning point in the crisis. A *Sacramento Bee* headline in its July 17 edition concurred: "New numbers won't end California school dropout debate."

Plank jokes that research questions invariably receive two answers: "it's complicated" and "it depends," while policy questions also have two answers: "yes and no."

"PACE has become really good at figuring out how to move from the nuanced conclusions of academic research to clear guidance for policymakers, which leads to better policies and a better future for California's students."