

The Changing Role of County Offices of Education

Survey Results

David N. Plank
Daniel C. Humphrey
Jennifer O'Day



In this brief we summarize findings from three surveys that sought to learn how county offices of education (COEs) are changing in response to the implementation of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and the Statewide System of Support (SSS). COEs have been assigned critically important responsibilities in the implementation of these initiatives, and our survey results suggest that most county superintendents are strongly supportive of the state's new policy direction. They are increasingly aware of the scale of change that will have to occur to fully implement the LCFF and the SSS, both in the organization and operation of their own COEs and in their relationships with other agencies, and they recognize that full implementation remains a work in progress.

December 2019

Introduction

In October 2017 and January 2019 the Local Control Funding Formula Research Collaborative (LCFFRC) administered in-person interactive surveys to county superintendents¹ during quarterly meetings of the California County Superintendents Education Services Agency (CCSESA). The surveys focused on the superintendents' attitudes towards the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and the Statewide System of Support (SSS), and on the extent to which implementation of these two initiatives was bringing about change in the organization and activities of county offices of education (COEs). We administered a similar survey to the members of CCSESA's Curriculum and Instruction Steering Committee (CISC) in March 2019. The members of CISC are drawn from the staffs of COEs, where they have the primary responsibility for providing assistance to local school districts and schools. In this policy brief we present some of the key findings from these surveys, with a particular focus on salient changes in responses among superintendents between 2017 and 2019, and on differences in the responses between superintendents and CISC members in 2019.

Policy Background

The adoption of the LCFF in 2013 introduced dramatic changes in the roles and responsibilities that COEs are expected to fulfill in California's education system. Most notably, COEs are required to review and approve the Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) produced by the school districts in their counties. In addition, COEs are now expected to provide guidance and support to local school districts that need or request assistance as they seek to encourage continuous improvement in the performance of local schools and students, in concert with the broader SSS. The SSS comprises the 58 COEs along with other agencies including the California Department of Education (CDE) and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE). Within the SSS seven COEs have been designated as "geographic leads," with responsibility for coordinating the work of multiple agencies in specific regions of the state. Additional COEs have been designated as "content leads," charged with assisting other agencies in the System of Support with specific challenges including community engagement and support for English learners and students with special needs.² These are big changes, and it is not surprising to learn that COE superintendents find implementation challenging. Their responses to our surveys nevertheless suggest that they are optimistic about the new policy direction that California has adopted.

2019 Survey Responses

When asked whether the state’s new System of Support is “a step in the right direction,” nearly all of the superintendents in our sample either agreed (63 percent) or strongly agreed (31 percent) that it is. (See Figure 1.) On a series of 11 questions asking how well prepared (on a scale from 1-10) their COE is to provide assistance on the challenges local districts face, however, there was some significant variation. The modal response on most items was 7/8, but on some critical challenges – including providing support for English Learners (ELs) and Students with Disabilities (SWDs), evaluating interventions, and building local capacity for continuous improvement – the modal responses were lower. (See Figure 2.) In contrast, when asked how well prepared their COE was to assist districts with Root Cause Analyses (a foundational element in the continuous improvement process) 80 percent of superintendents gave their COE a 7, 8, 9, or 10.

As the SSS develops it is important to recognize that in each of these 11 areas a significant number of COE superintendents indicated that their county is well prepared (9-10) to offer assistance, which suggests that some county offices may have expertise in particular fields that would enable them to provide assistance to other COEs and to districts outside their own county. Building an effective System of Support will in any case require much closer cooperation among COEs and between COEs and other agencies, as we discuss in the final section of this brief.

Figure 1. The state’s new System of Support is a step in the right direction

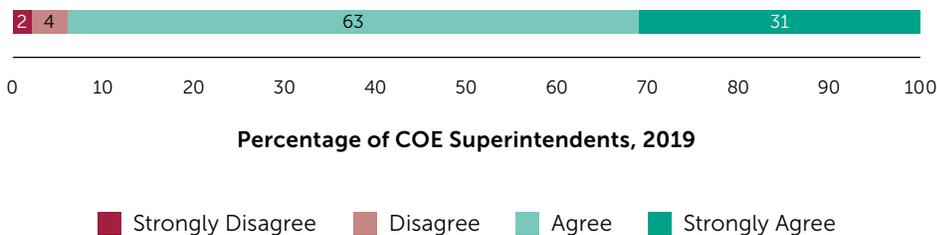
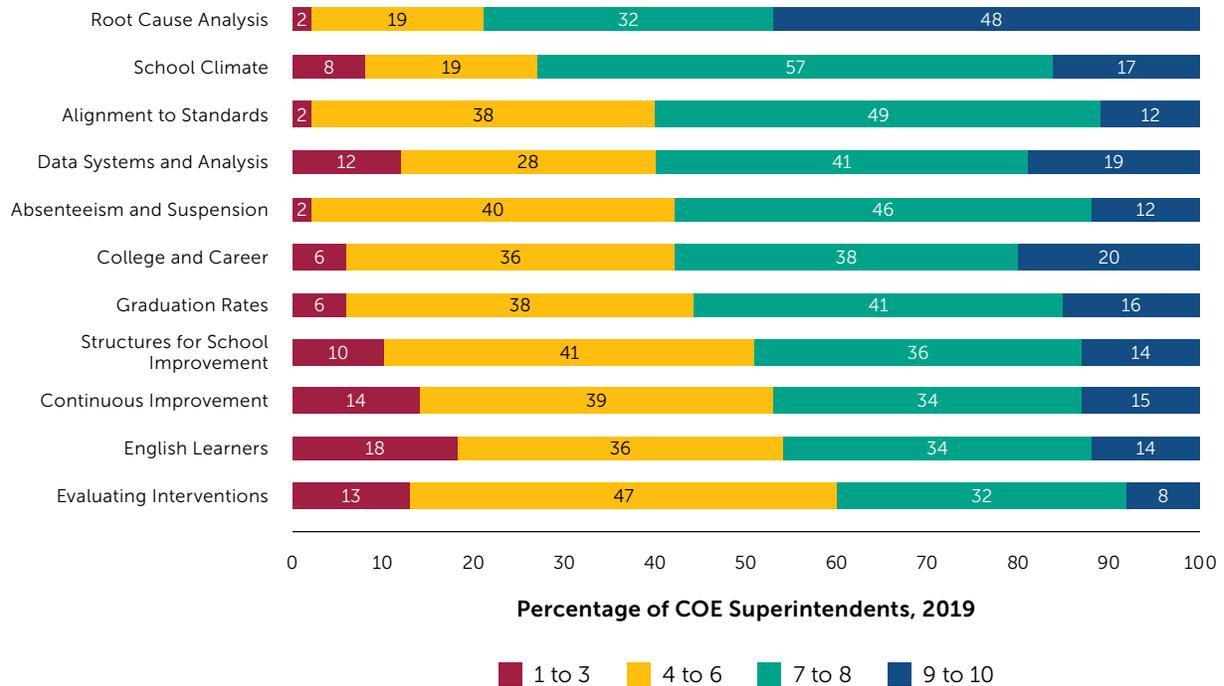


Figure 2. On a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), how prepared is your county to provide assistance regarding...



Note: Percentage results are rounded to the nearest whole number and may not add to 100 due to rounding error.

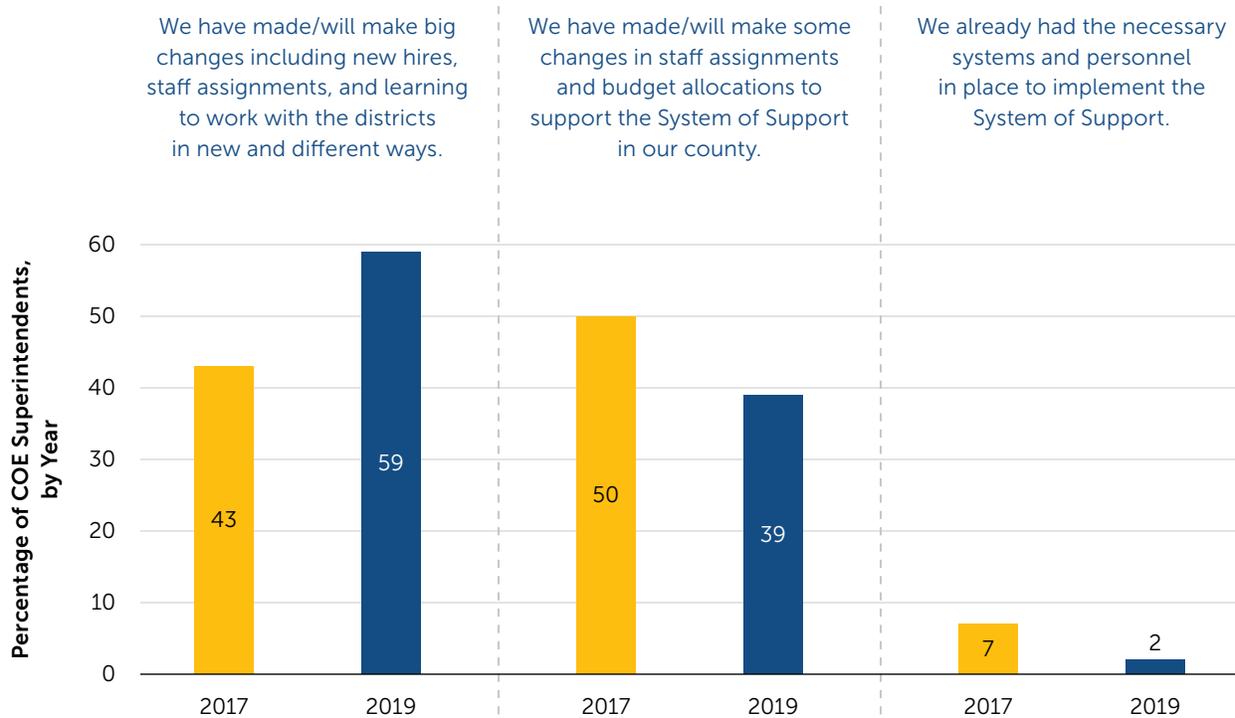
Differences Across Time

In our 2019 survey we included two questions that we had posed to county superintendents in 2017, to learn how their views had changed over time. The first question asked COE superintendents how much change they had made in the structure and operations of their COEs in response to the LCFF, while the second asked about how superintendents view the role of COEs in the SSS.

Extent of Change

The number of COE superintendents who have made or plan to make big changes in their COEs to implement the SSS increased significantly between 2017 and 2019. (See Figure 3.) In 2017, 43 percent of superintendents foresaw big changes in response to their new responsibilities, while 50 percent had made or planned to make “some” changes in COE staffing and budget allocations. Seven percent stated that they already had the necessary systems and personnel in place to implement the new system. In 2019, in contrast, the share who have made or plan to make big changes increased to 59 percent, while the share who expected “some” changes declined to 39 percent. The percentage of superintendents who stated that they already had the necessary systems and personnel in place fell from seven to two.

Figure 3. How much change has/will the implementation of the System of Support require(d) in your COE?

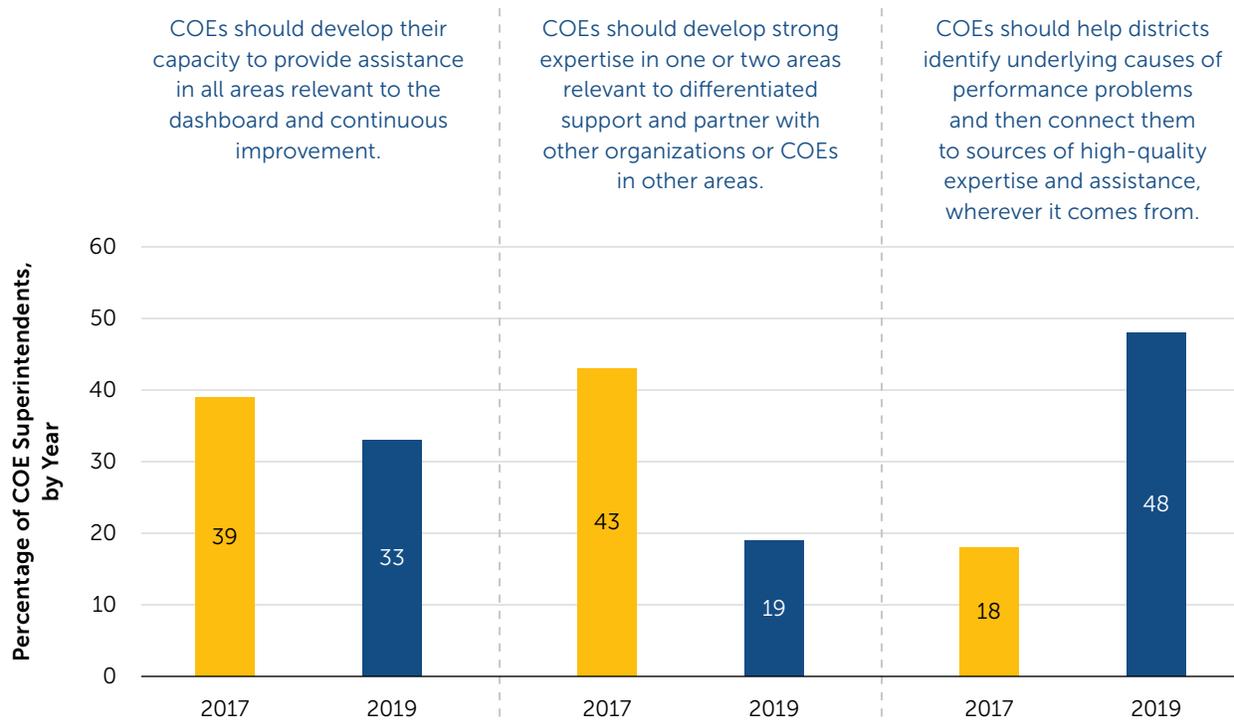


Role of the COE

One of the key questions facing COEs is how to define their role in California’s emerging System of Support. On the one hand, COEs may seek to establish themselves as “one-stop shops” for the assistance local districts need, building internal capacity to support districts across the full array of challenges districts must confront. On the other hand, COEs may serve as brokers of expertise, working with districts to identify sources of high-quality assistance and support inside or beyond the COE. COEs may also seek to establish themselves as specialists in specific areas (e.g., services for English Learners), sharing their expertise in these areas with other COEs while directing districts requiring other kinds of assistance to other sources of support.

COE superintendents’ views on their roles shifted dramatically between 2017 and 2019. In 2017 only 18 percent of superintendents saw brokering among multiple sources of expertise as the primary role of COEs, while 43 percent saw their primary role as developing local expertise in one or two areas to share with other COEs and school districts. In 2019 these numbers basically reversed: 48 percent of superintendents saw their primary role as brokering, while 19 percent foresaw their COE specializing in one or two specific areas. (See Figure 4.) Interestingly, the percentage who saw their COE as a “one-stop shop” for local districts remained virtually unchanged.

Figure 4. Which of the following statements do you agree with MOST?



Differences between Superintendents and CISC Staff

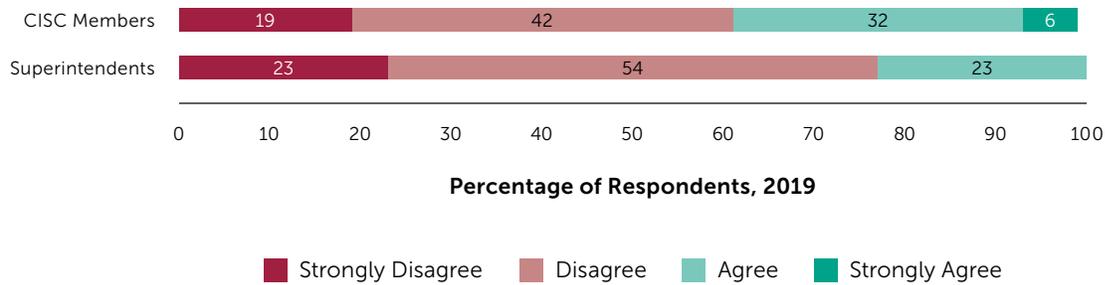
CISC is a committee organized and administered by CCSESA, comprising COE staff who are directly involved in providing guidance and assistance to districts and schools on questions related to instructional services for students. The members of CISC are consequently more directly involved in and affected by the implementation of the SSS than COE superintendents, and their views of how implementation is proceeding may differ from their superintendents' views as a result.

In March 2019 we administered the same survey that we had administered to COE superintendents in January to members of CISC at their quarterly meeting. On most questions CISC members' responses tracked closely with the responses from COE superintendents, but on a few questions there were some notable differences.

Adequate Funding

When asked whether their COE has sufficient resources to implement the System of Support in their county, CISC members are significantly more optimistic than COE superintendents. (See Figure 5.) Only 23 percent of superintendents agree that funding for the System of Support is adequate, while the corresponding number among CISC members is nearly 40 percent. Most members of both groups nevertheless affirm that the funding that COEs receive will have to increase if they are to provide the assistance that school districts need.

Figure 5. Our COE has adequate funding to implement the System of Support in the districts in my county

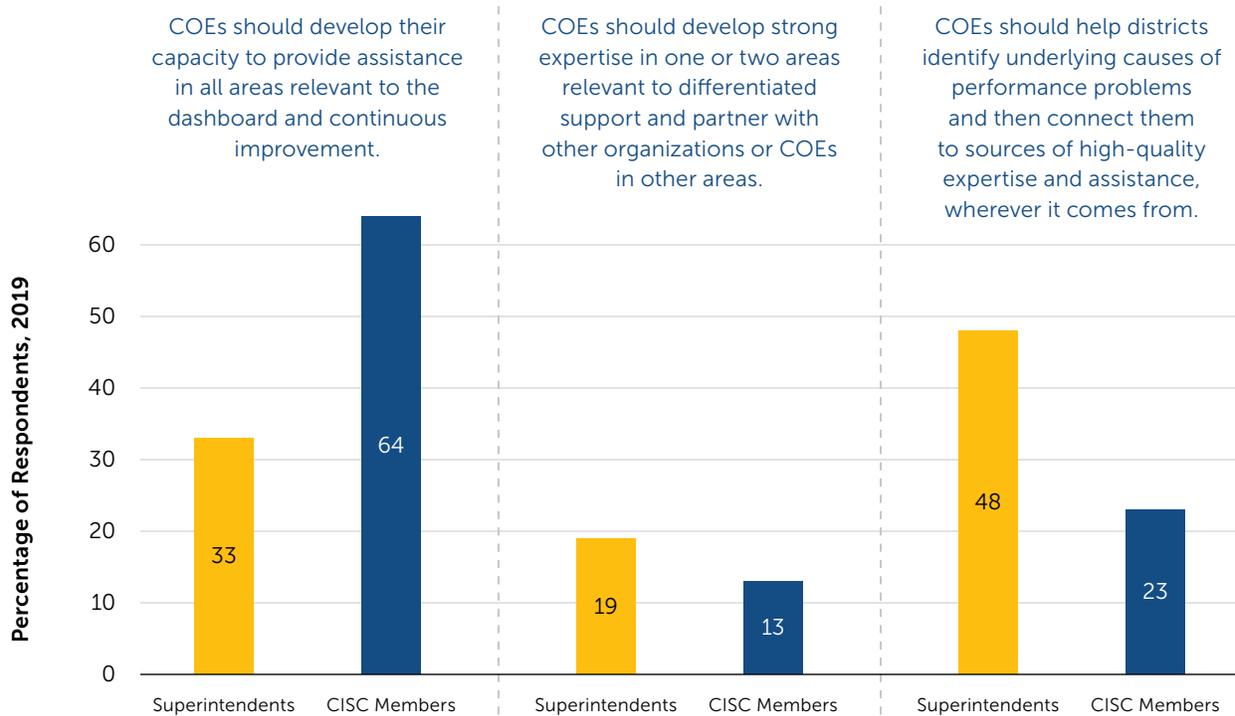


Percentage results are rounded to the nearest whole number and may not add to 100 due to rounding error.

Role of the COE

As Figure 6 shows, a strong majority of CISC members continue to affirm that their COE should be a “one-stop shop” for the guidance and support that local districts need. Only one-third of superintendents share this view and, as can be seen in Figure 4, this number has declined since 2017. In contrast, nearly half (48 percent) of COE superintendents agree that the primary role of the COE is brokering expertise from a variety of sources, while only 23 percent of CISC members see this as the COE’s primary role. Relatively few members of either group see the development of specialized expertise in one or two areas as the primary role of COEs.

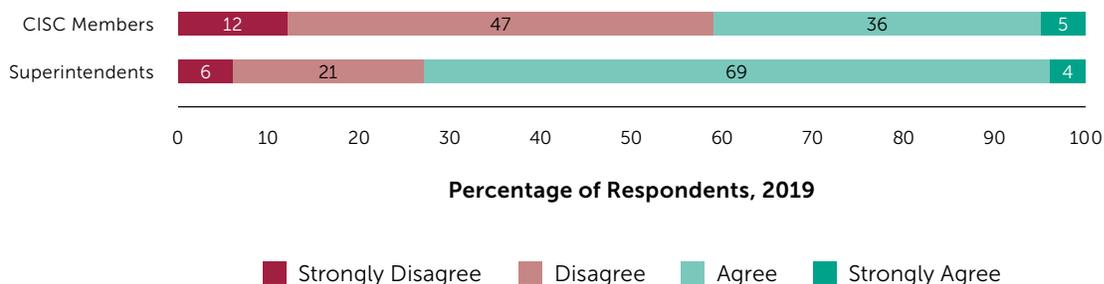
Figure 6. Which of the following statements do you agree with MOST?



California School Dashboard

The sharpest disagreement between COE superintendents and CISC members is observed on the question of the utility of the California School Dashboard. (See Figure 7.) Superintendents are broadly supportive of the Dashboard, with 73 percent either agreeing (69 percent) or strongly agreeing (4 percent) that results on the Dashboard provide an accurate measure of which districts are in need of assistance. In contrast, only 41 percent of CISC members agree (36 percent) or strongly agree (5 percent) that the Dashboard provides an accurate measure of district performance, while 59 percent disagree (47 percent) or strongly disagree (12 percent).

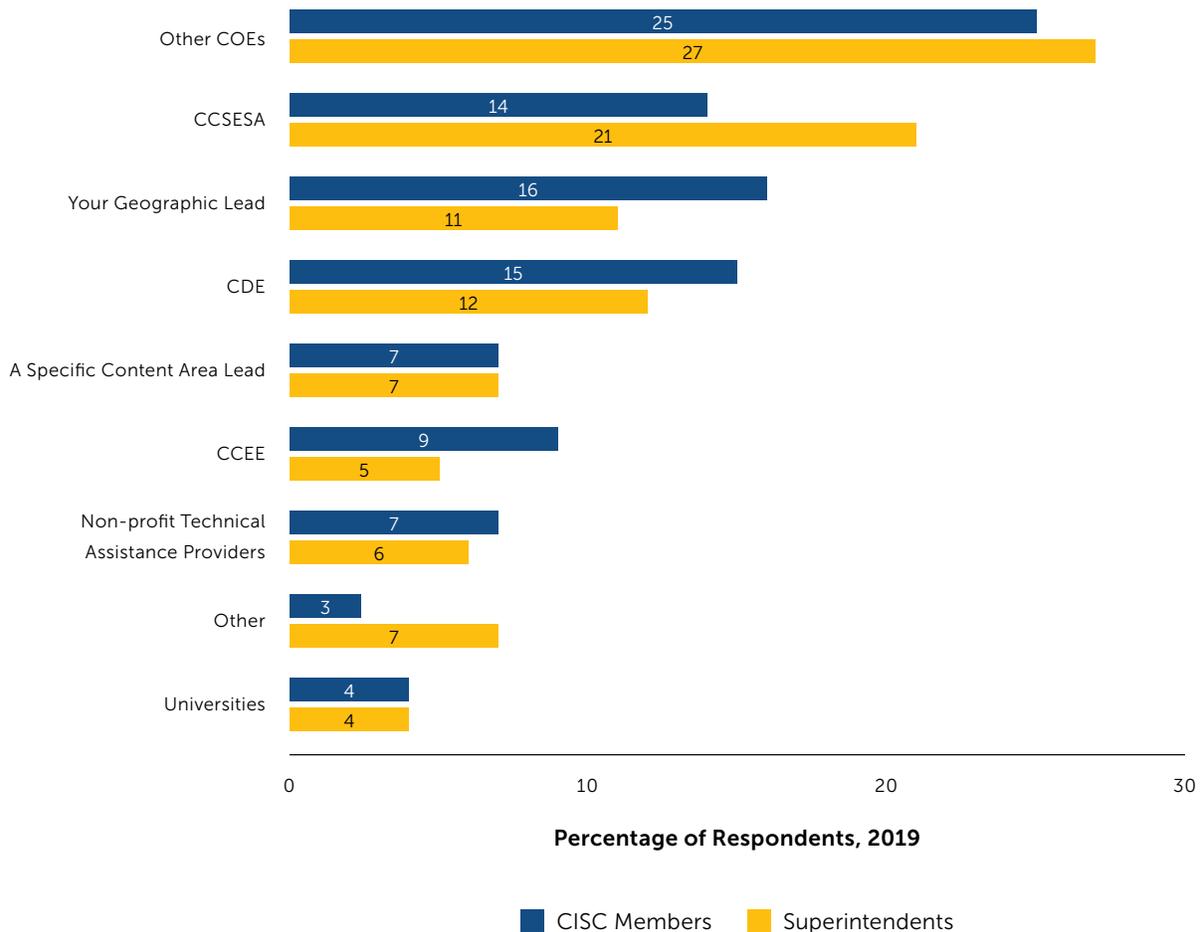
Figure 7. District results on the California School Dashboard provide an accurate measure of which districts need additional support



System of Support is Still Emerging

Finally, we asked both superintendents and CISC members whether their COEs had sought assistance from any of the many agencies that constitute California’s emerging System of Support. (See Figure 8.) Responses from both groups suggest that county offices rely most heavily on the support of other COEs and relatively little on other agencies. Among superintendents the most common source of support is Other COEs (27 percent), followed by CCSESA (21 percent) and the CDE (12 percent). Some mentioned Geographic Leads (11 percent), and a few have reached out to other agencies including Content Leads (7 percent), nonprofit providers (6 percent), and the CCEE (5 percent). CISC members are somewhat less likely than superintendents to seek assistance from CCSESA (14 percent vs. 21 percent) and somewhat more likely to seek assistance from the CCEE (9 percent vs. 5 percent), but the numbers are otherwise similar.

Figure 8. Has your COE sought assistance from any of the following groups to improve the support you provide your districts identified for differentiated assistance? (Check all that apply.)



Responses from both groups make it clear that the System of Support remains more of an aspiration than a reality, with most COEs calling on their neighbors and peers for help rather than looking farther afield. The CCEE in particular appears not to have established itself as a widely used source of assistance to COEs, which is likely to complicate greatly the leadership role that it is expected to play in the System of Support.

Conclusion

California has embarked on a course that promises transformation in the state's public school system, rooted in a shift of focus from compliance and sanctions to continuous improvement and support. The success of this transformation depends on deep changes in organizational culture and behavior at all levels of the system, which will inevitably take time to enact fully.

County offices of education have been assigned a critical role in this new system, as learning partners and assistance providers to local school districts, and our surveys provide evidence that COE leaders are moving towards acceptance of the responsibilities that this new role entails. Nearly all (94 percent) of the superintendents in our sample agreed that the creation of the SSS is a "step in the right direction." (See Figure 1.) Between 2017 and 2019, the share of COE superintendents who confirmed that they have made major changes in the structure and operations of their COEs increased by nearly 40 percent. (See Figure 3.)

Our surveys simultaneously make it plain that major challenges persist when it comes to the engagement of COEs in the state's emerging System of Support. On the one hand, a near-majority (48 percent) of superintendents have come to view their primary role in the SSS as brokers of expertise, supporting local districts in their work to identify the root causes of the challenges they face and connecting them to sources of high-quality assistance. (See Figure 4.) On the other hand, however, the number of COEs that have sought assistance from sources other than their fellow COEs remains very small, and a solid majority (64 percent) of CISC members continues to affirm that COEs should be prepared to provide all of the assistance that local districts need, without support from other agencies. (See Figure 6.)

Given the scale and depth of the challenges that most California school districts face, building an effective SSS will require the mobilization and deployment of expertise and assistance from every available source and not just from COEs. The responses to our surveys suggest that COE superintendents are increasingly ready to seek out the best available assistance for their local school districts wherever it may be found, but state action can support their efforts in two key ways. First, the state must make some provision

for cataloguing and vetting the experts and resources that might help districts with the specific challenges they face (e.g., low performance in specific subgroups), and for making this information readily available to COEs and other actors in the SSS. This could be done directly by the CDE or the CCEE, or contracted to a university or other third party. Second, both seeking and providing assistance impose costs on districts and COEs that the Legislature should acknowledge as the SSS evolves. The success of the new system depends on cooperation across district and COE boundaries, and this is unlikely to happen at the necessary scale in the absence of explicit state support to encourage the sharing of expertise and other resources.

Author Biographies

Dr. David N. Plank is an Emeritus Professor (Research) in the Graduate School of Education at Stanford University. He served as Executive Director of PACE from 2007 until 2018.

Dr. Daniel Humphrey is an independent consultant who has specialized in research on education policy for over 25 years. His most recent work has been focused on California education policy, including a variety of research projects on the implementation of the LCFF.

Dr. Jennifer O'Day, an Institute Fellow at the American Institutes for Research, has conducted research and advised policymakers on system improvement, capacity building, accountability, and equity for over 30 years. As chair of the California Collaborative on District Reform, she has helped to identify and address challenges in LCFF implementation.

Endnotes

¹ All three polls were administered in person, on the PollEverywhere platform. There are 58 COEs. In 2017 46 superintendents (or their delegates) were present for the poll, and the average response rate on specific items was 94 percent. In 2019 all 58 COEs were represented, and the average response rate was 91 percent. There were 83 participants in the CISC survey in March 2019, and the average response rate was 90 percent.

² For additional discussion of the Statewide System of Support see <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/early-implementation-californias-system-support>

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. 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

- Publishes policy briefs, research reports, and working papers that address key policy issues in California's education system.
- 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.

Related Publications

Humphrey, D., & O'Day, J. **Early Implementation of California's System of Support.** Policy Analysis for California Education. December 2019.

Manansala, E., & Cottingham, B.W. **Leadership for Continuous Improvement: The Vision for County Offices of Education.** Policy Analysis for California Education. December 2019.

Koppich, J., Humphrey, D.C., Marsh, J., Polikoff, M., & Willis, J. **The Local Control Funding Formula After Four Years: What Do We Know?** Getting Down to Facts II. September 2018.

Henig, J.R., Lyon, M.A., Moffit, S., & Plank, D. **Creating Coherent Systems to Support Education Improvement.** Getting Down to Facts II. September 2018.



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

edpolicyinca.org