



Strengthening the LCAP

Recommendations for improving
the template, process and state supports

Introduction

As part of the Local Control Funding Formula enacted in 2013, each local education agency in California is required on an annual basis to complete a Local Control and Accountability Plan using the template adopted by the California State Board of Education. The LCAP is a key component of the overall LCFF system, as well as the state's emerging new accountability system. Local boards of education fulfill an essential role in adopting LCAPs, as well as in engaging their local communities and stakeholders, approving and monitoring goals and progress, and making decisions about allocating funding aligned to goals.

The California School Boards Association (CSBA), representing the state's nearly 1,000 school districts and county offices of education, and approximately 5,000 locally elected citizen-leaders, recognizes the powerful potential of LCFF-LCAP, with ongoing improvements, to promote student success, help close achievement gaps and put greater decision-making authority into the hands of local communities who know their students best. We also recognize that, during the first few years of LCFF-LCAP — as guidelines, templates and other materials were rolled out by the state to support local implementation (and initially under a compressed timeline) — local governing boards have encountered challenges and limitations with the current LCAP.

The following set of recommendations presented by CSBA address the most significant of these challenges and concerns and would lead to an LCAP template, process and state support system that promotes greater ease of use, enhances the ability of districts to plan and achieve their goals, and maximizes collaboration, engagement, transparency and trust. These recommendations are based on direct input from hundreds of school board members from across the state. CSBA urges that these changes be incorporated by the State Board of Education as it undertakes revisions and improvements to the LCAP this year. Our ultimate goal is to help California continue to build, improve and implement a system that best enables school districts and county offices of education to identify, support and expand practices that are proven to contribute to student success.

Process for Developing Recommendations

The recommendations in this report are the result of input systematically gathered from more than 260 governing board members from across California, representing all sizes and types of school districts and county offices of education.

In May 2016, as part of CSBA's Delegate Assembly, governing board members participated in facilitated breakout sessions at which they identified and discussed ways to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency, clarity and accountability of the LCAP template and process. In preparation for these sessions, many board members also solicited prior input from their district staff, as well as from other board members in their regions. The composition of several of the sessions was weighted to determine potential differences based on district size and location (small/rural, K-8, high school), as well as the number of "unduplicated" students (high unduplicated count and low unduplicated count). Four of the groups were composed of board members randomly assigned from a variety of district types and sizes. Overall, board members identified more than 400 individual recommendations for changes to the LCAP; these were then prioritized in order of importance. Given that most ideas closely aligned with one or more specific areas (i.e. — improving the template, strengthening state support, etc.) they were therefore also grouped by common themes and characteristics to arrive at this consolidated set of 16 priority recommendations.

Further informing this work, CSBA conducted a more intensive review and analysis of the LCAP utilizing its LCFF Collaborative Working Group (CWG), a group of governing team members representing 18 local school districts and county offices of education from across California. Formed in October 2014 in partnership with California Forward, and with supplemental support from both The California Endowment and the Stuart Foundation, the CWG has led efforts to identify opportunities and ongoing challenges in LCFF and LCAP implementation. One of the focal points of the CWG has been identifying ways that the LCAP can better assist LEAs to support and expand practices that best contribute to student success — what education researcher Michal Fullan, who has consulted with the group, calls “the right drivers.”

During the spring of 2016, CSBA conducted interviews with 23 members of the CWG, including board members, superintendents and district LCAP administrators. Those interviewed represented 13 geographically and demographically diverse California school districts and three counties. The purpose of the interviews was to learn more about the changes districts and counties have made to their LCAPs since year one, the process they use for developing their LCAPs and the opportunities and challenges presented by this work. Findings from the interviews were then compiled in a report, “[Increasing LCAP Transparency and Reaffirming California’s Commitment to Local Control: Experiences of District and County Leaders in Year 3.](#)” In their interviews, district and county leaders reported almost universal support for the concepts embodied by LCFF and LCAP. They also reported improvements they had made in their processes for LCAP development and in the quality of their LCAPs. Nevertheless, these district and county leaders affirmed that many challenges remained. The findings and recommendations from this more intensive research closely align with and support the input provided by the larger sample of board members who participated in CSBA’s Delegate Assembly.

Recommendations

The recommendations presented here are primarily intended to inform the California State Board of Education as it works to revise and improve the LCAP this year. The recommendations address two key areas: 1) Improvements to the LCAP template and process; and 2) Additional state-level support that should be provided. In addition, a third section provides recommendations from board members directly for LEAs to help them improve their local process and approach to LCAP development and implementation.

Part One: Improving the LCAP Template and Process

Based on our ongoing work with districts and key stakeholders engaged in implementing LCFF in local communities, CSBA shares the belief that the LCAP possesses great potential to evolve into the critical planning and accountability document envisioned by state policy leaders. To accomplish this, however, changes to the current template must help move it from being a static document that tends to emphasize or reinforce a focus on *compliance*, to one that fosters *coherence* among all stakeholders about what needs to happen to improve student outcomes — particularly for students facing significant obstacles in the classroom and in the community.

CSBA's specific recommendations fall into three general categories: Changes to the LCAP that support strategic thinking; changes that facilitate greater alignment; and changes that make the LCAP template easier to understand and use.

The LCAP should support strategic thinking

The LCAP template and process should support LEAs with their strategic thinking and planning, and help focus the direction of educators and community stakeholders on delivering services and programming to students. The LCAP should:

- 1. Explicitly allow LEAs to focus on fewer priorities to truly drive results in those areas.** Nearly all research-based best practices for effective program implementation argue against focusing on more than 2-3 priorities at any one time. The current lack of clarity about the requirement for districts to substantially address each of the eight state priority areas each year leads to a diffusion of focus, and creates unrealistic expectations by stakeholders and unnecessary tension in the LCAP development process. Therefore, the template (and guidance from the state and county superintendents) should reinforce the ability for districts to identify which of the eight state priorities they will address substantially in their plans.
- 2. Be a true, three-year plan.** This would transform the current practical reality in which the LCAP functions as a series of annual plans. By shifting to a clear, three-year approach, requirements for annual update years could be streamlined.

The LCAP should facilitate alignment

Alignment is essential for successful planning, as well as to maximize effectiveness and efficiency. The state should:

- 3. Align the timing of the availability of assessment, enrollment and fiscal data with the LCAP planning calendar to facilitate the utilization of real-time data (or as close it as possible) by LEAs in their plans.** This might mean adjusting the testing calendar, or making improvements that allow for data to be made available to districts in a timelier manner so they can thoroughly review it and utilize it to evaluate current goals before being required to update their plans. This might also mean adjusting the LCAP planning calendar itself.
- 4. Incorporate or combine other required plans.** For example, combine or incorporate the LEAP, SCP, SPSA and WASC, etc., so that LEAs can meet a single, unified planning requirement, thereby eliminating duplication and inefficiency.

The LCAP template should be easy to understand and use

The current template is cumbersome and complex, and does not help LEAs maximize transparency and trust among stakeholders. The following changes would make the template easier for districts and stakeholders to use and understand, as well as enhancing the navigation and coherence of the document. The state should:

5. **Allow for greater customization of the LCAP by creating an updated electronic/online template that allows multiple and enhanced features.** This would include: subject indexing and search capabilities; the ability to link to other data sources, tables and information; and auto-fill capabilities, so that data from one section will automatically be populated in other necessary sections of the template as needed.
6. **Enable different types of districts or those meeting certain criteria (such as very small or those with few unduplicated pupils) to further customize or have the option to complete a modified “EZ” version.** The experience of many LEAs is that the LCAP development process is time and resource-consuming. This especially can impact small districts with limited staff and resources. Additionally, for districts with limited numbers of unduplicated students, template requirements could be streamlined. Creating an “EZ” version of the template would still promote accountability while reducing the commitment of resources required to develop the LCAP. Additionally, the template should include more opportunities for local districts to incorporate local goals and metrics.
7. **Re-format the template by moving the instructions and government code sections to an appendix or separate document.** Moving these items from the actual template would make it more concise and less cluttered. Information that is repetitive or redundant should also be removed.
8. **Remove all “edu-speak” and utilize clear, understandable language in the instructions and guiding questions.** The guiding questions should also be re-worded to more clearly communicate the essential information about the LCAP to the reader.
9. **Incorporate an ability for LEAs to create an executive summary or ‘LCAP at a glance’ at the front of the document.** Providing space for an executive summary, as well as the capacity to develop a table of contents within the actual template that is auto-populated as the template is being completed, would improve the user experience and make the document more relevant and accessible to stakeholders.
10. **Improve data display capabilities that aid in communicating key information.** This would include: a separate data table with auto-calculate features (or a customizable excel data table); graphics capability; and other tools that generate easy-to-understand information quickly and easily for all stakeholders (e.g. data dashboard or other data visualization tools). It could also include cells within the template that allow for fiscal data to be incorporated.
11. **Re-order sections of the template to improve its logical flow.** For example, the format would begin with a report on progress toward current goals.
12. **Provide clear direction and a consistent way for LEAs to report their use of supplemental and concentration funds, and explicit guidance as to any restrictions on the use of funds.** Clear guidance would ensure a consistency of reporting across LEAs and enhance transparency and trust.

Part Two: Additional state-level support

In addition to the recommendations regarding the template and process itself, CSBA members identified several important ways the State of California could provide additional support to LEAs in their efforts to implement LCFF. Based on this input from local governing board members, we recommend that the state:

- 13. Increase guidance, communication and support to county offices of education.** This includes clarity regarding the role, responsibilities, scope and authority of the county superintendent relative to the approval of local district LCAPs, and a uniform set of expectations established for county superintendents in their review of the local LCAPs. This would lead to improved outcomes, and should be accomplished while preserving the ability of local communities and local decision makers to create a plan that is responsive to local needs and priorities.
- 14. Provide data display and infographic capabilities for local LEAs.** The state should invest in, and make available to all districts, the capability to generate infographics to assist in communicating local LCAP plans and progress to stakeholders. Currently, local districts are, on their own, spending LCAP funds to develop systems and capabilities to generate useful infographics to inform their stakeholders and communicate progress. The state can experience significant cost savings, while providing a certain level of consistency across all districts, by providing this service through the Department of Education.
- 15. Increase communications support to promote greater statewide awareness about LCFF and LCAP.** A set of FAQs and other communications materials, as well as some type of coordinated communications campaign, would help better inform all stakeholders and the public about the requirements of LCFF and LCAP, and promote a shared understanding of the use of supplemental and concentration grant funds and LCAP best practices.
- 16. Support greater data utilization with equipment and training.** Provide IT hardware and software, training and support for districts to support LCAP implementation, information sharing and analysis. This includes new LCAP templates, data visualization software, and other tools to facilitate improved data access, as well as improved communication of progress and challenges related to LCAP implementation.

Part Three: Strategies for Local Education Agencies

Finally, during the process of discussing and identifying recommendations to strengthen the LCAP template and process, governing board members also identified a number of key strategies they believe LEAs should embrace as part of their own efforts to improve LCAP development, planning and engagement. These include:

- **Broader stakeholder engagement.** Local districts should identify and implement practical and effective strategies to broaden stakeholder engagement. These strategies include, but are not limited to: year-round engagement activities; expanding stakeholder committees to include more than mandated stakeholders (educators, parents and students); and increasing student engagement through focus groups, surveys, student leadership, campus committees, and other ways.
- **Partnering with community-based organizations.** Districts should work with and consider contracting with local community-based organizations to help plan, facilitate and expand stakeholder engagement efforts, and to provide needed services, such as translation, outreach and connectivity.
- **Improving sub-group accountability in the LCAP.** LEAs should commit to incorporating goals for all of their significant student population subgroups, and clearly and specifically including them in all LCAP reporting.
- **Maintaining a student-centered focus.** LEAs should focus direction around increasing student success in everything they do.
- **Keep it simple.** Simplify LCAP and strategic planning documents and processes to broaden community understanding and engagement using available best practices, such as summaries, dashboards, infographics, translators, flex meeting times, and other means.

CSBA provides additional resources and guidance to all members regarding LCFF and LCAP. More information may be found at www.csba.org.

Conclusion

The carefully considered recommendations in this report reflect the experience of more than 260 active governing board members from across the State of California, representing LEAs of all sizes and types (small, large, elementary, joint union, high school, unified and county offices) and demographics (low and high- unduplicated student populations, urban, suburban and rural).

Taken together, these recommendations address the most significant LCAP-related challenges and concerns facing school district leaders, and would result in an LCAP template, process and state support system that promotes greater ease of use, enhances the ability of districts to plan and achieve their goals, and maximizes collaboration, engagement, transparency and trust.

CSBA believes that by implementing these recommendations, the LCAP experience for governing boards, stakeholders and all communities will be vastly strengthened and, most importantly, local schools, districts and counties will be more effectively equipped to advance the success of all of California's 6.2 million public school students.