

Roles for County Offices of Education to Support College and Career Readiness: Bridging California’s Vision with Local Implementation Needs

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With the adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (Common Core) and the Smarter Balanced assessments aligned with the Common Core, California policy leaders have signaled the importance of preparing a larger share of students for college and careers.¹ At the same time, the state has moved toward a local or regional approach for educational decision-making, and this appears to be the case for college and career readiness as well.² For example, other states have proposed statewide definitions of college and career readiness, but California’s leaders have stopped short of doing so.³ Schools and districts are now responsible for interpreting and implementing California’s vision for college and career readiness, but to do this, they face significant challenges.

About this Brief

This brief focuses on the potential role of County Offices of Education (COEs) in bridging the state’s vision for college and career readiness with the implementation needs of local districts and schools. After summarizing the work of 10 COEs that are known for supporting districts in increasing college and career readiness, the brief raises questions and outlines concerns in this area for COEs across the state.

In terms of how districts are interpreting the state’s vision of increasing college and career readiness, there appears to be substantial variation—and no clear roadmap as to the direction districts should move. Some districts have adopted the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems’ “a–g” eligibility requirements for all students.⁴ Some have developed applied career pathways, through Linked Learning or Career Pathways Trust.⁵ Some districts have continued their use of externally developed college preparatory curricula, such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate. Many districts have adopted combinations of efforts. For some districts that have been sending large numbers of students to college, the Common Core might not have catalyzed significant changes in their readiness efforts.

In 2014, EdInsights conducted exploratory research in four high schools in two districts, asking teachers, staff, and administrators about how their schools were implementing the Common Core, especially in relation to college and career readiness. The educators reported that they appreciate having greater latitude in decision-making, but they also said they need more guidance and resources to understand how to increase rates of college and career readiness among their students.⁶ In particular, teachers said that they need:

- 1. Clarification on what constitutes student readiness for postsecondary study and well-paying careers.** This responsibility can be particularly difficult to take on for schools in regions with many postsecondary institutions and rapidly changing job opportunities.

2. Assistance in developing strategies to foster critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and other skills among students. Developing these skills in students requires different instructional strategies than the ones teachers were asked to employ during the last decade.⁷

3. Better ways to assess the effectiveness of their instructional strategies—especially with regard to the knowledge and skills associated with college and career readiness.

Local educators wondered if they are grappling with issues that others already might have resolved. For example, educators said that others might have developed useful templates or tools that they could use, and, if so, they were not sure where to find them.

The state has decided not to define college and career readiness or to vet curricular materials or professional development providers, but local educators repeatedly described the need for such guidance. COEs sit squarely in the gap between local educators and the state; they historically have provided to districts a range of services, including curricular and instructional support and technical assistance associated with new state frameworks, in addition to fulfilling oversight responsibilities. In its 2014 review of the California Department of Education (CDE), the Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) reported, “We believe COEs and other local entities continue to be better sources [i.e., compared with the CDE] for providing most professional development, technical assistance, and other forms of ‘ground level’ support to local education agencies.”⁸ Some COEs have already begun helping K–12 and postsecondary educators define and understand student readiness as it pertains to their particular regions, and bringing partners together in an effort to improve alignment across segments. But several questions remain regarding the roles of COEs in this area:

- Are COEs appropriate entities to serve as bridges between California’s college and career readiness expectations and local implementation activities?
- Does each COE have the appropriate capacity—in terms of relationships, expertise, and funding—to help its district(s) and schools plan and operationalize strategies for improving college and career readiness?
- In those regions where COEs may not have the capacity to meet local district needs in these areas, what can the state do to support districts in understanding and mapping out plans to improve college and career readiness?

“County Offices of Education could potentially help to bridge state priorities with local needs by supporting local and regional capacity-building.”

— *State education leader*

Research Methodology

Since 2014, EdInsights, with support from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, has been exploring the implementation of the Common Core through the lens of high-school-to-college connections. These findings are based on EdInsights’ research on Common Core implementation, which included interviews with 50 district and school leaders and teachers in two districts; interviews with 17 administrators from 10 COEs; interviews with 20 state policy leaders and two education policy researchers; a literature review of Common Core research; and a website review related to statutory obligations of COEs. The studied COEs were identified by state policy leaders as being at the forefront of Common Core implementation; they vary in terms of the number of districts, schools, and students served; the size and rural/urban characteristics of the county; and funding.



Findings

Reported COE Roles with Regard to College and Career Readiness

COE administrators described the following areas of support that they provided in helping districts prepare students for college and careers.

Professional Development

Administrators from all 10 COEs that EdInsights studies said they developed professional learning opportunities for administrators and teachers grounded in the Common Core and in support of college and career readiness. For teachers, the services included supporting curriculum design and development, developing new instructional strategies and learning materials, using formative and interim assessments to inform instruction, and sharing promising practices. Most COEs helped teachers adopt strategies to integrate literacy instruction across disciplines (such as science and history) to align with the Common Core. Some offered trainings in applied technologies for instruction and assessment (such as using videos in classroom practice). COE administrators identified the following additional ways they have supported school districts with the goal of preparing more students for college and careers:

- Developing programs to close achievement gaps;
- Creating searchable databases of curriculum aligned with the Common Core;
- Vetting and cataloguing resources aligned with the Common Core;
- Helping schools with master scheduling (switching to block schedules); and
- Helping districts communicate about the Common Core with their boards and communities.

“There are certainly a number of challenges that districts are having in the implementation of the Common Core, and so we’re paying attention to their feedback and paying attention to what teachers are doing, and where they’re having success and where they’re having challenges. I think that the work that we’re doing is much more targeted and focused than in the past.”

—COE administrator

State Support for Common Core Implementation

Since the adoption of the Common Core, the state has provided several funding streams to local education agencies (LEAs) to support implementation. The following funds have supported school districts in purchasing technology, instructional materials, and professional development. In some cases, districts purchased professional development and other services from COEs.

- In 2013–14, the state provided \$1.25 billion in one-time funds for use by districts and COEs to support Common Core implementation;
- In 2015–16, the state provided \$3.2 billion in one-time funds to LEAs for unpaid mandate claims, with discretion to use the funds to support critical investments such as Common Core implementation. Also, \$40 million in one-time funds directed to COEs to support their role in review and approval of Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs).



Postsecondary Connections

Interviewed administrators described the COEs' role in bringing together K–12 and postsecondary educators to work on issues that require cross-system collaboration. They cited meetings to clarify and align expectations for students at the end of high school and the beginning of postsecondary education. Examples included gatherings to discuss the new standards in math and English Language Arts/literacy, and the development of transition or capstone courses, such as the Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC),⁹ to prepare seniors for college-level coursework. A few COEs discussed helping to broker agreements between their districts and local community colleges that would exempt students from community college placement testing if they passed the ERWC course during their senior year of high school. Several COEs also invited local postsecondary partners to workshops to clarify the colleges' roles in supporting Common Core implementation, such as preparing teachers in licensure programs. One COE described working with its high schools to perform “college and career readiness audits” that include analyzing student enrollment and success in “a–g” courses.

“We’ve been educating the colleges on the Common Core, and then looking at what their expectations are for classes. For example, Language Arts [postsecondary faculty] would bring in a sample of what a good paper would look like for them at the college level. And then we went over that with [high school] Language Arts teachers.”

—COE administrator

Workforce Connections

Several COEs helped connect local high schools with workforce representatives. Examples of such connections included bringing in business representatives to facilitate project-based learning and develop apprenticeships, and working with high schools and local community colleges to implement initiatives such as Career Pathways Trust and Linked Learning. Some COEs are involved as partners in Education and Workforce Development (EWD) initiatives; one COE administrator said that recent state investments facilitated more collaboration between COEs, regional EWD personnel, and workforce investment boards to develop career experiences for high school students.¹⁰

Gaps in Math Expectations Across Systems

In “[Degrees of Freedom](#),” Pamela Burdman documented inconsistencies in math requirements across education systems in California. These inconsistencies create barriers to K–12 students' ability to prepare for college-level courses, as well as to community college students' ability to transfer to four-year universities. Currently, K–12 schools and community colleges are responsible for navigating these disconnects so that their students are prepared for local postsecondary institutions. This issue gained the attention of the Department of Finance; the governor's 2016–17 [budget proposal](#) contains \$3 million in federal carryover funds for a one-time competition to design a grade 12 math course that would prepare students for college-level math.



Concerns about the Capacity of COEs with Regard to College and Career Readiness

Our research and interviews raised several issues about the capacity of COEs statewide to provide adequate support and guidance to school districts on college and career readiness. The administrators we interviewed stated that the organizational capacity of COEs varies widely across California, creating challenges to the development of a statewide strategy. COEs fulfill a range of mandated statutory functions throughout California (see “Key COE Roles”); beyond these, the extent to which COEs support their districts’ college and career readiness efforts are determined by the county superintendents within each local context. Based on our research, the COE services to districts that are related to college and career readiness appear to vary according to a range of factors associated with a COE’s organizational capacity, including: relationships with districts, postsecondary institutions, and workforce entities; staff expertise and leadership; and funding.

Relationships with Local Districts and Schools

The statutory roles of COEs are complex, and their relationships with school districts are sometimes strained by their mission to oversee districts in some areas, offer support in others, and provide direct educational services to students. The COEs that EdInsights studied spent significant time and resources developing their relationships with school districts over time, well beyond their traditional oversight roles, according to interviewees. Administrators said that these relationships, built on trust, were critical when teachers were seeking to develop new curriculum and instructional strategies with little state guidance.

“The COE role is to prepare and deliver and support professional development for schools in the county that choose to participate. The COE has no authority to insist on, or really no role in implementing, the Common Core. We have a huge role in putting the information and the support out there for districts who choose to pick it up.”

—COE administrator

However, COE administrators also described challenges in separating their oversight and support roles. For example, several COEs were working closely with schools to train teachers on new content and instructional strategies. Some administrators expressed frustration that they had no authority to compel schools to implement the suggested practices; they could only offer information and support to those districts who chose to use them.

Key COE Roles

County superintendents and their COEs are instructed by statute to provide support to school districts through student, instructional, and administrative services. Many of their duties are mandatory, but some are optional (COEs may perform them, but are not required to do so). Duties include:

- **Oversight.** Provide fiscal oversight of districts, including approving district budgets and ensuring their fiscal integrity. Review and approve districts’ Local Control and Accountability Plans.
- **Supports.** Provide limited business and personnel tasks that can be done more economically at the county level. Many COEs offer a range of staff development and new teacher training, and otherwise support district efforts to improve instructional procedures and curricula.
- **Direct Services.** Offer special and vocational education, programs for youths at risk of failure, and instruction in juvenile detention facilities.

All COEs are charged with serving the districts in their counties; however, administrators said that some districts have better relationships with and rely more heavily on their COEs than others. For example, they said that historically, smaller districts relied on COE services more heavily than larger districts, but that this was beginning to change. Nearly all interviewees said that in places where the relationships between COEs and districts were strained, many smaller schools did not have the resources they needed to enact reforms effectively.

While many administrators described efforts to collaborate among COEs, several said that some districts had sought services from COEs outside their counties, and that this had created competition among COEs in a growing fee-for-service professional development marketplace. They added that, in some cases, this competition inhibited collaboration among neighboring COEs. In addition to seeking services from COEs outside their counties, many districts sought professional development from independent, for-profit providers.

Relationships with Postsecondary Education

The majority of interviewed COE administrators expressed a desire to facilitate better connections among high schools and postsecondary institutions in their regions. Most connections between COEs and postsecondary institutions in the studied counties centered around initiatives that were funded by philanthropic grants or state block grants. In general, interviewees described the following challenges related to working with postsecondary institutions:

- It is difficult to organize initiatives or develop working relationships without outside funding catalyzing the activity;
- It can be unwieldy for COEs to establish solid working relationships in areas with multiple higher education institutions; and
- Partnership activities between schools and postsecondary institutions often do not get to the level of specificity needed to align expectations or curricular pathways across systems.

Relationships with Workforce Entities

Most COEs' relationships with workforce entities, as with their interactions with postsecondary partners, appear to center around initiatives funded by philanthropic grants and block grants from the state. This work varies substantially by county and

“What’s most frustrating is, in my own backyard, the competition is probably the greatest with neighboring counties. Because districts will cross county lines, I collaborate far more with folks in Southern California and in Northern California than I do with people in Central California [where I’m located], because I’m [perceived as] a threat [to nearby COEs].”

— COE administrator

“We have all of these business leaders who are saying, ‘We want to be involved in schools,’ and schools saying, ‘We want to be connected with business so our kids have these experiences,’ and we have just this wealth of great people in all of those nonprofit areas as well, and yet we haven’t been able to develop a coherent system to make that work.”

— COE administrator

by district. Many administrators said they responded to workforce needs by sharing their career and technical education curriculum with workforce partners. They said that there was substantial interest among workforce partners, but that without funded initiatives, there was little to no infrastructure to engage meaningfully with them and sustain their participation.

Staff Expertise and Leadership

COE administrators and state education leaders we interviewed said that many COEs face challenges in having sufficient staff expertise to (1) identify the needs of districts in preparing more students for college and careers, and (2) provide a range of professional development and technical services to meet those needs. In terms of leadership capabilities, state policy leaders said that each geographic region needs a leading entity to work with school districts to develop and promote a shared vision for college and career readiness that can span separate grant initiatives and education systems. Interviewees said that the capacity of COEs to develop a regional vision for college and career readiness in concert with districts, and to provide services to support implementation, varies by county.

“If we weren’t here providing [curriculum], [small districts] would have no one who would have the time to even open up and look and see what the Common Core is.”

—COE administrator

Funding to Deploy Staff Expertise

COE administrators said they had experienced increased demand for services to schools because of Common Core implementation, and that they welcomed this need for services, but even so it significantly strained their resources. They indicated that the increase in services had to be funded from COE operational dollars, which had been significantly reduced since the Great Recession. While the new finance policies enacted through the Local Control Funding Formula are increasing COEs’ flexibility with fiscal decisions, there still appears to be variation in funding across COEs.¹¹

Evaluation Rubrics and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence: New Opportunities to Improve College and Career Readiness

The State Board of Education is scheduled to adopt rubrics in September 2016 to assist local education agencies (LEAs) in evaluating their own performance, as outlined in the Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs), and to assist county superintendents in identifying LEAs in need of technical assistance. COE administrators expect that the rubrics will provide some guidance to LEAs relative to college and career readiness. The newly formed California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), located in the Riverside County Office of Education, will also provide assistance to LEAs in achieving the goals set forth in their LCAPs.



Recommendations

California’s education leaders have a window of opportunity to be more explicit about their expectations for college and career readiness. This brief is intended to give voice to what local educators say they still need—clarity in defining college and career readiness, help with changing content and instructional strategies, and ways to assess effectiveness—and to prompt the state to consider how best to support districts.

Provide clarity to California schools about who should define college and career readiness. This is the time for the state to determine if there is statewide coherence for its vision of college and career readiness, or if this is a regional responsibility. For example, the state could clarify its expectations about quantitative literacy across the systems—or it could continue to leave that decision up to local entities. Either route is challenging, given the wide range of institutional and program types in California’s postsecondary systems and the decentralized governance in all public education systems. Schools have relied on some definitions of readiness, such as completion of “a–g” requirements, Advanced Placement testing, and the Early Assessment Program, but these fall short in measuring whether students are truly college and career ready. The current lack of guidance leaves districts and schools struggling to help students achieve an undefined goal for college and career readiness, often in relative isolation from their local postsecondary institutions.

“If there is one thing the state should do, it is to focus on county offices. Their capacities are so different from each other. Any capacity-building along those lines (knowing the county office capacity, its higher ed partnerships, support providers, etc.) could be hugely interesting. How does a district navigate that, and what is valuable to draw on?”

—*Education policy researcher*

Commission an assessment to identify the capacity of COEs in key areas such as relationships, staff expertise, and funding.

This assessment should include an inventory of promising practices and challenges/barriers related to regional roles in supporting college and career readiness.

Invest in capacity-building for COEs in need of support, or turn to alternative structures to provide college and career readiness-related supports to schools and districts.

Since supporting collaboration across education systems is a highly relational endeavor and does not have a technical “fix,” the entities best suited to support the work might vary by region.

Conclusion

In exploratory research by EdInsights, district and school educators expressed a need for greater support to understand what college and career readiness means, how to foster greater readiness through classroom practice, and how to know if their classroom practices are successful. This call for support, however, comes at a time when the state has adopted a series of reforms that have devolved decision-making to the local level. COEs function as intermediaries between the state and local school districts, but COEs face several challenges in supporting schools in improving college and career readiness. The implementation of California’s new education policies provides the state with a good opportunity to clarify these roles and responsibilities, assess regional capacities, and otherwise provide leadership to assist schools and districts in adopting and implementing a vision of college and career readiness that will be effective for students.

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Endnotes

- 1 See Venezia, A. and Lewis, J. (2015). *Leveraging the Common Core for College and Career Readiness in California*. Sacramento: EdInsights.
- 2 Regarding the shift from state to local control in California K-12 education, see: CDE <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/lcfoverview.asp>; Koppich, J., Humphrey, D. and Marsh, J. (2015). *Two Years of California's Local Control Funding Formula: Time to Reaffirm the Grand Vision*. Palo Alto: Policy Analysis for California Education; Policy Analysis for California Education. (2014). *2020 Vision: Rethinking Budget Priorities Under the LCFF*. Sacramento. Regarding the shift to regional approaches, see: Economic and Workforce Development program at <http://www.ccewd.net>; Governor's Awards for Innovation in Higher Education at <https://www.gov.ca.gov/news.php?id=18896>; Moore, C., Venezia, A., Lewis, J., and Lefkowitz, B. (2014). *Organizing for Success: California's Regional Education Partnerships*. Sacramento: EdInsights.
- 3 For a summary of various state definitions for college and career readiness, see College & Career Readiness & Success Center. (2014). *Overview: State Definitions of College and Career Readiness*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research. http://www.ccrscenter.org/sites/default/files/CCRS%20Definitions%20Brief_REV_1.pdf.
- 4 The "a-g" is a set of required courses that qualify a high school student for admission to UC and CSU campuses. For more information, see <http://www.ucop.edu/aguide/a-g-requirements/>.
- 5 For more information on Linked Learning, see <http://www.linkedlearning.org>. For Career Pathways Trust, see <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/ct/pt/>.
- 6 Venezia and Lewis, 2015.
- 7 See, for example, David Conley's research on noncognitive factors to college/career readiness, such as <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/VUE%20Noncognitive%20Factors.pdf>.
- 8 LAO. (2014). *Review of the California Department of Education*. Sacramento, CA. <http://www.lao.ca.gov/reports/2014/education/review-cde/review-cde-082814.aspx>.
- 9 For more information on the ERWC, see <http://www.calstate.edu/eap/englishcourse/index.shtml>.
- 10 For more information on the Economic and Workforce Development program of the California Community College Chancellor's Office, see <http://www.ccewd.net>.
- 11 See the Legislative Analyst's Office Analysis of the 2016-17 Proposition 98 Budget for Education, http://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/3355?utm_source=subscription&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=traditional; and Koppich, J., Humphrey, D. and Marsh, J. (2015). *Two Years of California's Local Control Funding Formula: Time to Reaffirm the Grand Vision*. Palo Alto: Policy Analysis for California Education.