

# Evaluating the “Crazy Quilt”: Educational Governance in California

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## Getting Down to Facts

A research project designed to provide California’s policymakers and other education stakeholders with comprehensive information about the state’s school finance and governance systems, and lay the groundwork for a conversation about needed reforms. The project was made possible by grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, and the Stuart Foundation.

This summary was prepared by IREPP.

For the full text of the author’s research report and the other studies in this project, see: [www.irepp.net](http://www.irepp.net)

For background on California’s school finance system, see: [www.californiaschoolfinance.org](http://www.californiaschoolfinance.org)

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This study presents a comprehensive picture of educational governance in California and describes how that structure affects decision making. The questions it explores include:

1. What analytic framework can help policymakers to better understand California’s complex education governance system?
2. Are there specific indicators of effectiveness that can be used to evaluate the governance system?
3. What do stakeholders report about the effectiveness of California’s system?
4. How can California’s educational governance system be improved?

## Summary of Key Findings

Broadly interpreted, “governance” includes the institutions that are part of the educational decision-making and delivery system, the constituencies that interact with these institutions, and the ways the parts of the system relate to one another. Policies, laws, regulations, and informal practices are part of this framework and are reflected, one way or another, in the behaviors of all involved. Needless to say, California’s educational governance structure is extremely complex, encompassing many organizational entities: schools; school districts; and county, state, and federal agencies. It also involves thousands of individuals from state legislators and other policymakers to school board members, superintendents, principals, and teachers. The organizational structure is multi-dimensional, characterized by bodies that have overlapping responsibilities across executive, legislative, and judicial jurisdictions.

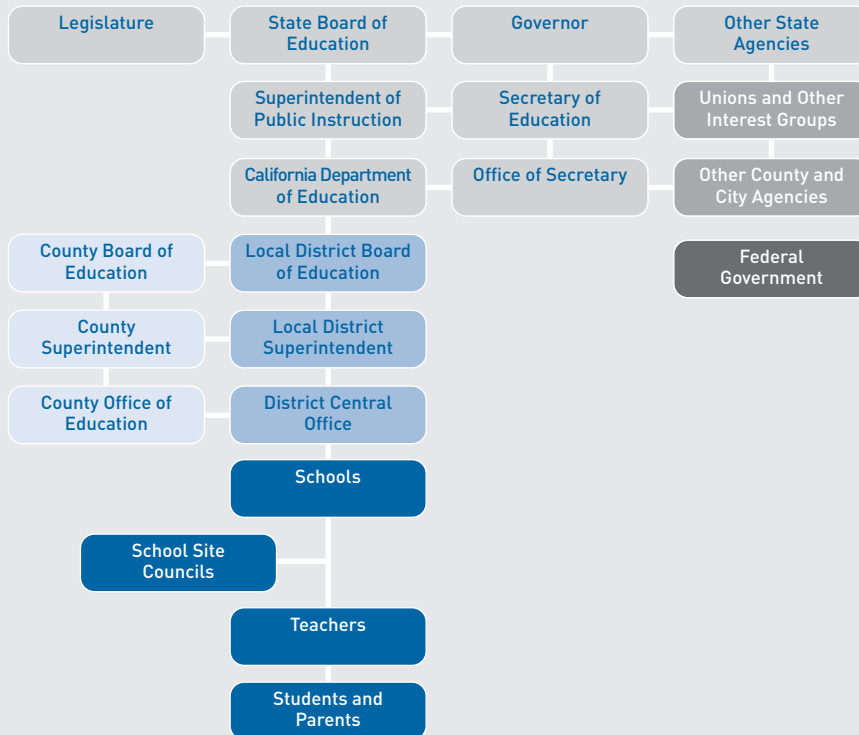
## Study Methods

The study methods included:

- A comprehensive review of the research literature on educational governance, including an overview of systems in other states.
- A review of historical documents and reports pertaining to California’s educational governance system.
- An analysis of various aspects of California’s educational governance system from public documents, such as the California Education Code, historical records from various agencies, and collective bargaining agreements from a sample of school districts.
- Interviews with leading academics across the nation regarding important aspects of governance and the work of past scholars.
- Interviews with key stakeholders in California at all levels of the education system.

The title of this report comes from the author’s interview of a nationally recognized expert on educational governance who described California’s system as “a remarkably crazy quilt of interacting authorities that are not aligned for purpose of accountability or action.”

Figure 1 • Major Institutions in California's Educational Governance System



**Effective governance is necessary for meeting student outcome goals, but the relationships are complex**

Educational governance arrangements contribute to the overall effectiveness of a school system. However, relatively little empirical research exists on the actual workings of different governance arrangements or why they vary. An extensive review found only a handful of rigorous research studies that try to systematically evaluate the contribution of governance to school improvement. From this review, the authors draw two conclusions.

First, *governance is an important determinant of an educational system's effectiveness in meeting its goals.* The evidence suggests that governance is best thought of as an 'enabler' that can support other critical elements, such as effective resource use and parental engagement.

Second, *there is no preferred set of governance arrangements.* The elements of effective governance differ from place to place and across time. Further, the different governance structures interact with one another. Thus the efficacy of a particular structure depends in large part on how it fits within the system as a whole. This makes definitive statements about "what works" in terms of governance very difficult. Although there is support for a conclusion that more decentralized and less regulated governance is preferable, the specific forms are not definitively proven.

**A framework for understanding governance structure: the what, who, and how of governance**

Educational governance encompasses many organizations and individuals that interact in highly

complex ways. The authors suggest using a three-dimensional matrix to examine the relationship between the goals or functions, the institutions, and the mechanisms of governance.

*What:* The first dimension is what needs to be done given the goals for the system. For education, those include such functions as structure and organization; finance and business services; human resources/personnel; and educational programs.

*Who:* The second important dimension is which agency or organization, at what level, will best perform each of the functions. This includes organizations and stakeholders at the state, county, district, and local school level.

*How:* The third important dimension is what are the best mechanisms for persuading others to implement policy. This includes a mix of mandates, inducements, capacity-building, and changes to the system.

*California's governance system centers on the "who"*

The authors find that California does not do things based on function—the "what" in the framework above—but rather based on institution, the "who." The essential building blocks of the California educational governance system are shown in Figure 1. To the official state structure, the authors add the federal government and influential others (most particularly labor unions). For the purposes of analyzing California's decision-making structure, the authors divide these institutions into six general categories: school site, district, county, state, federal, and other (e.g., unions).

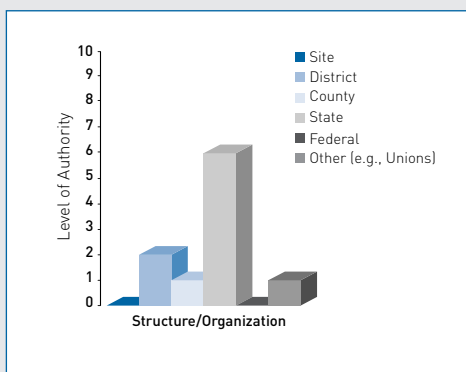
The authors analyze state documents and interview stakeholders to examine how authority over various functions, the "what" of

**Figure 2 • Distribution of Decision-making Authority in California in 2006**

The charts below show the relative authority the authors of this study, using a 10-point scale, assigned to each entity within the various governance functions.

**Structure and Organization:**

- The 1985 Commission suggested that, in 1964, power was split between district and state levels, with some role for counties.
- A marginal shift to the state level occurred by 1985, with a resulting diminution of power at the district level.
- Over the past 20 years there have been several changes, but none has shifted the balance in a consistent direction.

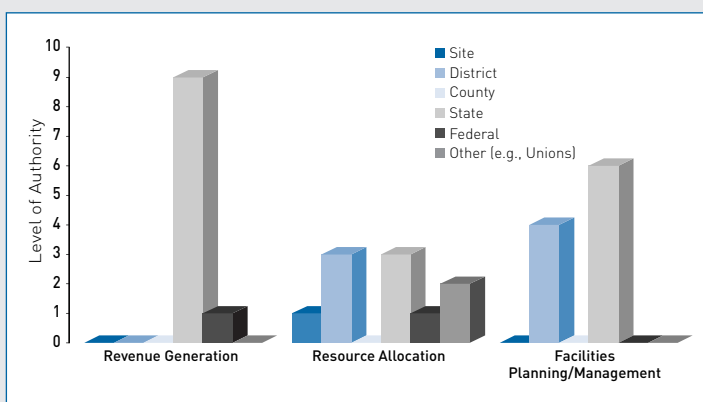


The state has passed charter school legislation, moved to take over more than one school district, and recently altered the governance of the largest school district in the state—Los Angeles Unified School District—at the request of the city’s mayor. On the

other hand, districts and counties still decide much of the organizational configuration of their districts’ schools, as well as having the authority to grant charters.

**Finance and Business Services:**

- Since *Serrano v. Priest* court case in 1971 and the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, the state has had nearly exclusive control over how much income for schools is generated and from where. More recently, the federal government has assumed a small amount of authority as well.
- While states have gained control of resource allocation through an increase in the amount of categorical compared with general funding, district-level collective bargaining determines much about how the budget is used because the bulk of the money goes to salaries.
- Facilities planning and management in California has shifted over the past 40 years such that the federal and state roles have shrunk and the local district role has increased, predominantly through voter initiatives (Proposition 1A and Proposition 39) and court orders (*Williams et al. v. State of California*).



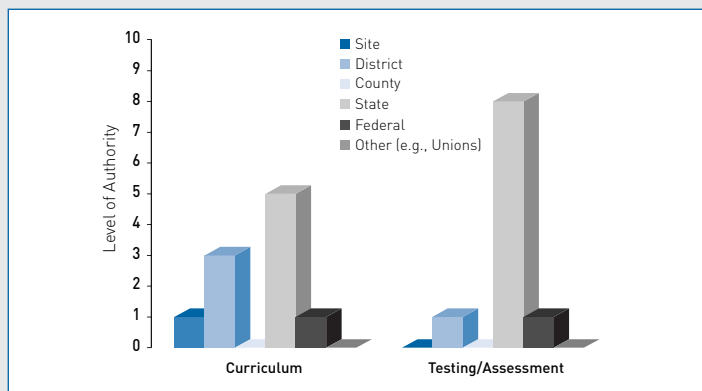
**Personnel:**

- Although the state roles in teacher credentialing and preservice training impose a personnel framework over staff, districts have significant leeway over personnel decisions through the collective bargaining process with unions. The federal role in these matters has increased through the “highly qualified teacher” requirement of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).
- Districts, counties, and the state share authority over the training and professional development of teachers, with state categorical funding targeting certain in-service opportunities.

**Educational Programs:**

- As a result of the standards-based reform movement, state curriculum framework requirements and recommendations have an increasingly strong influence on local curriculum materials and instructional approaches.
- While the district retains some control over testing and assessment, NCLB’s “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) requirements have resulted in a greater federal role at the same time that the state’s Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) imposes rewards, sanctions, and interventions based on schools’ Academic Performance Index (API) results.

The state also sets graduation requirements, and, starting with the class of 2006, requires most students to pass the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) to receive a high school diploma.



governance, is distributed among the myriad of institutions in California. Their analysis is organized into four functional areas. (See Figure 2 on page 3.) They use a 10-point system, originally developed by the 1985 California Commission on School Governance and Management, to describe the amount of authority the various institutions have in a given area.

*Over time, the state's role in educational governance has become predominant*

Along with this analysis of decision-making authority in 2006, the authors look at how governance has changed in California, using the years 1964 and 1985 as comparison points. They conclude that many of the trends toward increased state control between 1965 and 1985 have continued. The state determines much of what goes on in schools through propositions and legislation. There is evidence that some of the regulation in the Education Code is superfluous and the result of narrow interests. In addition, regulatory directives are used as a policy instrument more commonly than inducements. Despite the predominance of state-level influence, district leaders report that they have very little direct contact with personnel at the state level, including the Governor, Legislature, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, or the Secretary of Education.

More recently, the federal government has played an increasingly important role, particularly in schools receiving substantial federal assistance under Title I of NCLB. Unions also play a major role in resource allocation and staffing. In this context, school sites have little authority over most educational functions.

**Five general indicators provide context for evaluating the educational governance structure in California**

The authors focus on five characteristics, which provide a means to evaluate whether the existing governance structure works well.

*Stability*

Stability enables actors in the system to act in a rational and planned way. This is important for the development of expertise and long-term investments in capacity. A stable governance structure is one in which policy is made as far in advance of proposed implementation as is reasonably possible, revenue is known in advance for planning, and policies are given an opportunity to work before changes are made. Stable governance also requires that few major changes of direction or new initiatives are introduced suddenly and that leaders have tenures that allow for knowledge development and on-the-job learning.

Interviewees for this study reported that in California revenue fluctuations are common, the use of categorical funding has grown over the past two decades, policy changes in student assessment and curriculum increase frustration and mistrust, and the amount of legislation has increased and is more prescriptive. The authors also report that staff turnover is more common at all levels, citing legislative term limits, State Board of Education membership, and local leaders as examples. This increased turnover reduces the stability of the system.

*Accountability*

A governance structure with strong accountability is one in which there are clear lines of authority between the various parts of the system, with limited duplication of functions.

With such a structure, the source of decisions is known, there are consequences for good/bad behavior and outcomes, and the actors understand their roles and have incentives to accomplish the system's goals.

Interviewees observed that the lines of authority in California were unclear, due in part to fragmentation of the system. However, there was no consensus on who ultimately should be responsible for education: some thought control should go to the Governor, others to the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and others to county and district offices. Also, interviewees noted a lack of alignment between state and federal outcome expectations.

*Innovation, Flexibility, and Responsiveness*

An innovative, flexible, and responsive governance structure is one that adapts to changing context and responds appropriately to new external demands. New approaches are encouraged, and a variety of ideas are generated and spread throughout the system. Innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness are essential for a system to adapt to changing needs and take advantage of cutting-edge knowledge.

Interviewees reported that in California, compliance was often stressed over creativity. Further, there was criticism of the one-size-fits-all approach as seen in the high number of categorical funding programs that the state uses (e.g., K-3 Class Size Reduction) and in broader testing and curriculum policies.

*Openness and Transparency*

Transparency allows for the exchange of information among the different levels of the governance system. An open and transparent system is less likely to be corrupt and subject to "capture" by special interests. Such a system is more

likely to encourage public engagement and support of schools. An open and transparent system is one in which it is clear to the public how decisions are made and who makes them. Participation is encouraged at every level, and monitoring happens routinely. Information and evaluation data flow openly, and there are clear mechanisms for communicating performance to citizens.

Interviews revealed that the role of special interests, particularly the teachers' unions, was the one major concern in this area. There was also some perception that the public lacks awareness of the functions of each entity within the governance system.

#### *Simplicity and Efficiency*

A simple and efficient governance structure is one that ensures decisions are made in a timely manner and with minimal overlap, cost, or confusion among entities. It is a structure in which decision making is located where knowledge is greatest. Policy is coherent, and decisions across multiple domains and levels are coordinated, thereby minimizing duplication and waste.

Regarding this dimension, there was a widespread perception among interviewees that California's system

is overly complex and fragmented and that policy is often incoherent. Those interviewed also emphasized that complying with the state's regulations was overly burdensome and inefficient.

Based on the foregoing, the authors found that the current system in California did not rate highly on any of the five indicators of effective governance.

### **Authors' Conclusions**

The authors note that their examination of educational governance in California revealed a system that has evolved over time without clear redefinition of the roles and responsibilities of all the institutions involved. They believe that change is needed. They report that their interviews provide an indication of the direction to take, but no agreement on the details.

First, stakeholders almost universally agreed there was a need to simplify and clarify the role of the state and specific institutions at the state level, particularly in light of increased accountability. Second, there was a strong desire to reinforce local control and give districts greater authority over more decisions than they currently have. It was noted that California has overlaid outcomes-based

accountability upon an educational governance system that was built on input-based regulatory compliance. In the process, the state has not given lower-level institutions the ability to fully manipulate resources to attain the outcomes the state expects of them.

The authors argue that reforming California's educational governance system can best be accomplished gradually and should be accompanied by significant attention to building capacity at the local level—everything from school board training to enhanced school budget tools to a statewide data system that permits the easy collection and analysis of data on resources and performance.

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*This study was completed in December 2006.*