

# California's Golden Opportunity

LCAP's Theory of Action

*Problems and Corrections*

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## Note

This is the third commentary under the title of *California's Golden Opportunity* published by Michael Fullan and others (see [www.michaelfullan.ca](http://www.michaelfullan.ca)), and supported by the Stuart Foundation. The three notes are:

1. California's Golden Opportunity: A Status Note  
Michael Fullan & Team  
November 2014
2. A Golden Opportunity: The California Collaborative for Educational Excellence as a Force for Positive Change  
Michael Fullan & Team and California Forward  
January 2015
3. California's Golden Opportunity: LCAP's Theory of Action—Problems and Corrections  
Michael Fullan & Team  
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See Glossary at the end for the list of acronyms.

## LCAP's Theory of Action: Problems and Corrections

California got to the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF, see [www.cde.ca.gov, lcff overview](http://www.cde.ca.gov/lc/ff/overview)), and its companion, Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) partly because the governor embraces 'the principle of subsidiarity', and partly because many people at all levels concluded, as I did in a paper called 'Choosing the wrong drivers for whole system reform', that external judgmental accountability does not produce the desired outcomes it seeks; nor does elaborate bureaucratic compliance result in actions that cause measurable improvement. The evidence is overwhelming that such approaches do not work. This seems to be the governor's instinct as well (and many others at all levels in California) that places more responsibility and resources at the local level. The question becomes how can we support and in so doing increase the likelihood that locals take good action, and how can we establish processes that will maximize the likelihood action will be taken that results in measurable progress?

Requiring a district plan is not new. Virtually every categorical fund source requires some kind of plan, most of which had to be approved by the local board and some by the state. What is new about LCAP is having a local plan that is linked to a major restructuring program designed to bring about substantial transformation that mobilizes districts, regions and the state to bring about real system transformation that has widespread benefit for all students in the state. As significant as the new LFF/LCAP state plan is, it is vulnerable to the historical weaknesses of any statewide implementation effort.

Our team has been engaged in whole system change for sometime in Ontario, California and elsewhere. If there is one thing that is clear it is that you have to focus on a small number of key factors, and avoid the temptation to micro manage the process. Here is the principle that is becoming widely endorsed in the system change literature: *don't make a complex process more complicated by adding more requirements*. Keep it simple and focus relentlessly on the small number of goals that will make a difference. It is not surprising that the first LCAP attempts will be flawed. It is unreal to assume that what is touted as transformational process could be accomplished and assessed after one year of planning. It is unfair, premature and counterproductive to deem the first plans in low performing districts a failure.

In the rest of this note I identify three problems in the initial implementation of LCAP, and three remedies that should be implemented. In discussing the problems in the next section I do so, not as an out and out criticism, but as feedback to a new process where I think everyone is committed to making corrections as we go, especially in these critical first two years. It is crucial that we take this opportunity to refine the process as a natural way of improving a new system intended to achieve major improvements in the very near future.

### Three Problems

When you try something new, and have a lot at stake there is a tendency to lay on too many requirements, rather than focus on a few core factors, trust the process, and build in conditions (e.g. transparency and working together) that will make success more likely. The irony is that the more that you try to directly control the process *the less likely you are to be effective at managing change*.

Instead of trying to build in elaborate assurances (that end up not working) we are better off establishing a small number of more manageable requirements that are more likely to result in progress.

There are three problematic issues that I see in the first stages of LCAP:

1. Making complexity complicated
2. Overdoing front-end process
3. Making the plan the goal

### **Making Complexity Complicated**

My experience and the evidence is that the bureaucracy and interests groups, even when well intentioned, make the beginning process many more times complicated than can be managed. If you simply take a common sense approach to LCAP you can surmise instantly that following the current process is going to be an enormous investment of time producing voluminous planning documents that, except in rare cases, cannot be implemented. I know that data are being gathered but it's a virtual certainty that the researchers will find that the majority of districts are becoming less clear and more confused than they were prior to developing the LCAP plan. You can just go by one our cardinal implementation principles, *beware of fat plans* as you take a look at given plans. One district that I know of required 114 pages to complete their plan following the template. Even Long Beach, an exemplary district, has a plan that is 67 pages long that I suspect is very strong mainly because *they already knew what they are doing*. Let me be clear. Elaborate planning requirements can be met by systems that are already successful, but do not help unsuccessful districts. If anything they become less effective.

My point is that the plan itself—the plan on paper –is not a good indicator of quality. Moreover, elaborate plans, as is the current case, are too long and vague to be deciphered either by implementers, or those seeking to assess them. The remedy as we will see is not to provide more help to develop a more elaborate template. What makes an implementation plan successful is the extent to which *implementers* (teachers, parents, students, staff, administrators) understand the plan in action, and have the capacity to implement it on a daily basis. And the latter to a large extent depends on the ability of local leaders to articulate the plan clearly and effectively on an ongoing basis.

### **Overdoing Front-end Process**

It is understandable but misguided that one should want a lot of input at the front end. If you require considerable detailed input prior to action you will find that people get mired in desiderata without really knowing how it works in practice. You will see in my solution below that the center of gravity shifts to implementation based action with clear powerful goals. LCAP is to some extent intended to replace 'wrong policy drivers' such as the punitive push for accountability around *learning goals* that NCLB represented. It is deeply ironic that compliance around goals is in danger of being replaced with *compliance around means*, that is, compliance around process. If you thought monitoring compliance around goals was difficult and counterproductive, trying doing it around process! It is and

will become a nightmare of counter productivity. As I will address below, you do need a good process up front in relation to desired goals and strategies, but having elaborate checklist based input from stakeholders is not the best way to set the process in motion.

My point here should not be misinterpreted. The future of effective learning must be grounded in strong partnerships between and among students, families and educators; and most school districts do not do a good job of this. This requirement will not be met with compliance-oriented, detailed plans. Common sense tells you that students and parents will not identify with or otherwise be engaged by 50-100+ page plans. Rather, as my three guidelines below indicate, school, family and community engagement must be accomplished through participating in the identification of a small number of ambitious learning goals, and by corresponding involvement in shaping and assessing these learning goals in practice.

### **Making the Plan the Goal**

A derivative of the first two problems is that increasingly local districts will be scrambling to get their plan done. Sociologists call this 'goal displacement'. The original goal that was to improve capacity, commitment and progress on student learning becomes displaced whereby the means becomes an end in itself—'get my plan done and approved'.

LCAP, in its present form is a massive distractor eating up resources of time and money in counterproductive activities that seem based on getting the plan done to meet compliance requirements rather than one that serves implementation. The result is that plans will be produced, but they will not satisfy school districts or their critics. The plans will be a combination of a mile wide and an inch deep, and/or will be mired in detail.

A word on accountability: it is understandable that advocacy groups do not trust the system to get it right. But the solution--to increase process specificity—does not produce the desired result. Paradoxically less overt means of control, if the right elements are combined, generate more effective accountability. Second-guessing districts capacity to develop good plans de-motivates them, and in any case puts them through a process that is complicated and ultimately superficial.

Scoring districts on a rubric will not tell districts *how* to get better. Getting a four or a five on a rubric "as a goal" is not the point. Elaborate plans *on paper* give no assurance that action will follow, and the larger the plan the harder it will be to monitor. In short, LCAP's first manifestation has unintentionally become a bureaucratic requirement rather than a springboard for new action (the evidence base for this claim is the prima facie bureaucratic nature of the LCAP template, and the complaints from superintendents which I have not quantified, but are widespread). There is a real danger that the more that the process tries to perfect LCAP as a document, the greater that LCAP per se may become a bottleneck to effective action.

As to external accountability, i.e. accountability from the state, it is not clear at this point what will replace the previous Academic Performance Index (API) which has been (thankfully) dropped as being too unwieldy. In the meantime smart districts will not worry too much about this and will focus on building and supporting instructional capacity with teachers and leadership capacity linked to measurable results for students. If they do this well they will be fine regardless of the external measures that evolve.

## Three Corrections

The solution to planning is counterintuitive. Focus and link to actions that move the district forward need to be more direct and targeted. It turns out that you must get the direction right, and then build in processes that provide the checks and balances and actions that yield cumulative and pervasive progress. Here are three guidelines for 'LCAPing' more in tune with predictable success. Plans following these guidelines can be described in 10 pages or less. My main recommendation is that we identify and/or help generate LCAP plans based on the three guidelines outlined below. I also refer to three consortia that have formed to support LCAP; these consortia, along with the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), the recently CDE established Local Agency System Support Office (LASSO), and the California Labor-Management Initiative (<http://cdefoundation.org/lmi/>) could represent mechanisms for identifying and spreading good examples of less bureaucratic and more direct action plans (I will comment in the conclusion on the issue of coordinating all the coordinators).

The three guiding principles I would suggest are:

- Step One: Go back to first principles—local control that identifies results for children
- Step Two: Describe your plan for getting there and what help you might need
- Step Three: Agree on transparency, and monitoring during the process

### **Step One: First principles—local control for results with children**

Using the goal areas in the LCAP guidelines, districts need to identify their main goals. Input from stakeholders is essential but need not be laborious. The difficulty is not in identifying the goals but in achieving them. Front-end planning and initial implementation must happen in tandem with a strong bias for action.

Quite directly the intent of LCAP is first to develop a *Compelling Focus* that promises to move the needle. Is there clear and compelling evidence (achievement data, attendance data, stakeholder survey) that the district has a specific and urgent reason for establishing the focus? If the answer is 'yes' proceed with step two. If the answer is no or vague then additional questions should be asked to get clarity on the district's thinking, and if asked right should help the district to become even more clear and focused.

### **Step Two: Describe your plan and how you will show progress**

What actions within the districts control or in partnership with others could be taken that would improve results? What would an effective road map to improvement look like? A productive process will guide reflective questions that will lead districts to undertake much deeper thinking about what they can actually do to improve, specific actions they will have to take to realize progress, and what they expect to see change as a result of these efforts.

Districts should be guided by a process that makes it clear what actions they are taking and why they chose these, what success looks like if they take these actions, and what evidence will they use to judge if the actions taken are having the intended and desired results? Leading indicators (evidence of instructional shift in practice, formative student results), and 'trailing' indicators (summative student results in achievement and behavior) should be used depending on the stated goal/compelling focus, and should be communicated transparently, along with subsequent action to address problems and to strengthen progress.

Develop your plan utilizing all the resources at your disposal with an emphasis on shared and collaborative work within the district and the community.

### **Step Three: Agree on transparency and monitoring**

Being very clear on what evidence will be used to judge the effectiveness of the plan the district is acting upon is equally valuable from an internal (to the district), and external lens. Evidence used to judge the plan should be clear and transparent from the beginning, not to serve as a 'gotcha', but rather as markers that will show what next steps are needed. Districts need time to implement sustainable, scalable change and there are very few short cuts. That being said progress can be made within two years, and then built upon. If stakeholders and advocates are going to be asked "to give us time", it is equally fair that they ask districts to tell them how to judge their actions along the way so that they can, at appropriate points in time, assess leading indicators to determine how much progress is being made in reaching the stated destination. The quid pro quo for local control is a system whereby transparency of practice, results and progress is the norm. Mostly this works to help local districts grow. It is understood and agreed upon that all districts will seek help; that the system will intervene to facilitate assistance in a partnership mode; and that in some instances direct external intervention will be required. Public monitoring of progress on equity and excellence will be a pervasive priority.

### **Next Steps**

It is not too late as this is the early stage of a complex new set of processes. But time is of the essence; there is an urgent need to step back and consider how best to take advantage of the enormous opportunity of commitment and resources that now exists in California. Do not try to control the uncontrollable, or to control weak levers. Above all, this is time to be selective and focused on what will unleash and propel the energy within the system. What I have called the current problematic LCAP version squanders resources, good will and energy as it fails to get at the very problems that it seeks to address. Yet we need mechanisms and help that will support the specific steps that I have outlined above. There are at least three consortia that have been established recently to serve this purpose, as well as actions that can be taken by LASSO, CCEE, and the CA Labor-Management Initiative. The advice to these groups is to avoid the trap of 'LCAP planitis' that I identified earlier, and instead to provide a buffer, and action help—positive pressure if you like—to engage districts in the three step set of actions stated in the previous section.

To be very clear I am not saying move away from LCAP per se. The solution is not just freedom *from* the current overly bureaucratic LCAP, but rather a movement to using LCAP to achieve more focus, more action, and more implementation linked to shifts in instructional practice that achieve greater results for all students.

The three consortia are: California Forward/CSBA has established a group of 17 districts designed to spur quality implementation. At the table are Board Chairs, and Superintendents (questions here about the role of unions). A second new group involves a group of Six County Offices, working on behalf of all 58 counties and their districts supported by California Ed Partners and the County Offices (CCESA): Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, Shasta, Tulare, and Ventura. The third is sponsored by ACSA and involves some 15 districts (5 small, 5 medium, and 5 large districts). The intent of all three consortia is to buffer, and support districts in developing effective LCAP activities, and to disseminate what is learned as they do this work. CCEE and LASSO have a major coordinating role to play that could involve interfacing with the three consortia to draw out lessons, and more comprehensively to guide and intervene as necessary relative to statewide actions. The CA Labor Management Initiative (coordinated by the CDE Foundation, and sponsored jointly by CDE, California Teachers Association and California Federation of Teachers in partnership with ACSA, CSEA, CSBA, and CCSESA) also has to be interfaced with this work.

In light of the previous paragraph it is right to worry about the complications of multiple overlapping coordinating bodies. To me this is less of a problem if everyone is moving in the same direction employing the same principles as I have outlined in Steps One to Three. California is large with its 1009 districts and 58 counties so there is plenty of work to do. What is needed is to work with similar strategies, and to share, evaluate and act on what is being learned. Still, I take as a given that coordinating the actions of various groups involved in supporting the development of LCAPs will require constant attention.

Given the sheer size and complexity of the solutions, in order to make progress you have to give a degree of confidence that most districts, under the current favorable conditions, will put in the effort to become more successful. In short, most districts need help more than surveillance and will respond accordingly. On the other hand, a compliance system, that in effect mistrusts all, will be a demotivator for identifying and taking actions that are required to get results on a wide scale. Within this overall constructive stance it should be assumed that some districts will need more direct help and external intervention. In sum, progress should be assessed in terms of actions and impact, not front-end compliance of plans that have indeterminate grounding. Early problems are understandable given that all this is new and difficult, but progress can be made in relatively short periods.

It is time to go slow, to go fast. The state has a three-year window to get this right—a period that we have called ‘California’s Golden Opportunity’.

## Endnote

Our team consists of Andy Hargreaves, Joanne Quinn, Eleanor Adam, Claudia Cuttress, Santiago Rincon-Gallardo, Carol Campbell, Mary Jean Gallagher, Nancy Watson and Michael Fullan. In California our formal relations are with the Stuart Foundation, CORE, ACSA, California Ed Partners, UC Davis, and Linda Darling-Hammond. We also link with the various agencies and associations in the state.

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## Glossary

- ACSA: Association of California School Administrators
- API: Academic Performance Index (former California student assessment program)
- CaEdpartners: California Education Partners
- CCEE: California Collaborative for Educational Excellence
- CCSEA: California County Superintendents Educational Services Association
- CDE: California Department of Education
- COE: County Office of Education
- CORE: California Office to Reform Education
- CSBA: California School Boards Association
- CSEA: California School Employees Association
- CTA: California Teachers Association
- CFT: California Federation of Teachers
- LASSO: Local Agency System Support Office
- LCFF/LCAP: Local Control Funding Formula/Local Control and Accountability Plan
- SBE: State Board of Education