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DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPACT OF THE LOCAL CONTROL FUNDING FORMULA ON ENGLISH LEARNERS

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California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) ushered a new school finance system aiming to provide both more local control over the use of funding and a more equitable school finance system. One of the responsibilities entrusted to local districts, along with the flexibility to determine how best to meet their student needs, is to increase or improve services for low-income students, English Learners, and foster youth. Recognizing the need for additional financial resources, the new LCFF allocated supplemental and concentration grants for these three student populations historically underserved. The Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) is the process through which districts lay out their plan to address, not only, student needs overall, but those of the target population. It also describes how funds will be used to support the plan.

In our previous work, we conducted two quantitative evaluation studies during Year 1 and Year 2 of LCAPs' development in order to analyze how well the plans were meeting the promise of local control, specifically in terms of the quality and degree to which the LCAPs addressed the needs of English Learners (ELs). In the Year 1 study (Armas, Lavadenz, & Olsen, 2015), we sought to analyze the degree to which the LCAPs reflected increased or improved services for ELs. For the Year 2 Report (Olsen, Armas & Lavadenz, 2016), we examined the key differences between Year 1 and Year 2 LCAPs in demonstrating an increase in services for ELs.

For each of the two LCAP analyses, we reviewed 29 districts throughout California including those with the highest number and concentrations of ELs using the *English Learner Research-Aligned LCAP Rubrics*. Results revealed little differences between the plans and that districts continued to have a weak response to English Learners, especially in the following areas: 1) Teachers' capacity building; 2) ELD standards implementation; 3) Use of specific data as indicators of improvement and to inform goals; 4) Strengthening access or

providing services, programs and support for ELs; and 5) Engaging parents of ELs in the process and content of the LCAP plans. This policy brief is the second phase of the Year 2 LCAP analysis.¹ For this second portion of the Year 2 LCAP study, we sought to examine administrative decision making in LCAP processes by asking the following question: *What are districts' administrators' perspectives on the impact of LCFF for ELs, as reflected by their district's development of the Year 2 LCAPs?* To date, there are few studies that explore this facet of the LCAP process.

What do we know about administrative decision-making processes?

Johnson and Kruse (2010) describe decision-making in educational administration as "unexamined" and "underexplored". Likewise, Darling-Hammond and Plank (2015) identified the need for knowledge sharing and dissemination that may lead to continuous improvement and to maximize the potential of LCFF and LCAPs to provide equitable funding allocation and improve ELs' academic outcomes.

In a review of the literature on district-level leadership practices and the influence on student outcomes, Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) found that administrators who developed longer term and strategic decision-making practices around professional development and stakeholder engagement in their districts had more successful student outcomes over time.

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(DARLING-HAMMOND AND PLANK, 2015)

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Our approach

This phase of the study complements the Year 2 LCAP analysis (Olsen, Armas, and Lavadenz, 2016) by collecting focus group interview data on administrators' perspectives on their school districts' efforts to make changes in their Year 2 LCAPs regarding improved or increased services for English Learners (ELs). Interview and focus group protocols were developed to expand on the findings of the Phase I study of the twenty-nine California school districts' LCAPs that analyzed the quality of services planned to meet the needs of English Learners (see References). Two focus groups and five interviews were conducted in Spring 2016 at the Annual Conference of the California Association for Bilingual Education, as well as during Summer 2016.

Participants represented districts from Northern, Central and Southern California and held a variety of administrative positions such as principals, coordinators, LCAP directors and assistant superintendents. In addition, focus groups included two parent representatives.

Thematic Analysis

Interviews and focus group participants (N=14) were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were read and coded inductively to generate themes using constant comparative method of qualitative analysis (Glaser, 1965). One example of such an emerging code was "leadership changes" identified in transcript analysis of respondents statements regarding personnel changes at the district level that resulted in shifts in priorities that were, in some cases, detrimental in meeting or addressing ELs needs. Our analysis of transcripts and the resulting themes are limited in generalizability given the few participants in our focus groups, however, they resonate with other research on LCAP development as well as administrative perceptions (Humphreys and Koppich, 2014). Five themes emerged from the data:

1. *The LCAP served as a mechanism to increase personnel and professional development to address EL needs.*

Interview responses revealed that the most common LCAP funding allocation for EL has been dedicated to the following:

- A. Support personnel including translators, family liaisons, director of special programs, coaches, bilingual instructional aides, tutors, intervention teachers, counselors
- B. Curriculum Intervention Programs and Initiatives: These included programs such as Imagine Learning, SEAL, or AVID.
- C. Professional Development on topics such as GLAD and the ELD/ELA Curriculum Framework.

These results are contrary to the findings in the analysis of Year 2 LCAPs that identified a **minimal** attention to professional development focusing on ELs. However, respondents indicated that most professional development activities were short-term in duration which research deems as least effective (Firestone and Martinez, 2007).

2. *The limitations of the LCAP template/tool make it difficult for districts to utilize it as a vehicle to communicate EL plans and initiatives—it is still viewed largely as a compliance document.*

Responses show that districts found it difficult to use the LCAP to communicate their plans and on-going initiatives to the various audiences. As a district LCAP Director stated: *"The LCAP is not conducive to explain the work taking place to address EL needs. It is too complex and has too many layers of information, and the document is not accessible to the public."* Accordingly, a central office coordinator reflected on the key differences between Year 1 and Year 2 LCAPs, including the communicative challenge along with the learning that took place in that district: *"The LCAP written in Year 1 did not document what we had in place... Thus, in [the] Year 2 LCAP we needed to have better documentation about what was being done as well as data points..."* This resulted in lengthier LCAPs, an outcome that further complicates communication and accessibility for both administrators who need to complete the templates, as well as end users. This finding also concurs with other studies and policy reports that address the cumbersome nature of the LCAP document itself (Collier and Freedberg, 2015).

3. *Districts' outreach to a variety of stakeholders were contingent on administrators' perceptions of stakeholders' understanding of LCAP and LCFF.*

Responses revealed that districts made efforts to be inclusive and obtain input from the different stakeholders through different approaches. District administrators also made an effort to build a better understanding of the needs of ELs among non-EL parents and EO staff. In addition, administrators made changes and accommodations based on what was learned from the previous LCAP. Some of the commonalities and differences in the districts' approaches to designing the LCAP were as follows:

- A. Representatives from different stakeholders met regularly throughout the year.
- B. The representatives focused on studying data, initiatives, research, and identification of EL needs.
- C. Changes were made from the Year 1 LCAP to the Year 2 LCAP in order to increase stakeholders, especially parents, understanding and involvement in the decision-making process.

As one district-level coordinator explained: *"The previous year we did our town hall meetings and the response from parents was not very good... this year we had a new strategy, 'Breakfast with the Superintendent'. The superintendent will talk about the mission and vision of the district and I explain what LCAP is... I give them the survey and ask for their input... We get close to 87 parents."*

Another coordinator echoed this focus on parents: *"We were able to bring out the message of the ELs' issues to the larger community by having EOs and EL families at the LCAP meetings... The positive that came out is other people saw the need ELs have."*

Additionally, respondents stated that there was a need for clarity, openness, and differentiated training according to local parents' needs so they could clearly understand their role in deciding how the funding would be utilized in order to meet the needs of ELs. We had one parent in a focus group at the CAFE conference that agreed that a differentiated approach to improve parent involvement is needed in the future: *"We need to revisit the stakeholder input process. We need a stronger way to get more parent input."* District administrators emphasized the importance

of parent engagement and also the importance of parent training and information required to build their abilities to fully engage in the process: *“By the end of the process [YR 1], I don’t think parents fully understand how they influence what’s going to happen with the decision making. So in terms of training and information, I think that there’s a need to be more sincere...”*

These findings extend those of the *Year 2 Review of LCAPs* evaluation study and might explain the finding regarding weak parental involvement – this remained weak despite districts’ awareness and efforts around increasing EL parent engagement. Achieving a clear understanding of EL parents’ role coupled with technical aspects of the LCAP’s intent proved challenging.

4. *There is a recognition of the need to align LCAPs with other strategic documents; initial efforts are emerging.*

Six of our respondents indicated that the Year 2 process reflected their efforts in aligning the LCAP funding to their previously identified goals and plans. This alignment included other plans such as site plans, English Learner Master Plans. One coordinator stated that this was

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part of his annual work plan: *“One of the things I’ve worked on this year was aligning the single plan with the LCAP, so that the school site goals are aligned with the LCAP goals.”* Responses revealed that districts feel there is a need for streamlining the process of reporting on the various funding sources that districts receive. An Assistant Superintendent and an LCAP Director shared, *“If we can merge the school site single plan and the LCAP, it would help to streamline the process and have principals more involved—there is too much duplicity.”* This

finding has also been acknowledged elsewhere (Darling Hammond and Plank, 2015).

5. *Leadership discontinuities challenges LCAP implementation.*

Analysis of responses indicated that in districts where there was a change in leadership, e.g., superintendent, school board, or staffing disruptions, there were parallel disruptions in LCAP implementation. District EL Coordinator explained: *“We are in search of a superintendent at the moment... we have newly elected board members and some shifting priorities right in the middle of the LCAP decision making process.”* In cases where there were tensions between administration and salary negotiations, the discussions around LCAPs were diverted according to another informant: *“[it] was a huge challenge for us this year and going through the LCAP process and engaging in a discussion about what we can do, because the message got diverted to talk about teachers’ salaries.”* Administrators’ concerns about leadership and particularly superintendent continuity were consistent with Walters and Marzano (2008) report that found positive correlations between the influence of school leaders, and their tenure, on student achievement.

analysis of phase one (Olsen, Armas, and Lavadenz, 2016). That analysis identified a need for coherence and comprehensiveness in the districts’ approaches to providing programs and services for ELs, especially those that target EL needs, such as, issues of access to programs and curriculum. Based on administrators’ responses in this phase, this could be due to problems with the tool itself; school leaders expressed frustration with the utility of the LCAP to communicate the efforts being carried out to address EL needs, mainly resulting from the complexity of the template. In fact, a key finding from phase one concluded that the “LCAPs do not serve as either an adequate planning mechanism or a sufficient accountability measure...” (Olsen, et al, p. 11); that “most plans were convoluted and difficult to read;” and that “individual line items described scattered things but did not allow the reader to realize a clear understanding that can account for how well EL needs are being met” (Olsen, et al, p. 11). If the plans are difficult to understand by the learned eye, how much more difficult will it be for a layperson, not versed in the intricacies of budgets and educational terminologies?

As revealed by the interviews and focus groups, administrators’ perspectives regarding the political realities in school districts such as labor union issues, shifts in school boards, as well as changes in leadership impacted the extent to which the districts’ visions and goals specific to ELs’ needs could be accomplished. Similarly, Waters and Marzano’s 2008 meta-analysis, found that effective superintendents focused their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts and provided “defined autonomy” that included a long term process for “setting clear non-negotiable goals....providing school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority for determining how to meet those goals” (p.4).

This phase of the study also shed light on the fact that the administrators seem to be suffering from “plan-saturation,” that is, the number of plans required to report on the use of the different funding sources, places a burden in terms of time and resources. Participants found the template time-consuming and a duplication of efforts, which might have influenced the limitations of LCAPs in presenting a coherent and comprehensive approach to meeting EL needs and its ability to measure impact. The results of the interviews conducted in this phase of the research shed some light on administrator’s thoughts about the processes that took place during the LCAP Year 2 development, although the small size of the sample limits generalizability across other districts in the state. Additional research, with broader sampling is needed in order to have a deeper and more thorough perspective on both the development of LCAP and implementation of LCF. Nonetheless, these findings served to provide a limited yet deeper understanding of the relationship between LCAP processes and LCFF support for ELs as reflected by our participants.

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CONCLUSIONS

The perspectives of district administrators’ in phase two of the LCAP Year 2 research served as a complement to the Year 2 LCAP

1. The LCAP tool should be (re) designed to support districts in specifying EL learning goals, services, assessments and outcomes using research-based evidence.

The state should review multiple and duplicative requirements and develop more efficient and effective ways of avoiding compliance-orientations, unnecessary complexity and duplication. Districts need to develop ambitious vision and goals for ELs and identify and remove barriers to success for their ELs. Gándara and Zárate's (2014) provide research-based recommendations that should be used as a guide in developing and carrying out LCAPs.

2. District administrators need differentiated support in building and implementing coherent, long term plans for EL student achievement.

District leaders need opportunities to “get things done” differently and break away from the set ways in which they have gone about “plan writing.” To that end, districts need, with the support of the state and county offices of education, to develop greater clarity and coherence in their vision and goal setting. Brazer, Rich & Ross' (2010) study found that the success of implementing reforms even when the decision-making process is a collaborative one is minimized when directives put the intended reforms at risk. Thus, differentiation is needed, just as in classrooms and in professional development, in meeting the *local* needs of this particular student population. Designing and clearly describing long-term plans with key stakeholder input is critical for determining impact and effectiveness for ELs. Although scarce, research on data-driven decision making points to the need for district level leadership to mediate school reform by building a common interpretation and orientation, which is in turn mediated

at the school-level by principals and other school site leaders (Park and Datnow, 2009). They identified this type of decision making as a key improvement strategy that builds on an “ethos of improvement” whereby central office administrators build a sense of mutual support between the district and the school through modeling and learning.

3. District and site-based professional development plans should be designed with a strategic focus on EL success.

Intensive, long-term investments for off -and on-campus professional development are needed to align multiple goals across LCAP and LCFF investments. These activities extend beyond the “typical” workshop format and instead incorporate well-defined and extended professional learning opportunities for both teachers and administrators (Garret, et al, 2001). This includes elements that cohere such as teacher peer observations, professional learning communities, coaching, lesson study and collaborative curriculum planning focused on student learning (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom, 2004; Firestone and Martinez, 2007).



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