

**California Education Policy Fund
2014-15 Deeper Learning Evaluation
Narrative Report Highlights**

**prepared for
Rockefeller
Philanthropy Advisors**

January 2016



Introduction and Methodology

Created by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in 2011, the California Education Policy Fund (CEPF) works to improve education policies in California by strengthening and supporting an “ecosystem” of nonprofit advocacy, research, grassroots and information-sharing organizations. With an annual grantmaking budget of about \$3 million, the Fund—managed by Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA) with support from Capitol Impact—has supported organizations advancing a wide range of policies for boosting success in college and careers, especially for disadvantaged students.

Beginning in 2013 (with its third round of annual grant awards), CEPF began asking its grantees to target and make headway on advancing “deeper learning” in California schools specifically. Deeper learning emphasizes students using both skills and knowledge in ways that prepare them to succeed in college, careers and civic life. When schools focus on deeper learning, students master core academic content and graduate able to think critically, collaborate, communicate effectively, direct their own learning and persevere through challenges. As part of this new focus on deeper learning, the Fund specifically prioritized grantees’ efforts in policy advocacy, research and communications designed to help California successfully implement new Common Core State Standards, high-quality assessments, new accountability systems and better aligned K-12 and higher education systems.

In addition to providing grants to organizations, CEPF supports a network of funded organizations to meet regularly, share intelligence and learn together about advancing deeper learning policies in California. Designed as a grantmaking fund (and not as an advocacy coalition), CEPF seeks to boost coordination and collaboration among key education advocacy and support organizations as they work to pursue complementary activities that advance deeper learning goals.

As part of this grantmaking shift in 2013, RPA enlisted [Education First](#), a national strategy and policy analysis organization, to annually examine the progress, successes and setbacks of its grantees as they work to advance deeper learning in the state. This evaluation effort looks only at the work of CEPF grantees specifically funded to advance deeper learning policy-change, which included 10 grantees in 2013-14 (the third cohort of CEPF grantmaking) and 21 grantees in 2014-15 (the third and fourth cohorts of CEPF grantmaking). Education First completed its first review of CEPF grantee activities in fall 2014 and its second (this document) review in fall 2015.

Importantly, this evaluation is not an impact evaluation that seeks to prove a causal link between individual or joint grantee activities and specific policy changes; rather, the goals of the evaluation are both formative and summative, including:

- Inform the Fund’s annual grantmaking strategies,
- Help the Fund improve the support and technical assistance it provides grantees throughout the year,
- Take stock of what steps and progress California is taking to implement Common Core standards, a new school accountability model and deeper learning,
- Track the grantees’ activities, contributions and outcomes toward advancing CEPF’s goals.

To shape our findings and ratings, we interviewed leaders at all 21 grantee organizations in September 2015 and reviewed the grantees' one-year progress reports submitted to RPA in October 2015. We also reviewed major reports and media stories from the past year related to deeper learning and interviewed 12 state policymakers and education leaders in September 2015 for their insights into the policy climate and developments.

Recap: CEPF Results and Recommendations in 2013-14

This 2015 evaluation considers and builds on the results and recommendations from Education First's 2014 evaluation of the CEPF Deeper Learning grantees. From interviews a year ago with leaders of grantee organizations in CEPF cohort three (plus a review of cohort three's grant progress updates) and interviews with 12 state policy and education leaders, we found widespread optimism about the California's progress toward making and changing policies to support deeper learning.

However, among CEPF grantees, Education First found their specific deeper learning policy goals to be ambiguous, not widely understood and/or not always prioritized. We found that grantees were defining what "fit" under the umbrella of deeper learning differently and there was little evidence that grantees had changed much to focus more directly on deeper learning. In addition, we reported grantee activities were spread thinly. And, while policy leaders told us they saw only a few of the CEPF grantees as visible contributors and helpful resources to policy advances, we observed that many grantees were leading important work behind the scenes, with state agency and district leaders and in communities around the state. We also observed that grantees might be collectively more successful (and CEPF more successful) if grantees were better coordinated and worked together to achieve a smaller, explicit number of deeper learning policy "wins."

We also considered the role CEPF itself played to support and strengthen the effectiveness of grantees in the deeper learning policy arena. Grantees consistently told us they appreciated the opportunity to advance the CEPF policy goals and collaborate with other grantee organizations. Grantees also relayed that they were struggling to communicate clearly about what deeper learning is (and even whether or when to use those words).

We concluded last year's evaluation with four recommendations to CEPF:

- Narrow CEPF's goals and variety of grantee activities to focus on a few most essential policy opportunities or needs,
- Clarify and prioritize the specific reforms to accomplish under each goal that directly advance deeper learning in more California schools,
- Look for opportunities for grantee organizations to share emerging research and work together in more coordinated ways to influence policy deliberations, and
- Revisit how grantees are communicating about deeper learning and what tools they need to be more effective and clearer.

Observations and Progress in 2014-15

During its second year of deeper learning-focused grantmaking (fall 2014 to fall 2015), CEPF supported 21 grantees across two cohorts: Cohort three includes 10 grantees who completed their two-year grants in fall 2015, and cohort four includes 11 grantees, who are either half-way through two-year grants or completed their one-year grants in fall 2015.

At the start of this second year, CEPF narrowed its goals from five to four (*see sidebar for list of goals*), choosing to make its goal to “promote educational equity to ensure deeper learning for all” an embedded strategy in all the goals rather than keeping it as a separate goal.

In part this change was a recognition that there are not separate policies to support making deeper learning opportunities more equitable; rather, to have policies advance the cause of ensuring disadvantaged students have access to richer classroom experiences, equity must be the lens through which all CEPF policy goals are viewed. In addition, this change recognized that advancing equity was already a priority for grantees and a goal to which they already were committed. For example, some of the grantees are working together as members of the LCFF Equity Coalition, which includes 25 civil rights, advocacy and community organizations that supported passage of California’s new Local Control Funding Formula in 2013 and are informing the development of the evaluation rubrics for school districts, charter schools and counties.

CEPF Policy-Change Goals

CEPF’s goals address four broad areas of policy change that can advance deeper learning:

1. Define and systematize college and career readiness and the deeper learning skills it includes as the state’s K-12 education system goal
2. Establish comprehensive assessment systems to measure college and career readiness, including implementation of new SBAC assessment
3. Anchor the multiple state accountability systems with college and career readiness indicators
4. Develop seamless pathways between K-12 and postsecondary systems, using Common Core standards and SBAC

CEPF also worked with grantees to develop a shorter and clearer list of indicators of progress for each goal; these indicators serve as examples of policy actions that make progress toward the goals. Also, recognizing much of the policy discussion and activity in California during 2014-15 focused on efforts aligned to Goals 1 and 3, CEPF helped organize and support two grantee working groups to collaborate on developing a shared model definition of college and career readiness for state adoption and to jointly influence indicators of school progress that will be included in California’s new school accountability system (see more details below).

California Policy Progress

As we did a year ago, Education First “took the pulse” in fall 2015 of policymakers’ and grantees’ perceptions of how California’s policies to support deeper learning are evolving, and what policy opportunities and challenges CEPF grantees face.

Similar to last year's evaluation, both policy leaders and grantees are optimistic about (and many are proud of) the progress California is making in the areas of the four CEPF goals. Among the policy leaders with which we talked, there is strong understanding about this education reform agenda and strong agreement that it is the right direction for California. Nearly all grantees and policy leaders consider successful implementation as the true measure of success, and many also expressed some degree of worry about the capacity of school systems to deliver on the policies being put in place.

- ▶ **Goal 1 – Define and systematize college and career readiness and the deeper learning skills it includes as the state's K-12 education system goal.**

The adoption of the Common Core and Next Generation Science standards—in 2010 and 2013 respectively—remains the state's key accomplishment under this goal, and several grantees have led communications efforts to inform parents and teachers about the importance of these standards and how they are different than California's previous standards.

Complicating this situation, both grantees and policy leaders observed there is an unequal focus in California on students' college readiness over career readiness. Many grantees believe it will be important for the state's still-under-development K-12 accountability system to prioritize and reinforce

CEPF Working Group: Definition of College and Career Readiness

CEPF organized and supported grantees that were interested in developing a proposed state definition for college and career readiness. Several other states have adopted these definitions to be more explicit that preparing students for success after high school is the goal of the K-12 system.

By spring 2015, grantee organizations had drafted this model definition:

"Students who graduate from high school college and career ready have mastery of rigorous content knowledge and the abilities to apply that knowledge through high-order skills to demonstrate success in college and careers. This includes the ability to think critically and solve problems, communicate effectively, work collaboratively, be self-directed in the learning process and other 21st Century skills required for a postsecondary education and workplace. Students with these skills are ready to learn, work and succeed beyond high school in high-quality, postsecondary general education coursework, certificate and technical degree programs, and apprenticeships without needing remedial or developmental assistance."

Participants in this working group included:

- ▶ California Acceleration Project
- ▶ Californians for Justice (CEPF grantee from cohort 2)
- ▶ Campaign for College Opportunity
- ▶ Career Ladders Project
- ▶ Children Now
- ▶ Council for a Strong America
- ▶ Education Insights Center
- ▶ Education Policy Improvement Center (EPIC)
- ▶ Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce Foundation
- ▶ Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)
- ▶ Public Advocates

the goal of college and career readiness too, and many are working to inform the State Board of Education's deliberations on these issues.

Some of the ways grantees worked to advance Goal 1 included working to prioritize and reinforce the goal of college and career readiness into the state's local accountability efforts and developing a possible statewide definition of "college and career readiness" (*see sidebar on prior page for more information*).

► **Goal 2 – Establish comprehensive assessment systems to measure college and career readiness, including implementation of new Smarter Balanced assessment.**

This past year's major milestone under this goal was the successful first-time administration of the Smarter Balanced assessment in spring 2015, coupled with the release of first-ever test score results. To support smooth administration of the test, especially in remote areas with limited technology access, state leaders continued to prioritize spending additional funds to connect schools to the Internet.

Grantees questioned if districts and schools across the state have the capacity to use data from the new state assessment well.

Although Smarter Balanced assessment implementation was successful, the state has not yet complemented these efforts to improve the state's summative investment with a significant investment in more widespread use of high-quality formative assessment tools for teachers. And, similar to the concerns raised about the local capacity and leadership to successfully implement college and career readiness standards, grantees questioned if districts and schools across the state have the capacity to use the data from the new state assessment well.

Grantees worked to advance Goal 2 by developing communications materials for the rollout of the new Smarter Balanced assessments to the community and business partners, advocating for more resources for the successful administration of Smarter Balanced and researching the utility of Smarter Balanced for community college placement.

► **Goal 3 – Anchor the multiple state accountability systems with college and career readiness indicators.**

Both policy leaders and grantees framed this goal as a top area of focus for the state. But grantees expressed more concern about how the new system is being designed; with the state shifting toward decentralization and de-emphasizing the test-score-based Academic Performance Index, they raised questions around the capacity of the state entities to hold schools accountable for higher expectations (and the capacity of local school districts to follow through on their LCAP commitments), especially for California's neediest students. Grantees and policy leaders have great expectations for the new California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (which legislators and the governor created in 2013 to support school district improvement and accountability) as the main state mechanism for supporting local improvement, but worry that the agency may have an impossible task.

Grantees have supported the state's commitment to redesign the accountability system with multiple measures, the intentional one-year delay in creating the state evaluation rubric and the recent development of the Accountability & Continuous Improvement Task Force.

Grantees agree an important opportunity to encourage deeper learning in more schools will be the state and districts using a robust set of multiple measures—that can build on summative test scores and high school graduation to emphasize other deeper learning priorities—to report on school progress and for school accountability. Policy leaders have not yet decided what these multiple measures should be; left unresolved is how much guidance and specificity the state should offer districts, how extensive the list of required indicators should be, and how reliable are different indicators/sources of data.

Grantees primarily worked to advance Goal 3 by increasing the transparency of the state’s Local Control Funding Formula regulations and LCAP implementation and by proposing different options and principles for the new accountability system. Several grantees contributed by collaborating to develop a menu of suggested measures for the LCAP evaluation rubric. (*See sidebar for more information.*)

CEPF Working Group: Accountability System Redesign

Throughout 2015, the Council for a Strong America organized fellow CEPF grantees interested in informing the measures and indicators the State Board of Education adopts as part of a new state rubric to guide Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs). The working group has sought to identify and agree on the most meaningful, research-based indicators of school performance and quality. It has shared its recommendations with the State Board at monthly meetings. Some of the working group’s recommendations have included:

- ▶ Measure students who have graduated having met college and career ready standards (rather than just graduating)
- ▶ Measure students on track to graduate college and career ready
- ▶ Measure both students who successfully complete “A-G courses” for admissions in the University of California system and who successfully complete CTE pathways

Participants in this working group included:

- ▶ California Collaborative on District Reform
- ▶ Campaign for College Opportunity
- ▶ Children Now
- ▶ Council for a Strong America
- ▶ Education Trust-West
- ▶ Educators for Excellence
- ▶ Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)
- ▶ Public Advocates
- ▶ Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE)

Importantly, in addition to representing a coordinated and common point of view among many CEPF grantees, the working group’s recommendations have attracted support from other California advocacy organizations.

- ▶ ***Goal 4 – Develop seamless pathways between K-12 and post-secondary systems.***

Recognizing the mix of CEPF grantees (most are focused on K-12 advocacy) and priorities at the state level (most attention is currently focused on the design of the state’s K-12 accountability system), both

grantees and policy leaders think the development of effective pathways between K-12 and postsecondary education is under-attended to (with the exception of two major initiatives to engage higher education institutions in creating stronger transitions with high schools: the \$500 million Career Pathways Trust and the \$60 million State Budget allocation to support the scaling of effective community college transition strategies).

Mirroring the state, CEPF grantees appear to be somewhat siloed between those working for deeper learning changes in K-12 systems and those working within higher education institutions. In part to address this challenge, CEPF has already committed for its next year of support (2015-16) to convene a grantee working group on strengthening transitions to college and careers.

In this policy environment, some of the ways grantees worked to advance Goal 4 included researching and developing ways for higher education systems to access and use students' Smarter Balanced results

CEPF has already committed for its next year of support to convene a grantee working group on strengthening transitions to college and careers.

and other measures in placement decisions and/or admissions decisions and assisting in the development of seamless accelerated course pathways and a model work-based learning continuum. One notable development this past year has been the deep planning and implementation work several higher education systems and community colleges have invested in making sure they can access and use students' Smarter Balanced results and other measures (such as GPAs) in placement decisions and/or admissions decisions; several CEPF grantees have played

key leadership roles in moving these efforts along.

State Capacity and Leadership

As part of our interviews with state leaders and grantees to document the different ways California policies are supporting deeper learning, Education First also asked about the capacity of state and local systems to follow-through and provide support to schools and educators during implementation.

In California's dynamic education policy environment and during a time when expectations for student achievement are increasing, grantees are deeply concerned about the capacity of both state agencies and local districts to successfully implement all these deeper learning-aligned policy changes and to support needed, widespread improvements in teaching and learning. They worry the California Department of Education lacks the resources to provide the extensive and deep support the field needs during this time of transition (a common concern about state agencies in other states, too). Many policy leaders expressed similar concerns, although more are willing to give the benefit of the doubt to the new California Collaborative for Education Excellence to offer state leadership and support.

Grantee Coordination and Collaboration

In our interviews with CEPF grantees, we found many organizations were collaborating in numerous and substantial ways—and doing so because of connections made as part of participating in the CEPF network. Many grantees reported new-found partnerships that emerged organically from regularly sitting around the CEPF “table” with other organizations. Examples of these collaborations included co-publishing briefs and reports, sharing information and data, and serving as informal sounding boards and advisors.

Similarly, grantees highlighted the diversity and expertise of cohort members as a key benefit to being part of the CEPF network. Likewise, grantees highly rated the regular meetings as an opportunity to share information and intelligence. Still, grantees said CEPF could do even better at facilitating these meetings to surface common interests and expertise and possible areas for collaboration and next steps; the meetings could focus even more on strategy and less on information-sharing.

Continued Prioritization of Equity?

As noted above, at the start of the second year of its deeper learning-focused grantmaking, CEPF shifted from calling out its focus on equity as a separate goal to embedding this priority in its four other goals. CEPF took this step because promoting educational equity in deeper learning doesn't require independent policies but rather must be a driving consideration for all policies, and because its grantees already prioritize equity in their activities.

However, several grantees highlighted their worry that the removal of equity as an explicit goal could imply less of a priority on this issue for CEPF or for the overall deeper learning agenda.

Continued Prioritization of Higher Education?

Postsecondary-focused grantees said they are unclear about how much commitment CEPF really has to postsecondary engagement and stronger transition pathways (CEPF Goal 4). Similarly, during interviews, the majority of K-12 CEPF grantees could not speak in detail about the progress of postsecondary policy changes in the four policy goals—and many of the postsecondary grantees were not comfortable speaking about K-12 policy progress.

CEPF Progress: 2014-15

From interviews with policy leaders and grantees, we found important changes and developments between the first year of CEPF's deeper learning focus (2013-14) and the past year (2014-15), including:

- ▶ **Grantees were more visible players in policy debates.**
- ▶ **Grantee activities and effort were more tightly aligned with CEPF's Deeper Learning goals.**
- ▶ **Grantees organized to better unify their messaging and advocacy on two key education policy issues.**

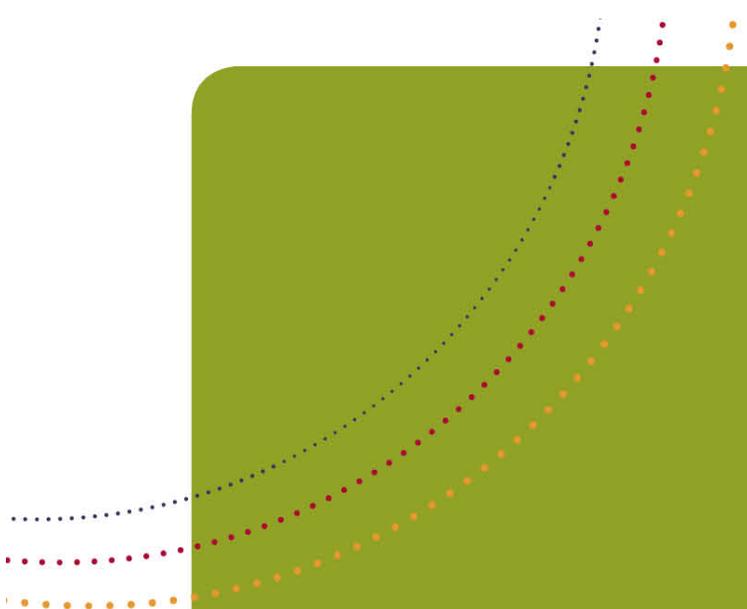
Conclusion and Recommended Next Steps for 2015-16

California has an extraordinary number of capable organizations working to inform and influence education policymakers. The state also is making significant gains—many likely to be models for other states—in adopting and implementing policies that encourage deeper learning, from redesigning its school accountability system with multiple measures, to improving state testing so it measures college and career readiness, to improving pathways into college.

In a network of diverse and productive organizations with strong and independent leadership, RPA, Capitol Impact and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation face a continuing balancing act between funding and supporting individual grantees with their own priorities and organizing these individual grantees to collaboratively work on shared agendas and common outcomes. Over the coming year, CEPF can continue making strides—as it did from 2013-14 and 2014-15—in how its grantees work as a network and share information and in their prioritization of fewer, more strategic activities to advance deeper learning.

Possible changes for CEPF in 2015-16

- Narrow the indicators of progress under each CEPF goal, to further focus and prioritize the learning policies grantees are collectively working to advance
- Continue to improve ways of coordinating and connecting organizations, to ensure grantees are contributing in meaningful ways and working together to achieve specific outcomes
- Consider gaps in postsecondary prioritization and expertise



About Education First

We are a national, mission-driven strategy and policy consulting firm with unique and deep expertise in education improvement and reform issues. We work closely with policymakers, advocates and practitioners to design and accelerate ambitious plans in college and career readiness, college completion, STEM strategies and effective teaching, and we specialize in developing bold policies, planning for implementation and building widespread, bipartisan support and understanding for change.



education**first**

experience | quality | results