

# Evaluation of the California Education Policy Fund 2011-2014

October 2014



## Introduction

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (Hewlett) created the California Education Policy Fund (CEPF)<sup>1</sup> in 2011. The CEPF was created at a time of budget crisis and limited policy opportunity within the California policymaking context. Administered by the Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA) and its contractor Capitol Impact LLC (CI), the Fund was conceived of as a way to help preserve the ecosystem of education advocacy in California, defined as the set of players focused on state-level education policy and advocacy (e.g., advocacy organizations, research organizations, grassroots groups). The Fund was also designed to keep some attention and focus on key policy areas of interest, including standards, assessments and accountability policies, state education data systems, finance reform, etc.<sup>2</sup> Within this context and set of goals, grant making was structured as general operating support to organizations that were selected through an open process. From 2011-2013, CEPF awarded grants to a total of 21 organizations (see Appendix A).

Since 2009, the context in California has shifted significantly, with California aligning around Common Core State Standards and providing greater opportunity for statewide uptake of Hewlett's national Deeper Learning strategy<sup>3</sup>. As the context has changed, the focus and structure of the Fund has also evolved from supporting a broad ecosystem of policy actors in 2011-2012 to being Deeper Learning oriented in 2013-2014. This shift moved the Fund from a more general focus on policy and practice reform in California to a more directed focus on policy and practice reform aligned with Deeper Learning for the purpose of preparing students for college and career.

ORS Impact was asked by Hewlett to conduct a retrospective evaluation of the Foundation's investment in the CEPF from 2011-2014.<sup>4</sup> The evaluation addressed the following questions:

1. What has been **achieved** as a result of funding the first two CEPF cohorts for ecosystem support from 2011-2013?
2. To what degree has there been a successful **shift** from the ecosystem approach to a Deeper Learning focus among CEPF grantees who received funding as part of Cohort 3 in 2013?
3. To make an informed decision regarding the structure of the CEPF **going forward**:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education/california-education> and <http://rockpa.org/page.aspx?pid=529>

<sup>2</sup> In original documents, these were conceptualized as "niches" being filled by CEPF grant making, including policy niches, voice niches and tactical niches.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education/deeper-learning>

<sup>4</sup> Two complementary evaluations related to the CEPF were undertaken concurrently. EdFirst focused its evaluation on the accomplishments of the 2013 cohort of grantees (Cohort 3). Brock Grubb Consulting conducted a landscape analysis to identify opportunities for supporting implementation of the common core in California. Protocols and sampling frames were shared among the three efforts to minimize overlap and burden on respondents.



- What is the perception among key informants about the **balance** between the need for new or changed policies versus implementation of existing policies and/or expansion of pilot activities around the strategic work plan goal areas?
- What are the **perceptions about the “ripeness”** or timeline with which policy advances can be expected in these areas from key informants’ points of view?

The first two questions were specific to CEPF grantees; the third question asked informants about the broader education reform field in California, including but not limited to CEPF grantees. Key informant interviews were conducted in June- July 2014 along with a review of secondary data. Additional details about the methodology are provided in Appendix B.



## Key Learnings from the Evaluation

In addressing these questions of specific interest to the Foundation, a set of key learnings emerged of potentially broad interest not only to those involved in CEPF but to others working on education reform issues in California and other states. These learnings are shared here.

### 1. In contrast to the anticipated limited policy opportunity, strong state leadership heralded a period of big changes in K-12 and post-secondary education.

Although CEPF was formed at a time when there was perceived to be little activity or appetite for education reform in California, that quickly changed. Governor Brown took office in January 2011 for the second time, just as the first CEPF cohort was being recruited. He quickly restructured education leadership at the state level, consolidating offices and reinstating Mike Kirst as the President of the State Board of Education. Referred to as the “*dynamic duo*,” their leadership was widely viewed as central to policy advances, especially in K-12 education.

Most notable was passage of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). Informants also cited the importance of strong leadership in increasing funding for education (Proposition 30), and the suspension of accountability systems to “*clear the decks for common core*.” California adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2010. At the post-secondary level, there was a shift in the focus of activity from college access to college success, with the passage of the Student Success Act noted as an important milestone resulting from strong state leadership and broad-based advocacy.

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*“For policy you need three vector forces. You need revenue growth, big ideas, and a strong unified leadership and political system. We had that. All forces were aligned.”*

*– Decision Maker*

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### 2. Although the recession put financial stress on education advocacy groups, decision makers and other informants generally perceived that the field remained active and influential.

Grantees acknowledged that “*It was a brutal few years for nonprofits*.” Yet decision-makers perceived the **number** of nonprofit advocacy organizations to be the same or more than before. Similarly, key informants perceived the advocacy field to have maintained or increased its amount of **activity** during this timeframe. The **influence** of advocacy organizations was also generally perceived as strong, which may be because they were ready to and did take advantage of the policy window that opened. In the words of one key informant: “*The governor was the trigger, but advocacy roles were important both before and after*.” Specifically, grantees were perceived as successful at leveraging support for finance reform, assessment and accountability reform, and college readiness.



*“[Nonprofit advocates] know how to rally people and work with legislative staff.”*  
– Decision Maker

### 3. Non-profit advocates are seen as having useful and critical roles related to keeping a focus on equity issues, organizing constituents, and providing research, communication, and platforms for discussion.

During this time of intense activity, informants credit non-profit advocacy groups, including CEPF grantees, with playing important roles in advancing education reform. One of these was to be a strong voice for keeping **equity** issues at the forefront.

Another important role was **organizing constituents** and providing political cover.

*“We wouldn’t have LCFF without political pressure and the political cover that [advocates] provide to the legislature and governor.”*

Additional critical roles that advocates played during this period included policy **research** and conducting analysis to support decision making: *“We had a wealth of research...right people and right research.”* Informants

also noted the important role played by grantees to convene policymakers, share research and analyses, and *“raise understanding.”*

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*“[Grantee organizations] were significant in visibility and analysis to support decision making – big impact.” – Bellwether*

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*“Advocacy groups... who are looking at equity issues around what’s happening for students of color and English learners are central to the conversation of what is success in our state.” – Bellwether*

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As one informant stated, *“They are very helpful in providing necessary information about the need for policy change.”*

At the post-secondary level, the Chancellor’s office was described as a key advocate for reform from within the system. But informants also noted that there was visible advocacy from the governor, the legislative branch, and from third party groups that provided important research and commentary and *“were able to position themselves to help with the messaging.”*



#### 4. Deeper Learning is seen by CEPF grantees and key informants as a useful concept, although lack of clarity remains about how it is operationalized in a policy agenda.

CEPF grantees described Deeper Learning as “*the whole ballgame*,” “*what every good teacher should be engaging in*,” a useful descriptor “*for a way to really connect to better outcomes and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and jobs*,” “*at the heart of what we’re doing*,” and “*the goal that ties it together*.” Many informants were also familiar with the term and some could cite the elements in detail while others described it more generally as “*teaching students to think again*,” and how “*teachers should work*.” They noted that the term is not as well known in post-secondary education.

For many grantees and informants, the translation from Deeper Learning as an aspirational goal to a concrete strategy remains unclear:

*“Philosophically it has a place, but politically it is a hard road.”*

*“Not sure what the policy ask is that will promote Deeper Learning.”*

Many informants spoke about how the principles of Deeper Learning can inform work around common core, STEM education, and post-secondary student proficiency and suggested that greater traction could be achieved, especially in the business community, if the conversation were broadened to link to these related reform efforts.

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*“There’s a lot of synergy between [STEM education and Deeper Learning]. Business leaders get more excited about STEM. There is deep policy around it. How do we use that to drive deeper learning? Looking for connection points is valuable.”*  
 – Bellwether

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#### 5. CEPF benefited grantees by building new connections across organizations.

CEPF grantees are experienced organizations with high capacity for carrying out their tasks related to advocacy, research, and communications. Thus there was little need for intermediary organizations to provide technical assistance to hone their skills.

Nevertheless, grantees did perceive that being part of a collective added value. In particular, CEPF was credited with building new connections between organizations working on **different parts of the policy continuum** (e.g., advocates and policy research) as well as among those working at **different levels of the education system**, particularly the connections between those working in K-12 education and those working on post-secondary policy issues:

*“We all have things we are unable to do [for example] being a watchdog...but we can pass it on to others that can. It has given us the relationships.” – Grantee*

*“The Fund is our primary opportunity to engage with [higher education groups].”*  
 – Grantee



## Looking Ahead

6. All informants see this moment as a critical juncture; if California doesn't get implementation right, public backlash will occur.

*"We've had tectonic plates shifting...State has not demonized common core but that doesn't mean it's not possible here."*

There is a sense of pride and accomplishment at the moment, and many informants are reveling in the positive spotlight now shining on California education. Yet they worry that conditions are fragile and that it could all unravel if negative stories start surfacing. They are also concerned that the window is short to get support systems in place that help teachers and students adapt to new requirements before the public loses faith in the reforms.

Key informants noted that implementation is complex and operates on many levels. At the local level, districts and counties must develop local accountability plans and provide teachers with resources to manage changes in expectations. The state has a role in accountability reform. And third party advocates have a role in monitoring implementation, lifting up examples, fine-tuning policies, and managing expectations and stories that surface during implementation.

7. There is a role for policy in implementation.

Many of the perceived opportunities to help "get implementation right" are not necessarily based in policy reform, such as teacher preparation, leadership development, and curriculum development. In the words of one grantee, we need *"Instructional materials, professional development for teachers and administrators, technology – to ensure that people in system are ready to deliver."* Another informant commented on the importance of leadership development: *"How do you sustain change if always changing leadership? Need to build that pipeline."*

Nevertheless, informants could identify a role for both administrative and legislative policy in implementation. An exhaustive list is provided below. Informants also noted that as learning occurs through implementation, additional policy needs will undoubtedly surface.

"Getting it right" includes...

- Accountability system reform
- Evaluating, monitoring and refining policies
- Supports and resources, including teacher preparation and curricula, for teachers and students to adapt to new requirements
- Leadership development at K-12 and postsecondary level
- Keeping an eye on equity
- Continuing work on pathways from K-12 to postsecondary
- Public relations to manage expectations and prevent backlash





K-12 Policy Opportunities	Post-Secondary Policy Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accountability system</li> <li>• Policy evaluation and monitoring</li> <li>• Teacher tenure and teacher evaluation and compensation policies</li> <li>• Academic Performance Index (API) reform</li> <li>• Student performance and testing</li> <li>• Certified transition courses in 12<sup>th</sup> grade</li> <li>• Concurrent enrollment and on-line learning</li> <li>• Tackle outmoded education code</li> <li>• Protection of some statewide programs under new local funding</li> <li>• Labor management policies to free teachers to be reflective</li> <li>• Comprehensive data system</li> <li>• Continued funding - renew Prop 30?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies to support transition to college–assessments aligned to admissions?</li> <li>• Policies to support limited 4-year programs at the community college</li> <li>• LCFF as potential model for community college funding</li> <li>• Regulations to support best practices (unspecified)</li> <li>• Reform 50% law to support services and instruction that occurs outside the classroom</li> <li>• Other union issues – counselors are technically faculty. Affects actual hours spent seeing students</li> </ul>

Informants noted that there is a logical sequence to these reform opportunities. At the K-12 level, making sure standards stay on track and reforming assessments and accountability systems are the priority actions to pursue over the next three years, while simultaneously beginning to monitor implementation.

**8. Post-secondary policy is at a different stage of development.**

More so than in K-12, post-secondary informants talked about opportunities for new policies. They believe that forward movement is possible related to student proficiency assessments and policies to support transition to college and to ensure that post-secondary assessments are aligned with common core. Informants also noted that “*nobody owns space between high school and post-secondary*” and that CEPF has an opportunity to make a real difference:

*“Policies tend to focus at one [K-12] or the other [post-secondary] and not the shared space. CEPF can be critical there.”*





A valuable function that third party advocacy can play is to provide legislators with examples of how things could be different and shine a spotlight on what is prohibiting or encouraging desired changes. *“Having examples from third party makes it real.”* While educational leaders may have a clear sense of direction, they may not be as effective at demonstrating concretely for legislators *“how policy might change to get those practices to grow.”*

## 9. Grantees and other informants are grappling with the implications of the stronger role of local and regional authorities going forward.

The shift in policy power and foci from the state to local and regional levels as a result of LCFF and the development of related Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAP) has raised some interesting questions about the role of the state going forward. For example, beyond standards and accountability, what is the role of the state in enabling teachers and leaders to shift their practices? How do you influence space dominated by local districts, counties, and vendors? At this time, many informants perceive that the state has not yet answered these questions and is still *“figuring out what its role is in this conversation.”*

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*“How do we still have leverage when people are not doing what they are supposed to on behalf of students in a state as diverse as California?”*  
 – Bellwether

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Another important question raised by informants relates to the best way to define the state’s role as a good steward of public funds that is both fair and respectful of regional diversity. Informants described the local capacity for implementation as highly diverse which has the potential to result in very uneven implementation.

A corollary to these questions is what is the appropriate role for non-profit advocacy groups in this changed environment? Several distinct roles were described:

1. Serve as a watch dog: *“We need independent advocates monitoring where it is going ... at local level.”*
2. Guard against backlash: *“A high priority is protecting past victories against ongoing opposition.”*
3. Work on Academic Performance Index (API) reform and other policies that flow from LCFF: *“Trying to prevent return to API as sole measure to judge schools.”*
4. Work in partnership with decision makers charged with implementation: *“Success of local implementation is reliant on some specific activities by the state...we will be working with new state agency that is key piece of new accountability system.”*
5. Policy evaluation: *“Advocacy community has to weigh in constructively. What is and isn’t working? What can be disseminated to other districts?”*



## Conclusion

The California Education Policy Fund was created at a time of budget crisis and limited policy opportunity as a way to help preserve the ecosystem of education advocacy in California. During its first three years, the Fund has achieved this goal, providing support that allowed a group of high functioning advocacy and research organizations to take advantage of a policy window that opened in California. Nonprofits, including CEPF grantees, were seen as contributing to the significant achievements during this time by organizing constituents, informing policy discussions, and keeping attention focused on equity. Moving forward, there are strategic choices facing the Fund about how to operate in a changed environment in which there is an increased focus on policy implementation and greater responsibility at the local level.



## Appendix A: CEPF Grantees

### **First Cohort (funded in 2011)**

Campaign for College Opportunity  
Children Now  
EdTrust West  
Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy (IHELP)  
Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce Foundation  
New America Media  
Parent Revolution  
Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)  
West Hills Community College District/C6 Consortium

### **Second Cohort (funded in 2012)**

California Collaborative on District Reform  
Californians for Justice  
Career Ladders Project  
Council for a Strong America  
EdSource  
EdVoice Institute  
Foundation for California Community Colleges  
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund

### **Third Cohort (funded in 2013)**

Career Ladders Project  
Children Now  
EdSource  
Education Trust-West  
Educational Results Partnership  
Foundation for California Community Colleges  
Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy (IHELP)  
John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities  
Partnership for Children and Youth  
Public Advocates

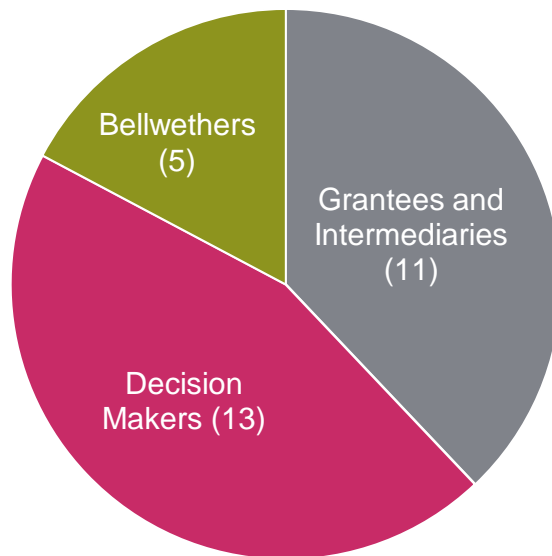


## Appendix B: Methods

The primary methods used to address the evaluation questions were key informant interviews and a review of secondary data, including grant reports, grantee websites, and high-level Google searches of public statements made by grantee organizations and their senior staff. The interviews targeted three classes of respondents:

- CEFPP grantees and intermediaries (restricted to grantees from Cohorts 1 and 2 who were engaged in the shift to deeper learning as part of Cohort 3)
- Decision makers (targets of advocacy efforts including legislative staffers, public administrators, etc.)
- Bellwethers (other funders, academic experts, thought leaders)

Figure 1: CEFPP Interview Participants by Type



Every evaluation has its strengths and weaknesses. Among the strengths of our approach were: 1) inclusion of a wide range of perspectives, including voices that have not been included in other evaluation efforts, 2) a good response (29 of 43 initially contacted, including all targeted grantees and intermediaries), and 3) a mixed method approach to measuring grantee alignment with deeper learning. The primary weakness was limiting the length of interviews to 30 minutes with bellwethers and decision makers. While this encouraged participation, it restricted the interviewer’s ability to probe in-depth on topics of interest.