

# **California Education Policy Fund 2015–16 Evaluation of Deeper Learning Advocacy and Policy Change**

## **SUMMARY**

**Prepared for  
Rockefeller  
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## 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 budget of about \$4 million, the Fund—managed by Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA) and Capitol Impact—has supported organizations advancing a wide range of policies to boost success in college and careers, especially for disadvantaged students.

In addition to grantmaking, CEPF aims to strengthen collaboration among key education advocacy and support organizations as they work to pursue complementary activities and influence similar policies. Thus, CEPF also supports funded organizations to meet regularly, share intelligence and learn together about advancing deeper learning policies in California.

Before making its third round of annual grant awards in 2013, CEPF reviewed policy changes over the prior two years in California and decided to shift its grantmaking focus to more narrowly support deeper learning-aligned policies. Deeper learning emphasizes students developing and using both skills and knowledge in ways that prepare them to succeed in college, careers and civic life. Students in schools that focus on deeper learning 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, the Fund specifically prioritized grantees’ efforts in advocacy, research and communications designed to help California make continued progress in four policy goal areas.

With this grantmaking shift in 2013, RPA enlisted [Education First](#), a national policy, strategy and analysis consulting firm, to examine annually the progress, successes and setbacks of grantees as they work to advance deeper learning in California. Education First has produced for CEPF two evaluations, one for the 2013–14 grantmaking cycle and one for the 2014–15 cycle. This is the third evaluation in the series and covers the 2015–16 grantmaking cycle. As in past years, this external review has three goals:

- Track notable steps California is taking to adopt and implement policies, practices and innovations that advance deeper learning in schools;
- Document how CEPF grantees are working individually and collectively to inform and influence the state’s progress;
- Inform the fund’s annual grantmaking and grantee networking strategies.

All of Education First’s evaluations have examined only the work of CEPF grantees specifically funded to work on deeper learning policy change, which included 10 grantees in 2013–14 (the third cohort of CEPF grantmaking) 21 grantees in 2014–15 (the third and fourth cohorts of CEPF grantmaking) and now 17 grantees (the fourth and fifth cohorts of CEPF grantmaking, although all of these current grantees had been supported as part of earlier grantee cohorts too) in 2015–16. These research efforts have not been designed to prove a causal link between individual or joint grantee activities and specific policy changes.

To inform our review and findings, we interviewed leaders at all grantee organizations (plus reviewed their reports to CEPF) and 11 state policymakers and education leaders to gain perspective on the policy environment in which grantees are working to achieve their goals for deeper learning. We also reviewed major news articles and op-eds, reports and other artifacts.

## Recap: CEPF Results and Recommendations in 2014–15

Last year’s evaluation built on the results and recommendations from Education First’s first-year (2013–14) evaluation of the CEPF Deeper Learning grantees. In 2014–15, grantees and policy leaders were optimistic about and many were proud of the progress made in the four CEPF focus areas.

Policy leaders interviewed for our 2014–15 evaluation shared a strong understanding of California’s education reform agenda and agreed the state was headed in the right direction; however, nearly all of them—as well as nearly all of the CEPF grantees—worried that state agencies and local school districts lacked the needed capacity to implement deeper learning-aligned policy changes. Many policy leaders expressed hope that the new California Collaborative for Education Excellence could provide new supports for state leaders and agencies and blaze a new trail for state leadership and support.

Education First concluded the 2014–15 report with three recommendations for CEPF:

1. Narrow the indicators of progress under each CEPF goal to further focus and prioritize the deeper learning policies grantees are working to advance collectively;
2. Continue to improve ways of coordinating and connecting organizations, to ensure grantees are contributing in meaningful ways and working together to achieve specific outcomes, and
3. Consider what more could be done to organize grantees to help the state close gaps in postsecondary attainment.

## California Progress and Grantee Activities in 2015–16

### CEPF Structure and Goals

During its third cycle of deeper learning-focused grantmaking (Fall 2015 to Fall 2016), CEPF supported 17 active network grantees. Since CEPF shifted its grantmaking focus to deeper learning in early 2013, the California policy environment has continued to evolve. For example, the state now seems fully committed to the Smarter Balanced summative assessment, designing an accountability system framework that prioritizes college and career readiness as a key goal for K–12 schools, and committed to including better indicators of student learning (including performance on Smarter Balanced) in placement decisions in the state higher education systems. Reflecting this progress, CEPF made slight adjustments in its four goals. Table 1 below compares the original CEPF goals to its 2015–16 goals.

Complementing each of the four goals, CEPF has generated short lists of what success looks like: specific anticipated policy outcomes and example indicators of progress toward the outcomes. Early in the grant year, grantees suggested the sort of activities and results they expected to pursue for any of the policy outcomes. These metrics—the four overall goals, the specific policy outcomes, the progress indicators and the planned grantee activities—are combined each year into an all-grantee, overarching workplan.

In addition to supporting and monitoring individual grantee actions, CEPF has organized issue-based grantee workgroups to help organizations tackle a particular policy change, take advantage of an emerging opportunity or develop a common approach on an issue of shared interest. During the past year, CEPF and grantee Career Ladders Project convened a new workgroup on K–12/postsecondary

pathways to accelerate grantee activities under Goal 4. *See sidebar on page 10 for more information about this new workgroup.*

**Table 1: CEPF Goals**

2014–15 Goals	2015–16 Goals
<b>Goal 1:</b> Define and systematize college and career readiness and the deeper learning skills it includes as the state’s K–12 education system goal	<b>Goal 1:</b> Define and systematize college and career readiness and the deeper learning skills it includes as the state’s K–12 education system goal ( <i>goal unchanged from prior year</i> )
<b>Goal 2:</b> Establish comprehensive assessment systems to measure college and career readiness, including implementation of the Smarter Balanced assessment	<b>Goal 2:</b> Establish comprehensive assessment systems to measure college and career readiness
<b>Goal 3:</b> Anchor the multiple state accountability systems with college and career readiness indicators	<b>Goal 3:</b> Build a coherent federal state and local next-generation accountability system that promotes college and career readiness
<b>Goal 4:</b> Develop seamless pathways between K–12 and postsecondary systems	<b>Goal 4:</b> Develop seamless pathways between K–12 and postsecondary systems, with particular focus on increasing access to college by reducing the number of students who encounter remediation

### California Policy Progress

As we did the last two years, Education First “took the pulse” of policymakers’ and grantees’ perceptions. We examined how California’s policies to support deeper learning are evolving, how well state leaders seem committed to the ideas of CEPF’s four goals, and what policy opportunities and challenges grantees face.

As we have found in the past, both policymakers and grantees remain enthusiastic and optimistic about the progress California is making to meet the four CEPF policy goals. They believe the state is ahead of others, although they recognize new requirements of the federal Every Student Achieves Act (ESSA) could complicate further progress and they are worried that too many local school districts may lack the leadership and capacity to deliver on the new state policies being put in place.

[Recent poll results](#) in the state suggest there continues to be strong public support for Common Core standards and the Smarter Balanced assessment.

- ▶ **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**

This CEPF goal remained unchanged in 2015–16. In past years, policymakers and grantees have emphasized the state’s adoption of new K–12 standards in English language arts, reading and science and its investment in the Career Pathways Trust as two primary ways California has systematized college

and career readiness as a system goal—and grantees have continued in particular to help ensure the success of the state’s implementation of Common Core standards.

To make the state’s commitment to college and career readiness more explicit, CEPF grantees worked together in 2014 and 2015 to draft a proposed goal—modeled on similar goals other states have adopted—to propose for State Board of Education consideration. However, it declined to take action on the definition. This past year, grantees’ main focus under this goal shifted to informing, strengthening and advocating for the “college and career readiness indicator” measure to be used in the state’s new accountability system (these activities overlap with CEPF Goal 3).

While California’s original Local Control Funding Formula legislation called out college and career readiness as a goal for school improvement, the State Board’s initial list of proposed accountability metrics earlier in 2016 did not include specific measures in this area. CEPF grantees worked together to help the State Board identify a more complete list of indicators, which included measures of career readiness and not just college readiness. In addition, it agreed to add more data and improve the sub-indicators over time. *See sidebar below for more information about the final metrics the State Board adopted.*

#### **California State “College and Career Readiness” Indicator**

In September 2016, the California State Board of Education adopted a new indicator for gauging how well students in individual school districts are prepared for college and careers. Based on data the state currently collects, the State Board decided students who earn a high school diploma plus achieve the measures in at least one of the categories below will be rated as “prepared”:

- A. Career Technical Education (CTE) pathway completion plus one of the following criteria:
  - ▶ At least a Smarter Balanced Level 3/“Standard Met” score in either English language arts or mathematics and at least a Level 2/“Standard Nearly Met” score in the other subject area
  - ▶ One semester/two quarters of dual enrollment with passing grades
- B. At least a Smarter Balanced Level 3/“Standard Met” score in both English language arts and mathematics
- C. Completion of two semesters/three quarters of dual enrollment with a passing grade
- D. Passing score on two Advanced Placement (AP) exams or two International Baccalaureate (IB) exams
- E. Completion of courses that meet the University of California’s “A-G” college entrance course-taking criteria plus one of the following criteria:
  - ▶ CTE Pathway completion
  - ▶ At least a Smarter Balanced Level 3/“Standard Met” score in either English language arts or math and at least a Level 2/“Standard Nearly Met” score in the other subject area
  - ▶ One semester/two quarters of dual enrollment with passing grades
  - ▶ Passing score on one AP exam OR on one IB exam

Due to the absence of robust career data in the state, the State Board opted not to set a “well prepared” performance level as part of adopting the overall indicator and instead committed to work to collect additional data from school districts.

Some of the ways grantees worked to advance Goal 1 included working to include a college and career readiness indicator in the final Local Control Funding Formula “evaluation rubrics” and produce briefs that define the work that needs to happen across systems to advance college and career readiness.

► **Goal 2: *Establish comprehensive assessment systems to measure college and career readiness***

This CEPF goal was substantially the same for 2015–16, although its language was broadened to include other components in addition to Smarter Balanced in a comprehensive system of assessments. During the past year, California administered that state test—which measures Common Core English language arts and math standards—and reported scores for the second time. New this past year, the state began working to develop a new state test aligned with the Next Generation Science Standards, and many believe that test can further advance deeper learning if it has a strong focus on problem-solving and performance-based real-world questions.

As we’ve found in past years, the strong support for California’s new, higher-quality state tests is coupled with a continued worry that teachers don’t have access to similarly high-quality and aligned formative and interim assessments and lack the assessment fluency to maximize the use of these tests and their data in their classrooms. While the Smarter Balanced assessment package comes with some tools and while some school districts have worked to support their teachers with these tools, in our interviews we didn’t learn of any wide-spread or systemic effort in California to address this gap.

Grantees worked to advance Goal 2 by encouraging the State Board to commit to refine the statewide assessment system over time and to encourage innovations that seek to better measure higher-order thinking skills.

► **Goal 3: *Build a coherent federal state and local next generation accountability system that promotes college and career readiness***

This CEPF goal was updated in 2015–16 to reflect the dual need to finalize a new state accountability system (a key part of California’s Local Control Funding Formula legislation) and start working on a federal accountability system (based on the new Every Student Succeeds Act, passed in late 2015). Many grantees hoped these two systems could, as much as possible, be *one system* with a shared set of goals, metrics of school success, and approach to supporting struggling schools.

In 2014, the State Board of Education began its work on creating the Local Control Funding Formula evaluation rubrics. A key part of the state’s Local Control Funding Formula approach adopted in 2013, the rubrics are intended to lay out the indicators the state will use to gauge and report on school district success.

After a year-long extension from the Legislature, the State Board approved the new approach in September 2016. Still, members have noted that the adopted version is a “work in progress” that will evolve both in the coming months, as the state drafts its federal ESSA accountability plan, and over time as the state is able to add more refined indicators in some areas. In addition to a commitment to continuous improvement, the new state approach includes a variety of measures of student learning and a dashboard reporting system.

One large gap for California moving forward—which both policymakers and grantees acknowledge—is the lack of clear plans for supporting struggling schools. While the state has created a new, designated state agency, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), to work with school districts on how to improve—and the Governor tapped respected educator Carl Cohn to lead this agency—many believe it is moving too slowly and lacks the resources needed to help more than a handful of districts. (This gap is discussed in more detail below, in the section on “State Capacity and Leadership.”)

Grantees primarily worked to advance Goal 3 by producing recommendations for the State Board about the state’s new evaluation rubrics, especially for ways of strengthening its proposed college and career readiness index indicator.

#### **CEPF Working Group: Accountability System Redesign**

Beginning in 2015, CEPF supported grantees that were interested in informing the measures and indicators the State Board of Education would adopt as part of the state rubrics to guide Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs). The working group sought to identify and recommend the most meaningful, research-based indicators of school performance and quality, and it shared its recommendations with the State Board at monthly meetings, commenting on the state’s draft documents as they evolved. Throughout the past year, the working group prioritized helping the state identify the right measures of college and career readiness in California’s new accountability system—and made a difference influencing deliberations as described above.

Participants in this working group included:

- ▶ California Collaborative on District Reform
- ▶ Children Now
- ▶ Council for a Strong America
- ▶ Education Policy Improvement Center (EPIC)
- ▶ Educators for Excellence-Los Angeles
- ▶ Education Trust-West
- ▶ Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Foundation
- ▶ Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)
- ▶ 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 postsecondary systems with particular focus on increasing access to college by reducing the number of students who encounter remediation***

While largely the same as the prior year, this year’s CEPF goal emphasized creating stronger K–12/higher education alignment by reducing the number of students who enroll in postsecondary and then need remediation.

As part of ensuring students are ready to succeed in credit-bearing courses, the California State University system and 78 of California's 133 community colleges (about 60 percent) are using Smarter Balanced scores as evidence in course placement decisions; high school juniors who demonstrate college-level proficiency on the state test are exempt from taking the CSU and participating community college placement test for math and English. However, the University of California system does not yet use Smarter Balanced results to measure college readiness.

To further strengthen alignment, legislators enacted two new grant programs during the 2016 session. The [Award for Innovation in Higher Education](#) will award grants to college campuses for efforts that reduce the time it takes students to complete degrees. The [College Promise Innovation Grants Program](#) (created by AB 1741) will support partnerships between schools districts and public postsecondary universities that increase college preparation, access and success. Also, to further advance efforts to improve career readiness and vocational education, the State Board of Education and the California Community College System Board of Governors are re-instituting a dormant joint working committee.

#### **CEPF Working Group: K–12/Postsecondary Pathways**

Led by the Career Ladders Project, CEPF's K–12 Postsecondary Pathways Working Group seeks to expand seamless pathways between K–12 and postsecondary systems in California, in particular by using the tools of Common Core standards and Smarter Balanced "college ready" test score results. Working Group members look for ways to advance policies and administrative regulations that contribute to improving student transition from high school to college and expand influential leaders' and champions' awareness of Common Core, Smarter Balanced and deeper learning generally.

During 2015–16, the new working group prioritized crafting a common set of desired policy outcomes.

Participants in this working group included:

- ▶ California Acceleration Project
- ▶ Campaign for College Opportunity
- ▶ Career Ladders
- ▶ Education Insights Center
- ▶ Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Some ways grantees worked to advance Goal 4 included developing a CEPF working group on K-12/postsecondary pathways and supporting the state's establishment of the Basic Skills and Student Outcomes Transformation Program to reduce the amount of time students spend in remediation.

### **Prioritizing Equity**

At the start of the second year of its grantmaking focused on encouraging deeper learning, CEPF shifted from calling out its focus on equity as a separate goal to embedding this priority in its four other goals. According to CEPF staff, the Fund 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. This year, grantees continued to pursue more equitable opportunities for deeper learning.

## State Capacity and Leadership

Given the ambitious education policies California policymakers have adopted in recent years, many grantees are concerned about local school and school district capacity to implement (and state capacity to support implementation, especially when local schools struggle) these policies.

The Governor and legislators created the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) as part of the original Local Control Funding Formula legislation to provide advice and assistance to county offices of education, school districts and charter schools as they work to achieve state and local improvement goals. However, as many grantees and some state leaders noted, CCEE is a small operation and limited in its ability to provide support to very many school districts or to school populations with significant variances. The organization has not yet articulated a full strategy or signaled how others can help; still, as one legislative leader told us, there remains confidence in CCEE moving “slowly yet deliberately.”

### Suggested state priorities moving forward

During our interviews, Education First asked policymakers to provide their perspective on what California’s greatest education priorities should be moving forward in the next few years. We heard a significant range of directions—not all of them fit well with the current focus and priorities of CEPF—including the following:

- ▶ Piloting and supporting implementation of Next Generation Science Standards
- ▶ Revising/refining/improving Local Control Accountability Plan templates and processes
- ▶ Delivering local support for school improvement
- ▶ Developing the state Every Student Succeeds Act plan
- ▶ Special education, including reforming the financing system
- ▶ School readiness and universal pre-school
- ▶ School climate
- ▶ Funding shortages
- ▶ Teacher shortages
- ▶ Charter school oversight

Some policy leaders reported that the past year’s primary focus on refining, debating and adopting state evaluation rubrics for local district for improvement efforts—the cornerstone of a new state accountability system—sucked attention away from addressing important teacher quality needs or tackling other looming issues such as teacher shortages.

Nearly everyone interviewed for this year three report asserted that better supporting and strengthening the ability of local educators to implement new state goals and policies—including strengthening the skills and knowledge of teachers, school leaders and administrators—needed to become a higher priority and needed a better solution. Without a more strategic and deliberate approach to helping, they said, the success of California’s new policies and efforts to implement deeper learning would be uneven at best. For example, capturing an opinion we heard in many of our interviews, one grantee argued, “Most policy people would say that we don’t have enough capacity. While that might be true, I’m not convinced we have a clear policy to support the investment in capacity. The state needs a clear conceptual message about what the system needs to look like.”

Finally, many grantees suggested that data about the performance of students and groups of students is essential to tracking progress, understanding how implementation is going and targeting resources to address gaps or problems—but they see the governor in particular as not committed to collecting the right data, using it or helping school educators understand it.

## Effectiveness of CEPF Grantee Network

To complement the financial support it provides organizations, CEPF regularly convenes grantees to share information, learn together (such as through site visits and issue briefings) and identify shared goals or activities. As part of our annual evaluations, we ask CEPF grantees to offer their perspective on the value and effectiveness of these efforts. Grantees believe they are being supported by the network and that the grant funds they receive help them advance their work; they did not identify consistent obstacles or problems in their work or in their collaborations.

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“In California’s current context of weak state entities and organizing abilities, CEPF continues to provide linkages between policy, practice and research.”

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### CEPF Meetings

Networking continues to be the highest rated activity. While grantees express some ambivalence—as they have during past years’ evaluations—about regular CEPF meetings (the average rating from all grantees falls in between “having little value” and “being valuable”), they also talked with passion about the network’s overall value and the unique opportunity to bring key education players together across different sectors (K–12 focus vs. higher education focus) and different approaches (advocacy vs. research vs. communications vs. local capacity-building).

### Grantee Coordination and Collaboration

Our interviews with CEPF grantees suggest that most are collaborating on discrete projects in substantial ways—and are doing so because of connections made by participating in the CEPF grantee network. Indeed, considering the feedback we received in past years’ evaluations, grantee collaboration and coordination appear to have increased across the network this past year and are a distinguishing success of CEPF.

Most grantees say that CEPF’s networking structure fills a niche, as there are no other venues for stakeholders and policy groups to get together. One grantee reported, “Collaborations have been incredibly powerful. Speaking in one voice to the State Board regarding accountability was powerful.” Another grantee explained, “Two years ago, I didn’t believe there was much value. But now, there is enough synergy and enough substantive conversation that there is impact.”

In addition to more organic collaborations and conversations that CEPF seeds among grantees, it also supports coordination via its two grantee working groups. In 2015–16, CEPF supported two working groups: one on accountability system redesign and one on K–12 postsecondary pathways. (This past year, the Accountability System Redesign Working Group merged with CEPF’s Definition of College and Career Readiness Working Group, recognizing that the priority for the past year was informing the State

Board of Education’s decision for a college and career readiness school quality indicator and that many of the participating members were the same.)

## Recommendations for 2017

In Fall 2016, the Hewlett Foundation announced it would be resuming direct grantmaking in California in 2017 and to dissolve its CEPF structure after existing grants have finished in late 2017. In resuming direct grantmaking, the Foundation expects to build on the success of CEPF and its grantees in creating a favorable climate in California for deeper learning and to ensure past policy gains are both well implemented and serve as models to others. Given this shift, it’s important to consider how CEPF can best support this transition in 2017 and help grantees advance their work and advocacy.

As noted above, CEPF has continued to evolve as a network of grantees from 2013–14 to 2015–16, becoming more effective and engendering more grantee collaboration each year. Based on the trajectory of good work already underway by CEPF to strengthen key education organizations and a review of California policy accomplishments to date, Education First offers the following recommendations to support making CEPF’s last year as impactful as possible.

- ▶ ***Recommendation #1: Continue to narrow/prioritize activities and shared work—with an eye to what can be (or ought to be) collectively accomplished in 2017 on the policy advocacy front before grantmaking returns to the Hewlett Foundation.***
- ▶ ***Recommendation #2: Acknowledge, elevate and address the disagreements various grantees and policymakers have about how best to manifest a commitment to both equity and deeper learning in state policy.***
- ▶ ***Recommendation #3: Encourage grantees to inform and influence state decisions and priorities for better supporting struggling schools.***

## Conclusion

California is blessed with an extraordinary number of capable organizations working to inform and influence education policymakers. And state policymakers and education leaders are 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.

With a network of such diverse and productive organizations, CEPF can continue making strides to inform state policy choices and ensure a strong pathway to successful implementation—perhaps with even more urgent steps than it did in earlier years as the Fund prepares to draw to a close in late 2017.