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# **LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ON EDUCATION ISSUES IN THE CALIFORNIA LEGISLATURE: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

April 2022

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As stated by the National Conference of State Legislatures, “the stakes are high as states work to move beyond the COVID-19 pandemic...every facet of state government has been impacted and those who work in the legislature are instrumental in shaping their states’ futures.”<sup>1</sup> In order to effectively shape their states’ futures, legislative staff need quality professional learning. As one staffer stated: “Equipping staff with the tools to [draft a bill] in the most informed, most up-to-date [way], that builds relationships and connectivity with the right people on campuses and within systems, only lets us be more effective, and it only helps us to make better public policy and be good public servants and stewards of the public trust.” Recognizing this critical need to strengthen staffer professional learning in California, the Hewlett Foundation, Sobrato Philanthropies, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (collectively, “the funding partners”) partnered with Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) in March 2021 to conduct a landscape analysis of the professional learning opportunities available to education policy staffers in the California legislature. The funding partners and SPR also worked closely with Capitol Impact, a Sacramento firm that currently leads the California Legislative Staff Education Institute (CLSEI), to conduct this landscape analysis and make meaning of preliminary findings.

SPR’s landscape analysis seeks to achieve the complementary purposes of (1) informing potential future approaches for the funding partners related to supporting professional learning; (2) understanding the ways in which CLSEI can be a resource for staffers; and (3) contributing to the knowledge base around the professional learning needs of legislative education staffers, to be shared with the broader California legislature. Data in service of addressing these purposes were collected and analyzed via virtual interviews and focus groups with a range of stakeholders, including education policy staffers, legislative leaders, and field leaders, as well as a survey of education policy staffers. SPR also collected perspectives from families that are affected by education policy to add to and triangulate findings from staffers, legislatures, and field leaders.

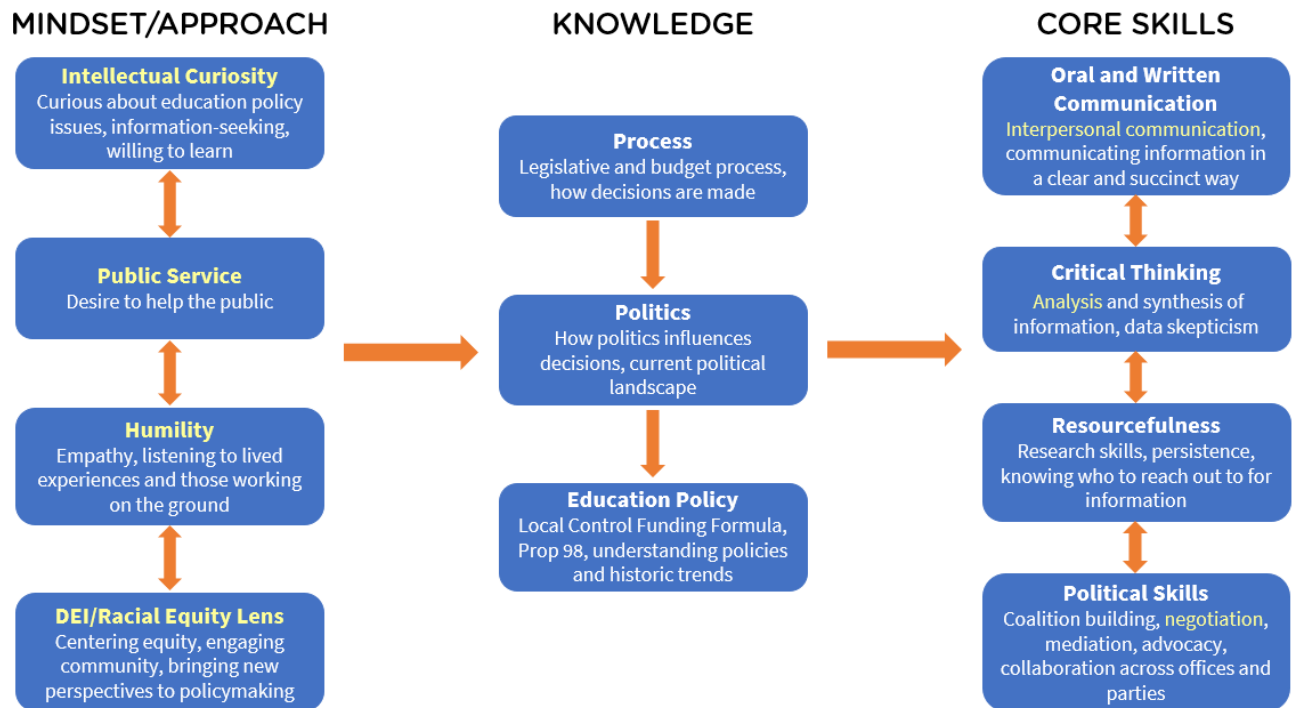
## What Critical Competencies Do Education Policy Staffers Need?

In interviews, education policy staffers, legislative leaders, and field leaders reflected on the core competencies needed to attend to intersectionality in education policy issues, as well as the skills needed to craft education policy that is rooted in the lived experiences of students and families. Furthermore, field leaders were asked about how staffers typically engage with or incorporate the perspectives of communities furthest from educational opportunity and who face the biggest systemic barriers. The learnings from these interviews were distilled into a critical competencies framework and validated by a Staff Advisory Group, which is composed of a representative cross-section of legislative staffers across roles, offices, parties, and tenure. This Staff Advisory Group provided critical insight to add further nuance and detail to the findings. The critical competencies framework served as an anchor for identifying gaps and opportunities for growth in the current professional learning landscape. It is important to note that while the mindsets and approaches detailed below reflect attributes that many staffers bring to their role, professional learning opportunities can continue to influence and shape these mindsets. The critical competencies framework is Exhibit I.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncsl.org/meetings-training/ncsl-base-camp-2021.aspx>

EXHIBIT I: CRITICAL COMPETENCIES FRAMEWORK



## What Professional Learning Opportunities Are Currently Available to Education Policy Staffers?

Legislative staffers and leaders, as well as education field leaders, were asked about current professional learning opportunities. Findings from these interviews, as well as survey responses, illustrated participation levels across professional learning opportunities, the factors that facilitate their access to these opportunities, as well as the barriers that prevent them from accessing these opportunities.

The most referenced learning opportunities were CLSEI, fellowship trainings, research briefings by external organizations, and legislative leader- and staff-initiated learning events. Exhibit II highlights how key professional learning opportunities align with staffer critical competencies, as well as barriers to accessing these opportunities.

## EXHIBIT II: CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF OPPORTUNITIES, CORE COMPETENCIES, AND BARRIERS

Current Opportunities	Core Competencies	Barriers
Research Briefings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge (Education Policy)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time &amp; capacity</li> <li>• Virtual fatigue</li> <li>• Funding to attend</li> </ul>
CLSEI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mindset/Approach (Public Service, Humility)</li> <li>• Knowledge (Politics, Education Policy)</li> <li>• Core Skills (Oral &amp; Written Communication, Critical Thinking, Political Skills)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time &amp; capacity</li> <li>• Not available to all staffers (invitation-only)</li> </ul>
Legislative leader- and staffer-initiated learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mindset/Approach (Intellectual Curiosity)</li> <li>• Knowledge (Process, Education Policy)</li> <li>• Core Skills (Oral &amp; Written Communication, Critical Thinking, Resourcefulness)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time &amp; capacity</li> <li>• Competing demand to learn about other topics</li> </ul>
Fellowships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge (Process)</li> <li>• Core Skills (Communication, Critical Thinking, Resourcefulness)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not available to all staffers (selectivity)</li> </ul>

Key themes from interviews suggested that the landscape of professional learning opportunities varies based on staffer tenure, with some opportunities tailored for senior staff and others for junior staff. Additionally, some interviewees perceived that the legislature values a "self-starter" attitude and anticipates that staffers will seek out professional learning on their own and thus do not need formal support. However, several staffers expressed interest in more institutionalized opportunities built into their role and supported by the legislature.

Notably, staffers described CLSEI as a unique and significant professional learning opportunity. Staffer comments detailed what they have gained from their past and current CLSEI participation. Specifically, staffers have: (1) gained new connections and expanded their network; (2) increased their knowledge of topics relevant to education policymaking; and (3) improved their communication, outreach, collaboration, and analytical skills.

### FACTORS INFLUENCING ACCESS TO LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Interviewees shared that specific factors often facilitate or hinder access to learning opportunities.

**Logistic Factors:** The timing and dissemination of professional learning opportunities impact access, given that some staffers face capacity constraints, especially when the legislature is in session, that may prevent them from finding out about or taking advantage of professional learning opportunities. Moreover, several junior staffers noted that they have felt intimidated interacting with more experienced staffers, which may influence junior staffers' access to informal professional learning opportunities (i.e., mentorship).

**Staffer Background and Characteristic Factors:** Staffers with a stronger network are exposed to a larger number of professional learning opportunities. Moreover, junior staffers' comfort with seeking

mentorship from senior staffers may influence their access to informal professional learning opportunities (i.e., mentorship), with several interviewees noting that they have felt intimidated interacting with more experienced staffers.

**System Factors:** While the legislature does offer a number of professional learning opportunities, several staffers perceived a lack of institutional support for professional learning. Moreover, some staffers were unaware that the legislature offers funding to cover the expenses of attending a learning opportunity. Thus, the financial cost of professional learning opportunities may be functioning as a barrier for some participants.

## What Additional Professional Learning Opportunities Do Education Policy Staffers Need?

The current learning opportunity and resource landscape was described as “disjointed,” in that some staffers shared that not every activity is aligned with developing a necessary skill. Moreover, though opportunities like CLSEI and fellowships offer interactive and applied programming, they are not broadly accessible to all staffers given their limited capacity and selective nature. Overall, interviews surfaced the following gaps in the current landscape:

- Current learning opportunities are missing a component that explicitly helps staffers apply acquired knowledge to their roles and to inform policymaking.
- Newer staffers need more opportunities to learn how to synthesize information from various sources – including academic research, advocacy reports, and community member perspectives – to inform their analysis and crafting of education policies.
- Senior staffers need additional support to establish mentorships with new staffers.
- Legislative staffers need more opportunities to interact with community members so that the community’s lived experiences can be integrated into the education policymaking process.

### STAFFER INTERESTS AND SUGGESTIONS

Interviewee comments suggested strong interest in having institutionalized professional learning support that legislative leadership endorses and an environment in which legislative leadership heavily encourages staffers to participate in learning opportunities that support their growth. Specific suggestions included the following:

**Knowledge Suggestions:** Interviewees suggested that professional learning opportunities should focus on providing a solid foundation of the legislative process (including an understanding of the policymaking cycle), particularly for junior staffers. Furthermore, staffers said they would benefit from more opportunities to grow their policy knowledge, particularly around creating policies using a racial equity lens.

**Skill Suggestions:** Staffers shared an interest in growing their communication and networking skills. Listening skills surfaced as a key area of focus as they are necessary for staffers to learn from diverse communities.

**Community Engagement Suggestions:** Staffers expressed a strong desire to learn through interacting with communities and individuals affected by policies. This engagement was seen as critical for effective policymaking and an area where additional professional learning opportunities are needed.

**Format Suggestions:** Staffers value and want interactive opportunities that are directly applicable to their role.

### Community Recommendations for Staffers and Legislative Leaders

Overall, parents expressed a wish for leaders to appreciate that the students whose lives their decisions affect are each unique, complex, and brilliant individuals. They feel that policies often paintbrush children as a monolith, forgetting the diversities and complexities of student needs. Specific recommendations from parents regarding how state decision makers can approach community engagement are detailed below.

**Build direct and consistent connections with families and students by spending time in the community.** A prominent recommendation from parents to leaders was to build authentic connections with communities and those who are experiencing the impact of state policies in California’s schools. Parents felt that leaders can begin to develop authentic connections by visiting communities more frequently to understand the challenges they face in their neighborhood and in their school. Visiting the community will also help leaders understand how housing and community safety intersect with employment, nutrition, and education, showing the intersectionality of education with other important policy areas.

**Approach the community with sincerity, empathy, compassion, and an open mind.** Parents highlighted that they will candidly share the challenges they are facing in all sectors of life in an effort to be understood and seek action. Leaders should be receptive to the stories they hear and approach these conversations with humility and authenticity to establish communication and trust with the community they serve.

## What Can Philanthropy and Legislative Leaders Consider as They Plan Next Steps for Strengthening Professional Learning?

Based on the gaps in professional learning opportunities, and how parents and staffers feel these gaps can be filled, SPR outlined the following considerations for the funding partners and legislative leaders.

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUNDING PARTNERS

- Engage legislative leaders and staffers in thought partnership and co-design of additional opportunities.
- Draw on examples from outside of California for ideas on how philanthropy can support professional learning, such as trainings offered by the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#).
- Pilot new opportunities that fill gaps and address the staffer suggestions highlighted above, such as peer mentorship and fellowship programs.

- Support centering community voice and diversity, equity, and inclusion within professional learning opportunities.<sup>2</sup>
  - *Create space for more conversation between staffers and the community.*
  - *Support participatory action research projects between grassroots organizations, researchers, and staffers through (1) funding grassroots organizations to drive research questions and meaning making; (2) engaging academic researchers to perform data analysis and synthesis; and (3) encouraging staffers to brainstorm ways in which findings can inform education policy reform.*
  - *Draw upon existing examples of diversity, equity, and inclusion in legislative settings, such as [the Government Alliance on Race and Equity](#).*
  - *Explore education policy issues through the lens of students and families furthest from opportunity, including English learners, low-income students, students of color, and other historically underrepresented groups.*
- Continue providing thought partnership and support to current grantees focused on professional learning, including CLSEI.

#### CONSIDERATIONS FOR LEGISLATIVE LEADERS

- Make professional learning an explicit part of staffers' job descriptions, including dedicated hours during legislative quiet periods for staffers to engage in professional learning.
- Work closely with the Assembly Speaker's and Senate President Pro Tempore's offices to remove barriers to access to ensure that all staffers, but particularly new staffers, can take advantage of professional learning opportunities.
- Engage a broad cross section of legislative staff (such as those who served in the Staff Advisory Group) to help design future professional learning opportunities.
- Redesign briefings to make them more interactive and offer follow-up opportunities for junior and senior staffers to discuss the content.
- Increase access to high-leverage interdisciplinary opportunities, particularly site visits and other community engagement opportunities.

This landscape analysis of professional learning in the California legislature surfaced important findings related to strengths and areas for growth in the current professional learning landscape. We hope that these findings and considerations support the funding partners and legislative leaders with continuing to improve professional learning for staffers in a way that responds to and centers those most impacted by education policy.

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<sup>2</sup> In the education policy staffer context, having a DEI lens includes knowing how to think critically about the impact of policies for diverse groups (e.g., English learners, students with special needs, etc.) in diverse settings (e.g., rural versus urban, under-resourced versus wealthy districts), knowing how to explore options outside of existing constructs and structures, and questioning whether new or existing policies are needed.