

BUILDING SYSTEM CAPACITY FOR IMPROVING HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES IN CALIFORNIA

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Highlights:

- ▶ **Educational capacity is the ability to deliver, or support the delivery of, assistance to students to improve learning outcomes.**
- ▶ **Districts, the state, universities, and private and non-profit providers all play important roles in contributing capacity to the educational system, and their efforts are interdependent.**
- ▶ **Solving California's dropout crisis requires building the capacity of teachers and school leaders to provide high-quality learning experiences for all students.**
- ▶ **Well-functioning school districts are uniquely positioned to build school capacity...but they themselves generally lack the capacity to identify and coordinate the resources that must be brought together to address intractable problems such as school dropouts.**
- ▶ **California's public education system requires both more capacity and better coordination to improve high school graduation rates.**

California educators face an unprecedented challenge in preparing an increasingly diverse student population to graduate from high school and go on to college. To meet this challenge, the main strategy the state has used over the past decade has been to provide clear standards for student performance, hold schools accountable for results, and allow local flexibility to decide how best to meet these expectations. Known as *systemic reform*, or *standards-based reform*, this strategy assumes that local schools and districts have the capacity to meet these ambitious goals.

The research on systemic reform points to two critical and connected weaknesses to this approach. First, many levels of the system currently lack sufficient capacity to achieve state standards. Second, there is a general lack of coordination amongst the important stakeholders providing capacity within the system. Addressing these challenges is critical to improving California's schools and solving the state's dropout crisis.

▶ **The Current State of Educational Capacity**

Educational capacity is defined here as *the ability to deliver, or support the delivery of, assistance to students to improve learning outcomes*. This is a deceptively simple definition because embedded within it are a large number of requirements. In the classroom, teachers must have the capacity to effectively convey knowledge and ideas to students and to respond to the complex array of factors that influence this process—teacher and student prior knowledge, student readiness to learn, student motivation, as well as teacher content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and classroom management. At the school level, school leaders must have the capacity to deploy resources to work with teachers, parents, and the community to keep students in school.

Beyond the school walls, districts, the state, external for-profit and nonprofit educational resource providers, and universities all contribute capacity in support of educational improvement.

- *Districts* provide capacity by working closely with schools to select and enact curricula, delivering professional development for teachers and school leaders, and using data for instructional improvement and evaluation.

Read the full report at: lmri.ucsb.edu/dropouts

- **State capacity** comes in the form of setting standards, developing assessments and specific accountability systems, sponsoring local capacity-building through regional resource centers, and providing funding for local schools.
- **The federal government** contributes capacity by setting broad educational policy, providing funding to local schools, and investing in research and development.
- **External providers** deliver capacity through curriculum, professional development, materials, technological advances, and other programmatic developments. They proffer textbooks and other curriculum materials, professional development programs, and resources and services.
- **Universities** supply capacity by offering both pre-service and in-service professional development to both teachers and school leaders, as well as being a source of educational ideas and innovations.

► **The Nested Nature of Capacity**

While these educational support providers all contribute considerable thought, effort, and resources to improving the quality of public education, their efforts are insufficient, as evidenced by the current level of performance in the system. Part of their collective challenge is the difficult nature of the capacity-building enterprise; systematically building human knowledge and

skill at any level of an organization is complex and uncertain work.

Beyond this, capacity-building at each level of the system is intricately related to, and influenced by, efforts at other levels of the system. Therefore, the challenge of building capacity across the education system is a *nested* problem.

First, there are different *types* of capacity required at the classroom, school, district, state, federal, university, and provider levels. Second, each level of the system faces a simultaneous struggle to build its own capacity even as it is trying to support capacity-building in other layers of the system. Consequently, efforts to build capacity at each level are dependent upon both their own priorities, as well as the priorities of those they serve. Thus, the efficacy of capacity-building in support of educational improvement depends on the quality of support at each level of the system, in combination with the coherence of their collective efforts.

► **The District Role in Building Educational Capacity**

Well-functioning school districts are uniquely positioned and integral in supporting schools' efforts to provide a quality education for students. This is because school districts straddle the space between individual schools—where reforms are ultimately enacted—and the external world—where the ideas, materials, and expertise to make reform happen resides.

Research on the district role in supporting educational improvement points to several important

district qualities facilitating their efforts.

First, successful reforms take place within districts where strong leaders put into place an explicit and coherent vision for educational reform. Second, these leaders build and coordinate capacity at all levels of the district system in support of their vision. Third, districts provide data and other forms of feedback to schools, and monitor their progress. Fourth, districts do not work alone; they develop solid relationships with external providers and coordinate their efforts with other educational support providers, including universities, state intermediate units, for-profit and non-profit support providers, foundations, and other support organizations.

Thus, districts sit at the fulcrum between *support* and *accountability*, and balance their work as such. However, despite their positional advantages and central role, districts themselves generally lack the capacity to identify and coordinate the broad array of resources that must be brought together to address intractable problems such as school dropouts.

► **The Need for Strong Coordinated Capacity to Improve Graduation Rates**

While the dropout problem is manifested in schools, school faculties lack the time and expertise to improve graduation rates on their own. As just described, the district central office is best suited to initiate a response to the dropout problem because school-based issues are local and best understood by leaders who recognize the distinctive

context of the problem. However, many districts lack the capacity to respond to the array of challenges they face without substantial assistance. Other education-support organizations must buttress district capacity with their own support capability. This is the essence of strong coordinated capacity.

Efforts to coordinate capacity to address the dropout problem would focus on providing assistance to schools and districts by (1) analyzing particular causes and circumstances of dropouts in their context; (2) assisting in the searching and vetting of existing strategies to address the problem; (3) helping in the adoption and/or adaptation of an evidence-based response to the problem; and, (4) aiding in the evaluation of the efficacy of the response, such that it assesses impact and contributes to the overall knowledge base in the state.

The state, external providers, and universities all have important roles to play in supporting districts as they go through such a process.

The state's role, given its constitutional authority over the educational system, is integral. However, state support for districts must be differentiated according to district size and need. States must understand that districts are in different places in their development, with different levels of capacity, different performance levels, and different student population compositions. So, while states may demand that districts confront important problems, they should support districts to devise their own responses.

The state is also well-positioned to act as a clearinghouse for information about external support

providers who supply dropout programs, services, and technical assistance. The state can also facilitate district networks on particular topics related to the dropout problem and help deepen their work by fostering cross-district networks and communities of practice that engage district leaders in discussions around strategies and implementation challenges.

Universities and external providers might provide technical assistance in the search and analysis processes. Providers might also contract with districts to implement specific programs and approaches they have developed and work with district personnel on an ongoing basis to train district employees to skillfully implement these approaches.

While the state, universities, and external providers all play roles in contributing the capacity necessary to support broad-scale educational improvement, none of them are well-positioned to coordinate the array of capacity available to schools.

A more comprehensive approach to coordinating the different organizations supporting educational improvement would establish a *consortium of support providers* in the state.

A similar model was tried, with some success, in the 1990s with the National Science Foundation's state-wide systemic initiatives. Alliances of major capacity builders, including state government, nonprofits, and other major education support providers, were brought together to form a consortium to help schools and districts assess their needs, sort through the available resources,

select and implement choices, and assess the efficacy of their reform efforts.

► The Challenge of Coordinated Education Reform

The past decade of education reform has highlighted the promise of systemic reform in building a structure of standards and accountability to provide guidance, goals, and incentives to American schools. Yet the capacity part of the equation has thus far not been systemically addressed, much less harnessed, in support of this structure. While much progress over the last decade has been achieved, the building of capacity at different levels of the system, and coordination of that capacity, represents an even more daunting challenge.

Solving California's dropout crisis requires building the capacity of teachers and school leaders to provide high-quality learning experiences for all students. Although the federal government, states, and districts all support educational improvement, none of these education support providers *alone* offer the solution to the dropout crisis; rather, all working in concert will bring about better student outcomes.

California's public education system requires both *more capacity* and *better coordination* to improve high school graduation rates.

The next critical steps facing policymakers are to examine what each education support organization does best, how to make their knowledge and expertise more readily available, and how to coordinate their resources.

Research Reports and Policy Briefs in Print

1. **THE ECONOMIC LOSSES FROM HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS IN CALIFORNIA** (*August 2007*)
2. **THE RETURN ON INVESTMENT FOR IMPROVING CALIFORNIA'S HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE** (*August 2007*)
3. **DOES STATE POLICY HELP OR HURT THE DROPOUT PROBLEM IN CALIFORNIA?** (*October 2007*)
4. **CAN COMBINING ACADEMIC AND CAREER-TECHNICAL EDUCATION IMPROVE HIGH SCHOOL OUTCOMES IN CALIFORNIA?** (*November 2007*)
5. **STUDENT AND SCHOOL PREDICTORS OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION IN CALIFORNIA** (*December 2007*)
6. **CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS THAT BEAT THE ODDS IN HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION** (*December 2007*)
7. **ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS TO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION: AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON** (*January 2008*)
8. **GIVING A STUDENT VOICE TO CALIFORNIA'S DROPOUT CRISIS** (*March 2008*)
9. **Building System Capacity for Improving High School Graduation Rates in California** (*April 2008*)

Forthcoming

10. Improving California's Data System for Measuring Dropout and Graduation Rates
11. Follow-up Study of Students Who Did Not Pass the California High School Exit Exam (CASHEE)
12. School Transitions, Adolescent Development, and the Potential for Reducing Dropout Rates
13. Investigating Middle School Determinants of High School Achievement and Graduation in Three California School Districts
14. A Profile of High School Completion in the Los Angeles Unified School District
15. Why Students Drop Out of School

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