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Governance Brief

Meeting California's Challenge:

Access, Opportunity, and Achievement: Key Ingredients for Student Success

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Introduction

An adequately funded education system is one that provides the resources to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared for college and career success. To achieve this, all students need robust educational opportunities and the necessary supports to take advantage of them. Unfortunately, significant opportunity gaps exist—principally between more affluent students and their peers from lower income families. These opportunity gaps are reflected in achievement gaps: only 31 percent of economically disadvantaged 4th graders scored proficient or advanced in English language arts/literacy, compared to 67 percent of their non-economically disadvantaged peers in the 2015-16 school year.¹

A recently released CSBA report, *Meeting California's Challenge: Access, Opportunity, and Achievement: Key Ingredients for Student Success*, describes an adequately-funded education system that ensures the educational opportunities that support student success. This brief provides a summary of the research-supported ingredients highlighted in the report and suggests key questions that board members can ask as they consider how to invest local resources in support of students.

It is our intention that this report, along with an earlier CSBA publication, *California's Challenge: Adequately Funding Education in the 21st Century*, make the case for the need to provide additional funding for California's education system. In addition, we hope that the information in the report provides evidence that helps county offices of education, districts, and schools make investments that are equity-focused and research-supported.

This brief will answer the following questions:

- » What are some research-proven strategies that could be provided for every student with adequate funding?
- » What are some of the opportunity gaps impacting economically disadvantaged students and students of color?
- » What are the questions that board members can ask to ensure that equitable investments are being made in their schools?

The Eight Ingredients and Equity

Multiple studies have shown that increases in school funding can result in improvements in student outcomes, particularly for low-income students.² In addition, how districts invest their resources is crucial. Districts should invest equitably—providing opportunities for students according to their needs—and effectively—dedicating resources to strategies for which there is evidence of a positive impact on students. To that end, the eight ingredients of an adequately funded education system described here and in the full report represent research-supported strategies to ensure that all students graduate college and career ready. They include:

1. A Rigorous, Well-Rounded, and Relevant Curriculum
2. Academic Support to Improve Achievement
3. Staff with the Skills, Competencies, and Knowledge to Promote Student Success

4. Early Support and Services
5. Education and Assistance for Families to Support and Guide Learning
6. Physical, Mental, and Environmental Health Supports
7. 21st-Century Infrastructure and Technology
8. Services for Students with Specific Needs

In order to close opportunity and achievement gaps, equity should be a key consideration in board decisions about how best to use local resources. An equity focus means holding all students to the same high expectations while providing the additional resources that some students might need in order to meet those expectations. Considering local and community factors is an important aspect of this equity lens. It will fall to the education system to provide opportunities to some students that others already have in their homes, communities, and schools.

1. A Rigorous, Well-Rounded, and Relevant Curriculum

All students need access to a rigorous, well-rounded, and relevant curriculum to graduate from high school, college and career ready. At a minimum, rigorous courses must meet A-G requirements in high school, while elementary and middle schools must prepare students for success in those courses. All students should have equal access to the Advanced Placement (AP), advanced math and science, and other rigorous courses that multiple studies have shown to provide academic and career benefits for students.³ Recent research indicates that STEM coursework can be particularly helpful for promoting both science and language learning for English learners.⁴

A focus on relevance is important, as many students drop out because they are unmotivated and uninterested in their coursework.⁵ Work-based learning opportunities can provide this relevance and have been associated with academic and career success past high school.⁶ A well-rounded education that is not focused solely on Math and English language arts benefits students as well. Multiple studies have shown improved outcomes for students who take a more expanded curriculum that includes arts and physical education.⁷

The Gaps in Opportunity

Students of color and economically disadvantaged students are less likely to attend schools that offer rigorous courses. Even when such courses are offered, these students are under-represented in advanced STEM and AP courses.⁸ They are also more likely to graduate from high school without meeting A-G requirements.⁹ This under-representation is due to multiple factors including few counselors who can advise students on courses and prerequisites, family experience that may not include knowledge of the courses necessary for college preparation, and lack of the necessary preparation in earlier grades for more advanced courses in high school.

2. Academic Support to Enable Achievement

It is not enough to offer students the opportunity to take rigorous and relevant coursework. Students also need a range of supports (e.g., counseling, expanded learning time, tutoring, mentoring, and personalized learning strategies, among others) to succeed in their coursework.

A variety of supports have been shown to have a positive impact on students' academic outcomes. These include, advisory programs, which provide students with academic and social support through a knowledgeable adult,¹⁰ personalized learning practices,¹¹ peer tutoring,¹² and expanded learning time through summer and after school (which can be particularly helpful for English learners).¹³ Enrichment activities such as field trips and other experiences also promote student success.

The Gaps in Opportunity

Compared to all other states, California has the highest number of students per teacher, the second highest number of students per counselor, and the third highest number of students to total staff.¹⁴ This means that access to an adult at school who can provide guidance and support for education decisions is lacking for many California students, a fact which disproportionately impacts students whose parents do not have experience that prepares them to provide this information and guidance. A gap also exists with regard to the other supports—such as enrichment activities—which are more available to wealthier students than their less economically advantaged peers.¹⁵

3. Staff with the Skills, Competencies, and Knowledge to Promote Student Success

Access to staff with the necessary qualifications and preparation to promote student learning is fundamental. Teachers are the most important in-school contributors to student achievement.¹⁶ The impact of quality teachers goes beyond academic achievement, with students of effective teachers more likely to attend college, attend higher-ranked colleges, earn higher salaries, and have lower rates of teen pregnancy.¹⁷

An expanded and more diverse teacher pool that mirrors the backgrounds of California's students is also important. Staff members who understand their students' backgrounds and view students' language, culture, and experience as an asset, are important contributors to a positive school environment and improved academic and non-academic outcomes.¹⁸ A successful strategy for closing opportunity and achievement gaps is to implement policies that place the best-prepared and experienced teachers with the highest-need students.

An effective education system also helps teachers build their capacity through professional development systems that provide them with time to collaborate, learn from each other, build instructional and cultural competencies, form connections with outside groups to bring relevance to their lessons, and receive mentorship and ongoing feedback to support improvement. Principals and other administrators also need preparation focused on building instructional leadership, creating a positive school climate, fostering student achievement, and supporting teachers and staff.

The Gaps in Opportunity

The students with the highest need are most often in classrooms with the least experienced and prepared teachers. Economically disadvantaged and students of color are more likely to attend schools with more teacher turnover, greater numbers of underprepared and underqualified teachers, and staff absenteeism.¹⁹

4. Early Support and Services

Providing support as early as possible, even before kindergarten can make a big difference in improving student achievement. The period before children enroll in kindergarten is one of dramatic brain growth and development. Therefore, appropriate and nurturing stimulation is essential to building the neural pathways, social skills, and self-confidence that will lead to future academic success.

Investing in early childhood education is one of the most cost-effective uses of resources, adding up to \$8 in savings for every \$1 invested.²⁰ These investments can address knowledge gaps early and prevent students from getting progressively further behind as they move through the grade levels.²¹ Children who attend high-quality preschool, pre-kindergarten, or transitional kindergarten programs develop greater language, literacy, mathematical, and social skills.²² These programs can also contribute to improved life outcomes, including a lower likelihood of becoming pregnant as a teen²³ or committing a crime²⁴ and a greater likelihood of graduating from high school,²⁵ reaching higher levels of educational attainment, and earning greater incomes.²⁶

The Gaps in Opportunity

By age three, children from high-income families have double the vocabulary of same-age children from low-income families.²⁷ Moreover, only two in five California students have access to quality early education programs,²⁸ with low-income families less likely to attend preschools that meet the state criteria for high quality.²⁹

5. Education and Assistance for Families to Support and Guide Learning

Parents are students' first and most important teachers. Therefore, the education system can improve student outcomes by helping parents and guardians to support their children's education at home, guide them through grade level and other transitions, and navigate important decisions (such as the college admissions process and career choices). Given California's diversity, family engagement can be more successful when staff understand the backgrounds of their students' families, including culture, socio-economic status, language status, and other factors. It is also important that parents and guardians have the chance to provide meaningful input into school decisions and to participate in learning opportunities, such as civics, leadership, English language, and GED courses.

Initiatives that support parent and guardian engagement have been shown to improve student outcomes.³⁰ These efforts are crucial because multiple studies indicate that students with parents who are engaged in their lives and in school are less likely to drop out of school³¹ and have higher academic outcomes.³²

The Gaps in Opportunity

All parents and guardians care about their children's education. Nonetheless, parents with extensive education understand the system better, know what needs to be done in preparation for college, and more often have professional jobs that allow them the time to visit and participate in school activities as well as the financial resources to invest in trips, learning experiences, and supports such as tutoring. All of this contributes to a positive association between student achievement and parents' level of education.³³ Gaps are also associated with income status (which is itself strongly associated with education level), neighborhood characteristics, and a whole range of opportunities that come with greater education and income.

6. Physical, Mental, and Environmental Health Supports

If children are hungry, traumatized, or in pain, they will not be able to learn, and are more often absent from school. Furthermore, if they cannot regulate their emotions, manage challenges productively, or cooperate with their peers and teachers, they will have difficulty benefitting from instruction. A safe and healthy school environment is also essential for learning. Within that environment, students need opportunities for physical activity and encouragement of healthy lifestyle habits.

Daily physical activity has been shown to improve students' classroom behavior and ability to focus on schoolwork.³⁴ Multiple studies have also shown a negative impact on academic achievement of trauma and bullying³⁵ as well as an unfortunate prevalence of bullying and stress in schools,³⁶ particularly for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students.³⁷ A number of studies have also highlighted that building students' social-emotional (SEL) skills has a positive effect on academic achievement.³⁸ One such study found a significant association between SEL skill development in kindergarten and positive outcomes years later in education, employment, criminal activity, substance use, and mental health.³⁹

The Gaps in Opportunity

Nearly one in three 10-17 year olds in California is overweight or obese,⁴⁰ contributing to greater absenteeism among other problems.⁴¹ Moreover, nearly two thirds of California students do not meet health and fitness standards in fifth, seventh, and ninth grades.⁴² Physical and mental health challenges are particularly prevalent among economically disadvantaged students, who are more often students of color. Children in poverty are more likely to suffer from asthma, heart conditions, hearing problems, digestive disorders, and elevated levels of lead in the blood.⁴³ These children are also more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and stress, while at the same time having lower levels of health insurance coverage and more limited access to quality health services to address these issues.⁴⁴

7. Schools with 21st Century Infrastructure and Technology

All students should have access to schools with a 21st century infrastructure, including classrooms, lab spaces, fields, gardens, and food preparation facilities. These facilities are essential to students' learning as well as to their health and safety. State of the art technology platforms are also critical to 21st century schools—students and families should have access to the internet in and around school. A technology platform should also include a robust data infrastructure with quality hardware, software, and trained staff to support the analysis and storage of data, and deployment of high-quality assessments and pedagogy for appropriate use of technology. Finally, when schools are not close enough for easy access, transportation options should be provided.

According to a survey by the United States Department of Education, over half of America's public school facilities need to be repaired, renovated, or modernized.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the implementation of the California State Standards, including the implementation of the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) and continued expansion of Career and Technical Education Programs, Career Academies, Career Pathways, Linked Learning, and other innovative approaches, will require quality lab spaces and equipment, beyond the basics covered in the report.

The Gaps in Opportunity

A higher percentage of public schools in poor areas are in need of repair than those in wealthier places.⁴⁶ There is also more limited access to the internet⁴⁷ and teachers report more obstacles to using technology in low-income areas.⁴⁸ Another important infrastructure issue that impacts the health of students in and outside of school is access to a healthy water supply. While adequate water consumption has been associated with a number of health benefits and stronger student achievement,⁴⁹ aging lead water pipes are more common in the lowest-income neighborhoods or cities.⁵⁰

8. Services for Students with Specific Needs

While every ingredient in this report is a critical component of serving all student groups, educators need to differentiate instruction and services in order to meet the specific needs of all students. Student groups—such as English learners, students identified for special education services, foster youth, homeless students, and others—need targeted support if we are to truly close opportunity gaps. For example, in the case of English learners and students identified for special education services, the district and school procedures for identification should result in proper placement of students in learning environments that can best meet their needs. Support systems should also meet the needs of foster youth, students experiencing homelessness, and others. Recruiting, training, and supporting staff who can identify students' needs and understand the most appropriate assessment and instructional strategies for specific student groups is highly important.

Despite the gaps and challenges, there is sufficient evidence that students with specific needs can achieve on par with their peers when the services they need are in place. For example:

- » English learners in programs that leverage their home language, provide rigorous courses, and integrate them into the school culture, show greater academic achievement than their peers in other programs.⁵¹
- » Special education students with early supports and interventions improve their school outcomes and such supports can reduce the number of students identified with learning disabilities.⁵²
- » Foster youth who are provided with social supports that improve their confidence and allow them to participate in community activities, have greater social and academic success.⁵³

Conclusion

A public education system that provides free, quality, and appropriate schooling to all students is essential to a strong democratic society. This system should have the necessary resources to ensure that all students can succeed and that these resources are distributed equitably in order to provide meaningful opportunity for all students.

The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) made important changes in support of education including an explicit focus on equity and greater flexibility for decision-making at the local level. However, LCFF by itself does not provide more funding for California schools. In addition, districts are facing mounting fixed costs, such as school district pension obligations. This gap in funding emphasizes the urgent need to invest in our most precious resource—the young people who represent our future. Until that fundamental deficit is addressed, many students and their families will not have access to the opportunities described in this brief, and closing achievement and opportunity gaps will be an uphill battle.

CSBA will continue to advocate for adequate funding that supports these opportunities. CSBA will also continue to provide information that supports making the best use of the resources available. Board members should consider the eight key ingredients as areas of potential investment. For a more detailed description of each ingredient, research, and examples of programs across the state, reference the full report, [Meeting California's Challenge: Access, Opportunity, and Achievement: Key Ingredients for Student Success](#).

Questions for Board Members

Board members can ask the following questions when considering investments that help to close opportunity and achievement gaps:

1. Do we have a common definition of student success in the district or county office of education? If we do, how many of our students are successful?
2. What are the highest areas of need? How do we know that these are the areas of need?
3. Which resources are available in the community that are providing opportunities for students? Are there gaps in the availability of opportunities to some students?
4. Which district or county office of education programs have been producing the greatest academic and non-academic outcomes for students? How can these existing programs be expanded or supported further?
5. Are we making investments equitably? Are we using resources in a way that closes opportunity gaps?

Endnotes

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