

**Assembly Subcommittee 3 on Education Finance and
Assembly Education Committee**

**Joint Informational Hearing: Coherence in Education Finance and Planning
February 25, 2026, 1:30 pm,
1021 O Street, Room 1100**

**Linda Darling-Hammond
President, State Board of Education**

Good afternoon. My name is Linda Darling-Hammond. I am here today in my role as the President of the State Board of Education. I am also Founding President and Chief Knowledge Officer of the Learning Policy Institute and Professor Emeritus at Stanford University.

Before I begin my remarks, I'd like to thank Assemblymember David Alvarez, Chair of the Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 3 on Education Finance and Assemblymember Al Muratsuchi, Chair of the Assembly Education Committee, as well as the members of both committees for inviting me to participate in today's discussion on achieving coherence within TK-12 education.

This is an important dialogue that we must all continue to engage as we look to modernize California's education system and support its success at this critical moment in history. This includes examining how we can ensure that state and local resources and objectives are aligned in ways that allow schools to serve students most effectively and efficiently, given current needs and demands.

The current system in California was built piece by piece over the last 100 years – creating a geological dig of policies and governance structures with intersecting, and sometimes competing, roles and responsibilities. While this system is informed by many shared aspirations, it was not constructed to provide a coherent foundation for the work that schools must do today.

Our schools are currently navigating a rapidly changing economy and society, with continuous technological changes, within an outdated factory model approach to education that is contributing to growing incoherence.

Furthermore, meeting the pressing needs in recent years, from the pandemic and its aftermath to the effects of rapid climate change and immigration raids – to the growing numbers of students who are low-income, experiencing homelessness, and those with disabilities -- means that we have added many new programs and other initiatives to meet those needs. However, these have landed on top of other components in ways that schools sometimes feel produce redundancies, extensive reporting requirements, and unnecessary restrictions on how they use funding.

Districts talk about the Plan-demic when they refer to the many well-meaning initiatives launched to address the needs that arose during the pandemic. The programs are appreciated but the often duplicative and overlapping reporting and auditing requirements for each one, when cumulative, have been overwhelming, especially for smaller districts. These requirements cause districts to have to hire administrative and fiscal managers of the many different streams of money that must be tracked and rules that must be followed, instead of teachers and other staff who directly support students.

The California School Boards Association produced a recent report called Drowning in Documentation that itemized 103 annual reports and data submissions required of LEAs for federal and state programs.¹

The state has an important role in bringing coherence to its support for schools so that schools can be maximally effective.

There are many underlying sources of systemic instability and incoherence that we have inherited and have to contend with:

- 1) **Multiple state and federal initiatives addressing similar goals** that have piled up at different points in time with different application, reporting, implementation, and auditing requirements. A case in point is the bevy of programs districts now juggle for career and technical education with application processes, different timelines, educational and credentialing requirements, and funding rules, creating incoherence and inefficiencies.
- 2) **A fragmented system of governance and implementation** - including the State Board of Education, California Department of Education, California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, 58 county offices of education and a higher education system that includes the California Community Colleges, California State University system and University of California system as individual, independent segments -- which together creates rules and processes without coordination that are not always aligned. Districts can be buffeted by regulations from different sectors that are inconsistent and create the need for many workarounds. Furthermore, a lack of alignment of coursework pathways leading to college and careers create unnecessary costs and barriers to students' attainment of credentials and degrees.

¹ <https://www.csba.org/-/media/CSBA/Files/GovernanceResources/GovernanceBriefs/LEA-Reporting-Requirements-WEB.ashx?la=en&rev=03523f19990a459baf0d4593abeb21b2>. The California Department of Education's required report to the legislature about reporting requirements and their recommendations about what to do about them are here: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/re/lr/ga/salegreport2025.asp>

- 3) **Unstable state revenues**, which can lead to large annual fluctuations in available resources, creating the need for one-time funding strategies that produce categorical programs which then often come and go, adding to the incoherence of the system.
- 4) **Year-by-year state budgeting with school budgets not confirmed until July**. This creates uncertainty leading to incoherence when districts must adopt plans much earlier for the following school years on multi-year cycles and must publish annual March 15th layoff notifications that may or may not materialize once budgets are known. This contributes to the stress and turnover of our educators and leads to disruptions in instructional continuity and coherence.
- 5) **A funding system based on Average Daily Attendance (ADA)**, which is increasingly unpredictable at a time when growing impacts of climate events and immigration raids disrupt both students' abilities to get to school and the attendance dollars on which districts rely to maintain coherent plans and practices.

California is one of only 5 states that continues to use ADA instead of Average Daily Membership (ADM) to fund schools. It is also a state that has been particularly vulnerable to climate events including storms (now also featuring hurricanes and tornados), fires, extreme heat, and floods, which are increasing with each passing year. In a recent year in which State Board staff maintained an informal count, there were more than 1300 events across the state that prevented students from getting to or being in school.

The Eaton and Palisades wildfires that began in early January 2025 in the Los Angeles area offer just one sobering example of recent large-scale climate-related school closures in California. These wildfires resulted in lost instructional time and disruptions for approximately 700,000 students¹ across over 1,000 schools in Los Angeles, Ventura, San Bernardino, and San Diego Counties.² Schools in several of these LEAs were directly impacted by fires and others either closed or were inaccessible to large numbers of students due to poor air quality, power outages, or road closures.³ Though schools in some LEAs reopened several days after the fires began, they still had large impacts on attendance as conditions impacted families in many other ways.⁴ These wildfires displaced more than 10,000 of Palisades' students, and among the 1,300 employees living in evacuation zones, approximately 300 lost their homes.⁵ Students and families left to live with relatives all across the country, so enrollment impacts were wide-ranging and longstanding. While the state attempts to hold districts harmless in extreme circumstances like these, there are many others that are not eligible for existing waivers.

In addition, in this past year, immigration raids significantly undermined attendance in many school districts. For example, a [Stanford University study](#) found that in five Central Valley districts, 2025 raids led to a 22% increase in absenteeism compared to the same period in previous years, resulting in an estimated 81,000 lost school days.

While options for independent study and attendance recovery can partially mitigate the impacts of some of this lost instructional time, they do not address the underlying challenge that districts have to budget and staff classrooms based on enrollments, but their reimbursements rely on increasingly unpredictable attendance-impacting events.

Together, these factors produce an extraordinarily unstable state school system that is buffeted by many internal and external forces – one that is likely to grow increasingly unstable, both fiscally and educationally, making thoughtful and coherent planning and implementation ever more difficult.

You have heard a lot about the problems. The question is what can we do about them? Some challenges will ultimately require fundamental shifts in our state revenue and school funding systems to create stability and reliability that can support more coherence and less volatility. Other challenges can be addressed, at least in part, by better coordination within and between the branches of government and some thoughtful policy overhauls.

The Governor’s office and State Board, in concert with the legislature, have taken and are taking up several strategies that aim to support greater coherence and create more stability for school improvement. Among the strategies are:

- 1) **More intentional use of one-time funding**, when is it necessary, to create programs that have greater odds of becoming successfully integrated into district work. For example, initiatives like teacher residencies, Golden State Pathways grants and community schools have had long spending tails of 7-10 years, allowing programs to become more firmly planted and sustainable. Ensuring effective and timely evaluations of these programs to see what is working would support thoughtful consideration of their integration and continuation. The State has also provided significant one-time discretionary funding to allow LEAs to fund local priorities.
- 2) **Development of local capacity for coherence around the goal of whole child education.** California’s Community Schools Partnership Program currently enables schools to bring coherence to a fragmented collection of federal and state programs. CCSPP is the nation’s largest investment in dismantling barriers to learning that contribute to inequitable student outcomes. Since the initial \$4.1 billion state investment in community schools was made in 2021, nearly 2,500 schools serving hundreds of thousands of the highest needs students in the state have learned how to partner with other education, local government, and community-based organizations to provide integrated health, mental health, and social services alongside high-quality, supportive instruction with a strong focus on community, family, and student engagement. Data from the first cohort of community schools shows that, compared to other schools serving similar students, those that received community school grants saw significantly reduced suspensions and chronic absenteeism and sharply increased achievement in math and English language arts, with the largest gains among historically underserved students, including black students and English learners. Building on this evidence of success, the Governor has

proposed ongoing funding in this year's budget for an expanded group of community schools. To allow even greater leverage in meeting student needs, the state could consider allowing those that are meeting the goals of the program to be enabled to blend and braid their funds even more seamlessly with fewer restrictive spending and audit requirements.

- 3) **Alignment of applications and funding systems for related programs.** For example, last year the legislature authorized the design of an integrated approach to teacher support programs including teacher residencies and student teaching stipends, through a grants management system being designed by Kern County Superintendent of Schools in partnership with the Teacher Credentialing Commission. More of this could be undertaken and is currently under consideration by the Department of Education.⁶
- 4) **Greater coordination across currently disconnected educational sectors.** A new coordinating council, the California Education Interagency Council, has just been established to better align the efforts of the TK-12 system, the higher education system, and the workforce development system, evaluating state needs and evaluating how to including alignment of coursework for career pathways.
- 5) **Rationalization of our accountability system and statewide system of support.** Over time, elements have been added to the state accountability system that create incoherence among its growing number of requirements as well as its alignment with federal requirements. The State Board has been tasked with rethinking the current system of Differentiated Assistance to address its misalignment with other elements of the state system of support and to allow it to become a stronger tool for school improvement. The Governor's budget proposes extending differentiated assistance to a three-year support cycle, which would align its timing with the LCAP, and allocating funds to County offices in a manner that incentivizes and enables greater access to more systemic universal supports for districts. The State Board's work will leverage greater coherence by more effectively targeting support to those with the greatest needs.

There are other things we can do to build and refine a more coherent system:

- 6) **Implement the Governor's governance proposal,** which will provide a more streamlined and coherent education system by unifying the Department of Education and the State Board of Education as most states do. The proposal recognizes the need for a more cohesive and aligned public education system from TK through college and redefines the role of the State Superintendent by adding voting authorities at all levels of public education governance in California.
- 7) **Develop a North Star to guide policy.** With widespread public involvement, the State Board is working to adopt a Portrait of a Learner and a Graduate later this year, which will include an agreed upon set of aspirations for what every learner should know and be able to do when they leave school. This approach has been critical in many states and districts as a lens to evaluate what students need to learn and experience to

succeed in today's rapidly changing society. A statewide Portrait will serve as a compass to guide the SBE's decision making and policy work regarding curriculum, instruction, assessment, and accountability, bringing more coherence across the board's work.

- 8) **Create more efficient processes for grant management** as CDE is currently seeking to do. This might include an on-line unified application and reporting process for many related programs and a process for ensuring that there is more expedited decision making about funding, reporting, and auditing requirements so districts don't have to backtrack when the guidance comes out a year or 2 later. This depends in part on ensuring that the department is properly staffed and organized so that reasonable timelines for launching programs can be established that meet the needs of LEAs and move resources efficiently to the field when they can be best used.

- 9) **Consciously plan for integration in program design and regulation.** Create a process by which the Legislature, SBE, and CDE could engage in more planful coordination of how new programs and their reporting and auditing requirements might be enabled to fit with existing programs. This process should include a scan of what should be eliminated or folded in from past policies, rather than just layering on, and should recognize the need for flexibility in implementing policies in widely diverse contexts across the state.

- 10) **Continue to remove unnecessary barriers to innovation** that hold schools back from responding effectively to current needs and create incoherence in the student learning process. The factory model school design that we inherited from a century ago was not constructed to enable strong relationships, deeper learning, or equity. Nor was it designed to develop the kinds of durable skills and competencies students need to be successful today. Many of our most successful schools have had to create workarounds to current requirements to create more engaging and effective learning environments. We continue to learn from innovative districts through the Secondary School Redesign Pilots funded in last year's budget regarding policy barriers that need to be addressed, such as seat time and credentialing requirements that reduce opportunities for experiential and interdisciplinary learning. We will use this learning to think with the legislature about the policy structures needed for 21st century schools.

Our work as education leaders requires that we adopt a continuous improvement approach to our education system and recognize that it requires continuous updating to ensure that it remains coherent, effective, and responsive to the changing needs of our students and our society. The state has made meaningful progress in advancing transformative initiatives in recent years that move our schools forward, but more work remains to create the aligned, integrated system we need to support their work.

Thank you, and I look forward to continuing this work and partnering with the Legislature to move these efforts forward.

Endnotes

¹ Barajas, J. (2025, January 14). Gov. Newsom offers schools, students flexibility in wake of LA fires. *LAist*. <https://laist.com/news/education/gavin-newsom-students-schools-executive-order-palisades-eaton-fires>;

² EdTrust and UndauntedK12. (2025). *The impacts of the Los Angeles wildfires on students: Lessons for schools nationwide*. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Uq9SE6Jc3sWYAMWQAgcZ_osgEGWYFxbx/view

³ EdCal. (2025, January 27). *Catastrophic fires disrupt school for half a million students*. <https://edcal.acsa.org/catastrophic-fires-disrupt-school-for-half-a-million-students>;

⁴ EdCal. (2025, January 27). *Catastrophic fires disrupt school for half a million students*. <https://edcal.acsa.org/catastrophic-fires-disrupt-school-for-half-a-million-students>;

⁵ Seshadri, M. (2025, January 22). *The day I lost my house: School communities reel from Eaton-Palisades fires*. *EdSource*. <https://edsources.org/2025/the-day-i-lost-my-house-school-communities-reel-from-eaton-palisades-fires/725439>

⁶ The California Department of Education's required report to the legislature about reporting requirements and their recommendations about what to do about them are here: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/re/lr/ga/salegreport2025.asp>