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**Coign of Vantage and Action: Considering California's  
Local Accountability and School Finance Plans for English  
Learners**

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**Abstract:** Local control has been a bedrock principle of public schooling in America since its inception. In 2013, the California Legislature codified a new local accountability approach for school finance. An important component of the new California Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) approach is a focus on English learners (ELs). The law mandates that every school district produce a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) to engage the local community in defining outcomes and determining funding for ELs. Based on an exploratory analysis of a representative sample of LCAPs, we show that, although California's new approach offered an opportunity to support locally-defined priorities and alternatives to top-down accountability, few if any districts had yet taken full advantage

of the opportunity. That is, the school districts in our sample had not yet engaged with the local community to facilitate significant changes to accountability or redistribution of funding and resources to support educational equity for ELs.

**Keywords:** Local control accountability, English learners, school finance, LCAP, LCFF

### **“Coign of Vantage” y acción: Considerando la responsabilidad local de California y los planes de financiamiento escolar para los estudiantes de inglés**

**Resumen:** El control local ha sido un principio fundamental de la educación pública en América desde su creación. En 2013, la Legislatura de California codificó un nuevo enfoque de responsabilidad local para las finanzas escolares. Un componente importante del nuevo enfoque de California Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) es un enfoque en los estudiantes de inglés (ELs). La ley exige que cada distrito escolar produzca un Plan de Responsabilidad de Control Local (LCAP) para involucrar a la comunidad local en la definición de resultados y la determinación de fondos para ELs. Basado en un análisis exploratorio de una muestra representativa de LCAPs, mostramos que, aunque el nuevo enfoque de California ofreció una oportunidad para apoyar las prioridades definidas localmente y las alternativas a la responsabilidad de arriba a abajo, pocos o ninguno de los distritos habían aprovechado la oportunidad. Es decir, los distritos escolares de nuestra muestra aún no se habían comprometido con la comunidad local para facilitar cambios significativos en la rendición de cuentas o la redistribución de fondos y recursos para apoyar la equidad educativa para los EL. **Palabras-clave:** Responsabilidad de control local, Estudiantes de inglés, Finanzas escolares, LCAP, LCFF

### **“Coign of Vantage” e ação: Considerando a responsabilidade local e planos de financiamento de escola da Califórnia para estudantes de inglês**

**Resumo:** O controle local tem sido um princípio fundamental da educação pública na América desde a sua criação. Em 2013, a Califórnia Legislativo codificada uma nova abordagem à responsabilidade local para as finanças da escola. Um componente importante da nova abordagem local fórmula de financiamento Controle Califórnia (LCFF) é um foco em estudantes de inglês (ELS). A lei exige que cada distrito escolar para produzir um Accountability Plano de Controle Local (LCAP) para envolver a comunidade local na definição de resultados e determinação de fundos para ELs. Com base em uma análise exploratória de uma amostra representativa de LCAPs, mostramos que, embora a nova abordagem da Califórnia ofereceu uma oportunidade para apoiar as prioridades definidas localmente e alternativas a responsabilidade de cima para baixo, poucos ou nenhum dos distritos tinha tomado a oportunidade. Ou seja, os distritos escolares em nossa amostra ainda não tinha sido comprometida com a comunidade local para fazer mudanças significativas na prestação de contas ou redistribuição de fundos e recursos para apoiar a equidade educacional para ELs.

**Palavras-chave:** Responsabilidade do controle local, English Learners, Finanças escola, LCAP, LCFF

## Introduction

Local control has been a bedrock principle of public schooling in America since its inception (Howe & Meens, 2012). Despite a long history of local control, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 sent us in the opposite direction of this traditional notion, with an intense focus on top-down goal setting and measurement via federally required high-stakes testing and accountability (Peterson & West, 2003; Vasquez Heilig & Darling-Hammond 2008). This focus on high-stakes testing and accountability continues to be central in the newly passed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), but there does appear to be some opportunity to leverage the recent federal law for more meaningful stakeholder engagement and democratize decision-making towards a more comprehensive accountability approach (Policy Analysis for California Education and The Opportunity Institute, 2016). Moving forward, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs), California's bottom-up approach to accountability and school finance, has the potential to address the historical inequities that have existed in the US education system including low-quality pedagogy, low levels of teacher quality, and inequitable education funding present in urban schools (McNeil, 2000; Vasquez Heilig, 2011; Vasquez Heilig, Williams, & Jez, 2010).

Challenges to meeting the demands of the top-down paradigm of accountability have been particularly acute in communities serving large numbers of English learners (ELs), where districts and schools are held accountable for improving ELs' academic achievement on high-stakes exams as well as their progress toward English language proficiency (Crawford, 2004; Vasquez Heilig, 2011). Indeed, ELs comprise a large and growing sector of students who are segregated in schools plagued by failing academics, weak performance on standardized exams, low graduation rates, and high dropout rates (Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003; Vasquez Heilig & Holme, 2013). These trends are not surprising in the context of the United States' long history of legislative, executive, and judicial enactments that have codified unequal provision of resources for schools serving ELs (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2010). For example, the long-standing practice of relying on property tax revenue for school funding has meant that state and local funding systems tend to allocate fewer resources to schools that serve high-need populations like low-income students and English learners, and the extra federal funding schools receive under Title I and Title III of the ESEA do not adequately make up the difference (Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2014; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

Although NCLB accountability mandates did not explicitly incorporate local input, local and community-based input in accountability processes (Horsford & Vasquez Heilig, 2014), ESSA potentially allows flexibility for community-based input to include measures beyond standardized-testing achievement in state and local accountability systems, such as attainment and other indicators of educational opportunity. This type of bottom-up accountability offers several advantages over purely top-down approaches (Fullan, 1994). First, it redirects school and district attention from government mandates to community expectations and needs (Pisciotta, 2001). Importantly, it can shift attention to distinctly local priorities, recognizing, for example, that low-income, urban Oakland, California, is distinct and has different interests and needs than wealthy, suburban Elk Grove, California. Such approaches allow communities to determine both short-term and long-term community-based goals, to democratically develop a set of measures of educational quality that align with these goals, and to determine how funding and resources will be allocated to support them (Vasquez Heilig, Khalifa, & Tillman, 2013). By including a broader set of stakeholders in decision making processes, there is potential to shift what scholars have referred to as the *zone of mediation* within which local educational policies are developed (Renee, Welner, & Oakes, 2010). As we explain in more detail below, expanding the boundaries within which school

district policy is constructed can facilitate the adoption of more equity-oriented approaches to serving the local student population (Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen, 2005).

Second, top-down accountability requires objective, quantitative goals that facilitate distal evaluation of schools. Hence under federal policy schools either meet, or fail to meet, a fixed standard of Adequate Yearly Progress. In California, schools also receive a single API (Academic Performance Index) score. Such scores, while facilitating measurement, are, of necessity, too simplistic, fail to consider local context, and fail to recognize the complex environment in which schools are nested. More subjective outcomes, while important, are not easily quantifiable and are, therefore, simply not feasible under top-down approaches. Bottom-up accountability makes it possible to incorporate subjective goals (Pisciotta, 2001), and thus could enable local communities to hold schools accountable along multiple measures in addition to, or instead of, standardized high-stakes testing.

Top-down accountability is fundamentally based on governmental priorities, simplistic and inflexible measures and targets. Without a bottom-up component, such policies will prove ineffectual. As Fullan (1991) pointed out, “Governments can’t mandate what matters, because what matters is *local* [emphasis added] motivation, skill, know-how and commitment” (p. 8). Given the relative failure of top-down policies in supporting achievement and educational opportunity or allocating resources and funding in an equitable manner, especially for English learners, the purpose of this paper is to explore if and how emerging bottom-up accountability and funding approaches address the needs of California’s EL population. We selected California as the focus of our research because the state recently adopted a local accountability law requiring school districts to incorporate community input as they develop plans for accountability and funding, an approach hailed as a seismic shift to the local level in the way state funding and accountability operate (California Department of Education, 2014).

Our paper explores whether local accountability in California is a viable policy alternative to completely top-down conceptions of accountability and high-stakes testing—a coign of vantage for EL success. The study was guided by the following research questions:

How do local accountability plans describe community involvement in developing and including locally-identified priorities for ELs?

Are the amounts of actions and new expenditures explicitly directed at ELs?

How are student outcomes measured for ELs?

The purpose of our study was to determine the extent to which the new Local Accountability reform has served to augment support for ELs in the state of California. We find that while the Local Accountability policy in California offered an opportunity to support locally-defined priorities and alternatives to top-down accountability, few districts demonstrated in their initial local accountability plans that they had engaged with the local community in ways that facilitated significant changes to accountability or redistribution of funding and resources to support educational equity for ELs.

We begin by describing the birth of top-down accountability and outlining California’s new bottom-up approach to accountability and school finance. Our zone of mediation framework is presented next, and then the study’s methods, which included a systematic document analysis that drew upon a critical discourse framework. Turning to findings, we first discuss the locally-identified priorities for ELs in the Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) and then describe actions and expenditures specifically directed at ELs. We complete the findings with a discussion about the measurement of student outcomes associated with ELs in the LCAPs. Finally, we conclude the paper with the implications of our findings for both policy and practice.

## Birth of Top-Down Accountability

In 1993, Texas-style top-down accountability was enacted through Texas Senate Bill 7, the incipient statute that codified the state's public school test-based accountability system that rated school districts and evaluated campuses. In the years following, publicly-reported achievement gains across grade levels, coupled with increases in high school graduation rates and decreases in dropout rates in the state, brought nationwide acclaim to the Texas accountability "miracle" (Haney, 2000). Due to its purported statewide success and especially in urban areas such as Houston and Dallas, Texas-style school reform was brought to Washington, DC. An alliance between Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy and Republican President George W. Bush, a former Texas governor, facilitated the passage of NCLB, which codified a wide-ranging top-down federal role in education largely through test-based accountability policy.

NCLB replicated the Texas model of top-down accountability by injecting sanctions tied to testing into national education policy, ushering in an era where states and local public school districts are required to build accountability formulas based on high-stakes assessments. The centerpiece of NCLB required that schools and districts meet a federally-established Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goal as determined by high-stakes assessment results. AYP provisions established yearly minimum levels of improvement that schools and districts must attain for all demographic subgroups (e.g., all racial/ethnic groups, ELs, students receiving special education services), with the goal that all students in the United States would be rated as proficient by 2014. As outlined in the law, schools and districts that failed at the yearly and then penultimate goal of full proficiency would face federal sanctions and penalties.

A burgeoning body of research has made clear that top-down high-stakes testing and accountability failed to deliver on their promise to improve urban education (Reardon, Greenberg, Kalogrides, Shores, & Valentino, 2012). In a recent review of the literature, Vasquez Heilig and Nichols (2013) found limited improvement in student outcomes after a decade of national high-stakes testing and accountability (and almost two decades in Texas). And these small improvements can be attributed at least in part to the ways in which schools (and entire districts) have, in desperation, sought to manipulate the accountability system by excluding low-scoring students of color and special populations (e.g., ELs) from testing through the use of exemptions and other gaming actions, resulting in the appearance of overall increased educational achievement (Vasquez Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). It is also pertinent to point out that the high stakes tests mandated by NCLB have not been valid forms of assessment for ELs and accommodations have not (except linguistic modifications) increased test validity for ELs (Abedi & Sato, 2007). Additionally, because top-down accountability policies have focused on outputs (primarily test scores), policymakers have done little to attend to improving inputs such as EL teacher preparation and professional development (Vasquez Heilig, Lopez, & Torre, 2014). These issues have led to persisting high rates of grade retention as well as dropout and depressed high school completion for ELs (Vasquez Heilig & Nichols, 2013).

Considering the failure of top-down accountability policies to close achievement and opportunity gaps (Reardon et al., 2012), it is important to identify and explore alternatives, such as the efficacy of community-based educational reform efforts designed to improve EL achievement and school success (Horsford & Vasquez Heilig, 2014). In discussions surrounding community-based reform efforts, however, a question remains as to whether these approaches will be community-based and efficacious in ways that support equity among student groups (Vasquez Heilig, Lopez, & Torre, 2014). As a result, we seek to extend the research literature on community-based education reform through our examination of community-engaged, locally-based accountability policies.

## **Bottom-Up Accountability in California**

In his 2013 State of the State address, California Governor Jerry Brown supported a new direction for accountability and school finance that was more focused on local control. He called for new educational policy approaches in California to consider the principle of Subsidiarity.

Governor Brown defined Subsidiarity as,

The idea that a central authority should only perform those tasks which cannot be performed at a more immediate or local level. In other words, higher or more remote levels of government, like the state, should render assistance to local school districts, but always respect their primary jurisdiction and the dignity and freedom of teachers and students. (Brown, 2013)

Governor Brown pressed for Subsidiarity by supporting Local Accountability, a new community-based approach that created a Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) process for school finance to increase flexibility, accountability, and input from the local level so that communities would have new input on student outcomes and strategic funding.

The Local Accountability reform sought to involve superintendents, school boards, school staff, parents, students, and other community stakeholders at the local level by requiring school districts to develop Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs). LCAPs must be based on short-term and long-term goals set relative to local priorities, and they must define outcomes and determine funding for ELs, students of low socioeconomic status, and foster children. Following Governor Brown's State of the State speech, the California Legislature codified the new local accountability approach for school finance, and Chapter 47, Statutes of 2013 (AB 97 Committee on Budget) was enacted as part of the 2013-2014 budget package. This statute made major changes both to the way the state of California allocates funding to school districts and the way the state supports and intervenes in underperforming districts (Affeldt, 2015; Menefee-Libey & Kerchner, 2015; Vasquez Heilig, Ward, Weisman, & Cole, 2014).

The San Jose Unified School District's LCAP succinctly described the educational policy and school finance context of the LCFF and LCAPs.

San Jose Unified, like all school districts throughout California, was forced to weather the most drastic cuts to public education funding in the state's history beginning with the 2008-2009 fiscal year. With funding at only 80% of what SJUSD should have received, it was necessary for the district to reduce expenses wherever and whenever possible. Prudent stewardship allowed the district to successfully navigate these unprecedented cuts and, while the reductions were kept away from the classroom to the greatest extent possible, educational experiences for students were negatively impacted throughout California as a result of the state's fiscal crisis.

Due to the passage of California Proposition 30 in November of 2012 and the rebounding state economy, the cuts ended with the 2013-2014 fiscal year and per pupil revenues to the district are now increasing. While revenues have changed dramatically in a short period of time, California remains at the bottom of funding per pupil nationally, which necessitates that the prudent stewardship of the district's resources not change. Rather than simply restoring what was cut, strategic investments are being made in services to students and in the district's workforce to maximize the educational experiences for students... (p. 1)

An important component of the new LCFF is a focus on English learners (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). To address long-standing achievement gaps that have persisted for ELs both in the state

and across the United States (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Vasquez Heilig, 2012), the new California law mandates that every school district, drawing on mandated local community meetings and input (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014), produce an LCAP that outlines the specific strategies and resources it will use to address ELs' language and learning needs. This re-envisioning of accountability and school finance is particularly important for ELs because districts have historically struggled with intradistrict reallocation of resources that would support this student population (Jimenez-Castellanos & Rodriguez, 2009).

Prior to the new school finance law, districts received substantial categorical Economic Impact Aid (EIA), based on the number of students designated as Limited English Proficient, which was strictly allotted to provide supplemental services to ELs. Under the new Local Accountability reform, districts continue to receive additional funding for ELs as part of a supplemental grant equal to 20% of the adjusted base grant. Concentration grants are also available if students targeted by the LCFF exceed 55% of a local education agency's (LEA) enrollment. However, the EL funds are now included as part of a larger block of funding instead of specifically targeted (those classified as ELs, eligible to receive a free or reduced-price meal, foster youth) by the state.

Some advocates have raised concerns that a local approach opens the window for districts to divert funds away from EL students to other priorities and have noted that it is difficult to determine if EL services are increased or improved (Hahnel, 2014; Koppich, Humphrey & Marsh, 2015; Olsen, Armas & Lavadenz, 2016; Wolf & Sands, 2016). Given the history of neglecting instruction for English learners (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010), this is not a trivial concern. On the other hand, the new bottom-up approach, which requires expanded community input and involvement, opens up new avenues for the local community to demand that ELs are provided with high quality, innovative instructional programs and that funding be allocated to support them (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014).

## Theoretical Framework

California's local accountability policy represents a shift in the dominant policy paradigm that has existed nationwide since Texas' approach to high-stakes testing and accountability was incorporated into federal policy early in the George W. Bush administration. The state's new locally-controlled funding formula has the potential to support an alternative paradigm for educational policy, one that focuses on bottom-up accountability and empowers communities to develop a local education system around their needs and to be accountable to themselves and the nation simultaneously. Local accountability is a revised form of educational policy where communities can democratically set the achievement and outcome goals that they desire. For some communities, improvement in high-stakes test scores might be the goal, while other communities might choose to focus on a new and more robust set of outcomes that address gaps in both achievement and opportunity.

The implementation of LCAPs in California represents an opportunity to include diverse stakeholders in the policymaking process and to move toward more equity-minded reform for ELs, a population that is often sidelined in educational policy efforts. To understand these efforts, we draw on a zone of mediation framework, which bolsters the case for bottom-up accountability and the inclusion of diverse community stakeholders in the educational policymaking process. This framework was developed by Oakes et al. (2005), who sought to examine the forces that shape the environment in which equity-minded reforms (i.e., those that aim to support equity of opportunity along race, class, and/or linguistic lines) are initiated and implemented. A zone of



mediation framework acknowledges that school districts are “situated within particular local enactments of larger cultural norms, rules, incentives, power relations and values. These forces promote either stability or change, and they accordingly set the parameters of beliefs, behavior, and policy” (Welner, 2001, p. 95). The zone of mediation thus sets the boundaries within which school district policy is constructed; policies that fall within the zone’s boundaries are likely to be accepted by local actors, while those that fall outside these boundaries will likely be challenged (Oakes et al., 2005; Welner, 2001).

Challenges often arise as equity-minded reforms are considered because they create a struggle between individuals or groups who perceive a scarcity of resources, and they require local actors to confront broader cultural patterns that shape their ideologies and beliefs about who should be educated and how (Oakes et al., 2005). Yet as people interact among themselves and between external normative and political forces in a zone of mediation, individuals or groups can navigate, confront, and shift the zone’s boundaries. Shifting the zone’s boundaries toward equity-minded reform thus requires that diverse stakeholders participate, including members of less powerful or marginalized communities and community organizers, as well as the professionals and elites who typically influence policy (Renee et al., 2010).

Within a zone of mediation, school districts serve as “mediating institutions” that channel external forces into sites of interaction, or schools (Oakes et al., 2005). This mediating role requires school districts to negotiate normative and political forces at the community, societal, and global levels as they adopt new reforms or policies. In this process, school districts often come up against existing power dynamics related to race, class, and language that make the implementation of equity-minded reforms difficult (Holme, Diem, & Welton, 2014). As a result, it can be challenging for school districts to go beyond the technical aspects of reform, such as adopting new curricula or hiring instructional staff, to address normative and political aspects.

While normative change requires confronting dominant ideologies related to intelligence or merit and the resulting structures developed around them (e.g., tracking, pull-out language programs), political change must address issues related to power and resource distribution (Holme et al., 2014). With respect to the latter, research suggests that district policymakers often relent to the demands of middle- and upper-class and White families who are threatened by policies perceived as redistributive (Frankenberg, McDermott, DeBray, & Blankenship, 2015; Posey 2012; Wells & Serna 1996), making it essential that diverse voices are included in district reform efforts.

Drawing on a collective of diverse stakeholders, school districts must craft policies with sufficient specificity to expand the boundaries of the zone of mediation, thereby enabling the adoption and implementation of equity-minded reform. On-the-ground efforts by actors within schools are not likely to succeed “unless the zone of mediation is first made more receptive” through district-level mandates (Oakes et al., 2005, p. 296). These mandates must do more than set forth general principles for supporting equity, however, as resistance from the powerful elite would likely undermine any school-level changes. Instead, the school district “must craft a more specific mandate, sufficient to substantially shift the zone of mediation and thereby to overcome such local resistance” (Oakes et al. 2005, p. 297). These mandates must be responsive to and inclusive of the needs and goals of community members; thus, they must draw on bottom-up decision making processes.

To explore the extent to which California school districts worked to shift the boundaries of their zones of mediation to support equity-minded accountability and funding for ELs in the development of Local Control and Accountability Plans, we undertook an analysis of California school districts’ 2014-15 LCAPs. Our analysis, which we detail in the next section, assessed the



extent to which diverse stakeholders were included in the process as well as the level of specificity used to allocate funding for high-quality and innovative instructional programs for ELs.

## Methodology

Under the new state accountability policy, all local school districts in California were required to outline three-year plans that described how they would use their funds to support student achievement and locally-defined goals and outcomes. As the primary policy documents guiding district finance and decision making, we conducted a systematic document analysis (Bowen, 2009) of about 1,400 pages of documentation from Local Control and Accountability Plans developed by a sample of districts across the State of California. Specifically, data were drawn from LCAPs written for the 2014-15 school year from 20 districts that were randomly selected from a pool of the 50 largest districts in the state. The 20 districts included in our sample enrolled a total of 1,554,374 students in 2012-13, representing a quarter of California's overall student population (see Table 1). They also enrolled 387,786 English language learners, representing 27.5% of the total EL population in the state.

Table 1  
*Demographics of 20 Sample Districts, 2012-13*

<b>District</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>ELL</b>	<b>Native</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Latino /a</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Pacif. Isl.</b>	<b>2+ Races</b>
Los Angeles	655455	186593	2819	39854	482768	61817	60315	2399	5483
San Diego	130271	29524	373	17977	60616	13261	30271	823	6950
Long Beach	82256	17512	159	9006	44739	12543	12084	1374	2351
Fresno	73689	17586	458	8927	47653	6904	8823	241	683
Elk Grove	62137	10779	344	16643	15972	9540	14443	1101	4094
San Francisco	56970	14196	255	22358	14752	5405	6166	908	7126
San Juan	47752	4554	590	2951	9623	3662	29208	433	1285
Sacramento									
City	47616	11306	360	8833	17654	8433	8956	812	2568
Oakland	46463	14324	159	6672	19455	13498	4294	499	1886
Riverside	42560	7393	189	1889	25038	3195	10821	207	1221
Stockton	38435	11069	1103	5646	23719	4396	2877	223	471
San Jose	33184	8406	163	4759	17390	973	8579	142	1178
Anaheim									
Union High	32085	6987	152	5171	20582	878	4005	236	1061
Mt. Diablo	32001	7437	142	3631	12524	1418	11971	298	2017
Twin Rivers	31420	8859	301	2892	11922	4705	9549	482	1569
San Ramon									
Valley	30757	1599	47	9817	2556	568	15496	70	2203
Saddleback									
Valley	30355	4465	83	3059	9276	463	15783	76	1615
Irvine	29072	4442	100	13465	3044	670	9930	104	1759
Pomona	27186	10438	71	1421	22757	1505	1060	30	342
Compton	24710	10317	35	34	19456	4867	84	161	73

California	6224066	1412437	40629	691690	3280983	394550	1588428	33972	193814
Sample									
Total N	1554374	387786	7903	185005	881496	158701	264715	10619	45935
Sample %									
California	25.0%	27.5%	19.5%	26.7%	26.9%	40.2%	16.7%	31.3%	23.7%

To begin our analysis, we gathered all of the LCAPs for the sample districts into an online Dropbox folder readily accessible to all members of the research team. While a few of the sample districts' LCAPs were rudimentary and brief, other districts clearly had prior strategic approaches in place prior to the LCAPs that resulted in sophisticated documents that were several hundred pages in length. Incidentally, about a quarter of the LCAPs mentioned master plans that were in place before 2014-15. Due to their existence prior to the development of the LCFF and the LCAP, the master plans were beyond the scope of the current study.

Drawing on a critical discourse framework (Tupper, 2008), we used document analysis to examine, interrogate, and interpret the sampled LCAPs. Document analysis (Bowen, 2009) is a qualitative research methodology that recognizes the importance of textual analysis in social science research. Like other qualitative methodologies, document analysis is "disciplined yet flexible" (Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese, & Schneider, 2008, p. 131). The LCAP documents, like interview transcripts or notes, were reflexively and recursively examined with the goal of identifying themes, patterns, and meanings embedded in the documents. The documents were also carefully examined for the presence and use of, as well as the absence of, key words and phrases (e.g. English learners, bilingual, parents, community, equity).

Our approach to data analysis followed that described by Altheide et al. (2008). First, we became familiar with the LCAP process and the context of the new Local Accountability policy in California. We read all existing peer reviewed papers on the new accountability and school finance policy and several research reports produced by various organizations in California. After developing a sense of the broader context, we reviewed five LCAPs from our sample as a team to review the format and general style of the documents. Next, we generated a list of categories to guide our analysis (See Figure 1), and created a data analysis protocol in Excel (a spreadsheet rubric) to guide and compile data from our reading of each LCAP. Based on this list of categories, we then developed research questions that holistically guided our document review.

To establish inter-rater reliability, we tested the protocol independently on five LCAPs, and then compared and triangulated our data. We then revised the categories listed in the data analysis protocol and selected two additional LCAPs for review, meeting again to discuss and refine the protocol. Once this process was completed, research team members conducted separate analyses of the 20 LCAPs and coded the LCAPs for the identified categories into the Excel spreadsheets. At the conclusion of the analyses, the research team met again to examine the completed coding and to develop emerging themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We used the constant comparative method (Patton, 1990) to analyze the dataset, allowing themes to emerge that had meaning in relation to the main topics and purposes of the study.

After completing the coding process, informant counts by category were conducted to understand the representativeness of the dominant codes generated in spreadsheets. We used analytic matrices (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) to identify the most representative codes across all data sources then wrote thematic summaries to develop descriptions of the information in the LCAPs presented in the findings section. To check the authenticity of the work and moderate the validity threats of description and researcher bias (Bowen, 2009), members of the

research team conducted member checks by examining the data and participating in joint review of the completed manuscript.

## Findings

### Identifying Local Priorities for ELs

One of the goals of the Local Control Funding Formula approach to local accountability in California was to encourage engage democratic involvement from communities in the development of locally-identified priorities to be addressed in the LCAPs, a prerequisite for shifting school districts' zones of mediation toward more equity-minded practices. In fact, the state explicitly looked for involvement from multiple constituents when assessing LCAPs submitted by school districts, and the first guiding question in the state's LCAP Annual Template (5CCR Section 15497.5) addressed whether parents, community members, pupils, local bargaining units, and other stakeholders (i.e., LEA personnel, county child welfare agencies, county office of education foster youth services programs, court appointed special advocates, foster youth, foster parents, education rights holders, and other stakeholders such as parents of ELs, community organizations representing ELs, and others as appropriate) were engaged and involved in developing, reviewing, and supporting implementation of the LCAP.

Our analysis showed that, while established district-level English learner committees were consulted in the development of the majority of LCAPs in our sample, few other stakeholders were mentioned in the documents. Specifically, 17 of the 20 sample districts reported consulting and soliciting meetings with their District-Level English Learner Advisory Committees (DELAC). In California, all public school districts serving grades kindergarten through 12 that enroll 51 or more ELs must form a DELAC, or form an EL-focused subcommittee made of up parents and guardians of district EL students. As an example, Compton Unified School District's LCAP repeatedly referenced the ways in which the district's DELAC was involved in the LCAP development process:

DELAC Advisory council met on 1/23/2014, information about LCAP was presented and questions answered about the process.

DELAC members provided [LCAP] input on 5/14 in writing to the Superintendent. Response will be provided in writing and face on 5/22.

Superintendent provided written responses to input not included in the LCAP from DAC and DELAC committees. The Superintendent met with DELAC on May 27, 2014, to provide written responses to the comments and questions asked. Superintendent did a face-to-face presentation.

In Compton and several other districts in our sample, intentional efforts were made to garner feedback related to the LCAP from the DELAC and to generate written responses to that feedback. In the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), although parents were included in conversations related to LCAP development, they were selected from among existing DELAC members to serve on the Parent Advisory Committee:

Regional delegate convenings were held for parents/guardians to elect their representatives to the Parent Advisory Committee. Members were selected from each of the 5 LAUSD regions, with two parents representing English Learners... The parents representing English Learners were selected from the members of DELAC by their regional representatives... There are 50 members of the DELAC...

The DELAC in LAUSD thus superseded the Parent Advisory Committee and remained the primary consulting body related to ELs during LCAP development. This approach meant that few new stakeholders were identified for inclusion in LCAP development, suggesting that there was limited potential for the districts in our sample to expand their zones of mediation and foster inclusion of novel or innovative policies or practices for ELs.

Moreover, while the DELACs were mentioned in the vast majority of LCAPs as stakeholders in the development process, most LCAPs did not explicitly outline the DELAC's role in defining locally-identified priorities, other than to note that the DELAC provided feedback on existing plans. In the case of Mt. Diablo Unified School District, however, the LCAP did detail the role of this committee and the way in which the committee's input was used in LCAP development:

The superintendent and staff met with the DELAC to explain the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). All materials, and the PowerPoint presentation, were in English and in Spanish. As with the Community meetings, feedback from this meeting was important to the development of the district's LCAP. This information helped the LCAP Focus Group align the feedback and the district strategic plan while developing the recommended LCAP Goals, Actions, and Expenditures. They also provided guidance about priorities for upcoming years. DELAC emphasized Celebration of Biliteracy seal, celebration of the reclassification of English learners, the need for clear communication, culturally responsive education, visions for different pathways, respect, and the development of strong English.

In contrast with the other 24 LCAPs in our sample, Mt. Diablo's described how the DELAC generated a list of priorities for the district related to ELs, and the way in which district leaders engaged with them.

Thus, while our review suggests that the DELACs played a role in the development of the LCAPs in the 20 sample school districts – and thus EL-related priorities were likely included in the development process in some way – the role of the DELAC in setting locally-identified priorities for ELs varied across the districts. An important caveat is that the depth of community involvement in the development process is difficult to determine solely from analyzing the text of the district LCAPs. Nonetheless, the state did require that each district invite and then detail the stakeholders involved in the LCAPs, and our analysis suggests that the DELACs served as the primary stakeholders in the process who were focused on EL issues.

Notably, established civil rights organizations were mentioned in only two of the 20 districts in our sample. Specifically, the NAACP was denoted in Stockton Unified School District's LCAP as having been involved in an early planning meeting (in February 2014). In the Riverside Unified School District, Inland Congregations United for Change, a local civil rights organization affiliated with the PICO national network of faith-based organizations, was involved in their LCAP development. Beyond our sample, a keyword search (LULAC, NCLR, NAACP) of the top 100 largest California districts revealed that no other districts stated that an established, national civil rights organization had been involved in the development of local priorities. The overall lack of inclusion of civil rights organizations suggests a dearth of engagement with external advocates of students of color and ELs, which again indicates that most districts were working within unchanged zones of mediation as they developed their accountability plans.

### Allocating Expenditures for ELs

We categorized the actions described in the LCAPs that were in some way focused on ELs into eight primary areas (see Figure 1). As can be seen in the figure, the majority of districts (16 out of 20) allotted funding to staffing and curriculum, often into the millions. With respect to staffing, when considering the school finance context discussed above in the San Jose Unified School District, it became apparent that staffing was a need that districts sought to address in their LCAPs. The smaller districts in our sample planned to spend several million dollars on new staffing, while larger districts such as LAUSD set aside tens of millions of dollars for their staffing needs. Although some of the allotments outlined in the LCAPs focused on substitutes and the hiring of principles, some of the staffing allotments were targeted for ELs, such as hiring English language development (ELD) staff. For example, Compton Unified School District specifically set aside \$340,000 to hire ELD coaches. Riverside Unified School District designated \$43,500 of LCFF funding for stipends for six bilingual teachers, materials and books.

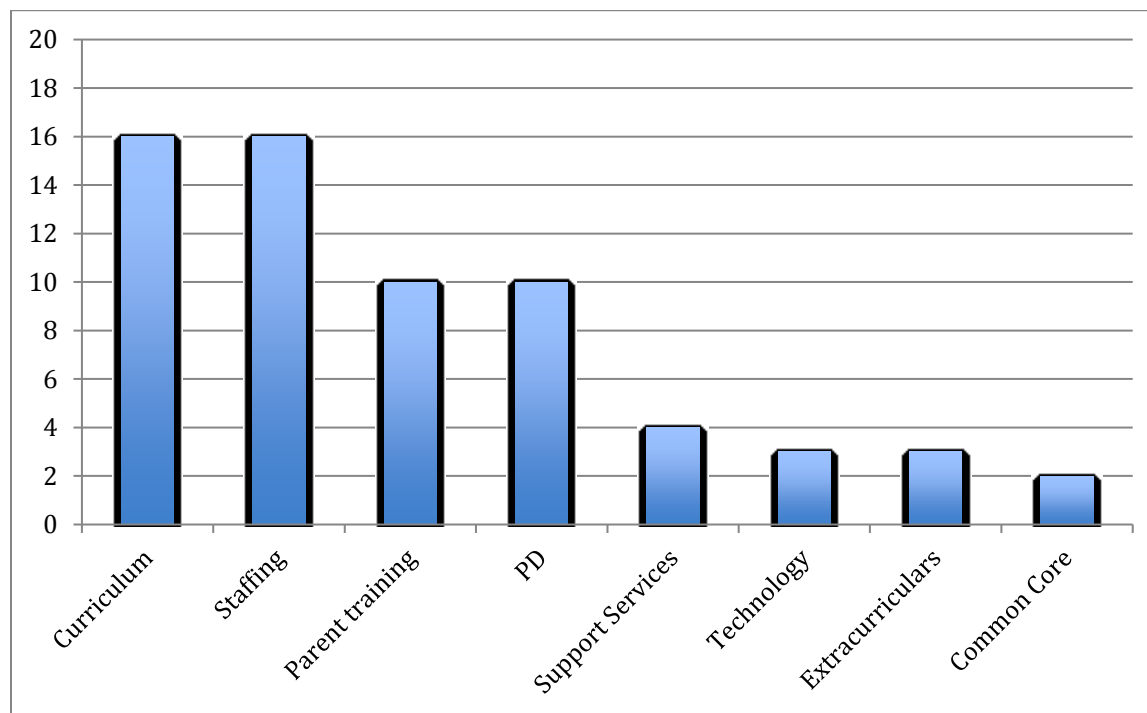


Figure 1. Categories of Actions Focused on ELLs in Sample Districts

In regards to curriculum, most of the allotments for specific curricular programs mentioned in the LCAPs, such as AVID, a college readiness curriculum, were in the tens of thousands. However, there were less specific funding designations for curricular needs that drew dollar amounts beyond \$100,000. For example, Oakland Unified School District set aside \$250,000 for ELD materials, including online tools that supported blended learning and grade-level appropriate course placement for ELs in middle school and high school. The funding denoted in the LCAPs for EL-related curricular expenses, however, was typically dwarfed by the millions that were earmarked for various staffing plans.

Among the other funding areas, half of the districts in our sample planned to allocate funding for parent engagement. For example, LAUSD focused on parent education by outlining the

ways in which they sought to provide training, learning opportunities, and workshops that would help parents support the literacy skills outlined by the Common Core Standards at home. Other districts focused more intensively on communicating with parents of ELs, such as Long Beach Unified School District that sought to: “Provide support to English Learners and their families... these efforts include translation/interpretation services.” Among all the LCAPs we reviewed, the largest allotment for parent engagement was in San Francisco Unified School District’s LCAP, where the district set aside nearly \$1 million for Family Engagement Liaisons.

Notably, four of the 20 districts appeared to take a “non-segregative” approach, in which the monies derived from the LCFF would not be spent specifically on the student population(s) from which the additional 20% supplemental allotment was derived. For example, Elk Grove Unified School District (EGUSD) developed their LCAP with a “general philosophy” that they would not exclude “non-identified students” (e.g., students not identified as ELs) from the programs the 20% allotment was meant to serve:

To exclude non-identified students would mean our programs would be segregated on the basis of income or language, and we believe such segregation is antithetical to our guiding principles and counter to the interests of every student, as well as to the community at large. Specific examples of programs would include a class that might be specifically developed to provide improved achievement for English Learners (EL). This class would also serve students who are not identified as EL students but who would benefit from the EL-specific instructional activities.

In essence, the district stated that it would spend the allotment on general curricular efforts that were not focused specifically on ELs’ needs. The example the district offered in the LCAP was a school wide summer program “developed to improve achievement for identified students [that] would also allow non-identified students to participate.” The EGUSD LCAP continued:

In addition, not all services for identified students would be remedial in nature. Some schools in EGUSD with high percentages of identified students have a need to promote the achievement of their advanced students by providing additional GATE, Honors and Advanced Placement opportunities for these students.

The four districts that took this non-segregative approach to allocating LCFF funding in their LCAPs, make clear that money previously targeted for ELs will be spent on other district priorities.

Overall, we found that districts largely targeted their funding resources to staffing and curriculum, both of which address technical aspects of EL teaching and learning. Even resources focused on parent engagement tended to focus on technical features such as translators and providing parents with school-based resources. This attention to technical reforms is common in school districts that have not sought to expand their zones of mediation by including diverse voices in their decision-making processes in ways that would address more normative and political reform aspects (Holme et al., 2014; Oakes et al., 2005).

### **Measuring English Learner Outcomes**

The state of California stipulated several areas that the 2014-15 LCAPs must address related to student achievement. In particular, the fourth priority in the state’s LCFF stipulates that district’s must describe their students’ performance on standardized tests and scores on California’s Academic Performance Index (API) in their LCAPs. Districts must also outline the share of pupils that are college and career ready, the share of English learners that have tested as English proficient as well as their reclassification rates, the share of pupils that have passed Advanced Placement exams with a

score of three or higher, and the share of pupils determined prepared for college by the Early Assessment Program. Although the potential was there for locally defined priorities for ELs to extend beyond standardized exams, all 20 of the LCAPs in our sample focused primarily on test-based student outcomes. For example, instead of using college and career ready measures that typically are tied to performance levels on ACT or SAT exams, districts could instead refer to data on college applications, retention after the first year, and graduation rates from institutions of higher education.

The State also recognized that student achievement is a function of student engagement and school climate. Accordingly, the State required that districts improve pupil engagement as measured by school attendance rates, dropout rates and graduation rates, and school climate as measured by suspension and expulsion rates. For example, the Riverside Unified School District set goals by subgroup (including African American, English learners, Hispanics, and students with disabilities) to increase attendance, decrease chronic absenteeism, decrease suspensions and expulsions. The San Juan Unified Sacramento Unified School District also included these metrics, but did not establish goals for ELs.

Additionally, local measures assessing safety and school connectedness were also encouraged. Here a few districts did include local outcomes. For example, Riverside Unified School District elected to implement the Healthy Kids and Gallup Student Poll. The Oakland LCAP included a focus on discretionary discipline on African American males. Overall, even though the state provided districts the leeway to envision student outcomes beyond standardized test scores, the districts in our sample did not generally avail themselves of this opportunity to include outcomes other than state mandates for ELs or other targeted groups. The limited changes we observed in the local selection of student outcomes again suggests that the zones of mediation in these school districts had not shifted in ways that supported more equity-oriented reform for ELs, due at least in part to the lack of participation from diverse stakeholders in the LCAP decision-making process.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our study explored whether local accountability in California is a viable policy alternative to the current top-down conception of accountability and high-stakes testing. Are the LCAPs a coign of vantage and action to address the needs of English learners in California schools? Our findings, though exploratory in nature, suggest that, while the Local Accountability policy in California offered an opportunity to support locally-defined priorities and alternatives to top-down accountability, few if any of the districts in our sample took advantage of it. That is, the school districts in our sample had not yet engaged with the local community in ways that shifted or expanded the zone of mediation to facilitate significant changes to accountability or redistribution of funding and resources to support educational equity among students, and especially for ELs.

For instance, it remains to be seen if districts' LCAP development enhanced community-based engagement, and to what extent district leaders drew upon the input of diverse stakeholders in the process. A limitation of this study is that it was difficult to assess community involvement and democratic decision making from a review of the approximately 1,400 pages in the sample LCAPs; ethnographic approaches would be necessary to understand on-the-ground decision making processes. Still, the state required that each district include community stakeholders in the LCAP development process and describe that interaction in the LCAPs, and we found limited evidence that diverse stakeholders were included. The primary source of input related to ELs' needs were DELACs that had already been established in each district, indicating limited engagement with other stakeholders with an interest in the district's EL population, including parents who were not



involved in the organized committee, families, students, and community-based organizations. Moreover, there was very limited explicit and formal involvement of national and local civil rights organizations in the development of the LCAPs.

Additionally, staffing and curricula were key funding concerns for districts, the former of which is not surprising given downturn in the economy that created staffing needs across the 20 sample districts. In some cases, LCAPs specifically noted how these funds would be allotted to support EL instruction, with respect to hiring English language development teachers and coaches, or adding supplement college and career reading programs (e.g., AVID). In other cases, however, funding originally targeted toward the 20% allotment for ELs was distributed in order to fund programs for all students, or advanced students in honors or AP courses, that likely included few ELs. Whether the best use of EL-dedicated funds is to support programs for all students is an issue that needs to be investigated further in the districts that adopted this “non-segregative” approach to funding. Nonetheless, it appears that advocates who raised concerns that districts may be using the block funding approach to divert funds to other priorities not necessarily benefitting ELs (Hahnel, 2014) may be correct. This approach is reminiscent of the ideology that teaching ELs is “just good teaching” (de Jong & Harper, 2005) and that, by addressing all students’ needs, ELs’ needs would also be addressed. Research focused on EL education indicates that this equality of treatment ideology severely limits the attention that is necessary to support ELs’ both academically and linguistically (Hopkins, Lowenhaupt, & Sweet, 2015; Reeves, 2004). Given the long history of neglecting EL instruction, especially in states like California that have implemented restrictive language policies (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010), this is an important concern that requires further research in districts that have taken this funding approach.

Finally, very few districts in our sample described the use of measures beyond test scores and other state mandated measures in their LCAPs. California’s Local Accountability policy represented an opportunity for local school districts to consider multiple outcome measures, including those related to opportunity as well as achievement gaps. While our findings are limited to a sample of 20 districts, our findings indicate that few districts took advantage of this opportunity in 2014-15. This trend is particularly concerning when considering ELs whose achievement and progress is not adequately captured by standardized tests as a result of their emerging English language proficiency (Hopkins, Thompson, Linquanti, Hakuta, & August, 2013).

Considering our zone of mediation framework, community-based approaches to accountability and funding have the potential to usher in a turn in community involvement in school district policymaking. In the United States, our communities, parents, and educators must see themselves as an important part of the solution rather than the problem. Returning to a community-based schooling approach could foment a multiple-measures approach driven by the community’s desire to see their children succeed, rather than a continuing focus on failed high-stakes testing and accountability policies. Whether California’s approach can facilitate a new efficacious community-based approach to school finance and accountability over the short- and long-term remains to be seen. Our findings covering the initial implementation year of Local Accountability are less than promising; yet additional research examining subsequent years is needed to understand how LCAP implementation, and in particular how LCAPs may or may not evolved and draw upon and expand the zone of mediation and support equitable educational opportunities for ELs.

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### Education Finance and English Language Learners

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