

CALIFORNIA'S GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY
District Case Studies of Professional Capital

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Corona Norco Unified School District
—one of five case studies of school districts—

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Introduction

We conducted four main case studies as part of our Stuart Foundation Grant to examine the concept of Professional Capital in action: Fresno Unified, Long Beach Unified, Twin Rivers Unified, and Whittier Union High School district. As part of our wider Leadership from the Middle strategy of helping districts learn from each other we encountered other districts that make for interest cases to learn from. One such district was Corona Norco Unified School District. We decided to include it as a 'mini case-study'. The study is based on a short visit to the district by two researchers of Michael Fullan's team in November 2015. The data collected and reviewed to create this case study include an in depth interview with the district superintendent Michael Lin, a focus group with his entire executive cabinet, and a few dozen documents. Due to the shorter duration of the site visit and the smaller amount of interview data, the case study presented here is considerably shorter and less detailed than the other four major case studies.

As in the case of the other four major case studies, the improvement strategy of Corona Norco is examined through the lens of system coherence, professional capital and student success. Following a similar structure, it starts with an overview of the Corona Norco Unified School District and then moves on to describe its core strategies to create system coherence and cultivate professional capital as they relate to increased student success.

Corona Norco in a Nutshell

The Corona Norco Unified School District (CNUSD) serves approximately 54,000 students through 50 schools and close to 5,000 staff. The largest school district in the Riverside County and the ninth largest in California, CNUSD serves the communities of Corona, Norco, and Eastvale. Its diverse student population include 52% Hispanic, 30% White, 9% Asian, 6% African American, and 3% Filipino students, coming from homes where 49 languages are spoken. At Corona Norco, 43% of students are eligible for free and reduced meals.

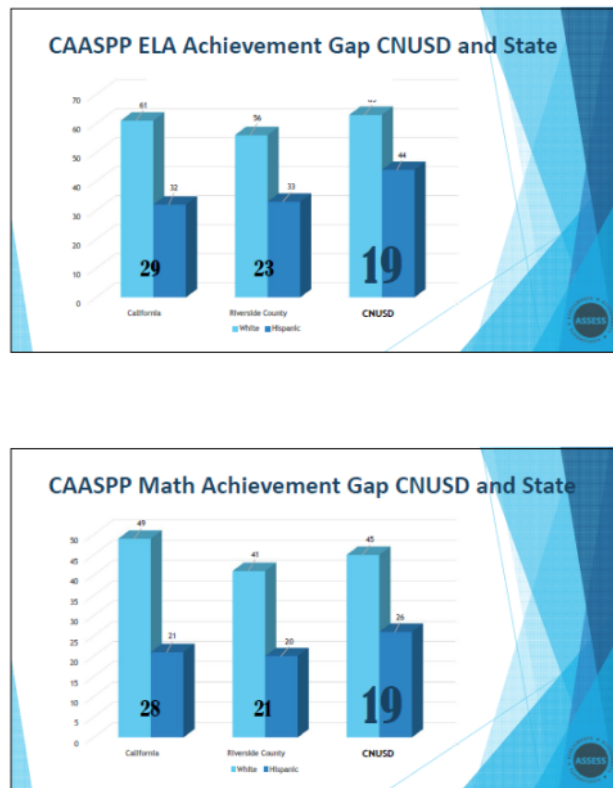
CNUSD has a strong reputation in California as a high performing system. The district was selected as a finalist for the prestigious Broad award in 2012 and 2013, and his superintendent, Michael Lin, was recognized in 2015 as a Leader to Learn From, a national highlight from Education Week. Of the 50 schools in the district, 35 have been selected as California Distinguished Schools. Corona Norco ranks among the top 2 or 3 districts in Riverside County in conventional measures of student achievement and engagement, with a cohort graduation rate of 92.4%, A-G completion rates of 50.6%, and a drop-out rate of only 4.1% (the average rates at Riverside County are 87.4%, 39.9% and 7.7% respectively). The recent results in the new California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, introduced in 2015 with the intention of measuring college and career readiness, put Corona Norco on a strong starting place, with 53% of students meeting or exceeding the standards in ELA and 46% of students meeting or exceeding the standards in Mathematics (compared to 44% and 33% respectively in California)¹

¹ The percentage of students not meeting the new ELA standards in Corona Norco is 21% compared to 31% in California. In the case of mathematics, the percentage of students not

Corona Norco is not only high performing, but also a sustained improver. The district increased its graduation rates from 87.5% to 92.4% between 2010 and 2014. Over that same period of time, dropout rates dropped from 7.4% to 4.1%. Over the past decade, the district has demonstrated success in raising the bar and closing the gap in student achievement. Between 2003 and 2013, the proportion of students at or above proficient level in ELA increased from 28.2% to 54.2% for Hispanic students and from 54.3% to 74.6% for White students (closing the achievement gap from 26.1 to 20.4 percentage points). In Mathematics, the increase in the percentage of students at or above proficient went up from 32.4% to 54.6% for Hispanic students, and from 52.8% to 71.8% for White Students (closing the achievement gap from 20.4 to 17.2 percentage points). The recent CAASPP results show that, while having achievement levels that are higher or similar to those of Riverside County and California, Corona Norco has a shorter achievement gap between Hispanic and White students in ELA and Math than the County and the State. (See Table 1 below)

The rest of this document describes and discusses how Corona Norco, a high performer and sustained improver, has developed system coherence and cultivated professional capital.

Figure 1. CAASPP Achievement Gaps at Corona Norco, Riverside County and California



Source: Corona Norco (2015) Unlocking the Value of our Data.

meeting the math standards in Corona Norco was 31%, compared to 38% in California. Data from CAASPP website: www.caaspp.cde.ca.gov. Retrieved on June 15, 2016.

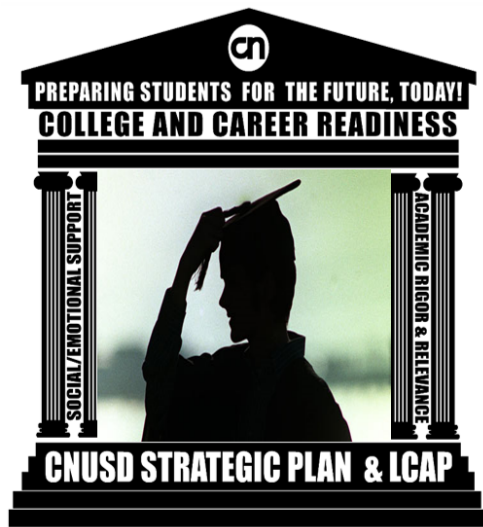
System Coherence at Corona Norco

Making Complexity Simple

Michael Lin describes his key role as constantly making sense of the education policy landscape, and making the key priorities of the district clear and understandable for district staff, schools, and the larger community. As he puts it “If I don’t clarify intentionally, then it slides back to a system of initiatives out there, disconnected from each other and from people. The most important work of the superintendent is to keep the eyes on the ball, connect everything, make sense.” Making complexity simple enhances clarity for those served by the district as well as for district leaders themselves. As Michael Lin puts it, “making it clearer for others makes it clearer for ourselves”. Fullan and Quinn’s (2016) definition of ‘Coherence’ is based on the shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work. They underscore this definition by observing that coherence is fully and only subjective. If it doesn’t exist in the minds of people, it doesn’t exist. Making complexity simpler is a coherence making strategy.

The district makes complexity simple in a number of ways. First, Lin and his team have articulated their entire strategy around only two intertwined pillars: Academic Rigor/Relevance, and Social Emotional Support (See Figure 2). Second, they took LCFF and LCAP as an opportunity to focus the district efforts strategically: closely examining the work they were doing, looking at existing initiatives and good practice, ensuring purposeful alignment, eliminating redundancy as much as possible, keeping a focus on results and allocating resources strategically. Third, Michael Lin brings focus and intention to the system (“a second to none laser focus on what we want” as a cabinet member put it) through his formal communications as a superintendent and to his informal interactions with district leaders, staff, principals, teachers, students and the larger community. Fourth, infographics and consistent messaging are carefully designed and crafted to capture and organize otherwise complex information into simple and comprehensive formats, crafted to appeal to their intended audience, and with especial attention given to purpose – why is the district doing what it is doing, or why is it asking people to do what it is asking them to do? (e.g. a brief infographic that explains LCAP and reports progress to parents and communities). Fifth, through constant visits to schools, planned listening sessions with students, teachers, and staff, and constant formal and informal communication vertically and horizontally, Lin and his executive cabinet keep their fingers on the pulse of the system, get a sense of whether and how the district strategy is panning out in schools, and use this rich input to identify gaps in understanding, refine their strategies, and frame their messaging accordingly.

Figure 2. CNUSD Two-Pillar Philosophy



Source: Corona-Norco USD Strategic Plan (2015-17).

Developing Deep Relationships of Trust and Collaboration

Corona Norco is perhaps one of the districts in America with the greatest intentionality and intensity of its forging strong relationships, connecting and constantly communicating with union leaders, board members, parents, and other agencies (e.g. cities). Trust follows more than it precedes purposeful relationships.

Especially noteworthy is the excellent relationship and communication Lin and his executive cabinet have cultivated and maintain with the union leadership. For three decades, the Board and the superintendent of the time had been very intentional about using a collaborative approach to bargaining, a need that was identified after a difficult strike at Corona Norco in the early 1990s. But as a member of the executive cabinet pointed out, "there was collaboration in the past, but Michael Lin turned it into an art form". As Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, the role Lin played at Corona Norco before becoming the superintendent, he invested a lot of time up front to cultivate strong relationships with union leaders: having regular coffee dialogues or attending student sports events, spending weekends together with their families, a lot of 'by the way' conversation, taking in phone calls at midnight to finalize the language of the new collective agreement. Lin even describes the nature of his relationship with the president of the union as friendship.

The priority Corona Norco gives to acknowledging the importance of the union and maintaining deep relationships of trust and collaboration with the union is reflected in district decisions such as the full time release granted to the president and vice-president of the two unions at Corona Norco so that they can focus on gaining information from their constituents about what's working and what isn't, the inclusion of the national and regional union representatives at the regular Business Services meetings, and the regular practice of district and union co-creating the agenda and co-facilitating their meetings.

Lin seems to understand the importance of cultivating relationships of deep trust and friendship with the union like few do. Here's his reflection on the matter:

"Imagine that you bring your very well prepared team out to a match on open dome and suddenly there's a storm. To me, union/district collaboration is really the weather piece that people often overlook or take for granted [...] The more time you spend upfront the greater the dividends on the end. When relationships are more superficial everything may look nice until it comes to the money. Not in our case. Here the relationship is so strong that negotiation is a true collaborative process for problem solving in the best interests of our students."

An important breakthrough that facilitated such depth in the link between Lin and the union occurred in 2008, when the financial crisis hit the district. Instead of lay-offs, district and union leaders agreed that everyone would take a pay cut of 5%. This move, Lin remembers, "changed the way we do business."

Lin's approach to building deep relationships with the union has been so successful that the district has continuously searched for strategic places to cultivate these type of relationships across the system. Currently, under the leadership of Sam Buenrostro, Deputy Superintendent of Human Resources, the whole executive cabinet meets with the union executive team every month, and several cabinet members meet and communicate formally and informally with union representatives. Furthermore, all schools in the district are trained in labor bargaining and management, and there are efforts currently underway to move personal relationships between union representatives and staff to the school level.

Relationship building and collaboration are key features of the organizational culture at Corona Norco. The district has multiple formal and informal channels of vertical and horizontal communication and interaction within the district and with external stakeholders. Corona Norco has a very stable and supportive Board that meets twice a month – one meeting is used for Board related issues and the other one as a study session about issues such as Best practices, the district's approach to professional development of mathematics, etc. Constant formal and informal communication between Lin and the Board keep everyone on the loop, ensure that there are no surprises about anything, make it manageable to fit in all the business issues in a single monthly session. As reported by Lin, by the time it comes to vote, the Board has had ample time to consider and debate the agenda items and result in unanimous support.

The executive cabinet, for example, meets every week, but many other encounters happen in between (for example the Assistant Superintendent of Business Services meets with each division each week). The high levels of interaction and trust developed within the district have also created strong internal accountability. As members of the executive cabinet put it, "We have deep trust among us, so we push each other, with professional courtesy, but with honesty [...] Calling out someone in the team is difficult not only on the receiving end, but also on the giving end, but as people at this table understand, we're just trying to get to the best results. It's uncomfortable on either end, but we're used to it. We do it because we know it's important"

Strong relationships with the larger community are also deliberately pursued by district leaders at Corona Norco. The executive cabinet is intentional about meeting quarterly with each of the cities that make up the district, while members of the cabinet also see them on a regular basis in

community events, Chambers, interest groups, etc. (The good relationship with city agencies explains, for example, the approval of a tax increase with the support of the Chamber of Commerce that brought in additional resources to the district). As a member of the executive cabinet described: "Meeting constantly is part of our job. In this way, we constantly engage in conversations and ensure we give the heads up to key people. There is always someone raising the important conversations." Constant formal and informal communication ensures a regular, multidirectional flow of information and allows everyone to stay in the know of what needs done and keep track of what's going on.

Parent engagement is another area where the district invests significant time, energy, and resources. A director of Parent Engagement was recently hired, and a Parent Center is being established in the area with highest concentration of Hispanic families, which will offer parents access to college and career pathways, academic support, intervention, information workshops and trainings, and other resources and programs for parental involvement and mentorship. The district recently hosted a Parent as Champions event that was attended by over 600 parents.

Finally, the district culture and focus on relationships and trust extends to building success with students. The district has developed Social Emotional Support, or wellbeing, as one of two pillars of the district strategy. Corona Norco constantly monitors student progress by identifying students that could take AP courses or Career and Technical Education pathways but aren't, and quarterly tracking down retention, progress on A-G completion. The district uses a multi-pronged approach of prevention and intervention to ensure student wellbeing and success, which includes: i) a cadre of school counselors that addresses and provides support on issues such as chronic absenteeism, negative behavior, academic progress, and career plans; ii) a Positive Behavior Intervention Support program that takes a proactive, rather than reactive approach to student behavior, emphasizing the encouragement of positive behavior instead of punishment of negative behavior ; iii) a School Attendance Review teams in schools and a School Attendance Review Board that keep track of student attendance, conduct home visits, and intervenes as necessary; iv) Comprehensive School Safety Plans and school training to ensure consistent protocols and practices of school safety across the district v) the conversion of Saturday schools from centers for detention to spaces for academic intervention and credit recovery.

Creating a Culture of Organizational Learning

Lin and his executive cabinet keep their fingers on the pulse of the system, constantly checking out whether and how district initiatives are working on the ground, and refining and adapting their strategy accordingly. To start with, Michael Lin spends 2 to 3 days, 4 hours each day, in classrooms. The members of the Board and the executive cabinet as well make themselves very visible in schools through constant visits. By directly observing classroom activity and talking with students, teachers, administrators and school staff, they gain first-hand knowledge about how things are going – be it a counselor initiative, the introduction of the Common Core, the use of literacy practices supported district wide etc. – and are able to identify what needs to be tweaked, changed or refined in the design an initiative, the professional development offered to schools, or the messaging from the district.

Upon suggestion from union leaders, and in collaboration with them, Lisa Simon, Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services recently started to organize listening sessions to understand the perspectives and key issues faced by teachers and students. Through a listening

session with teachers, for example, they found out that the introduction of the Common Core was bringing a lot of stress to teachers. The listening session helped the executive cabinet remove some of their initial assumptions when they found out, for example, that many teachers who had been successful for decades felt all of a sudden like first year teachers again. The learning gained from the listening session was then used to intensify teacher professional development on the new standards, and adapt it to what teachers needed.

Listening sessions with students are another recent development at Corona Norco. The district organized its first listening session with students the year prior to our visit, which included students from each High school representing different student subgroups. In total, district leaders met with over 1500 kids. Lin reported his surprise at witnessing how articulate and thoughtful the student representatives were and how much their expressed needs made sense. The insights gained through the listening session led the district to recalibrate the district's LCAP, so that the allocation of resources matched the needs expressed by students. The experience was so helpful and informative to Lin and his team, that they were planning a second session for the year of our visit, and starting to encourage school principals to lead listening sessions with their students.

In addition to the direct input gained from school visits and listening sessions, Lin and his executive cabinet constantly monitor progress in key indicators relevant to the two strategic pillars of Academic Rigor/Relevance and Social Emotional Learning, such as enrollment and progress on Advanced Placement and A-G courses, Career and Technical Education pathways, attendance rates, and student achievement. Reports are produced and discussed quarterly with the data gathered by and available to the district, and used to inform their key decisions and recalibrate strategies as needed. (As a side note, Michael Lin acknowledge that the district still has work to do to ensure timely collection and availability of data that is directly relevant to the district's strategic priorities but that the district is either not collecting or not having available on time to intervene – as he put it, “We need lead data, not lag data”)

Professional Capital at Corona Norco

Michael Lin and the Board are very intentional about making Corona Norco not only a district that offers the best academic opportunity to students but also a great workplace for adults. Teacher salaries at Corona Norco are among the highest in California. But beyond the salary, it is the culture of collaboration and support and the deep and stable relationships with the Board and the union that makes Corona Norco an attractive place to work.

District leaders are also deliberate about attracting highly talented teachers, leaders and other staff to Corona Norco, and about ensuring that the people they hire do not only have great credentials, but are the right fit for the district culture. When a new person in a district leadership position is needed, Lin and his executive cabinet invest time in contacting people they believe would be a good match for the role, meeting with them informally, but also organizing more formal sessions like interview panels – this complements the more formal process that the district has in place to call for applications.

The critical role of high caliber teachers is deeply acknowledged by the Board, and in the current context of teacher shortage in California, the district was being very aggressive about recruiting

the best candidates available – for example, hiring earlier in the year, offering contracts as early as January – and made plans to go out of state as needed in search of the best possible candidates – for example, visiting Universities in Central California, Michigan, and Illinois to recruit teachers in hard-to-fill areas.

Lin and his executive cabinet have a careful process in place to identify people who are the right fit for the district. During his tenure, Lin has hired more than 70% of the current school principals at Corona Norco. In selecting them, he and his team are very deliberate about making sure that, as a baseline, they are strong on content, process and relationships, but also searching for leaders who believe in people, have empathy, and go beyond what's expected. The district has established an interactive, relaxed and enjoyable teacher recruitment process that involves Lin, his executive team, and all school administrators in the process of talking to candidates and finding the right fits. Typically, recruitment sessions are held for a half-day where about 300 candidates in sets of 30 participate in one-on-one interviews with administrators (who are prepared with targeted questions and score cards), visit classrooms, and hold speed-dates with every school administrator. This interactive design offers multiple opportunities for candidates to recuperate if they didn't start strong and is reportedly very enjoyable for all those involved.

Once school leaders and teachers come in the district, they are offered a range of opportunities to gain familiarity with and get better at their work. New principals, for example, have the option to be paired up with a mentor from within or outside the district, and they take part on a new administrators' program meeting each Monday. New teachers are assigned a coach for their first two years.

Every teacher at Corona Norco is part of a collaborative team – the composition of the team may vary from site to site – e.g. organized by grade or by discipline. On Wednesdays, all elementary schools have early dismissal and all High Schools have an early arrival so that teachers can work in their Professional Learning Community. By the time of our visit, teachers had 90 minutes a week to participate in their PLC. The use of this time varies from school to school – e.g. within school teacher collaboration, school to school visits – but it is required that this time is used for professional development purposes.

Teachers are offered professional development by the school and by the district. 60 substitute teachers a day are available to allow school site teams to provide training for their teachers (in the past the number of available substitute teachers per day was 80 but the number had to be reduced due to teacher shortage. The district also offers an optional one-week professional development session for teachers and substitute teachers during vacation time. Participation in this voluntary session is high, which speaks to the quality and relevance of the professional development offered by the district. Teachers are constantly surveyed, and more recently the union and work services started to work together to identify the type of professional development teachers were needing. Right now, the Common Core, and in particular mathematics, are a strong area of focus of the professional development offered for teachers at Corona Norco.

As a regular practice, the district offers professional development opportunities where teacher teams, steering committees, teachers and administrators work and train together, a strategy that ensures a greater degree of adoption of what is learned in classrooms and schools. The district is also intentional at developing teacher leaders and offers multiple opportunities for teachers to

practice and build their leadership capacity – for example, as teacher trainers, teacher coaches, etc.

With regards to developing decisional capital, district leaders acknowledge their strategy has been much stronger on the literacy front than on mathematics. The district has a long history of supporting teachers to develop strong reading and writing skills in students through the use of specific practices and tools for diagnosis and intervention. Currently, a “Reader by 9” program is being piloted that prepares teachers to ensure that 9 year olds leave grade 3 being proficient in reading, through the use of simple assessment and intervention tools in the classrooms and the intentional involvement of parents in developing literacy habits and skills at home and ensuring regular attendance of their children to school. Consistency in high quality Math instruction is seen by Lin and his cabinet as one of the main challenges and areas of focus of the instructional agenda in the district. A strategy is currently underway to train teachers from each school as trainers of other teachers at their sites on Math instruction that is consistent with the new Common Core standards.

District wide formative assessments are a key piece in cultivating decisional capital at Corona Norco. The district started to develop its own benchmark assessments back in 2002, about two years into the introduction of the California State Standards. Through a constant process of review and calibration, the district to get a correlation of between 0.8 and 0.9 with what would be measured on the State tests. New interim assessments based on the Common-Core inspired SBAC tests are currently being developed and adopted in Corona Norco. School PLCs make use of the formative assessment results to establish their priorities and inform the classroom practice of teachers.

To enhance the use of data to inform classroom and school practice, the district is currently developing a portal for staff, parents, and students, that will gather all available information on student and school progress on the two major pillars of Academic Rigor/Relevance and Social Emotional Support (e.g. formative assessment results, enrollment and progress on AP courses, CTE pathways, and A-G courses, school attendance, etc.), and working on integrating the use of this data portal on the day-to-day activities of teachers and school leaders.

Although we haven’t used the language of Professional Capital as explicitly as we have in the four larger cases, it is clear that Corona Norco pays explicit attention to the three components of capital and their relationships. A great deal of attention is paid to identifying and cultivating talent both inside to the district and to new hires. The district is preoccupied with strengthening the quality and availability of data concerning instructional practices and the link to outcome data (with a self –admitted recognition that further development is required in the use of assessment data). Attending to relationships and developing collaborative teams within and across levels, and especially with unions is a critical part of social capital.

Key Lessons and Strategic Recommendations

Corona Norco is a remarkable example of high student performance and sustained improvement. Its forging of deep relationships of trust and collaboration internally and externally, its deliberate work to make complexity simple, and its strategies to not only attract talent but ensure the right

fit with the district culture are leading the way in forging the future of governance and human resource strategies for educational systems in America.

Moving forward, Corona Norco faces, in our view, two major challenges: First *reduce relevant achievement gaps to zero*. The gaps have been consistently reduced over the past decade at a similar or faster pace than Riverside County and California, but while smaller, there are still clear gaps in achievement between Hispanic and white students in the district.

Second, there is a wider movement currently developing (and we are part of this) that goes beyond traditional pedagogy into 'deep learning' (www.npdl.global). We think Corona Norco is well positioned to move explicitly into the *deepening learning* agenda. The district has excelled on existing measures of achievement. The question now is to what extent is Corona Norco successfully preparing students for the future, or on what we have called global competencies or 6Cs (character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking). How can Corona Norco leverage its strong culture for a next phase of schooling that involves powerful pedagogies and deeper learning outcomes?

Note

This is one of five district case studies of Professional Capital under the title of *California's Golden Opportunity*.

The five case studies are:

1. Corona Norco Unified School District
2. Fresno Unified School District
3. Long Beach Unified School District
4. Twin Rivers Unified School District
5. Whittier Unified School District

In addition, there are three supporting documents:

1. California's Golden Opportunity: A Status Note
Michael Fullan & Team
November 2014
2. A Golden Opportunity: The California Collaborative for Educational Excellence as a Force for Positive Change
Michael Fullan & Team and California Forward
January 2015
3. California's Golden Opportunity: LCAP's Theory of Action—Problems and Corrections
Michael Fullan & Team
July 2015

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*Endnote

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Glossary

ACSA: Association of California School Administrators

API: Academic Performance Index (former California student assessment program)

CaEdpartners: California Education Partners

CCEE: California Collaborative for Educational Excellence

CCSEA: California County Superintendents Educational Services Association

CDE: California Department of Education

COE: County Office of Education

CORE: California Office to Reform Education

CSBA: California School Boards Association

CSEA: California School Employees Association

CTA: California Teachers Association

CFT: California Federation of Teachers

LASSO: Local Agency System Support Office

LCFF/LCAP: Local Control Funding Formula/Local Control and Accountability Plan

SBE: State Board of Education