

Moving along the Learning Curve: From Values to Public Judgment

Citizen Dialogues on K-12 Education Reform

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It is no secret that California's K-12 education system is facing major challenges. While the state has focused considerable effort and resources on strengthening standards and improving outcomes, the education system still suffers from low performance across the board and a persistent achievement gap – all under the recurring shadow of state budget crises. But many in Sacramento and statewide are pessimistic about whether the system can be changed for the better – and in particular about enlisting Californians' support for the difficult changes necessary to bring that about.

The best research and political commitment in the world will not add up to sustainable reform if the public does not support it. In the fall of 2007, Viewpoint Learning conducted a research and engagement project funded by the Hewlett Foundation, designed to provide insight into the public's key priorities and engage the public in working through alternative approaches to education reform.

Viewpoint Learning's project proceeded in three steps, each building on the ones before:

- a. Six **Choice-Dialogues** conducted across the state with randomly selected representative samples of Californians. These sessions assessed Californians' attitudes towards potential directions for education reform and illuminated key priorities as well as the tradeoffs Californians are (and are not) willing to make to improve the state's K-12 education system.
- b. A **Stakeholder Dialogue** that brought together some of the citizen participants from the Choice-Dialogues with key California policymakers, union leaders, education advocates and business leaders. This group worked to build on the citizens' conclusions from the Choice-Dialogues and to further develop possible approaches for reform.

- c. An **Online Dialogue**, in which Californians across the state discussed education reform over the course of ten days in a structured online format.

CHOICE-DIALOGUE GENERAL FINDINGS

The most striking finding from these dialogues was the extent to which Californians, given a chance to work through the issues, independently arrived at conclusions that anticipated and mirrored experts' recommendations, such as those in the Governor's Committee on Education Excellence March 2008 report.¹ Even more striking, we found that Californians were ready and eager to have the conversation. Our kids' education is an issue that Californians care deeply about and that they have given some thought to. Again and again we found that Californians are ready to support significant, long-term reforms to

1. *Students First: Renewing Hope for California's Future*. (November 2007; released March 2008).



California’s K-12 school system, and they are willing to make difficult choices and real sacrifices to get a system that works.

Each of the dialogues reached very similar conclusions following a similar sequence of steps outlined in the following chart. Each number on the chart corresponds to a section of the General Findings in the main body of report, and is elaborated there.

WHERE THEY STARTED:

1.

**Education is a top priority!
 Our local schools are trying hard, but**

- Kids aren’t engaged
- Parents aren’t involved
- Classrooms are overcrowded
- The system is wasteful and inefficient



We spend **HOW** much on education?
 We spend **HOW** little per student compared to other states?
 Our scores are **HOW** low on national tests?

We have to do something!



2.

We have to do something!

What’s the problem?
 Teachers, schools and districts can’t help kids do better because of state restrictions:

- Red tape/regulations
- Narrow curriculum focused on test scores
- Spending restrictions (“categoricals”)



? **Possible solution:**
 • **Get rid of state bureaucracy?**
 Let local districts and communities decide:

- How schools are run
- What kids are taught
- How money is spent



BUT
 This will lead to big variations in what kids learn in different districts
A California education should be a California education



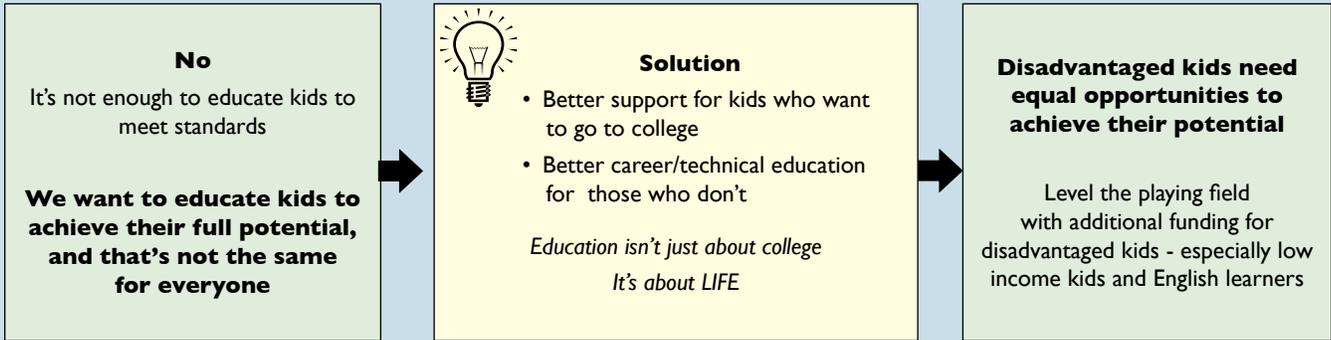
 **Better Solution:**

- Statewide standards for what kids need to learn
- Local districts decide how to get kids to those standards and how to spend funds to do that

CONTINUED 

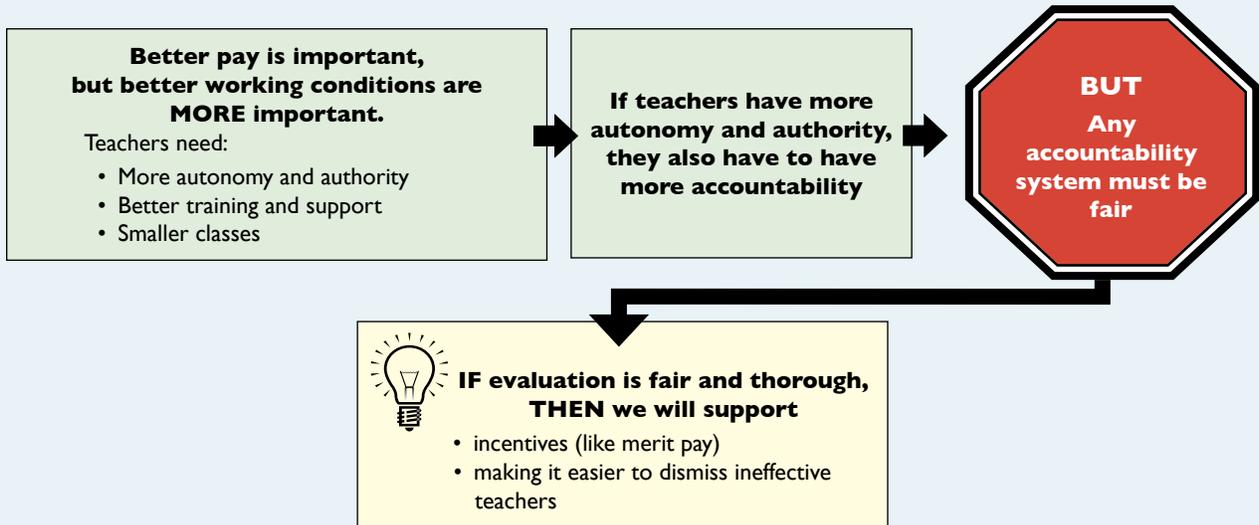
3.

Will this be enough?



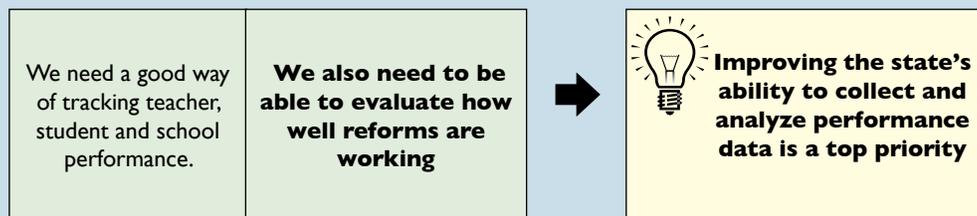
4.

A school system that gives all California kids the chance to achieve needs highly talented teachers. How do we get them?



5.

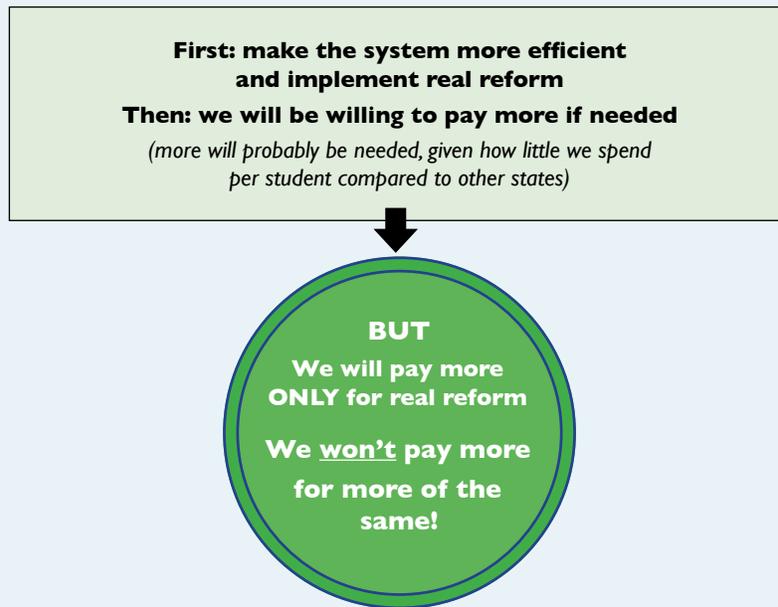
Fair evaluation requires better data



CONTINUED

6.

Are we willing to pay more?



CONCLUSIONS

This series of dialogues with Californians holds important lessons for leaders who want to build public support for significant education reform. The findings of the Choice-Dialogues indicate not where Californians are today, but where they can go in the future given effective leadership and time to connect the dots and work through the implications of proposed reforms. To advance and accelerate this learning process and build broad-based public support for change will require understanding the public’s learning curve and engaging the public on its own terms.

1. Understanding the public’s learning curve.

More than 50 years of research, led by Viewpoint Learning Chairman Daniel Yankelovich, has demonstrated that public opinion on complex issues evolves in stages. From an initial stage of highly unstable “raw opinion” the public moves through a series of steps in which they confront tradeoffs, establish priorities

and reconcile choices with their deeply held values. This process can take anywhere from days to decades. Only when the public understands and accepts responsibility for the consequences of their views can we say that this “learning curve” is complete.

Californians’ understanding of K-12 education reform is advancing along this learning curve. Certainly not every individual and group in the state is at the same stage on every aspect of the issue. But the dialogues have revealed a great deal of common ground – Californians are impressively consistent on a range of conclusions:

Californians are ready to take some steps now. These are areas where the public is furthest along in its learning curve:

- **Rethinking standards.** Californians agree that the basics are essential – every child should be able to read, write and do math – but that the basics alone are not enough. In addition they want to see a more effective and flexible set of standards that ensures the basics but allows students to go beyond that

in different ways depending on their interests and aptitudes. In their view the state’s kids are so diverse that no single set of educational standards can allow every child to maximize his or her potential.

- **Providing better opportunities for kids who are not college bound.** Part of this is ensuring that kids who are not college bound have more access to career trade and technical education.
- **Moving towards a system where the state sets overall standards but local districts have much greater say in how they use resources to get kids to meet those standards.** When considering who should make key decisions about how kids are taught and how money is spent, participants quickly agreed that they wanted more of these decisions to be made by people who know the kids in question and understand their needs – teachers, districts, communities, parents. But they did not want to go too far. While some initially suggested that local entities should establish standards

for their students as well, participants quickly came to feel that it was more important to ensure that every California schoolchild would get a comparable education, no matter where they live or if they move between districts. This idea – that a California education should be a California education across the board – led them to conclude that the state should play a key role in setting overall standards while giving local districts more authority in deciding how to meet those standards.

There are also some directions

Californians are NOT willing to go, and no amount of leadership, persuasion or spin will get them there:

- Holding teachers or schools accountable for performance without also giving them the authority and resources they need to improve performance. (Many participants saw this as the main failing of No Child Left Behind.)
- Cutting funding to some schools or students so that other schools or students can get a larger share. The idea of robbing Peter to pay Paul was especially galling to participants with children attending public schools, most of whom felt that their schools were struggling as it is to make ends meet.
- Spending more on the current system without significant reforms. Any increase in funding must follow and support significant reforms.

On other issues, the public has moved some distance along the learning curve, but they have some way to go before the issue is fully resolved. With leadership and an opportunity to work through the tradeoffs, Californians can be ready to take some additional steps:

- *Shifting away from a categorical funding model* (where dollars are targeted to specific programs) towards a student-centered funding model in which dollars

follow students from school to school.

- *Shifting to a weighted funding system*, in which each student is allocated a baseline amount of funding with additional funding going to disadvantaged students (e.g. English Language Learners and low-income students).
- *Offering teachers merit pay and other incentives.*
- *Making it easier to dismiss ineffective teachers.*
- *Creating better data and information systems for K-12 education.*
- *Paying more for a system that works.*

2. Engage the public on its terms, not yours.

Given the chance to work through the issues around education reform, Californians independently arrive at many conclusions that are remarkably similar to those reached by experts. But they often do not reach these conclusions by the same routes or based on the same assumptions that experts do. Leaders hoping to engage the public and build support for reform need to be aware of this – and to structure their outreach in a way that reflects the public’s framework.

This involves understanding how people process information, the steps they take as they work through the issues, and how to sequence the conversation in a way that keeps pace with the public’s learning process.

This is not a matter of simple framing, or of finding the argument or piece of information that will push the right emotional button and make all the pieces fall into place. It requires a deeper understanding of the public’s values on an issue and how they move along the learning curve. For example, advancing reform measures before the public is ready to accept them is likely to backfire – even

if the proposal is one the public might have ultimately supported given time and effective leadership.²

The first step: a shared language.

Citizens and experts often approach issues with different assumptions, frameworks and terminology – and when two parties use the same words to refer to different things, misunderstanding and mistrust can result. Education issues are especially prone to such misunderstandings. In the course of the dialogues we noted some signal examples of terms that mean one thing to experts and another to members of the general public. These are terms that are especially likely to derail the learning process:

- *“Accountability.”* To education experts, ‘accountability’ generally means using standards and testing to measure student performance and require that they perform up to an acceptable level. While citizens recognize this definition, for them the term has a broader meaning. Citizens also take “accountability” to mean making sure schools are run well and money is not being wasted, and that all parties (students, teachers, administrators, and parents) are held responsible for students’ success.
- *“Tenure.”* When citizens point to ‘tenure’ as one of the problems that stands in the way of improving California’s schools, experts will sometimes note that in fact there is no tenure in California schools – teachers can be dismissed for poor performance just like other civil service employees. This may be technically true but the point for most Californians is that this only happens in the rarest circumstances. Instead, they see a system where bad teachers stay at their kids’ schools year after year. Insisting on the technical nicety while ignoring the larger issue tends to deepen mistrust – citizens conclude that the speaker is either prevaricating or clueless.

2. For example, two recent proposals to consolidate categorical programs including Gifted and Talented Education (or GATE) sparked resistance among parents who see them as attempts to do away with these programs.

- **“Standards.”** The California State Content Standards represent a comprehensive list of what students are expected to know at different stages of their education, and they are widely acknowledged to set a high bar for achievement. However, many Californians take “standards” to mean a far more basic set of skills (e.g. those measured by the exit exam). For experts, the question of whether kids are “meeting standards” can mean – are they critical thinkers who understand California history? But for many citizens the question is far more basic – can they read, write, and balance a checkbook? As a result, when experts say we want our children to “meet standards” citizens are likely to reply that this isn’t enough.
- **“Administration.”** Experts tend to see “administration” in terms of clearly defined roles: staffing, budgeting, selecting curriculum materials, compliance, property management, etc.. However, most citizens find school administration far more opaque, especially above the level of the school site – it is hard to figure out who does what or where a parent should go with a problem or concern. This leads many citizens to equate “administrator” with “bureaucrat” – someone paid to design and enforce cumbersome regulations.

The next step: helping Californians connect specific reform proposals to their basic values. In dialogue after dialogue, Californians’ basic values on K-12 education were clear:

Californians want an education system that will prepare our children for good jobs and full participation in our democracy. They see the goal of education as making sure that kids have a firm grasp of the basics, while allowing each child to achieve his or her fullest potential. Every proposal must be considered in light of how it supports this overall goal.

Every proposal that Choice-Dialogue participants ultimately supported grew out of these fundamental values, and participants assessed each specific step or policy in terms of how well it fit. Each of the following examples illustrates how Choice-Dialogue participants worked through the issues and related back to their fundamental values – and each outlines some implications for leaders who wish to engage the public and build public support for specific reforms:

- **Weighted funding.** Many education experts support allocating additional dollars towards disadvantaged and non-English speaking students. Most participants in our dialogues supported this idea, but they reached this conclusion by a different path from the one taken by advocates and experts. In particular, most were not initially motivated by a specific desire to help disadvantaged kids. Instead, they began from the position that the current education system is not meeting the needs of many students – rich and poor, English learners and native speakers, gifted and challenged – and that they wanted a system where all children have an opportunity to develop their full potential. Only after arriving at this conclusion did they begin to think about whether the playing field was level for all. Their support for weighted funding came out of this broader sense of fair play and making sure that everyone – advantaged and disadvantaged alike – has the resources and support they need to achieve their potential.

- **Implications for leaders:** First establish the common ground that public education should enable all kids to achieve their full potential. In that context, disadvantaged kids are one important group that needs additional resources to achieve their potential. To present the need to help disadvantaged kids as an end in itself is likely



to backfire – Californians want a system where all kids (including the disadvantaged) can succeed.

- **Categorical reform.** Choice-Dialogue participants supported the intent of categorical programs – they strongly favor targeting resources to kids who need them. And they viewed some specific categorical programs (like reading support, class size reduction and GATE) as extremely beneficial to student learning. But they agreed that in practice the categorical system falls far short. Rather than directing resources to children, it directs resources to programs – and too often prevents schools and districts from using those funds in the ways their students really need. They did not object to categorical programs because they object to offering programs to children who need them. The problem was that the programs too often seemed to be the focus, not the kids.

- **Implications for leaders:** First establish the common ground that the goals of most categorical programs are worthwhile and are intended to help kids achieve their full potential. The question is whether these programs provide the most effective *way* to achieve these goals. Local districts and schools have a better sense of what specific programs and approaches will do the most to help

the students they serve. Lifting the restrictions on categorical funding allows these entities to direct funds to the programs they need, rather than the ones that are required.

- **Higher salaries for teachers.** Most Californians we talked with did support higher salaries for teachers, but reached this conclusion in a different way than an advocate might. They began by asking what kind of support teachers need to do their jobs well and help kids to realize their potential – and they concluded that many non-monetary supports (such as reducing class size and improving professional development) were more important than increasing teacher salaries. They did see a role for salary increases – in particular in the form of incentives to attract talented teachers to disadvantaged schools. However, salary increases that were not so directly linked to helping students succeed – e.g., housing bonuses to offset the high cost of living in some areas – were seen as nice, but not essential.

- Implications for leaders:

Californians support teachers – but they do so as a means to improve student learning and achievement. They will assess any proposed changes in teachers’ salary, benefits or working conditions in terms of how it supports that priority.

- **Greater teacher accountability.** When asked early on about strengthening teacher accountability – rewarding exceptional teachers with merit pay and/or making it easier to dismiss teachers who repeatedly fail to improve their students’ learning – participants were wary. Student learning was the most important objective, but many participants felt that current accountability measures essentially scapegoat teachers by holding them responsible for failures they can’t control. Instead they approached the

issue by considering how to improve student’s outcomes. They felt that teachers are the ones who know best how to reach the students in their classrooms, and they wanted teachers to have much more authority to make those decisions. If teachers had that authority, then it only made sense to hold them more accountable for their performance as long as the evaluation system is fair.

- Implications for leaders: Any discussion of increasing teacher accountability has to begin with a discussion of how to give teachers more authority to make decisions about how to teach their students. Once teachers have this authority, Californians support holding them more accountable.

- **An improved data system.** This issue was not top of mind for most participants at the beginning of our dialogues. Many had considered data only in the context of high-stakes testing, which many felt was distorting the educational process by pushing schools to focus on scores rather than kids. But as they considered the question of how to hold teachers, students and schools accountable the issue of data and data collection came into sharper focus – and they began to see data as a necessary way of measuring outcomes and the effectiveness of different approaches. Once they had reached this conclusion, participants came to strongly advocate creating a better data system, seeing it as vital to understanding how their children are doing, how the system is performing, and how reforms are working.

- Implications for leaders: A useful starting point in discussing data is to point out that the current system cannot track the progress of an individual child from year to year – something Choice-Dialogue participants saw as an especially egregious lapse. Overall, it is

important to present a data system as a means, not an end – a way of understanding not only how students are doing, but also whether reforms are having the desired impact.

- **Increased funding.** Californians in all our dialogues were quite explicit and consistent: they are not willing to pay more for more of the same. Many began from the position that there is plenty of money in the system – that waste and mismanagement are the only problem. But as they compared what California spends per student compared to other states, they began to conclude that more money would likely be needed. Even so, participants had several conditions that would have to be met first. First, they wanted to see reforms taking place, and they wanted greater transparency and accountability for how money was being spent. After that, they agreed, if new money was needed to improve students’ learning they would be willing to pay.

- Implications for leaders: Begin by implementing low-cost reforms and by taking steps to make school spending more transparent and accountable. Take visible steps to reduce waste and to get the greatest value for money. These are essential pre-conditions for building broad-based public support for increased funding. Californians start from a position of skepticism and mistrust when it comes to the idea of paying more taxes for anything – and they will resist any proposal that seems to ask them to pay much more for the current K-12 education system.

These findings shed light on the public’s key priorities and values, the steps people take as they work through the issues and how their views evolve as they come to terms with the difficult tradeoffs involved in any sustainable reform. At the beginning of the dialogue the views

expressed by participants closely mirrored those of most Californians – most had not come to grips with the enormous challenges facing the K-12 education system. But by the end of the day – after working together to examine the pros and cons of various choices and struggling with the necessary tradeoffs – they had built on those views to reach conclusions that anticipate many of those reached by experts, including the Governor’s Commission on Education Excellence.

This is a very hopeful sign. Not only is the public farther along the learning curve than leaders might have thought, but when they are given the opportunity to work through the issues more completely they are likely to share significant common ground with leaders and experts. The public takes a different path to get there, one that begins with values, but they arrive at very similar conclusions.

The general public will not arrive at these conclusions overnight. But they *are* ready – today – to begin a serious conversation with the state’s elected leaders about the future of K-12 education in California, to build on what works and invest the time it takes to get reform right. By engaging the public in a way that reflects their values and their priorities, leaders have an opportunity to build broad based public support for change and to create an education system that truly works for all California’s kids.



It is no secret that California's K-12 education system is facing major challenges. While the state has focused considerable effort and resources on strengthening standards and improving outcomes, the education system still suffers from low performance across the board and a persistent achievement gap – all under the recurring shadow of state budget crises. But many in Sacramento and statewide are pessimistic about whether the system can be changed for the better – and in particular about enlisting Californians' support for the difficult changes necessary to bring that about.

An April 2008 poll from the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) illustrates why many decision-makers are downbeat. The poll reveals a public that is concerned about education quality, but with little agreement about what the key problem is or how to fix it. What does come through is dissatisfaction with state leadership, including the governor, the state legislature and the education system;

frustration ran so high that while many felt the system needs additional funds there is no commitment to action. Californians are split in their willingness to pay higher taxes to avoid proposed cuts in public school funding but largely unwilling to support most specific tax measures, especially those they would have to pay themselves.¹ This does not appear to be a climate where serious discussion of systemic (and possibly costly) education reform can flourish.

Small wonder, then, that many leaders view the public as at best a reluctant partner in education reform (and at worst an actual obstacle to be overcome). But we have found that while this is an accurate portrait of where the public stands today it gives little indication of where the public is capable of going – and how little it takes to get Californians thinking far more broadly about the issue of K-12 education, how to fix it, and what they are (and are not) willing to support.

In the fall of 2007, Viewpoint

Learning conducted a series of dialogues with representative random samples of Californians. Months later, in March of 2008, Governor Schwarzenegger's Committee on Education Excellence — a non-partisan, privately funded group established to examine K-12 education in California — issued a series of recommendations to improve the performance of public schools.² What is striking is the extent to which Californians in the dialogues, given a chance to work through the issues, independently arrived at conclusions that anticipated and mirrored the Committee's report in almost every major respect. Even more striking, we found that Californians were ready and eager to have the conversation. Our kids' education is an issue that Californians care deeply about and that they have given some thought to – again and again we found that Californians are ready to consider significant, long-term reforms to California's K-12 school system, and they are willing to make difficult choices and real sacrifices to get a system that works.

1. PPIC Statewide Survey: *Californians and Education*. April 2008

2. *Students First: Renewing Hope for California's Future*. (November 2007; released March 2008).

This is not to say that education experts and ordinary Californians view education reform exactly the same way. While citizens' conclusions closely tracked those reached by experts, we found citizens took a different path to get there. Understanding that path is crucial for leaders hoping to broaden the public conversation around education reform and build public support for change.

"My message to the legislature is we really need some big changes here. We can't keep adding band-aids and trying to fix things, especially while cutting the budget at the same time."

-- Choice-Dialogue participant

STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE PROJECT

The research described in this report builds on the *Getting Down to Facts* project, a major research project requested by a bi-partisan group of legislators and the Governor's office and funded by the Hewlett, Irvine, Stuart, and Gates Foundations. The 20+ studies that made up *Getting Down to Facts* (or *GDTF*) provided valuable insight into what California school finance and governance systems look like today, how resources might be used more effectively to improve student outcomes, and what additional resources may be needed so that California's students can meet educational goals. By illuminating the barriers affecting access and equity in education, *GDTF* shed light on the sorts of reform

approaches that are most needed and most likely to work from a technical standpoint.

However, successful and sustainable policy reform cannot be created with technical input alone - the best technical analysis in the world will not add up to sustainable reform if the public does not support it. Members of the public do not make up their minds on the basis of technical research alone; instead they base their judgment on deeper concerns shaped by values, emotions, deeply held beliefs and the reactions of their fellow citizens. These factors are at least as important as information in shaping citizens' responses to difficult issues: decades of research have documented people's ability to ignore, deny or explain away "facts" that do not correspond to their deeper beliefs. The *GDTF* analysis provided important insight into the systemic challenges facing California's K-12 education system, but it did not (and was not designed to) shed light on these deeply held beliefs and values that are so crucial to shaping public responses.

Viewpoint Learning's research, funded by a grant from the Hewlett Foundation, was designed to provide this essential counterpart to the technical analysis of *GDTF*.

Understanding where the public is today, much less where it is likely to go given effective leadership, is extraordinarily difficult. As we saw at the beginning of our citizen dialogues, most Californians have not yet come to grips with the enormity of the challenges facing the state's K-12 education system. Misconceptions and wishful thinking abound. Under these circumstances, people's surface opinions are highly unstable and polls and focus groups (which take snapshots of opinions) provide little sense of how those opinions are likely to evolve as people learn, or of the kind of leadership initiatives that can

help advance this learning process.

Choice-Dialogues™ were developed by Viewpoint Learning to engage representative samples of the public in working through their views on complex, gridlock issues. Dialogue participants come to understand the pros and cons of various choices, struggle with the necessary trade-offs of each, and come to a considered judgment – all in the course of a single eight-hour day. When conducted with a representative sample, Choice-Dialogues provide both a basis for anticipating how the broader public will resolve issues once they have the opportunity to come to grips with them, and insight on how best to lead such a learning process on a larger scale. As a research tool, Choice-Dialogue represents an important means of hearing the thoughtful voice of the unorganized public, uncovering the public's underlying values and assumptions and developing a deeper understanding of the solutions they would be willing to support and the conditions for that support.³

This project proceeded in three steps, each building on the ones before:

- a. Six **Choice-Dialogues** conducted across the state with randomly selected representative samples of Californians. These sessions assessed public attitudes towards potential directions for education reform. They illuminated key public priorities and concerns and the tradeoffs Californians were (and were not) willing to make to improve the state's K-12 education system.
- b. A **Stakeholder Dialogue** that brought together some of the citizen participants from the Choice-Dialogues with representatives of the political leaders who had requested *Getting Down to Facts*, as well as other key California policymakers, union leaders, education advocates and business leaders. This

3. Additional detail on the Choice-Dialogue methodology can be found in Appendix A.



group worked to build on the citizens' conclusions from the Choice-Dialogues and to further develop possible approaches for reform.

- c. An **Online Dialogue**, in which Californians across the state discussed education reform over the course of ten days in a structured online format. The online format allowed ordinary Californians with an interest in education issues to weigh in on potential reforms and work through the same issues and tradeoffs citizens discussed in the face-to-face dialogues.

CHOICE-DIALOGUES

In September and October 2007 Viewpoint Learning conducted six daylong Choice-Dialogues on K-12 education reform in California. These dialogues were designed to explore public views on education reform and the tradeoffs the public is (and is not) willing to make to achieve a better education system. The sessions, each with 35-45 randomly recruited Californians, were conducted around the state, with one session (in Fresno) conducted entirely in Spanish. The total sample (n = 217) is demographically representative of the state population in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, income, and having school age children.⁴

THREE SCENARIOS

1. FOCUS ON EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

In this scenario we will focus intensely on helping disadvantaged students – those who face the biggest challenges and are most likely to fall behind or drop out. The state will spend more on students who need more help, including those from low-income families and English language learners. Schools serving disadvantaged students must use this money for programs that have been proven to boost student performance on state tests and must show that these programs are working. California will do what it takes to ensure that all students meet a high standard, focused on key skills of reading, writing, science and mathematics.

2. FOCUS ON TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS

In this scenario we will put our resources into recruiting and retaining the best teachers and principals. We will spend more money on salaries, incentives and improved working conditions, as well as providing the support and training that helps teachers and principals perform at their best. Teachers will be given greater flexibility in how and what they teach, and principals will be given more authority in running their schools. Teachers and principals will be accountable for bringing their students to a high standard. Those who repeatedly fail to improve student performance will be given training and assistance; if they continue to fall short, they will be dismissed.

3. FOCUS ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES

In this scenario we will empower local communities to decide what kind of education will best help their students achieve. We will shift more control over K-12 education to local districts and schools. The state's role will be limited to setting overall standards, testing to make sure students are meeting them, and enforcing basic requirements for health, safety, and teacher certification. All other educational decisions – including curriculum, how schools are run, how money is spent and what services are offered – will be made by the district, the school board, the school site and the community.

As a starting point for discussion, participants used a special workbook, constructed around three distinct approaches or scenarios for education reform. (See box.) These scenarios provided a *starting point only* for discussion – participants were free to adapt and combine them as they saw fit.

Choice-Dialogue participants' views at the beginning of the dialogue closely mirrored the attitudes described in statewide polls like PPIC and HarrisInteractive – most had not come to grips with the enormous challenges facing the system. But the Choice-Dialogue format allows participants to go beyond this starting point. The findings outlined below illustrate how Californians' views evolve as they connect the dots and

work through the issues. The dialogue format not only measures support for specific proposals, but it also digs deeper to indicate what people mean when they talk about issues like local control, accountability, equity, and their specific conditions for paying more.

In all six groups, participants followed similar steps and reached a strikingly consistent set of conclusions. (Except where otherwise noted, findings represent all six Choice-Dialogues.)

4. Complete quantitative and demographic information, along with a list of Choice-Dialogue dates and locations, can be found in Appendix B.

1. Where they began

“We didn’t know it was this bad”:

Participants entered the room with a general sense that California schools are falling behind, but were nonetheless shocked by several facts about the current situation. In particular participants were struck to learn:

- how *much* California spends on K-12 education
- how *little* California spends per student compared to other states
- how *low* the state’s students score on national tests like NAEP

“I knew it was bad – but not that bad” was a common sentiment. These three data points established an important framework for the day’s discussion, and participants repeatedly returned to them to underscore their agreement that something had to be done.

“The most surprising thing I learned today was how little we spend on our students compared to other states.”

“Even with the size of California’s economy our education system ranked against other states is near the bottom. That’s egregious – and really pitiful.”

“It seems rather shocking that California is spending the most money in its budget on education and getting the least results in the country.”⁵

Over the course of the day, participants came to agree strongly on two points:

- ***The K-12 education system needs major changes*** (88% agree)

AND

- ***The state should spend more on K-12 education*** (75% agree)

Choice-Dialogue participants stressed that these two conclusions are linked and mutually dependent – they were not willing to spend more on the current system without significant reform, and most felt additional money would eventually be needed to put significant reforms in place.

“We can’t have solutions without money – but just throwing money out there without solutions isn’t going to work.”

Many Choice-Dialogue participants expressed frustration with what they saw as California’s short-sighted approach to reform, which resulted in a series of small-scale piecemeal fixes rather than the kind of systemic reform that is actually needed. Accordingly, they spent much of the day working out reforms that would create a more effective education system – one they *would* be willing to support – and outlining the conditions for that support.

Participants followed a consistent chain of logic in their discussions of what kind of system they would be willing to support:

2. The state should determine the “what” and let local districts determine the “how.”

Many participants began the dialogue highly critical of the state’s role in education – calling the state system of standards and compliance bureaucratic, punitive, and unable to respond to children’s needs and circumstances.

But while many initially suggested giving local districts and teachers more authority to run schools, they refined this position as they worked through its implications. Participants in all six dialogues agreed that the current system of targeting funds through restrictive categorical programs too often stands in the way of districts and schools helping their students. Most agreed that local districts were better suited to make decisions about what would work in their communities. (The only exception to this pattern was in Los Angeles, where deep-seated frustration with the LAUSD led participants to advocate dismantling the district altogether and letting authority devolve to “mini-districts,” individual schools, and teachers.)

“One of my concerns is categorical funding. Sometimes, in these categories, money is designated for a certain area where it really isn’t needed. That amount of money is not needed in that particular category. They go out and they buy all these kits and different things, for instance, in science, and they’re not used. They just sit there, sometimes unopened, never touched.”

5. In this section, participant comments illustrating key points are taken from all six Choice-Dialogues.

However, as they thought about it participants in all six dialogues felt that giving local districts authority over *what* students should learn would lead to greater inconsistency and inequality among districts. They saw the risk as twofold: students who move between districts would risk ending up with gaps in their education because of inconsistent courses of study; in addition poor, rural and small districts would not necessarily have the expertise or financial resources needed to create the best quality curriculum for their students. Accordingly participants agreed that the state should continue to play a strong role by establishing a core curriculum that each district would be responsible for implementing. This, they felt, would be a key means of ensuring that students throughout the state have access to a level playing field.

Ultimately all six groups arrived at a strikingly similar balance between state and local authority:

- In every group, participants stated clearly that ***the state should determine overall standards*** (the “*what*”). The state must establish a universal set of core competencies for all students and must test students regularly to make sure that they are meeting these standards.
- ***Local districts should decide how the curriculum is implemented and how money is spent.*** 66% of respondents said that the local district should make these decisions.⁶ In addition, participants strongly supported allowing local districts to add additional requirements on top of state standards. (A district might, for example, require foreign language study, or computer programming, or agriculture – depending on needs in its region.)
- ***If schools do not meet state standards, the local district should determine how to intervene.*** 48% said this is the local district’s responsibility (only 18% said it was the state’s role and 19% said it

“We want state standards. Our group talked a lot about wanting state standards, but wanting the local districts to decide how they got there.... We need standards at a state level so that if children move from district to district, a California education is a California education across the board.”

should be teachers). The state should step in only as a last resort.

- ***Schools and districts must make a concerted effort to engage both parents and the broader community in decision-making.*** Without this kind of engagement, any move toward greater local autonomy is likely to backfire.

Participants felt that moving toward a more locally controlled education system would do a great deal to improve student performance overall. As they considered the matter, they emphasized that simply ensuring that all students achieve basic competency was too narrow a goal. Instead of creating a system where all kids meet basic standards, they wanted to create a system in which all kids are able to achieve to their maximum potential.

3. All children should have the opportunity to develop their full potential.

Most participants (especially those with children in school) began the day focused on whether their own kids’ needs were being met by the system. As they shared stories and experiences, however, they

quickly shifted to a broader perspective, concluding that California must educate all its children or the whole state will suffer for it. This movement from “me” to “we” lay the groundwork for a fundamental principle articulated in all six dialogues – the idea that all children can learn, and that all have a right to an education that allows them to develop their full potential.

“There should be a core curriculum that is statewide to bring students across the state up to a higher standard. There also should be emphases that are determined by the local communities [and] tailored for their [needs], whether it’s manufacturing or agriculture, or maybe in Los Angeles it might be media and movies.”

“There should be more flexibility so that each school district, each school that receives funding, has the opportunity to decide where they need to spend the most money, what they need the most.”

As they considered how to create a system that would achieve this, participants worked through a series of key steps:

- ***Pay attention to the needs of all children – both those who are struggling and those who are doing well.*** Participants often began by noting

6. As noted above, Los Angeles participants did not want to hand this authority over to LAUSD – if the district could not be broken up into smaller units, then these decisions should be made by individual schools and teachers.

a disconnect between what students need to learn and what the school system is teaching them – and they traced this problem to a one-size-fits-all set of approaches and standards.

Many pointed to instances where they felt the school curriculum stifles creativity and students' interest in learning in the name of an unrelenting focus on test scores. Participants were especially concerned about kids at the extremes of the achievement spectrum. Many felt that academically gifted kids are left to fend for themselves when schools focus attention on children who are at risk of failing. Many also felt that kids who do not have the aptitude or desire to go on to college are being shortchanged as well – and are too likely drop out in the face of high stakes testing and a curriculum that seems irrelevant to their lives or employment prospects.

"I want to see that children have their individual needs met in the school system. Much too often ... we really don't know about the individual child. We have no idea if they are really able to do more. The ones who need a lot of help seem to [get some attention], but we need programs for both ends of the continuum. Individual children are very much left behind, because classes are too large, and ... referrals to special services are complex, bureaucratic, and they don't work very often."

Choice-Dialogue participants saw the dropout rate as a serious problem – bad for kids, communities and the future of the state. They agreed that family, community and the wider culture all contribute to the dropout rate. However, most saw it even more as a symptom of schools' failure to meet students' needs.

As they considered the issue, participants concluded that it is vital for students to have a wider range of opportunities. Specific suggestions included giving talented kids greater opportunities to go beyond the curriculum – through more advanced courses, internships and independent study. Some also suggested improving support for students who could be the first in their families to go to college. And all groups strongly supported **improved vocational and career technical education for students who are not necessarily college bound**. They emphasized that students should not be tracked based on income or family background. Rather, they wanted to see that all children, regardless of background, had a wide range of possibilities to explore. Many noted that California's students are so diverse that a one-size-fits-all model of education is bound to fall short.

Providing education that allows students to pursue goals that truly engage them will help keep more kids in school and will ensure that every child in the state reaches his or her fullest potential.

"Not everybody wants to be a doctor or a mathematician. I love mechanics and cars – If [auto mechanic training] was available to me, that's probably what I would have gone for, but we weren't able to get that in school... You have to go pay money to learn it somewhere else. If you were to learn it at a high school, you would be able to go straight to a job."

"I agree that there should be more vocational training in the high schools, but students also need to know that there are other possibilities. A lot of students don't want to go to college because they don't think ... they can do it, or they haven't seen their mom or dad graduate from college, or uncles and aunts. As well as having vocational education available, they also need to know there are other possibilities ... have the opportunity to become a lawyer if they want to, or a judge, or other things that do require higher education."

• **Education is not about college, it's about life.** This discussion led participants to the broader question of what a public education is *for*: Clearly not test scores – when participants were asked to identify the single most important goal for K-12 education, “preparing students to do well on standardized tests” ranked dead last. However, “preparing students for college” was also unexpectedly far down on the list for most participants.

The Spanish-language dialogue in Fresno was the only one of the six Choice-Dialogues where participants identified college preparation as a top goal: only 8% of participants in the English-language dialogues chose this as the top goal. It is likely that the Fresno group’s demographics (entirely Latino, largely lower-income and with lower education levels than other groups) played a part – other research has found that these groups often place an extremely high value on college. Seen in this light, Fresno participants’ emphasis on college appears to be an “aspirational” response reflecting a hope for upward mobility, for which college is an especially powerful symbol.

In all six dialogues, participants agreed that K-12 education should prepare kids for productive adulthood and full

participation in our democracy, whatever their background or abilities. For many, education was the glue that binds our diverse state together.

• **Some children have greater needs – and should get greater support.** As participants shared stories and experiences, they were struck by the wide variety of experiences, backgrounds, and circumstances participants brought into the room – and they became increasingly aware that children do not begin on a level playing field. As this realization sank in, most participants agreed that some children simply require more support if they are going to meet standards – and that extra funds should be allocated for these students to help them do so. At the end of the day 61% of Choice-Dialogue participants supported allocating additional money to disadvantaged students; 38% supported a flat distribution system in which every child receives the same allocation regardless of circumstance.⁷ In keeping with their overall vision of the proper balance between state and local authority, participants agreed that these funds should follow the student and that the district and the school should be responsible for deciding how to spend them to help disadvantaged students. These funds should no longer

“We were talking about college-bound or technical education, depending on the needs of the student. If they’re dropping out in 9th grade, [we have to] encourage them to stay motivated in school - whether they want to go to USC or they want to be a plumber. But keep them in school longer.... A more educated person looks at life differently and could have more community involvement later on, and [pass that on] to their kids too. I think it could have a huge impact.”

be spent through statewide “categorical” programs. Many also suggested that schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students could use these additional funds to attract skilled teachers.

This raised the corollary question of *who* exactly should be considered “disadvantaged.” Each group answered the question in a slightly different way, some focusing on household income and parental education, others on family situation and neighborhood environment, others on learning disabilities.⁸ While different groups had slightly different visions of who should receive additional support, every group across the board agreed that, at a minimum, low-income kids and English language learners are

Q: WHICH ONE OF THE FOLLOWING SHOULD BE THE MOST IMPORTANT GOAL FOR K-12 EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA?

Teaching every student the basics: reading, writing and math	40%
Giving students the skills they need to hold good jobs in the high-tech economy	24%
Teaching students to be responsible citizens in our democracy	16%
Preparing students for college	16%
Preparing students to do well on standardized tests	4%

7. This split generally tracks with our earlier findings about differing definitions of equity – on many issues we have found consistently that a majority defines a fair system as one that gives more to those who need more, while a significant minority defines a fair system as one in which everyone gets the same. This pattern holds true for all income groups except the wealthiest (those earning more than \$100,000/year), who are split 50/50.

8. Participants were asked not to focus extensively on special education, since those funds are largely Federal and as such outside the purview of this conversation.

“disadvantaged” and should receive a greater share of funding. Interestingly, while we anticipated that discussion of English learners would quickly turn to a discussion of illegal immigration, this concern surfaced only in Riverside, and even there participants – while strongly objecting to illegal immigration – agreed that English learners in public schools should get additional support.

By the end of the day, participants in all six groups supported creating an education system that emphasized a strong core curriculum (reading, writing, math) for everyone but gave students greater opportunities to move beyond these basics in a variety of directions, depending on their aptitudes and interests. They also supported allocating additional funds for students who need greater support to succeed. Participants agreed that these dollars should follow children, not be targeted to specific programs. In addition,

“When [extra money] goes to the disadvantaged student you need to ensure that the money is used specifically to meet their needs.”

“If you are in a low-performing school or in a school that has a lot of low achievers, and it’s a tough job, then we want to see more money for those teachers because we want teachers to compete for those jobs. You want the best of the best in those spots.”

there was widespread support for using these additional funds to attract skilled teachers to schools with large numbers of disadvantaged children.

As they hammered out their vision of a system that provides all students real opportunities to succeed, they realized that this system would stand or fall on the strength of its teachers. Their discussion next turned to the question of how to recruit, retain and support the kind of talented, highly professional teaching force that would be needed.

4. Teachers need greater flexibility, greater authority, and greater accountability.

From the outset participants had a very positive view of teachers and the challenging and important work they do. Good teachers make for better educated students. They agreed that improving the quality and preparation of teachers must be a top priority for any education reform, and they focused next on how to make that happen.

- **Teacher pay is important, but better working conditions and training are equally important.** Participants agreed that teachers should be better paid, but most participants placed even greater weight on improving teachers’ working conditions. Participants saw several specific ways that teacher working conditions should be improved:

- **Greater flexibility and autonomy.** In all six dialogues, participants especially emphasized the need to give teachers greater autonomy to decide what kind of approaches will engage the particular kids in their classrooms. Not only did they feel this would be more effective in improving student outcomes, many also felt that increasing teachers’ autonomy and authority would help attract talented young people into the



teaching professions.

- **Reducing class size** [64% say extremely important]. Even the best teacher cannot reach all students in a class of more than forty kids, and participants felt that overcrowded classrooms force teachers to focus on crowd control rather than learning. Many participants described teaching as fundamentally a one-on-one process – large teacher-student ratios made it far more difficult for teachers and students to succeed. Several suggested that making greater use of teachers’ aides would also help free up teachers to work with students individually.
- **Better training and support** [58% say extremely important]. Participants saw training and support as essential at all stages of a teacher’s career – for new teachers learning the ropes, for more experienced teachers

“My concern right now is the structure in the classroom. They’re requiring teachers to time themselves, teach so many minutes in math, so many minutes for the Spanish students, so many minutes for the at-risk students. The other students are left on their own at centers, working by themselves.”

to hone their skills, and for struggling teachers to get back on track.

Participants focused in particular on supporting newer teachers who are most likely to burn out – specific suggestions included mentoring, master teacher programs and teaming up newer teachers with more experienced teachers at the school.

- **Teachers must be held accountable but any system must be fair.** As participants considered the issue, they recognized that giving teachers greater authority and flexibility would require a stronger accountability system. Many felt that the current system does not effectively reward good performance or punish bad. However, many participants also

“You lose kids’ attention if you can’t captivate that part of them that makes them excited about learning.... If you take away [that excitement], it’s no longer fun. Kids are going to leave school and go out on the streets and look for a misperception of what fun is. That’s where we lose them, and sometimes on a permanent basis. So you have to give the teachers the ability to teach more creatively. They’re in the school, in the classrooms with those kids every day. They have a better idea of how to reach them with the creative element that they know that the kids are going to be excited by and stimulated by.”

initially had deep reservations about commonly proposed accountability measures, such as merit pay and making it easier to dismiss ineffective teachers. As they worked it through participants concluded they would accept stronger accountability measures only on two conditions.

First, as mentioned above, teachers must have the authority they need to make decisions about how to teach the children in their classroom. Without that, holding teachers accountable amounts only to punishing them for circumstances outside their control.

Second, the accountability system must be fair. In particular:

- Any teacher evaluation system must take student circumstance into consideration and must not rely on test scores alone.
- Any evaluation system must include multiple measures of performance. Specific suggestions included measuring student improvement over the course of the year, measuring teachers’ performance compared to others teaching similar subjects and students at the same school, and including input from master teachers, principals and (to a limited extent) parents and students.
- Teachers whose performance is not up to standard must receive training and support before dismissal proceedings are initiated.

If these conditions were met, participants agreed, they would support specific accountability measures. At the end of the day, 59% of participants said

“How is it possible that a teacher who’s badly qualified can’t be sacked? That’s a big problem!”



that “teachers should be financially rewarded when their students do well.” In addition, 77% of participants said that it was either “very” or “extremely important” to make it easier to dismiss ineffective teachers.

5. Growing support for improving the data system.

This discussion of whether and how to hold teachers accountable led participants to consider how the system measures and tracks performance overall. They quickly realized that teachers were only part of the issue – the system also needed to track the performance of students, schools, and specific programs. This would require a much more intensive investment in the system’s ability to measure and compare data than they had imagined at the start of the day.

Improving California’s education data system was not on most participants’ radar at the outset. However over the course of the day they came to see better data as the linchpin to any sustainable reform – if the system is going to hold people accountable, it must be able to accurately track individual student progress and evaluate teacher performance. Just as important, a good data system is essential to assessing whether any of the reforms under discussion are working. Ultimately,

improving the data system was participants' 2nd most important priority (after reducing class size).

"A data system [doesn't] just track the individual child. You're also really able to see what kind of impact each teacher has; what kind of impact each principal is having over their students; how the district is doing It's pricey, but it could be helpful in the long run."

6. Willing to pay more, but not for what we have today.

Participants recognized that creating the kind of education system they were describing would take money – quite possibly more than the state is spending today. This raised the question of how to pay for the changes they wanted – and under what conditions.

• ***Waste is a problem – but it's not THE problem.*** Concern about wasteful spending was widespread, but people did not conclude that fixing wasteful spending alone would be enough to solve California's education woes. While participants were shocked to learn the size of California's K-12 education budget – for \$67 billion a year we ought to get better results! – as they worked it through they also noted that other states actually spend considerably more per student. Perhaps, they concluded, the problem is not waste alone. (Again, Los Angeles was an exception to this pattern, largely because of participants' intense frustration with waste and mismanagement in the LAUSD.)

• ***Willing to pay into a system that works.*** In all six sessions participants agreed that they would ultimately have to pay more for K-12 education, and they became more willing to do so as they clarified their vision of a reformed system. At the end of the day 69% of participants were willing to pay more taxes to support K-12 education. However, most were emphatically not willing to pay more money into the current system, which they saw as failing (71% gave their local schools a grade of mediocre or failing (C or below)). Leaders would have to implement real reform – and show that money is being spent efficiently – before participants would be willing to consider any tax increase. After this, if a clear accounting shows that more money is necessary to implement further reform, then participants were willing to pay increased taxes to support K-12 education. Most favored either an increase in the state income tax (57% support) and/or a 2-3% increase in the state sales tax (55% support). Property taxes and parcel taxes did not gain majority support; nor did a larger (5%) increase in the sales tax.

"I keep hearing the word under funded. If we're spending \$67 billion, and everything is constantly under funded, where is the money? Is there any way to have them give us some sort of accounting of where the money is going, because we don't have it. Where is it?"

"Short of burning down all the schools and starting over, you don't get more money out of us. You just don't. \$10,000 times 20 kids, that's \$200K. I don't see \$200K in my classroom. I don't see a teacher making enough money to make a difference, I don't see new books, new technology, new ideas, new innovations, new training. I don't see it. When you show me the money in the classroom, and then you tell me, well maybe if you paid more taxes we could put in this brilliant music program, or this incredible art thing, then maybe. But until I really start seeing the money in the classroom, I can't get on board with it."

"The most shocking thing that I heard today is me saying that I would raise my taxes for other people's kids. The one message I have for decision-makers is this: Yes, I said I'd raise my taxes. But I did not say I was going to raise my taxes to give you any more of my money to waste. Get it right, or I will vote!"

STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUES

In February 2008, several weeks after the completion of the Choice-Dialogues, Viewpoint Learning conducted a day-long “Stakeholder Dialogue” that brought together some of the citizen participants from the previous Choice-Dialogues with key policymakers from Sacramento, union leaders, education advocates and business leaders. The Stakeholder session was similar to the Choice-Dialogues, but differed in two key respects: 1) The starting point for the discussion was the scenario defined by citizens in the Choice-Dialogues⁹ and 2) participants went further in defining a set of practical action steps that, based on their experience and expertise, would have the greatest leverage in moving California toward the agreed-upon vision. Throughout this practical problem-solving session participants looked for common ground between the vision and tradeoffs the citizens defined and the perspective and insider knowledge that leaders brought to the table.

One additional factor shaping the discussion in the Stakeholder Dialogue was the recent announcement of the extent of the state’s budget gap. These new, grimmer projections led participants to adopt a three-part approach that considered 1) what sorts of low-cost steps might be possible now, 2) what would have to wait until additional funds are available, and 3) what steps might best lay the groundwork for future action once the budget picture improves.

How did we get here? Participants first identified trends and changes that have brought the state’s education system to its current pass. Among the points they emphasized were:

- *An increased focus on strengthening academic standards and improving student outcomes.* Participants noted that this has had some positive effects – for example ensuring that students demonstrate basic competency before

earning a high school diploma. However many felt it has also led schools to prioritize test scores in reading and math over all else.

- *Changes in technology.* The technological revolution has transformed the classroom and the workplace in California – good jobs increasingly require technical literacy, and while a high school dropout might once have been able to get a stable job this is no longer the case.
- *Changing demographics and increased diversity.* Classrooms are more diverse – racially, culturally and linguistically – than ever before, making it more difficult to establish a common culture and to live up to the commitment to educate all children.
- *A top-down governance system.* Participants noted that over the last thirty years, authority instruction and dollars has shifted dramatically towards the state and away from local jurisdictions.
- *A short term focus.* Over the last twenty years California has displayed a marked preference for short term fixes over significant reforms. This had created a serious lack of continuity – teachers and principals must adopt new – and sometimes contradictory – approaches every few years. The problem is made worse by a budgetary process that results in inconsistent and highly unpredictable funding.
- *Persistent underfunding, coupled with lack of accountability for how money is spent.* Many felt that education in California is consistently underfunded, leading to larger class sizes and difficulty recruiting teachers. At the same time, the Byzantine school funding system makes it extremely difficult to understand how money is being spent and whether it is being spent effectively.

If California stays on this course, participants foresaw a series of negative consequences.

- K-12 schools will become even more overcrowded, understaffed and demoralized.
- Families with means will increasingly gravitate towards the few remaining “good” public school districts – or opt out of the public schools altogether.
- The achievement gap will widen, which will deepen and entrench the divide between ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ already at work in California.

The net result for the state will be serious and long-lasting: we will see higher crime, reduced economic activity and a decline in California’s standing in the nation and the world.

“If nothing changes, I think we’ll see that there really are two different school systems – one for haves and one for have-nots. The quality of teaching at socio-economically advantaged schools is so much better - I think we’ll continue to see an achievement gap between schools.”¹⁰

Where do we go from here? Stakeholder Dialogue participants next turned to the citizens’ conclusion from the Choice-Dialogue as a starting point for further discussion. They agreed with the citizens’ conclusion that the current system focuses excessively on testing and compliance and too often loses sight of the real goal of improving student outcomes. They strongly supported revising the state education code to support a more student-centered system. To this end, they

9. The “citizens’ scenario” – which summarizes citizen conclusions from the Choice-Dialogues – can be found in Appendix C.

10. Quotes in this section include comments from citizens and leaders who took part in the Stakeholder Dialogue.

supported the citizen conclusions, with the following additions and adjustments:

- **State standards/local autonomy.** Like Choice-Dialogue participants, Stakeholder Dialogue participants agreed that California needs strong state standards for academic achievement, and that local districts need greater autonomy in deciding how to meet those standards. They especially stressed the need for districts to have greater say in how money is spent; while this point had also been important for the Choice-Dialogue participants it had been lower on their list of priorities.
- **Community engagement.** Stakeholder Dialogue participants emphasized the importance of engaging the entire community in education – not only parents but all parts of the community, including those not directly involved with the schools. They also went beyond the citizens’ conclusion to emphasize that this involvement must go both ways – that community members have a responsibility to schools, but that schools also need to step outside their own boundaries and become more active participants in other aspects of community life.
- **Teaching must be the top priority.** Like Choice-Dialogue participants, Stakeholder Dialogue participants emphasized the need for the best quality teaching. They also refined this point



further, noting that the system must broaden its focus beyond teachers per se. Instead, the system must prioritize *teaching* – all the elements from funding to administration to classroom design that work together to help students learn.

Stakeholder Dialogue participants then turned to the question of what practical steps could be taken to move toward their common-ground vision. Given the current budget crisis they focused on steps that would not require significant increases in funding in the short term and would make better use of existing funds. Participants defined two key priorities:

1. **Reform the governance of K-12 education; move to a system of state standards with greater local autonomy in implementation**
2. **Build a better foundation for any future funding increases needed to support a reformed K-12 system**

1. Reform the governance of K-12 education. Participants supported the Choice-Dialogue conclusion that California must increase local autonomy in school governance. Like Choice-Dialogue participants, they envisioned a system in which overall standards are set by the state but local schools and districts have much greater authority to determine how to achieve those standards. They agreed that any attempt to bring this about would have to contend with two key challenges: making the system more effective, and making it more accountable. Participants outlined several specific steps to address each of these challenges:

Steps to increase effectiveness:

- **Make funding predictable**, so that districts and school sites can plan long term – this might involve creating a multi-year budgeting process for the state.

“What you really want is a system that is ... transparent and coherent – a system that focuses everything it does policy-wise and resource-wise on teaching. And whether that is through information flow, accountability, how we pay [teachers], how we focus instructional resources, it’s about a system in which it is apparent that teaching is job one. I don’t think that that’s apparent in the system we now have and it’s something that we ought to be working towards.... Individual teachers are the delivery system ... and the state has to create a policy structure in which teachers can do their job and they have all the appropriate resources.”

- **Address inequality of resources between districts.** This will require completely rethinking the current school funding system and moving to a simpler and more transparent system in which districts receive equivalent amounts of funding per student with additional resources targeted to students in need. In addition, districts (especially small districts and those in rural areas) should get assistance developing their human resources so that they have the personnel to run themselves effectively.
- **Increase parental involvement** – suggestions included active outreach to engage parents who might not otherwise be able to participate (e.g.

providing translators at school functions, scheduling meetings at times that meet the needs of working parents). Participants also discussed “sticks,” such as strictly enforcing truancy laws so that parents are held directly accountable when their children fail to attend school.

- **Spur community involvement**, possibly by restoring school boards’ power to tax – participants agreed that such a move would be an effective way of focusing community attention on school matters.
- **Collect a wide range of best practices from districts statewide**. Information about these best practices should be compiled and made readily available so that schools and teachers have a wide range of effective approaches to consider as appropriate for their students.

“There is no one program. That’s the problem – everybody keeps looking for that one program that works. It does not exist. . . . Instead it’s about teaching and learning in that class with those students. Even if you’re a great teacher, next year you’re going to have a new set of kids and you’re going have to teach differently than you taught [the year before]. So it’s not about just finding [one thing] that works . . . it’s about providing a menu of best practices. [Good teachers are] constantly evaluating what works, and good teaching is about always learning and always trying different things.”

Steps to increase accountability:

- **Hold teachers and principals more accountable for student performance**. This requires strengthening the evaluation process (allowing more time, better data, multiple measures). Once that has been done, then streamline the dismissal process so that weeding out ineffective teachers and administrators is easier. Participants also noted that reducing teachers’ job security would have to be balanced by significant improvements in other aspects of the job – or risk driving people away from the profession altogether.

“When you search for a job, you look at [several] key factors – stability, salary and benefits. We certainly don’t pay our teachers well . . . [but we] made up for that on the stability side. But if you’re contemplating a change [that makes teaching less stable], I think you have to fill up one of the other buckets, otherwise you’ve made the job unattractive. It’s barely attractive now.”

- **Create a community report card for education** that shows how schools in the area are performing on a variety of educational and financial measures. Some suggested as a model the infrastructure report cards now in use across California (and in many other states as well).
- **Create a high quality data system** to accurately measure how students, teachers, schools and specific programs are performing

- **Hold students more accountable for their performance**. Many tests now given as part of the annual STAR testing are integral to assessing school performance but matter quite little to students: a student’s score on these exams has no bearing on whether he or she is promoted to the next grade level. Participants felt that a test that is “high stakes” for a teacher or school should be “high stakes” for the student as well.
- **Establish a clear chain of accountability** so that it is clear who must intervene and how if students, teachers, administrators, schools, or districts are failing.

2. Build a better foundation for any future funding increases. Most participants felt that the substantive reforms that were required would eventually require additional funds, and that it was important to lay the groundwork for this sooner rather than later. They had several key points about conditions for raising additional revenue and how it might be accomplished.

- **Allocate additional dollars to students with greater needs**. Any reformed funding system should ensure that students get the resources they need to succeed – and that schools receive additional funds to support the learning of students who are more costly to educate. These funds should follow students, not programs. An important first step will be to establish clear guidelines about who needs additional resources and how much.
- **“Hold harmless” existing funding for districts**. When the funding system is streamlined and regularized, districts should be held harmless for what they are receiving now. Participants agreed that it was politically impossible to make dramatic cuts in any school’s funding in the name of “leveling the playing field”

– the opposition created by such an attempt would stop reform in its tracks.

- **Rebuild public trust.** Participants recognized that unless public mistrust can be addressed, it would not be possible even to begin a conversation about raising taxes for education reform. One key way of addressing this mistrust is to bring about greater transparency in how education dollars are allocated and spent. In addition, it is vital that any conversation about new dollars engages the public more fully and takes place in the context of long-term reform, not in the context of shoring up the existing system or implementing a small-scale quick fix.

ONLINE DIALOGUE

For 10 days in February and March 2008, hundreds of Californians from across the state participated in an on-line dialogue about the same issues of K-12 education reform. This dialogue, called “Citizen Dialogue on Education Reform” (CDER), was advertised through the web sites of the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Sacramento Bee* and the *Fresno Bee*, as well as through outreach to education organizations, community groups, parent-teacher organizations and other groups with an interest in the issue. Because the entire CDER dialogue was publicly available, many more Californians were able to follow along as the participants worked through the tradeoffs involved in K-12 education reform.

Over two weeks, the CDER participants worked in small groups using an on-line platform called “Small Group Dialogue” that has been used successfully around complex issues – including the redevelopment of Ground Zero in New York City, interracial relationships and marriage, and President Clinton’s impeachment.

Online Dialogue produces different kinds of insight compared to those reached through Choice-Dialogue. As a self-selected group, online dialogue participants cannot be considered to be a representative sample, and they are more likely to have some pre-existing interest in and familiarity with the issue. This was true of CDER participants, who were disproportionately female (66%), more affluent than Californians as a whole, with higher levels of education and fewer racial and ethnic minorities. In addition, about 50% of participants reported having a child in grades K-12 (compared to less than 40% statewide), and a little over half (53%) said they were or had been employed in the education field. However, their conclusions are an important reflection of a subset of Californians who are especially engaged in the question of education reform. Not only are these people who are likely to show up and weigh in during public forums, many could be described as the “boots on the ground” when it comes to education in their communities – PTA members, school volunteers, concerned parents and other community leaders. CDER participants are both concerned voices for change and also people who are in a position to help make change happen in their communities.

Most CDER participants’ conclusions closely tracked those reached by citizens in the Choice-Dialogues. CDER participants cared deeply about education

“A “fair” system to me is one that provides extra resources to the students who need the most help. I don’t mean to focus all attention on the disadvantaged, but quality education should not be based on personal wealth or the ability to learn quickly.”¹¹

reform, and their conversation was articulate and passionate. In particular they strongly supported:

- **Ensuring that all children get the opportunity to succeed to the best of their ability** (as opposed to being fit into a standardized mold).
- **More local control over how students are taught and how money is spent.** In the course of the dialogue a handful of participants took this a step further and called repeatedly for vouchers; however, the majority of participants did not take up this recommendation.
- **Getting parents and the community more engaged in K-12 education**
- **Smaller class sizes**
- **Giving teachers greater flexibility and autonomy – which in turn requires greater accountability.**

“Giving teachers and principals the flexibility to help their students achieve at specified levels is critical. Along with this increased freedom should come a solid value-added assessment, coaching and review system to help teachers who are not performing well to improve and to reward those teachers who consistently outperform expectations.”

There were several interesting differences between the conclusions reached by Choice-Dialogue participants and CDER participants. Some of these were a matter of timing: the announcement of the state’s budget gap had been made public only two weeks before the start of

11. Quotes in this section are taken from the Citizen Dialogue on Education Reform (CDER) message boards.

CDER, and newspapers and media outlets across the state were full of discussion of budget cuts and their impact on schools. As we saw in the Stakeholder session, these new, grimmer projections contributed to a more intense concern about budgets and budget cuts than had been seen in the earlier Choice-Dialogues. Other differences may be the result of a self-selected and more affluent sample.

- **Greater concern about over-reliance on standardized tests.** CDER participants were more likely to express resentment of standardized tests. Many, especially those with children in higher performing schools, found it difficult to see the utility of testing as it currently takes place; they saw it as arbitrary and punitive and too often an impediment to real learning.

“There are many things that need to change. Testing is one of them. Too much testing is burning everyone out. The constant drill of teaching to the test is doing nothing to create well rounded and critical thinking members of society.”

Choice-Dialogue participants tended to shift to a more systemic perspective over the course of the day. In particular, Choice-Dialogue participants came to focus on the importance of measuring progress and determining what approaches are effective, and they came to see accurate data and information as key to any workable accountability system – in short, they came to see testing as a tool rather than as an end in itself. While some CDER participants arrived at a similar conclusion, they were less hopeful that it would be possible

to devise a testing and accountability system that could go beyond a narrow vision of compliance.

- **Less willingness to adopt weighted student funding.** CDER participants were on the whole less willing than the randomly recruited Choice-Dialogue participants to embrace weighted student funding that would allocate additional per-student dollars to disadvantaged students. Many expressed a sense that the state has been funneling money toward disadvantaged kids for years and has little to show for it. Many were also acutely concerned that their own kids (most of whom would not be considered economically disadvantaged) were not getting the services they need – a concern thrown into particular relief by the state’s budget crisis.
- **Less willingness to pay more.** By the same token, many CDER participants were more inclined to argue that eliminating waste and abuse would be enough to shore up the system and to reject the notion of paying additional taxes. Some also questioned the link between spending more and improving outcomes. Others concluded that while improving the public schools would ultimately cost more money, they had little confidence that state leaders could put together a better system.

“Throwing more money and resources at the current education system has not created better schools for our children. True that disadvantaged districts don’t have as much as privileged, but there is no correlation between dollars spent and success.”

CONCLUSIONS

This series of dialogues with Californians holds important lessons for leaders who want to build public support for significant education reform. The findings of the Choice-Dialogues indicate not where Californians are today, but where they can go in the future given effective leadership and time to connect the dots and work through the implications of proposed reforms. To advance and accelerate this learning process and build broad-based public support for change will require understanding the public’s learning curve and engaging the public on its own terms.

1. Understanding the public’s learning curve.

More than 50 years of research, led by Viewpoint Learning Chairman Daniel Yankelovich, has demonstrated that public opinion on complex issues evolves in stages. From an initial stage of highly unstable “raw opinion” the public moves through a series of steps in which they confront tradeoffs, establish priorities and reconcile choices with their deeply held values. This process can take anywhere from days to decades. Only when the public understands and accepts responsibility for the consequences of their views can we say that this “learning curve” is complete.

Californians’ understanding of K-12 education reform is advancing along this learning curve. Certainly not every individual and group in the state is at the same stage on every aspect of the issue. But the dialogues have revealed a great deal of common ground – Californians are impressively consistent on a range of conclusions:

Californians are ready to take some steps now. These are areas where the public is furthest along in its learning curve:

- *Rethinking standards.* Californians agree that the basics are essential – every child should be able to read, write and do math – but that the basics alone are not enough. In addition they want to see a more effective and flexible set of standards that ensures the basics but allows students to go beyond that in different ways depending on their interests and aptitudes. In their view the state’s kids are so diverse that no single set of educational standards can allow every child to maximize his or her potential.
- *Providing better opportunities for kids who are not college bound.* Part of this is ensuring that kids who are not college bound have more access to career trade and technical education.
- *Moving towards a system where the state sets overall standards but local districts have much greater say in how they get kids to meet those standards.* When considering who should make key decisions about how kids are taught and how money is spent, participants quickly agreed that they wanted more of these decisions to be made by people who know the kids in question and understand their needs – teachers, districts, communities, parents. But they did not want to go too far. While initially some suggested that responsibility for setting standards should be transferred to local authorities, participants quickly came to feel that it was more important to ensure that every California schoolchild would get a comparable education, no matter where they live or if they move between districts. This idea – that a California education should be a California education across the board – led them to conclude that the state should play a key role in setting overall standards while giving local districts more authority in deciding how to meet those standards and to add to them as they see fit.

There are also some directions Californians are NOT willing to go, and no amount of leadership, persuasion or spin will get them there:

- Holding teachers or schools accountable for performance without also giving them the authority and resources they need to improve performance. (Many participants saw this as the chief failing of No Child Left Behind.)
- Cutting funding to some schools or students so that other schools or students can get a larger share. The idea of robbing Peter to pay Paul was especially galling to participants with children attending public schools, most of whom felt that their schools were struggling as it is to make ends meet.
- Spending more on the current system without significant reforms. Any increase in funding must follow and support significant reforms.

On other issues, the public has moved some distance along the learning curve, but they have some way to go before the issue is fully resolved. With leadership and an opportunity to work through the tradeoffs, Californians *can* be ready to take some additional steps:

- *Shifting away from a categorical funding model* (where dollars are targeted to specific programs) towards a student centered funding model in which dollars follow students from school to school.
- *Shifting to a weighted funding system*, in which each student is allocated a baseline amount of funding with additional funding going to disadvantaged students (e.g. English Language Learners and low-income students).
- *Offering teachers merit pay and other incentives.*

- *Making it easier to dismiss ineffective teachers.*
- *Creating better data and information systems for K-12 education.*
- *Paying more for a system that works.*

2. Engage the public on its terms, not yours.

Given the chance to work through the issues around education reform, Californians independently arrive at many conclusions that are remarkably similar to those reached by experts. But they often do not reach these conclusions by the same routes or based on the same assumptions that experts do. Leaders hoping to engage the public and build support for reform need to be aware of this – and to structure their outreach in a way that reflects the public’s framework.

This involves understanding how people process information, the steps they take as they work through the issues, and how to sequence the conversation in a way that keeps pace with the public’s learning process.

This is not a matter of simple framing, or of finding the argument or piece of information that will push the right emotional button and make all the pieces fall into place. It requires a deeper understanding of the public’s values on an issue and how they move along the learning curve. For example, advancing reform measures before the public is ready to accept them is likely to backfire – even if the proposal is one the public might have ultimately supported given time and effective leadership.

The first step: a shared language. Citizens and experts often approach issues with different assumptions, frameworks and terminology – and when two parties use the same words to refer to different things, misunderstanding and mistrust can result. Education issues are especially

prone to such misunderstandings. In the course of the dialogues we noted some signal examples of terms that mean one thing to experts and another to members of the general public. These are terms that are especially likely to derail the learning process:

- *“Accountability.”* To education experts, ‘accountability’ generally means using standards and testing to measure student performance and require that they perform up to an acceptable level. While citizens recognize this definition, for them the term has a broader meaning. Citizens also take “accountability” to mean making sure schools are run well and money is not being wasted, and that all parties (students, teachers, administrators, and parents) are held responsible for students’ success.
- *“Tenure.”* When citizens point to ‘tenure’ as one of the problems that stands in the way of improving California’s schools, experts will sometimes note that in fact there is no tenure in California schools – teachers can be dismissed for poor performance just like other civil service employees. This may be technically true but the point for most Californians is that this only happens in the rarest circumstances. Instead, they see a system where bad teachers stay at their kids’ schools year after year. Insisting on the technical nicety while ignoring the larger issue tends to deepen mistrust – citizens conclude that the speaker is either prevaricating or clueless.
- *“Standards.”* The California State Content Standards represent a comprehensive list of what students are expected to know at different stages of their education, and they are widely acknowledged to set a high bar for achievement. However, many Californians take “standards” to mean a far more basic set of skills (e.g. those measured by the exit exam). For

experts, the question of whether kids are “meeting standards” can mean – are they critical thinkers who understand California history? But for many citizens the question is far more basic – can they read, write, and balance a checkbook? As a result, when experts say we want our children to “meet standards” citizens are likely to reply that this isn’t enough.

- *“Administration.”* Experts tend to see “administration” in terms of clearly defined roles: staffing, budgeting, selecting curriculum materials, compliance, property management, etc.. However, most citizens find school administration far more opaque, especially above the level of the school site – it is hard to figure out who does what or where a parent should go with a problem or concern. This leads many citizens to equate “administrator” with “bureaucrat” – someone paid to design and enforce cumbersome regulations.

The next step: helping Californians connect specific reform proposals to their basic values. In dialogue after dialogue, Californians’ basic values on K-12 education were clear:

Californians want an education system that will prepare our children for good jobs and full participation in our democracy. They see the goal of education as twofold: giving every child

a firm grasp of the basics and allowing every child to achieve his or her fullest potential. Every proposal must be considered in light of how it supports this overall goal.

Every proposal that Choice-Dialogue participants ultimately supported grew out of these fundamental values, and participants assessed each specific step or policy in terms of how well it fit. Each of the following examples illustrates how Choice-Dialogue participants worked through the issues involved and related back to their fundamental values – and each outlines some implications for leaders who wish to engage the public and build public support for specific reforms:

- *Weighted funding.* Many education experts support allocating additional dollars towards disadvantaged and non-English speaking students. Most participants in our dialogues supported this idea, but they reached this conclusion by a different path from the one taken by advocates and experts. In particular, most were not initially motivated by a specific desire to help disadvantaged kids. Instead, they began from the position that the current education system is not meeting the needs of many students – rich and poor, English learners and native speakers, gifted and challenged – and that they wanted a system where all children have an opportunity to develop their



full potential. Only after arriving at this conclusion did they begin to think about whether the playing field was level for all. Their support for weighted funding came out of this broader sense of fair play and making sure that everyone – advantaged and disadvantaged alike – has the resources and support they need to achieve their potential.

- *Implications for leaders:* First establish the common ground that public education should enable all kids to achieve their full potential. In that context, disadvantaged kids are one important group that needs additional resources to achieve their potential. To present the need to help disadvantaged kids as an end in itself is likely to backfire – Californians want a system where all kids (including the disadvantaged) can succeed.
- **Categorical reform.** Choice-Dialogue participants supported the intent of categorical programs – they strongly favor targeting resources to kids who need them. And they viewed some specific categorical programs (like reading support, class size reduction and GATE) as extremely beneficial to student learning. But they agreed that in practice the categorical system falls far short. Rather than directing resources to children, it directs resources to programs – and too often prevents schools and districts from using those funds in the ways their students really need. They did not object to categorical programs because they object to offering programs to children who need them. The problem was that the programs too often seemed to be the focus, not the kids.
 - *Implications for leaders:* First establish the common ground that the goals of most categorical programs are worthwhile and are intended to help kids achieve their full potential. The question is whether these

programs provide the most effective way to achieve these goals. Local districts and schools have a better sense of what specific programs and approaches will do the most to help the students they serve. Lifting the restrictions on categorical funding allows these entities to direct funds to the programs their kids need, rather than the ones that are required.

- **Higher salaries for teachers.** Most Californians we talked with did support higher salaries for teachers, but reached this conclusion in a different way than an advocate might. They began by asking what kind of support teachers need to do their jobs well and help kids to realize their potential – and they concluded that many non-monetary supports (such as reducing class size and improving professional development) were more important than increasing teacher salaries. They did see a role for salary increases – in particular in the form of incentives to attract talented teachers to disadvantaged schools. However, salary increases that were not so directly linked to helping students succeed – e.g., housing bonuses to offset the high cost of living in some areas – were seen as nice, but not essential.
 - *Implications for leaders:* Californians support teachers – but they do so as a means to improve student learning and achievement. They will assess any proposed changes in teachers’ salary, benefits or working conditions in terms of how it supports that priority.
- **Greater teacher accountability.** When asked early on about strengthening teacher accountability – rewarding exceptional teachers with merit pay and/or making it easier to dismiss teachers who repeatedly fail to improve their students’ learning – participants were wary. Student learning was the most important objective, but

many participants felt that current accountability measures essentially scapegoat teachers by holding them responsible for failures they can’t control. Instead they approached the issue by considering how to improve student’s outcomes. They felt that teachers are the ones who know best how to reach the students in their classrooms, and they wanted teachers to have much more authority to make those decisions. If teachers had that authority, then it only made sense to hold them

more accountable for their performance as long as the evaluation system is fair.

- *Implications for leaders:* Any discussion of increasing teacher accountability has to begin with a discussion of how to give teachers more authority to make decisions about how to teach their students. Once teachers have this authority, Californians support holding them more accountable.
- **An improved data system.** This issue was not top of mind for most participants at the beginning of our dialogues. Many had considered data only in the context of high-stakes testing, which many felt was distorting the educational process by pushing schools to focus on scores rather than kids. But as they considered the question of how to hold teachers, students and schools accountable the issue of data and data collection came into sharper focus – and they began to see data as a necessary way of measuring outcomes and the effectiveness of different approaches. Once they had reached this conclusion, participants came to strongly advocate creating a better data system, seeing it as vital to understanding how their children are doing, how the system is performing, and how reforms are working.

- *Implications for leaders:* A useful starting point in discussing data is to point out that the current system cannot track the progress of an individual child from year to year – something Choice-Dialogue participants saw as an especially egregious lapse. Overall, it is important to present a data system as a means, not an end – a way of understanding not only how students are doing, but also whether reforms are having the desired impact.
- **Increased funding:** Californians in all our dialogues were quite explicit and consistent: they are not willing to pay more for more of the same. Many began from the position that there is plenty of money in the system – that waste and mismanagement are the only problem. But as they compared what California spends per student compared to other states, they began to conclude that more money would likely be needed. Even so, participants had several conditions that would have to be met first. First, they wanted to see progress on low-cost reforms, and they wanted greater transparency and accountability for how money was being spent. After that, they agreed, if new money was needed to improve students’ learning they would be willing to pay.
- *Implications for leaders:* Begin by implementing low-cost reforms and by taking steps to make school spending more transparent and accountable. Take visible steps to reduce waste and to get the greatest value for money. These are essential pre-conditions for building broad-based public support for increased funding. Californians start from a position of skepticism and mistrust when it comes to the idea of paying more taxes for anything – and they

will resist any proposal that seems to ask them to pay much more for the current K-12 education system.

These findings shed light on the public’s key priorities and values, the steps people take as they work through the issues and how their views evolve as they come to terms with the difficult tradeoffs involved in any sustainable reform. At the beginning of the dialogue the views expressed by participants closely mirrored those of most Californians – most had not come to grips with the enormous challenges facing the K-12 education system. But by the end of the day – after working together to examine the pros and cons of various choices and struggling with the necessary tradeoffs – they had built on those views to reach conclusions that anticipate many of those reached by experts, including the Governor’s Commission on Education Excellence.

This is a very hopeful sign. Not only is the public farther along the learning curve than leaders might have thought, but when they are given the opportunity to work through the issues more completely they are likely to share significant common ground with leaders and experts. The public takes a different path to get there, one that begins with values, but they arrive at very similar conclusions.

The general public will not arrive at these conclusions overnight. But they are ready – today – to begin a serious conversation with the state’s elected leaders about the future of K-12 education in California, to build on what works and invest the time it takes to get reform right. By engaging the public in a way that reflects their values and their priorities, leaders have an opportunity to build broad based public support for change and to create an education system that truly works for all California’s kids.

Choice-Dialogue: THE METHODOLOGY

Choice-Dialogue methodology differs from polls and focus groups in its purpose, advance preparation, and depth of inquiry.

PURPOSE

Choice-Dialogues are designed to do what polls and focus groups cannot do and were never developed to do. While polls and focus groups provide an accurate snapshot of people's current thinking, Choice-Dialogues are designed to predict the future direction of people's views on important issues where they have not completely up their minds, or where changed circumstances create new challenges that need to be recognized and addressed. Under these conditions (which apply to most major issues), people's top-of-mind opinions are highly unstable, and polls and focus groups can be very misleading. Choice-Dialogues enable people to develop their own fully worked-through views on such issues (in dialogue with their peers) even if they previously have not given it much thought. By engaging representative samples of the population in this way, Choice-Dialogues provide unique insight into how people's views change as they learn, and can be used to identify areas of potential public support where leaders can successfully implement policies consonant with people's core values.

ADVANCE PREPARATION

Choice-Dialogues require highly trained facilitators and (above all) the preparation of special workbooks that brief people on the issues. These workbooks formulate a manageable number of research-based scenarios, which are presented as a series of values-based choices, and they lay out the pros and cons of each scenario in a manner that allows participants to work through how they really think and feel about each one. This tested workbook format enables people to absorb and apply complex information quickly.

DEPTH OF INQUIRY

Polls and focus groups avoid changing people's minds, while Choice-Dialogues are designed to explore how and why people's minds change as they learn. While little or no learning on the part of the participants occurs in the course of conducting a poll or focus group, Choice-Dialogues are characterized by a huge amount of learning. Choice-Dialogues are day-long, highly structured dialogues – 24 times as long as the average poll and 4 times as long as the average focus group. Typically, participants spend the morning familiarizing themselves with the scenarios and their pros and cons and developing (in dialogue with each other) their vision of what they would like to have happen in the future. They spend the afternoons testing their preferences against the hard and often painful tradeoffs they would need to make to realize their values. To encourage learning, the Choice-Dialogue methodology is based on dialogue rather than debate – this is how public opinion really forms, by people talking with friends, neighbors and co-workers. These 8-hour sessions allow intense social learning, and both quantitative and qualitative measures are used to determine how and why people's views change as they learn.

STEPS IN A Choice-Dialogue PROJECT

1. ARCHIVAL ANALYSIS OF POLLS (OR CONDUCTING A SPECIAL ONE) AND OTHER RESEARCH TO PROVIDE A BASELINE READING ON WHAT STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT PUBLIC OPINION HAS REACHED.

2. THE IDENTIFICATION OF CRITICAL CHOICES AND CHOICE SCENARIOS ON THE ISSUE AND THEIR MOST IMPORTANT PROS AND CONS, AND THE PREPARATION OF A WORKBOOK BUILT AROUND THOSE SCENARIOS IN A TESTED FORMAT FOR USE IN THE DIALOGUES.

3. A SERIES OF ONE-DAY DIALOGUE SESSIONS WITH REPRESENTATIVE CROSS-SECTIONS OF THE POPULATION

Each dialogue involves about 40 participants, lasts one full day and is videotaped. A typical one-day session includes the following:

- Initial orientation (including the purpose of the dialogue and the use to be made of the results, the nature of dialogue and ground-rules for the session, introduction of the issue and some basic facts about it);
- Introduction of the choice scenarios on the issue, and a questionnaire to measure participants' initial views;
- Dialogue among participants (in smaller groups and in plenary) on the likely good and bad results that would occur as a consequence of each choice if it were adopted, and constructing a vision of the future they would prefer to see;
- A second, more intensive round of dialogue among the participants (again both in smaller groups and in plenary) working through the concrete choices and tradeoffs they would make or support to realize their vision;
- Concluding comments from each participant on how their views have changed in the course of the day (and why), and a questionnaire designed to measure those changes.

4. AN ANALYSIS OF HOW PEOPLE'S POSITIONS EVOLVE DURING THE DIALOGUES

We take before and after readings on how and to what extent people's positions have shifted on each choice as a result of the dialogue. This analysis is both quantitative and qualitative.

5. A BRIEFING TO LEADERS TO MAKE SENSE OF THE RESULTS

The briefing summarizes what matters most to people on the issue, how positions are likely to evolve as surface opinion matures into more considered judgment, the underlying assumptions and values that shape that evolution, and the opportunities for leadership this creates.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Ratings of the three scenarios:

In each ChoiceDialogue, participants were surveyed twice, once at the beginning of the day and again at the end. They were asked to rate their response to each scenario independently on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being totally negative and 10 being totally positive. The initial mean for each scenario indicates participants' average rating of the choice in the morning; the final mean represents participants' average rating of the same scenario at the end of the dialogue.

	initial mean	final mean
Focus on equal opportunity	6.9	6.9
Focus on teachers and principals	7.6	8.0
Focus on local communities	7.0	8.5

Additional questions

Overall, how much change do you think is needed in California's K-12 education system?

	Total (%)
The system needs major changes	88
The system needs minor changes	10
The system is basically fine the way it is	0

Do you think state government should ...

... spend more than it does now on K-12 education?	75
... spend the same amount that it does now on K-12 education?	22
... spend less than it does now on K-12 education?	3

Which ONE of the following should be the most important goal for K-12 education in California?

Teaching every student the basics: reading, writing and math	40
Giving students the skills they need to hold good jobs in the high-tech economy	24
Preparing students to do well on state standardized tests	4
Preparing students for college	16
Teaching students to be responsible citizens in our democracy	16

If you had to give your local public schools a grade, what would it be?

A	5
B	21
C	50
D	14
Fail	7

How important would each of the following proposals be in improving California's public schools?

	Total (%)
Reducing restrictions on how schools spend their money	
extremely important	23
very important	46
somewhat important	26
not very important	4
Reducing class size and school over-crowding	
extremely important	71
very important	22
somewhat important	6
not very important	1

Getting better information about how teachers, students, schools and programs are performing

extremely important	54
very important	39
somewhat important	7
not very important	0

Providing better training for teachers and principals

extremely important	58
very important	35
somewhat important	6
not very important	0

Putting more resources into helping low-performing students and preventing drop-outs

extremely important	51
very important	33
somewhat important	15
not very important	1

Which ONE of these changes do you think would help the most?

Reducing restrictions on how schools spend money	7
Reducing class size	41
Getting better information about performance	20
Better training for teachers and principals	15
More resources to helping low-performing students	17

How important would each of the following proposals be in improving the quality of teaching in California's public schools?

	Total (%)
Paying more to teachers and principals who produce better results.	
extremely important	28
very important	46
somewhat important	23
not very important	3
Making sure that teachers have strong credentials in the subject they teach.	
extremely important	44
very important	42
somewhat important	13
not very important	1

Making it easier to dismiss teachers who aren't doing a good job.

extremely important	37
very important	40
somewhat important	19
not very important	4

Paying more to teachers who work in challenging schools with low-performing students.

extremely important	35
very important	39
somewhat important	24
not very important	2

Offering bonuses to attract and retain teachers in areas where there are shortages like math and science.

extremely important	34
very important	44
somewhat important	17
not very important	6

Offering alternative teacher certifications based on capability and experience rather than a teaching degree

extremely important	29
very important	33
somewhat important	30
not very important	8

Offering teachers ongoing support and training in how to help their students achieve.

extremely important	58
very important	36
somewhat important	6
not very important	0

Improving teachers' working conditions by making class size smaller and increasing prep time.

extremely important	64
very important	28
somewhat important	8
not very important	0

How important would each of the following proposals be in improving California's public schools?

Reducing restrictions on how schools spend their money

extremely important	23
very important	46
somewhat important	26
not very important	4

Reducing class size and school over-crowding

extremely important	71
very important	22
somewhat important	6
not very important	1

Getting better information about how teachers, students, schools and programs are performing

extremely important	54
very important	39
somewhat important	7
not very important	0

Providing better training for teachers and principals

extremely important	58
very important	35
somewhat important	6
not very important	0

Putting more resources into helping low-performing students and preventing drop-outs

extremely important	51
very important	33
somewhat important	15
not very important	1

Which ONE of these changes do you think would help the most?

Reducing restrictions on how schools spend money	7
Reducing class size	41
Getting better information about performance	20
Better training for teachers and principals	15
More resources to helping low-performing students	17

Which comes closer to your point of view?

	Total (%)
Teachers should be financially rewarded when their students do well; they make a difference in whether kids succeed.	59
It's not fair to pay more to teachers whose students do well when so many things that affect student learning are beyond teachers' control.	40

In your opinion, if additional state funding becomes available for K-12 education, how should it be distributed?

It should be used to provide additional funding to schools with many disadvantaged students	61
It should be distributed evenly among all schools in the state, according to the number of students they serve	38

Who should have the greatest influence in deciding...

... what is taught in public schools?	
state government	42
teachers	18
local district and board	35
principals	3

... how funds are spent?

state government	11
teachers	11
local district and board	66
principals	11

... how to improve failing schools?

state government	18
teachers	19
local district and board	48
principals	11

How willing would you be to pay more in taxes to support K-12 education?

very willing	29
somewhat willing	40
somewhat unwilling	18
very unwilling	14

If there were a measure on your local ballot to increase property taxes to provide more funds for local public schools, how would you vote?

	Total (%)
Yes	45
No	54

There have been various proposals for raising additional funding for California's K-12 public schools. Please indicate the extent to which you favor or oppose each of the following if more funding is needed:

Increasing state income tax rates	Total (%)
favor strongly	21
favor somewhat	36
oppose somewhat	17
oppose strongly	24

Increasing parcel taxes	
favor strongly	12
favor somewhat	26
oppose somewhat	25
oppose strongly	35

Increasing the state sales tax by 5%	
favor strongly	14
favor somewhat	20
oppose somewhat	25
oppose strongly	37

Increasing the state sales tax by 2-3%	
favor strongly	21
favor somewhat	34
oppose somewhat	18
oppose strongly	25

CHOICE-DIALOGUE DEMOGRAPHICS

	Sample (%)	CA (%)		Sample (%)	CA (%)
Gender			In statewide elections (for governor and statewide initiatives), how likely are you to vote?		
male	46	50	always vote	65	53
female	54	50	usually vote	12	n/a
			sometimes vote	8	n/a
			rarely vote	1	n/a
Age			registered but never vote	2	n/a
under 18	1	-	not registered to vote	10	n/a
18-24	13	19			
25-34	18	19			
35-44	19	21			
45-54	25	19	Household income		
55-64	17	7	under \$25,000	28	21
65+	6	15	\$25,000 - \$34,999	13	10
			\$35,000 - \$49,999	13	13
Do you have children currently in grades K-12?			\$50,000 - \$74,999	22	18
yes	38	39	\$75,000 - \$99,999	9	13
no	60	61	\$100,000 or more	14	25
(If yes) Do your children attend			Highest level of schooling completed		
public school	89	n/a	less than HS	6	20
private/parochial school	9	n/a	HS grad	12	23
home school	1	n/a	some college	32	20
			college degree	32	26
How would you describe your political views?			grad study/degree	18	10
very conservative	9	n/a			
conservative	27	n/a	Ethnicity		
moderate	43	n/a	African American	17	6
liberal	15	n/a	Asian	6	12
very liberal	2	n/a	Caucasian	40	43
no answer	6	n/a	Latino	32	36
			Other	5	3

Citizens' Conclusion

As they worked through the three scenarios, participants in the ChoiceDialogues on Education Reform reached a notably consistent set of conclusions. For the Stakeholder Dialogue, these conclusions were summarized in a "citizens' conclusion," which Stakeholder Dialogue participants used as their starting point:

Citizens' Conclusion

We found a surprising amount of common ground on the future we want to see for K-12 education. We agree both that California's education system needs major changes and that the state will need to spend more on K-12 education. These goals are inextricably linked: we are not willing to spend more on the current system unless there is significant reform. At the same time we realize that additional money will eventually be needed to put significant reforms in place. As we worked through the issues and tradeoffs, we identified a range of reforms we would be prepared to support, including:

- **Funding should follow students, not programs.** In the current system, too much money is tied up in restrictive categorical programs, and too often it doesn't get to the kids who need it. We support revising this system so that funds follow children from school to school. To ensure that all students get the resources they need, a baseline amount of funding should be allocated for each student, with additional funds then allocated for students who need more help meeting standards – especially kids who are low-income or learning English.
- **The state should determine what students learn, and let local districts decide how.** It is the state's responsibility to determine what students should learn. Standards should be universal, and the state should test students regularly to make sure standards are being met. However, local districts should be the ones to determine how the curriculum is implemented, how money is spent and whether additional subject areas should be added beyond the state-mandated baseline. If schools do not perform well, the district should step in; the state should intervene only as a last resort.
- **Support teachers, give them more autonomy, and hold them accountable.** Teachers need support and resources to do their jobs. We believe it is important to improve teachers' pay, but even more important to improve their working conditions through smaller classes, better training and support, and up to date materials. Teachers should have greater flexibility and autonomy to try innovative approaches, but increased autonomy and resources will require a stronger accountability system. We will support accountability measures – including merit pay for successful performance and making it easier to dismiss ineffective teachers – provided that teachers are given the authority they need. Any evaluation system must be fair and transparent, and must not blame teachers for circumstances outside their control.
- **Strengthen the data system to improve accountability.** Better information is essential to holding teachers, students and schools accountable in a way that is fair. A better information system is the linchpin to any sustainable reform; without it we are flying blind. We strongly support creating a more effective system for gathering and tracking data about performance, and we believe this must happen soon.
- **We believe that the purpose of K-12 education is to prepare all our kids for productive adulthood and full participation in our democracy.** Education is not about college, it's about life – it should prepare people to hold good jobs and be responsible citizens, whatever their background or abilities. A one-size-fits-all approach to education leaves too many kids by the wayside and adds to the dropout problem. We must provide more and better opportunities for all students, including options like vocational education for those who are not college bound.
- **We will pay more but only for a better system.** Curbing wasteful spending is vital, but this alone will not be enough to turn California's system around. Given that California spends significantly less per student than other states with similarly large and diverse populations, it is reasonable to expect that we will have to pay more taxes for K-12 education. But we are not willing to pay more money into the current system. If leaders implement real reform and show that money is being spent efficiently, then we will be willing to pay more to get the K-12 education system we want.

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