

# **gardner perspectives**

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## **COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC READINESS FOR ALL: A TRI-LEVEL CHALLENGE**



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Two important policy shifts characterize the current wave of education reform in the United States and in California specifically: (1) a growing consensus that college, career, and civic readiness should be the educational goal for all high school graduates, and (2) a trend toward local control or flexibility in implementation to achieve that goal. Taken together, these trends present daunting new challenges for school district leaders. The equity and learning demands of universal college and career readiness imply that all young people in public schools must have access to deeper learning opportunities that will prepare them to master rigorous academic content, think critically, work collaboratively, and learn to apply classroom learning to real-world contexts. As well, districts are being called on to play a central role in developing the strategies, capacities, and professional accountability systems that are equal to these new learning goals. In fact, as California establishes plans to make college and career readiness the guide-star for student learning, the need for corresponding systems change and new capacities becomes evident at every level of our public education system.

At the classroom level, educators are preparing to use new technologies and to implement curricula that require greater capital and human investments in more sophisticated teaching methods and approaches. This, in turn, implies that teachers are being asked to engage in professional learning that not only expands their knowledge and teaching repertoire but that, in the case of veteran teachers, aims to transform long-standing habits of practice and to challenge deeply held beliefs about their role as teachers.

At the school level, school leaders must implement more robust assessment systems capable of promoting continuous learning and improvement among both students and faculty. They must also address school culture and climate issues that promote academic engagement of all students directed at the new learning goals. And, the heightened importance of school climate and social and emotional learning also raises the stakes for incorporating afterschool staff, support providers, and Linked Learning partners

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into a more coherent effort to expand learning opportunities across a restructured day.

At the top of the American school governance structure, there is a growing recognition among state and national leaders that the pursuit of universal college and career readiness will demand a next generation accountability framework anchored in a more ambitious vision for student learning. The challenge, according to experts, is to devise and implement a new paradigm that promotes professional accountability for equitable access to deeper learning. Against this policy backdrop, California's CORE districts are advancing an accountability system based on data-driven continuous improvement. Continuous improvement systems in education are characterized by: (1) leadership that brings a continuous improvement mindset to the work; (2) broad stakeholder engagement; (3) support for the on-going learning of all adults who work directly with students; and (4) the use of data to inform inquiry, action, and assessment.

The Gardner Center recently published a knowledge brief that examines the California CORE district's efforts to date to form a learning collaborative that advances professional accountability. The focus of analysis is on the how the districts are working to move away from the bureaucratic norms of accountability that have characterized public education for the last three decades to instead focus on building the infrastructure and capacity for district-led, continuous organizational learning and improvement.

Two years into this effort, the California CORE districts are in the formative stages. In the next two years the CORE Districts will begin the process of school level implementation of social emotional learning practices and related continuous improvement structures that will prepare all students for college and a career. Although they came together around a shared commitment to equity, each district's implementation context is very different in terms of size, student demographics, local politics and reform capacity. These differences will doubtless shape the approaches they will take to drive reform within their districts. This next phase will be critical to observe and document as the California Department of Education completes parallel work on a statewide school accountability system and seeks to draw lessons from the CORE District's efforts as they unfold.

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