

**Testimony Prepared for the Little Hoover Commission
Public Hearing on Educational Governance and Accountability
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Dominic J. Brewer, Professor of Education, Economics and Policy at The University of Southern California.

Thank you for inviting me today.

You have probably seen the lengthy report Jo Smith and I prepared for the GDTF series of studies, as well as a brief summary of that report. In addition, you have a PowerPoint presentation that reviews some of the main findings. I would be happy to answer any questions regarding the report or presentation. First, permit me to make some brief opening comments.

Educational governance is complex and it can be frustrating trying to determine how to improve it. I would like to stress five points.

First, in the view of both the academic experts, and the decision makers at the state, county, district level we interviewed for our study, educational governance *is* important. Although the laws, rules, institutions and relationships that make up the governance system do not directly *cause* good student achievement, they can *enable* it. It is important to get the governance structure as aligned as possible with the goals of the system. An effective governance structure can help schools get the most of students; an ineffective governance structure can lead to poor resource allocation, impose barriers to good instruction and lead to frustration.

Second, unfortunately research does not provide a clear guide as to the “best” governance system. Because the linkages to student outcomes are indirect, and governance arrangements typically complex, it is rarely possible to test whether a specific set of governance arrangements lead to certain outcomes. Frustrating as it may be for policymakers, research cannot provide a blueprint for good governance. At best it can provide some pointers on what might be most likely to produce good outcomes.

Third, in thinking about governance, we often tend to think in terms of specific institutions and their roles. These are important but in some ways they are less important than (i) agreement on the goals themselves and (ii) the way in which they are accomplished. Simply thinking in terms of what we are trying to do and how to get the incentives right to achieve those goals will go along way to improving governance. In particular, our study suggests that in California we have typically relied on mandates and regulations as the mechanisms for accomplishing what we want, rather than providing incentives for lower level actors to respond in the ways would like. Further, governance and finance are

intimately related. If funding is provided through increased categorical programs, there is decreased autonomy over decisions at the school and district level, a direct impact on governance.

Fourth, in considering the effectiveness of a governance system, five criteria emerged from our interviews with experts and stakeholders in the California system.

- *Stability*: policy is made as far in advance as possible, enabling rational and planned decision-making; detected through examining revenue fluctuations, policy continuity and tenure of leaders
- *Accountability*: institutions and individuals are held responsible for their actions; clear lines of authority between parts of the system; limited duplication of functions
- *Innovation, Flexibility and Responsiveness*: system adaptable to changing needs; responds to new demands
- *Transparency*: clear to all stakeholders how decisions are made/who makes them; participation encouraged at every level
- *Simplicity and Efficiency*: decisions are coherent, coordinated across domains and levels, and made in a timely manner; duplication and waste are minimized

On each of these criteria, it is clear to our interviewees as well as to us from our analysis of the education code and legislative activity that the state could improve. In particular, the numerous decision making bodies that currently exist result in a fragmented and confusing governance structure that doesn't promote accountability and transparency. The lack of a "culture of data" inhibits smart policy decisions. The tendency to proscribe actions of districts and schools limits flexibility and innovation.

Fifth, in reviewing educational governance in California, there is clearly an opportunity to refine an accountability system built upon high standards. Currently, we have put those standards in place but have not provided most schools with the autonomy to choose how to meet these standards. Rather, we continue to regulate the inputs and processes in the system either from the state or the district level, violating the basic theory of action underlying accountability. In our view, the more we can consider changes that enhance the flexibility of resource use at the school and district level the better.

Because of the lack of trust between the entities in the structure, and skepticism about the capacity of lower level actors to handle enhanced authority, a systematic effort should be made to build capacity at these levels. This includes

a greatly enhanced data system, school board and administrator training, and the development of budget and other tools. With a genuine effort to build that capacity, maintaining the high standards but accompanied by devolution of resource allocation decisions to schools and districts, we believe considerable progress could be made.