

# POLICY BRIEF

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## Defining a New North Star: Aligning Local Control Accountability Plans to College and Career Readiness

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## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

California's array of recent educational reforms presents school district leaders with an extraordinary opportunity. In the wake of the state adopting new academic standards, school funding models, and a system of accountability, California educators can repurpose their work beyond chasing improvement on standardized tests of basic literacy and numeracy. The Local Control Funding Formula and Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) also present a challenge: how to organize the complex overlay of policies, programs, and practices to realize multiple, often competing, federal, state, and local goals. This policy brief recommends that district leaders point their LCAPs toward college and career readiness to guide educator decisions and facilitate system coherency. With this new North Star, districts will be better able to navigate the murky waters between policy and practice.

# INTRODUCTION

Educators have the increasingly difficult task of preparing students to live, learn, and work in the 21st century. Amidst those challenges, a growing body of research suggests that college and career readiness depends upon students' ability to think critically, learn how to learn, communicate, and collaborate. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era of accountability prioritized basic literacy and numeracy above all other knowledge and skills. For better or for worse, cut score proficiency defined by standardized testing has operated as the North Star of education policy since the turn of the millennium. Yet federal and state accountability systems are undergoing a massive sea change, marked by new and more rigorous standards and assessments, shifting roles and responsibilities for district and state education agencies, and a growing recognition that school quality is composed of inputs, processes, and outcomes beyond a single score on a single assessment.

Recent legislation in California created the Local Control Funding Formula, replacing a 50-year-old system of state-controlled categorical funding by returning considerable financial control to local hands. Such funding flexibility brings both opportunity and challenge in the form of Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs). LCAPs require districts to detail how they plan to spend funds and measure progress for all students toward eight state priorities. In Figure 1, we show the portion of the LCAP template that describes California's priorities.<sup>1</sup>

Scrambling to meet those eight potentially competing priorities might leave many districts feeling as if they are adrift, particularly those

districts that have become heavily acculturated to understanding success through test scores alone. In the LCAP model, traditional cut scores account for only one subcomponent of one priority. Much like early mariners who used the North Star to navigate unfamiliar waters, California educators need a beacon to guide policy and practice. They need to adopt and align to a strategic direction, vision, and plan. In this policy brief, we recommend that district leaders align their LCAPs to a definition of college and career readiness that guides educator decisions in order to facilitate system coherence.

## THE NEED FOR A NORTH STAR

In many ways, NCLB's limited approach to accountability has intensified since 2001. In most states today, students who demonstrate proficiency in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)—as measured by cut scores on CCSS assessments such as the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)—will be deemed college and career ready. However, the reforms described above have created a unique opportunity for districts in California to expand their notions of student success beyond test scores on CCSS assessments.

Now district leaders face the challenge of organizing a complex array of policies, programs, and practices to realize multiple state and local goals. Without a North Star, districts and schools will likely continue to chase performance on narrow sets of outcome measures in a fashion similar to NCLB, perhaps doing so under the assumption that it represents the only path to close persistent achievement gaps.

## A. CONDITIONS OF LEARNING:

**Basic:** degree to which teachers are appropriately assigned and fully credentialed in the subject areas and for the pupils they are teaching; pupils have access to standards-aligned instructional materials and school facilities are maintained in good repair. (Priority 1)

**Implementation of State Standards:** implementation of academic content and performance standards adopted by the State Board for all pupils, including English learners. (Priority 2)

**Course access:** pupil enrollment in a broad course of study that includes all subject areas schools are required to offer. (Priority 7)

## B. PUPIL OUTCOMES:

**Pupil achievement:** performance on standardized tests, score on Academic Performance Index, share of pupils that are college and career ready, share of English learners that become English proficient, English learner reclassification rate, share of pupils that pass Advanced Placement exams with 3 or higher, share of pupils determined prepared for college by the Early Assessment Program. (Priority 4)

**Other pupil outcomes:** pupil outcomes in the subject areas schools are required to offer. (Priority 8)

## C. ENGAGEMENT:

**Parent involvement:** efforts to seek parent input in decision making, promotion of parent participation in programs for unduplicated pupils and special need subgroups. (Priority 3)

**Pupil engagement:** school attendance rates, chronic absenteeism rates, middle school dropout rates, high school dropout rates, high school graduation rates. (Priority 5)

**School climate:** pupil suspension rates, pupil expulsion rates, other local measures including surveys of pupils, parents, and teachers on the sense of safety and school connectedness. (Priority 6)

Figure 1. Local Control Accountability Plan state priorities and associated indicators.

So if not basic literacy and numeracy, what should districts point their LCAPs toward to close those achievement gaps? Research suggests that the student success formula is made up of a collection of cognitive and metacognitive skills such as collaboration, social awareness, global competencies, and learning how to learn. These skills and others in the metacognitive domain have been shown to provide greater utility,<sup>2</sup> better predict postsecondary success,<sup>3</sup> and be more malleable<sup>4</sup> than cognitive skills. College and career readiness, which refers to a set of cognitive and metacognitive skills associated with success beyond high school, seems like a viable alternative to an exclusive focus on basic literacy and numeracy.

Though college and career readiness might seem intuitive, it is actually a multifaceted construct that encompasses a wide range of competencies. In fact, literacy and numeracy make up a small

fraction of the skills students need to be college and career ready.<sup>5</sup> Dr. David Conley and his colleagues at the Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) have studied the topic for more than two decades. That research led to the development of the Four Keys to College and Career Readiness (see Figure 2), a nationally recognized definition of college and career readiness that serves as the model for states, districts, and organizations nationwide. The Four Keys include

- (a) Key Cognitive Strategies,
- (b) Key Content Knowledge,
- (c) Key Learning Skills and Techniques, and
- (d) Key Transition Knowledge and Skills.

The model comprises 42 components and shows that students need much more than content knowledge to succeed in a 21st-century economy.<sup>6</sup>

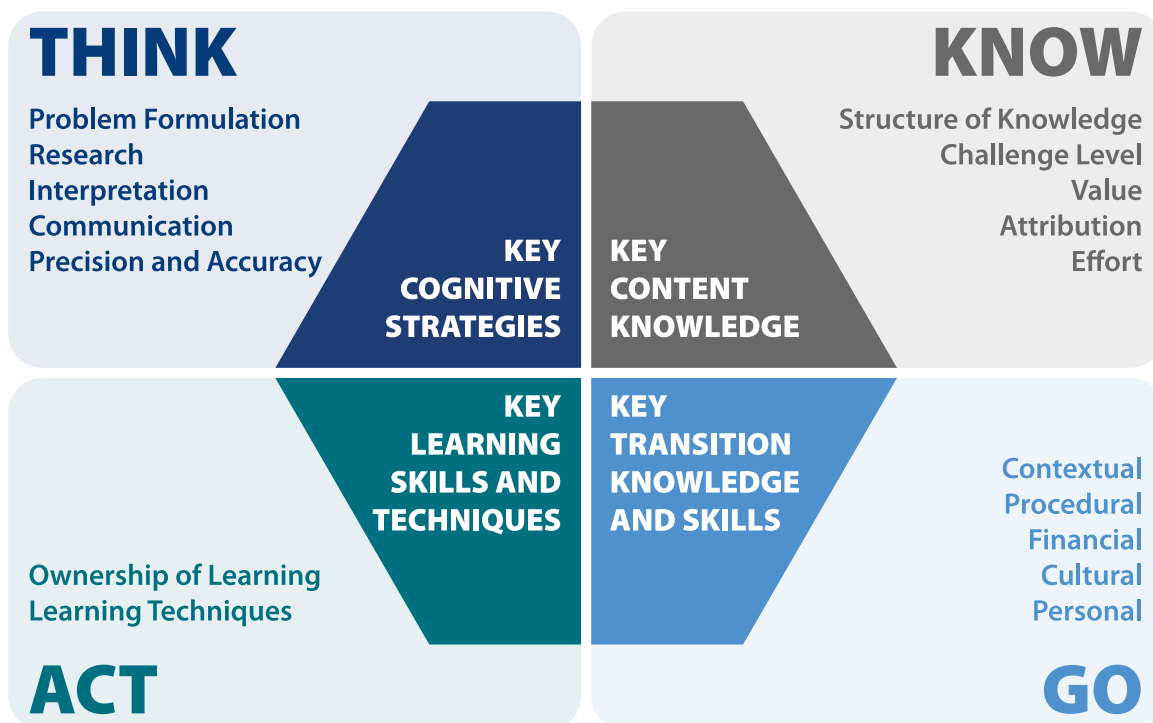


Figure 2. The Four Keys to College and Career Readiness.



A critical question then becomes: How well have districts aligned their LCAPs to college and career readiness? Answering this question first requires an acknowledgment that policymakers in Sacramento did not intend for LCAPs to be organized around college and career readiness. Instead, districts were expected to create plans for specifying how they will address eight state priorities. However, it is useful to know what strategic directions, if any, inform a district's LCAP.

To begin understanding the extent to which LCAPs might align with college and career readiness, EPIC researchers analyzed the first cohort of LCAPs from nine districts in Orange County for the 2014–2015 academic year.<sup>7</sup> Two noteworthy findings emerged from this analysis. First, each district's LCAP aligned minimally with college and career readiness. This finding should not be unexpected: the eight state priorities and 24 associated indicators, in and of themselves, do not explicitly speak to the majority of skills associated with college and career readiness. Second, the overwhelming majority of instances in which districts' LCAPs did align to college and career readiness related to students' content knowledge—what the Four Keys model refers to as Key Content Knowledge and most stakeholders associate with the type of information that standardized tests typically assess. The LCAPs in our sample suggested that local education leaders were still operating with NCLB-style accountability as their strategic framework.

In addition to analyzing district LCAPs, EPIC held a series of workshops in late 2014 and early 2015 with district- and school-based leadership teams in Orange County. Through these workshops, collectively referred to as the Orange County

Department of Education College and Career Readiness Consortium Coaching, EPIC provided guidance on college and career readiness strategic planning and implementation using the Four Keys as a lens. Focal areas included

- building the capacity of district and school leaders to support college and career readiness practices and policies,
- conducting asset mapping and gap analyses specific to the Four Keys, and
- providing technical support to develop systems of assessments and accountability that support making college and career readiness explicit in LCAPs.

These analyses and workshops described above informed the recommendation below.

## RECOMMENDATION

If a district lacks an organizing framework, we recommend that college and career readiness serve as the North Star for its LCAP. Districts seeking to use their LCAP to promote a college- and career-going culture should take the following steps:

1. Adopt, modify, or generate a consistent and shared definition of college and career readiness.
2. Evaluate the current LCAP for alignment to that definition.
3. Revise the LCAP to align with college and career readiness as its new North Star.

By following these steps, district leaders will help ensure that the goals and actions outlined in an LCAP describe a coherent system instead of

competing priorities. Making a system coherent will lead to school-based policies that can build the capacity of educators to teach students the skills necessary for success in K–12 and beyond.

## STEP 1: CHOOSE A NORTH STAR

A district has three distinct options for creating a consistent and shared definition of college and career readiness:

- **Adopting** an existing definition
- **Modifying** and contextualizing an existing definition
- **Generating** a new definition

### Adopting

Spokane Public School District in Washington State, the Beaverton School District in Oregon, and many other districts have adopted the Four Keys as their definition of college and career readiness. In addition to EPIC, other organizations such as ConnectEd and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills have provided research-based definitions of college and career readiness. Though each of their definitions is distinct, each embodies principles of Deeper Learning. Defined by the Hewlett Foundation,<sup>8</sup> the Deeper Learning framework requires students to master not only core academic content but also critical thought, collaboration, communication, and learning how to learn. Together, these skills allow engaged students to seek new knowledge, apply that knowledge to what they have learned, and work to build new knowledge. Most importantly, students who work toward Deeper Learning see how their studies relate to their postsecondary aspirations and goals.

### Modifying

The state of Hawaii adapted the Four Keys model in order to make it more culturally and locally relevant. Its model of college, career, and community readiness includes four components:

- Content knowledge
- Learning skills and cognitive strategies
- Transitional skills
- Wayfinding

Hawaii's first three components encapsulate the Four Keys. Wayfinding is bound in a Hawaiian cultural context and centers on students' understanding and valuing themselves, their community, and the diversity of cultures around the world. Wayfinding outcomes include, but are not limited to, students becoming connected in the community through volunteer service and taking active leadership roles to address local issues by engaging with a variety of stakeholders.

### Generating

Generating a definition may be the most difficult, but useful, option. Naturally, stakeholders have different beliefs and ideas about the purposes of education. Such discrepancies are not necessarily a problem—the process of reconciling opposing views can be an opportunity to create a definition that reflects the needs of the local community. By welcoming potentially disparate voices from students, parents, educators, and community members, a district can develop an inclusive vision of what students need in order to pursue their interests and aspirations during and after their K–12 experiences.

As a district develops its North Star, it must remain mindful that many students graduate from high school keen on attending community or technical colleges, seeking apprenticeships or other jobs, or enlisting in the military. A comprehensive definition of college and career readiness must incorporate knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for students to succeed in an array of postsecondary pathways. Failing to account for the diversity of pathways threatens the possibility of creating a shared vision and promoting equitable outcomes.

Below is an example of a district's definition of college and career readiness if it were to decide to adopt the Four Keys to serve as its North Star.

Students are ready to work, learn, and succeed beyond high school. They can *think* deeply about what they are doing, *know* why they learn, *act* purposefully to achieve their goals, and *go* successfully through life's transitions. They can qualify for and succeed in baccalaureate degree programs, certificate or career pathway-oriented training programs, and/or apprenticeships without needing remediation. They can complete such work at a level that enables them to continue pursuing their aspirations beyond the entry-level requirements of their chosen postsecondary pathway.

This definition acknowledges that there is a wide range of postsecondary pathways available to students. The Four Keys describe knowledge and skills that are necessary for students to succeed regardless of which postsecondary pathway they choose.

## STEP 2: EVALUATE LCAP FOR ALIGNMENT TO A NORTH STAR

Students, parents, educators, and community members need to see how the district's LCAP relates to improving the readiness of students for life after high school. Simply defining college and career readiness is not enough. As currently defined, the language contained in the description of each state priority does not describe a shared vision for college and career readiness. If educators and non-educators collaborate to revise the template, stakeholders would be more likely to recognize the purpose of each LCAP goal and take ownership in aiding and/or implementing the processes related to reaching each goal.

The example questions posed in Table 1 would inform revisions leading to the creation of LCAP goals that describe a coherent system of local policies and practices geared toward improving the college and career readiness of all students. In other words, the district's definition of college and career readiness becomes the framework around every subsequent decision related to LCAPs. For instance, a district might ask how school culture could support college and career readiness. This acknowledges that high scores on school climate surveys will not produce a college and career readiness environment on their own. The district wonders: What else must be done to create an environment that fosters college and career readiness for all students? Such important questions must be asked explicitly and answered collaboratively.



Table 1. Exemplar District Probing Questions

STATE PRIORITY	DISTRICT QUESTIONS
<p><b>Basic:</b> degree to which teachers are appropriately assigned and fully credentialed in the subject areas and for the pupils they are teaching; pupils have access to standards-aligned instructional materials and school facilities are maintained in good repair. (Priority 1)</p>	<p>How are our teachers trained to support college and career readiness in their subject areas?</p> <hr/> <p>How do our facilities promote our students' different aspirations?</p> <hr/> <p>How do our instructional materials provide opportunities for critical thinking?</p>
<p><b>Implementation of State Standards:</b> implementation of academic content and performance standards adopted by the State Board for all pupils, including English learners. (Priority 2)</p>	<p>How can we make the Common Core relevant to students' aspirations and postsecondary goals?</p>
<p><b>Course access:</b> pupil enrollment in a broad course of study that includes all subject areas schools are required to offer. (Priority 7)</p>	<p>How do we ensure that what students learn in one course is retained and built upon in subsequent courses?</p>
<p><b>Pupil achievement:</b> performance on standardized tests, score on Academic Performance Index, share of pupils that are college and career ready, share of English learners that become English proficient, English learner reclassification rate, share of pupils that pass Advanced Placement exams with 3 or higher, share of pupils determined prepared for college by the Early Assessment Program. (Priority 4)</p>	<p>Will we achieve these outcomes if we provide sound inputs and create strong processes?</p> <hr/> <p>How are we tracking career readiness outcomes, such as participation and performance in rigorous Career Technical Education and participation in work-based learning experiences?</p>
<p><b>Other pupil outcomes:</b> pupil outcomes in the subject areas schools are required to offer. (Priority 8)</p>	<p>How are we going to gather evidence of hard-to-measure college and career readiness competencies?</p>
<p><b>Parent involvement:</b> efforts to seek parent input in decision making, promotion of parent participation in programs for unduplicated pupils and special need subgroups. (Priority 3)</p>	<p>How do we involve parents in our college and career readiness efforts?</p>
<p><b>Pupil engagement:</b> school attendance rates, chronic absenteeism rates, middle school dropout rates, high school dropout rates, high school graduation rates. (Priority 5)</p>	<p>How are retention and prevention programs improving students' ability to aspire beyond high school?</p>
<p><b>School climate:</b> pupil suspension rates, pupil expulsion rates, other local measures including surveys of pupils, parents, and teachers on the sense of safety and school connectedness. (Priority 6)</p>	<p>How do our schools' cultures support college and career readiness?</p>

## STEP 3: REVISE LCAP TO ALIGN WITH A NORTH STAR

Working on Step 2 should produce a series of questions that lead to the revision of the LCAP template. If the language used is accessible for all stakeholders and that language connects back to the agreed-upon North Star, the district will begin to develop a culture that supports all students becoming college and career ready.

Figure 3 presents an example of reframing each state priority based on the questions posed in Table 1. These revisions are designed to help foster system coherency by constantly pointing stakeholders back to the district's North Star. Notice that the original language mandated by the state remains unchanged and each individual indicator contained in the description of the priorities is still present. Adding the additional language allows districts to take ownership over what the priority means in the local context and helps bring significance to the LCAP process.

Pupil engagement (Priority 5) provides an excellent example. The original language contained in the LCAP template simply listed the student retention indicators on which districts are expected to perform well. But to what end? An obvious answer, so they graduate from high school, begs a follow-up question: What then? Is our goal merely to graduate students or instead to equip graduates with skills and knowledge needed to achieve the postsecondary aspirations they have set for themselves? Without explaining why a district should prioritize preventing students from dropping out of high school, the exercise becomes more about compliance than improving student outcomes.

The administrators in this example district wrestled with these questions after implementing Step 2. They revised their LCAP such that their intervention and retention system will be designed to graduate high school students with aspirations and postsecondary goals and will do so by improving school attendance rates, chronic absenteeism rates, middle school dropout rates, high school dropout rates, and high school graduation rates. Instead of creating a system that simply keeps students in school, this district will create a program that promotes a culture in which students discover and pursue their aspirations. In turn, the school provides students with the transitional knowledge and skills needed to realize their goals. Through this process, students develop the academic mindset needed to relate their learning to their aspirations.

Perhaps the most meaningful lesson from this exercise is that districts do not need to focus solely on the indicators of pupil achievement (Priority 4) in an effort to improve student success. Instead of the accountability indicators that policymakers have prioritized during the last two decades, a focus on inputs and processes can have profound effects on students' achievement. For example, students need access to space and opportunities to aspire, a rigorous curriculum supplemented with challenging instructional materials relevant to student aspirations, qualified teachers who have mastered their subject areas and have training in metacognitive skill development, and a school culture that supports college and career readiness. Students will have the best chances to succeed beyond high school when all these priorities align toward a shared and consistent focus with enough breadth for all students to find success.

**Definition of College and Career Readiness: Students are ready to work, learn, and succeed beyond high school. They can *think* deeply about what they are doing, *know* why they learn, *act* purposefully to achieve their goals, and *go* successfully through life's transitions. They can qualify for and succeed in baccalaureate degree programs, certificate or career pathway-oriented training programs, and/or apprenticeships without needing remediation. They can complete such work at a level that enables them to continue pursuing their aspirations beyond the entry-level requirements of their chosen postsecondary pathway.**

## A. CONDITIONS OF LEARNING:

**Basic:** degree to which teachers are appropriately assigned, fully credentialed in the subject areas and for the pupils they are teaching, **and trained to understand and implement practices designed to develop student metacognitive skills;** pupils have access to standards-aligned instructional materials **that are engaging, challenging, and provide opportunities for critical thinking and the development of key learning skills and techniques;** and school facilities are maintained in good repair, **including a space for students to work collaboratively and independently with adequate access to technology and college and career resources.** (Priority 1)

**Implementation of State Standards:** implementation of academic content and performance standards adopted by the State Board for all pupils, including English learners, **with the goal of making the standards relevant to each student's unique postsecondary goals and aspirations.** (Priority 2)

**Course access:** pupil enrollment in a broad course of study that includes all subject areas schools are required to offer. **Students have access to challenging courses that allow them to seek out and acquire new knowledge, apply what they have learned across courses, and create new knowledge through each course.** (Priority 7)

## B. PUPIL OUTCOMES:

**Pupil achievement:** performance on standardized tests, score on Academic Performance Index, share of pupils that are college and career ready, share of English learners that become English proficient, English learner reclassification rate, share of pupils that pass Advanced Placement exams with 3 or higher, share of pupils determined prepared for college by the Early Assessment Program, **share of pupils that complete a rigorous Career Technical Education course pathway, share of pupils that earn an industry certification, and share of pupils that participate in a work-based experience.** (Priority 4)

**Other pupil outcomes:** pupil outcomes in the subject areas schools are required to offer, **specifically college- and career-ready outcomes, including awareness of learning techniques; ownership of learning through goal setting, persistence, self-awareness, self-efficacy, and motivation; collaboration and communication skills; critical thinking and problem-solving skills; awareness of other cultures and one's own cultural identity; and experiences in, and appreciation of, creative and expressive arts.** (Priority 8)

## C. ENGAGEMENT:

**Parent involvement:** efforts to seek parent input in decision making **and students' readiness, planning, and aspirations beyond high school;** promotion of parent participation in programs for unduplicated pupils and special need subgroups. (Priority 3)

**Pupil engagement: Creating an intervention retention system designed to graduate high school students with aspirations and postsecondary goals by improving** school attendance rates, chronic absenteeism rates, middle school dropout rates, high school dropout rates, high school graduation rates. (Priority 5)

**School climate:** pupil suspension rates, pupil expulsion rates, other local measures including surveys of pupils, parents, and teachers on the sense of safety and school connectedness **and support for a culture of college and career readiness.** (Priority 6)

Figure 3. Example district revised LCAP template. The bold, blue text shows where the district's college and career readiness goals have been added to the state's priorities.

## CONCLUSION

In a fluid policy environment, California's accountability system has not yet reached shore. Many unknowns remain. But educators in local settings should not wait for state and federal policymakers to create new currents. LCAPs have provided California districts with a unique opportunity to create a North Star by which to steer their own efforts. This policy brief recommends developing a shared definition and vision for college and career readiness to guide students, parents, educators, and community members.

A locally derived North Star can empower an education authority to convert the LCAP into a document with meaning for both planning and evaluation. A thoughtful LCAP would also provide a sturdy platform to enable a district's reaction to future state and/or federal mandates. Instead of shifting policies toward potentially narrow outcomes, local leaders could fit those outcomes within a larger vision that facilitates students pursuing their aspirations and equips them with the knowledge and skills necessary for a successful postsecondary life.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 was modified slightly from the LCAP template found on the California Department of Education website at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/documents/approvedlcaptemplate.doc>

<sup>2</sup> Pellegrino, J. W., & Hilton, M. L. (Eds.). (2013). *Education for life and work: Developing transferable knowledge and skills in the 21st century*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

<sup>3</sup> Conley, D. T. (2013). Rethinking the notion of “noncognitive.” *Education Week*, 32(18), 20–12.

<sup>4</sup> Heckman, J. J. (2000). Policies to foster human capital. *Research in Economics*, 54(1), 3–56.

<sup>5</sup> Conley, D. T. (2013). *Getting ready for college, careers, and the Common Core: What every educator needs to know*. New York, NY: Wiley.

<sup>6</sup> More information available at <http://epiconline.org/who-we-are/the-four-keys/>

<sup>7</sup> Anaheim Union School District, Brea-Olinda Unified School District, Fullerton Joint Union High School District, Garden Grove Unified School District, Huntington Beach Union High School District, Laguna Beach Unified School District, Newport-Mesa Unified School District, Orange County School District, and Santa Ana Unified School District.

<sup>8</sup> More information available at <http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education/deeper-learning/what-deeper-learning>





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