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*San Jose State University*

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THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES OF LOCAL  
SCHOOL GOVERNING BOARDS WITH REGARD TO CONSIDERING AND  
ENACTING STATE AND FEDERAL POLICIES

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Educational Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

J Jesus Contreras

May 2023

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Dissertation Titled

THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES OF  
LOCAL SCHOOL GOVERNING BOARDS WITH REGARD TO  
CONSIDERING AND ENACTING STATE AND FEDERAL POLICIES

by

J Jesus Contreras

APPROVED FOR THE EDUCATIONAL DOCTORAL PROGRAM IN  
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2023

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## ABSTRACT

### THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES OF LOCAL SCHOOL GOVERNING BOARDS WITH REGARD TO CONSIDERING AND ENACTING STATE AND FEDERAL POLICIES

by J Jesus Contreras

The purpose of this study was to examine and analyze the decision-making and policy development of local governing boards acting in response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Quantitative and qualitative data was gathered through open-ended items in a mixed-methods survey and through a focus group interview. This research sought to gather governing board members' perceptions about the effects that the COVID-19 crisis had on their decision-making processes with regard to enacting state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Funds policies. The findings in the study indicate that governing board members' understandings of state and federal policy were not nuanced enough to effectively inform their decision-making processes. The impacts of COVID-19 greatly impacted the governing boards' decision-making processes, and COVID-19 relief funding policy presented challenges to governing boards' abilities to address equity issues. The researcher concludes that (1) ongoing professional development for board members could benefit their decision-making and policy enactment, (2) governing boards could thus be helped to understand and implement a systems thinking approach that could aid their efficacy, and (3) governing boards must keep a focus on equity not only to address needs of all students but also to adhere to existing state and federal policy mandates that should guide their actions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While I was a classroom teacher, a guest superintendent shared this idea with me: “I am the result of people who have given me their ‘stuff’.” I, too, am the result of all those who have given me their “stuff.” I dedicate this work to all those who so generously have given me their “stuff.” I am grateful and joyful for their gift(s).

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction and Statement of the Problem**

### **Background and Context**

Thomas Jefferson's (1786) ideas on the importance of democratizing educational governance guided and informed our system of public education (Carpenter, 2013). Local governing boards were created by state governments to act as agents of the state for administering their overarching school district policies, and local governing boards were simultaneously empowered to translate state and federal policies to local practice in school and district operations (Virginia Department of Public Instruction, 1917, p. 197).

Similarly, Horace Mann (1848), often considered to be a founder of the American school system, proclaimed the importance of democratic governance in public education; he stated that "the common school was to be free, financed by the local government, controlled by lay local boards of education, and mixing [sic] all social groups under one roof." Mann further maintained that the school board was to be nonpartisan and nonsectarian.

Thus, the American school board is crucial to how democracy has been framed and organized in the U.S., and its importance and influence as a public political institution merits study. The school board combines legislative, executive, and judicial functions of government as it serves an instrumental role in enacting, translating, and orchestrating state and federal policies while also providing local control to citizens in myriad communities across this nation. Elected school boards are responsible for interpreting and translating state and federal policies along with addressing any gaps in those policies, interpreting and responding to conflicts between them, and mediating locally any major policy conflicts that arise in their day-to-day enactment.

## **Support for School Boards**

Despite the political turbulence of local governing boards, most Americans still strongly support the functioning of local school boards. In a WestEd (2003) report, it is noted that the public wants to maintain its basic institutional role and structure. The American public views school boards as the governance mechanism to keep schools close to the people and avoid excessive control by professional educators and state authorities. At the heart of our accepted paradigm of school governance is the importance of the school board as the body representing the community's electorate (WestEd, 2003).

The American people expect local boards to provide direction for the operation of state and federal policies at the local level. In the case of California, there is now a core expectation that local boards regularly make sense of and assure the implementation of the *California Local Control Funding Formula* (LCFF), and an expectation of compliance to LCFF requirements was complicated further by emergence of Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the resulting state and federal requirements that emerged regarding local response to it.

The first expected responses to the COVID-19 epidemic with regard to educational policy at the state level were codified in California Senate Bill 98 and Senate Bill 820, signed into law on June 29, 2020 and September 18, 2020 respectively. Additionally, local governing boards in California have always been assumed to be responsible for administering and articulating local policy required to implement the federal *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), charged as all local school boards are with alignment to all Congress-approved COVID-19 Relief Funds. Combined, these state and federal statutes codified and enforced an imperative of ensuring governing boards “owned” their fiduciary and policy-making

responsibilities to use state and federal funds to (a) develop local plans and policies that address equity by analyzing gaps in opportunity and performance, (b) meet the holistic educational needs of all children enrolled in districts, (c) pay special attention to disadvantaged students and their families, and (d) evidence responsibility for the education of all students throughout the COVID-19 pandemic which caused the closure of schools in March of 2020.

### **School Boards and State and Federal Policy**

The federal ESSA policy boldly presumes that states will voluntarily improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged students despite their historical tendency to do the opposite (Black, 2017). The California LCFF funding mechanism policy pursuit is as follows: (a) fund schools equitably; (b) increase local-level decision making; (c) evaluate school/district performance using multiple measures, not just test scores; and (d) encourage schools and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to improve. Thus, all California LEAs are required to develop, adopt, and annually update a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). In the LCAP, LEAs identify improvement goals, codify strategies to meet those goals, and measure progress for student groups over time and across multiple performance indicators.

In response to the COVID -19 pandemic, SB 98 redefined and realigned the 2020-21 funding mechanisms to redistribute state and federal resources to help mitigate the loss of learning resulting from the closure of schools. SB 98 charged local governing boards with the development and adoption of a Learning Continuity and Attendance Plan (Learning Continuity Plan) which was required to be adopted by all California local governing boards in September of 2020. The Learning Continuity Plan included the deployment of distance

learning programs, ensurance of instructional continuity, provision of student access to devices and connectivity, accounting of live contacts and synchronous instructional minutes, delivery of professional development, and an explicit focus on guaranteeing services to educationally disadvantaged students which include English learners, students with exceptional needs, students in foster care, and students who experienced homelessness during the COVID-19 crisis.

The federal policy ESSA, the federal COVID-19 Relief Funding funding laws, LCFF, SB 98/820, and subsequently AB 86/130 all combined would ultimately come to define the LEA's political system whereby federal and state authorities, the local school board, the superintendent, central office administrators, school professionals, and citizens/voters all coalesced to meet the educational demands of the community. These challenges and laws mobilized stakeholders across California in bold and focused ways. Implementation of these new laws required active participation of districts and community stakeholders, advocacy groups, local governing boards, parent groups, and a host of district and school staff. Stakeholders were empowered thus to take a more active role in navigating the political challenges of school system responses. Detailed reports, briefs, and communications from a wide range of advocacy and special interest groups (e.g., Californians Together, Public Advocates, Education Trust-West, and the California Parent Teacher Association [PTA], among others) were constantly informing the political ecosystem of their policy stances on LCFF/SB 98/820 and AB 86/130 along with already-in-place ESSA and newly adopted Federal COVID Relief Funding Acts. Local boards and the whole educational landscape were challenged and sometimes overwhelmed with the charge of navigating public opinion



while working to develop equity-centered policy for the implementation of these complex set of statutes as they arose and needed translation.

Looking back, and given the mix of stakeholders and conflicting values in local education, there are many and varied efforts of educational reforms which were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. These reforms included new responses in charter schools, a school-to-career emphasis in schools, learning communities, improvement science, a multiplicity of online learning modalities, Universal Design for Learning, and Project-Based Learning initiatives, just to name a few of the many other strategic responses taken. During the pandemic, the nuances of distance learning and many other taken-for-granted modalities to educate youth were to be contextualized anew by local boards as they made sense of renewed expectations to develop student-centered and equity-driven policies to meet the requirements of LCFF, California Budget Acts (Senate Bill 98 and Senate Bill 820 along with Assembly Bill 86 and Assembly Bill 130), ESSA, and new Federal COVID-19 Relief Funding Acts.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Since the American government and public have charged local boards of education with decision-making power to create policies that ensure ideals of equity, student success, and responsible management of resources and infrastructure to support learning, it is useful to study perceptions of board members to better understand their decision-making behind local policies developed to ensure alignment with local, state, and federally legislated expectations. According to Plough (2014), studies of educational reform movements have paid little attention to school district governance. Much of the effective school research has ignored the

role of school board governance, including district level leadership. Research regarding the link between school governance, student academic achievement, and issues of addressing systemic equity is limited. Additionally, specific studies of local governing boards analyzed from a global *systems thinking* perspective are not readily available. Systems thinking as a discipline for seeing wholes (Senge, 2006) has not been applied specifically to the equity-centered policy development function of local educational governing boards. Many boards have traditionally dealt with policy-development issues in a discrete and atomized manner and not operating as a system that encompasses child (and/or community) development as a whole.

Therefore, I argue that studying decision-making and policy development challenges of local governing boards in response to the COVID-19 pandemic might bring light to the impact of those specific challenges on their community leadership and equity-centered policy development. The social, educational, and budgetary crises brought on by the COVID-19 epidemic shook local communities and their school systems to their core. Analysis of the impact of local board policy development and decision-making can help provide scholars and the public with an illuminating vantage of the action, functions, roles, and perceptions of local governing school boards in a time of local, state, and national pandemic.

### **Significance of the Problem**

At the heart of equity-centered policies are student wellbeing, student achievement, and problems of performance exacerbated by opportunity gaps. Local governing boards are charged by communities that elect them to develop and monitor the implementation of equity-focused policies to address inequity and opportunity challenges for youth they serve.

Across the state of California, the data has clearly indicated how socio-economically disadvantaged students lag behind in academic achievement and are/were more adversely socio-emotionally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Chapter 2, data about the opportunity gap (which I name as the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities within society that keep whole student groups from receiving the quality education that would support their freedom) will be presented and discussed. The effect that the pandemic had in widening the opportunity gap and its ramifications on systems will also be presented.

**Context: LCFF, SB98, SB820, AB86, AB130, ESSA, and COVID-19 Relief Funding**

Local governing boards are required to align their locally developed policies to those legislated at the state and federal levels. LCFF (state) and ESSA (federal) are the result of years of local, state, and national political actors influencing and transforming education policy. Meanwhile, SB 98 (2020), SB 820 (2020), AB 86 (Budget Act of 2019: Budget Act of 2020, 2020), AB 130 (2021), and Federal COVID-19 Relief Funding represent additional state and federal responses to the pressures of the pandemic.

It is worth noting that education reforms during the 1960s and 1970s that influenced the advent of LCFF and ESSA are rooted in policy issue networks and interest groups. Advocacy groups, who regard LCFF as an opportunity for education equity, have taken a very active role in studying and pointing out the challenges of LCFF implementation. Some have argued as problematic the lack of effective stakeholder engagement, lack of budget transparency, ineffective implementation of budgets earmarked for actions and services to meet the needs of educationally vulnerable students, and failure to provide information in a community

friendly format (Fensterwald, 2016). As a result of these criticisms and the influence of these policy actors, these issues have sometimes impacted development and implementation of locally developed equity-policy.

Educating disadvantaged children requires local policy intentionality, and it also requires an honest focus on the specific needs of all students to implement reform initiatives rooted in local equity-informed policy. Adding the demands and equity provisions of SB 98, SB820, AB 86, AB130, and Federal COVID-19 Relief Funding, advocacy groups are now seizing the opportunity and calling for greater stakeholder involvement and renewed state presence in local accountability systems to counterbalance issues of race and poverty in education.

With focus on equity and local control, in 2016 the California State Board of Education (SBE) adopted an accountability system to serve multiple functions. These include providing guidance to parents, highlighting schools' strengths and diagnosing their weaknesses, and helping educators design and implement strategies to assist schools. The SBE maintains that adherence to this accountability regime and continuous improvement system should measure all of these areas and provide a more complete picture for parents and the public of how schools are serving students. The system was designed to focus on how student groups (including English learners, low income students, and foster youth) are performing and to identify achievement gaps to promote district efforts to improve equity at the local level. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, no assessment was conducted, and data was not collected. Thus, a system which would have informed local governing boards' equity decision-making process was not fully available. Governing boards did not have access to information that could have provided guidance to their decision-making processes.

Although the structure of the California School Dashboard data was available online to allow parents, educators, and the public to access school and district progress information, data from the 2019-20 assessments were lacking and limited 2020-21 performance data were collected. The policymakers' dream that California School Dashboard data would make it easier for parents to hold their schools accountable for any problem areas and foster the continuous improvement of all schools was thus rendered unfeasible during the pandemic. The California state system that was created to account for three levels of support was not fully operational. The system was designed to (a) monitor all schools, (b) support a subset of schools identified as struggling on several measures, and (c) provide intensive support for schools with persistent, significant problems. But the system was not capable of efficiently and meaningfully functioning and operating during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic's impacts on the California Department of Education (CDE) and state governance of public education presented serious implementation gaps in collecting and analyzing student, school, district, and state performance data; this, in turn, hindered the ability of board members to rely on dashboard information to inform equity-driven policy decisions.

Additionally, local governing boards have routinely faced parents and advocacy groups who voiced distrust and argued against districts' implementation of the LCFF, their corollary LCAPs, and the implementation of the new laws and requirements under SB 98, SB820, AB 86, AB130, and federal COVID-19 Relief Funding Acts. Fensterwald (2016) summarized the state's flaws and shortcomings with implementing LCFF as follows: (a) lack of transparency continues, (b) there is still too little funding for basic operating expenses, and (c) the LCAP process is still too burdensome. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many members of the

public and advocacy groups also heavily questioned the implementation of the Learning Continuity Plan and other “plans” that were required to be developed for effective use of the state and federal COVID-19 Relief funding. To date, there are parent groups and advocacy groups still now targeting student learning loss and its mitigation in their appeals to policy-makers. Thus, local governing boards are facing the pressures of public scrutiny of equity-based policy development and decision-making with limited information and limited resources at their disposal to inform and fund what is expected by federal, state, and local actors.

Other areas of concern among California advocacy groups are related to implementation of ESSA which requires states to hold schools accountable based on more than just test scores. It requires the effective delivery of appropriate equitable services to disadvantaged students. The California SBE accountability system sought to align the state and federal accountability systems through the state plan for implementing ESSA (as approved by the US Department of Education in July of 2018). Insufficient resources allocated for the implementation of LCFF and ESSA, along with the spotty engagement of stakeholders in the development of LCAPs, continue to be the subject of discussion and controversy among citizens, district leaders, interest groups, and policymaking bodies.

Local California governing boards are charged with the responsibility of crafting policies and allocating resources to meet the requirements established in LCFF, SB98, SB820, AB86, AB130, ESSA, and the Federal COVID-19 Relief Funding as they are also simultaneously expected to advocate for school quality, system efficiency, and equitable systems that provide choices for stakeholders who represent many different needs. School boards are

responsible for the local control of school finances (a notion which has been an emblem of American education for centuries) along with bureaucratic oversight of their school districts, their policy development and system improvement initiatives, and their timely responses to the uncertainties that presented with the COVID-19 crisis. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of local boards to set the direction for a myriad of local school districts and the development of citizenry in their communities.

Since diverse communities that elect local boards are composed of multiple factions (stakeholders), local board coalitions (and their resulting policy initiatives) are often short-lived, and thus some argue most educational issues can never be fully resolved (Carol et al., 1986).

### **Statement of the Purpose**

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine and analyze the decision-making and policy development challenges of local governing boards acting in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is argued that this might bring light to the impact of those specific challenges on board members' thoughts on community leadership and equity-centered policy development. Analysis of the impacts of local board policy development and decision-making can help provide scholars, professional experts, and the public with an illuminating vantage of the action, functions, roles, and perceptions of local governing school boards in a time of local, state, and national crisis.

### **Research Question**

Overseeing an educational system throughout the COVID-19 crisis represented a paramount challenge for local governing boards. Expectations of federal, state, and local

actors were that board decisions should be grounded on principles of subsidiarity, transparency, and equity as codified and required by LCFF, ESSA, SB 98, SB820, AB86, AB130, and the Federal COVID-19 Relief Funding Acts. Additional political and economic pressures of the pandemic contributed to public needs and expectations of local governing boards, throwing governing boards into a deeply uncertain policy environment. Based on the considerations discussed, and keeping the current socio-political and economic environments of our changing educational landscape in mind, this study will seek to answer the following essential research question:

***What effect did COVID-19 have on the decision-making processes of local governing boards with regard to considering and enacting state and federal policies?***

Since governing boards are charged with the responsibility of creating and implementing policies to ensure equity in the delivery of education to all students and to also guarantee that all educationally disadvantaged students are appropriately served, answers to the following questions will help understand governing board members' decision-making processes:

- Based on the eight (8) SBE Priorities rooted in LCFF, what are the equity policy development challenges for California local governing boards of education?
- What are local governing board members' perspectives on the degree of their equity focus in their decision-making regarding normative, structural, and systems-thinking equity policy developments?



## **Site Selection and Sample**

This dissertation used a convergent parallel mixed methods design to collect, analyze, and make sense of qualitative and quantitative data to document the responses to the challenges during COVID-19 of local board members. Governing board meetings, board members' surveys, and board members' focus group data related to COVID-19 decision-making and equity policy development data were analyzed and reported. Also, my own experiences (autoethnography) as a district-level administrator (i.e., a Chief Business Officer in a unified school district) throughout the pandemic were recorded. Autoethnography is a qualitative method focusing on the inquiry and analysis of the personal experiences of the researcher (Ellis et al., 2011).

For the quantitative component of the study, I designed and administered a five-point scale survey to collect descriptive, self-reporting data from board members. The survey was transmitted and administered electronically, and it also contained open-ended questions. From board respondents, the qualitative phase of this study included a focus group interview of board members. I investigated the beliefs and perceptions of board members regarding issues of local equity policy development, ESSA, LCFF, SB98, SB820, AB86, AB130, and Federal COVID-19 Relief Funding measures. I analyzed board members' perspectives of their roles in their respective districts' decision-making processes and the institutionalization of local policies to ensure equity as a goal for policy-making in the context of COVID-19.

## **Assumptions, Background, and Role of the Researcher in the Study**

Local governing boards are elected and entrusted to provide direction on how to achieve the holistic education of all students in their district. Throughout my over forty (40) years in

education, I have witnessed the challenges faced by local governing boards to deliver and implement effective equity-focused policies for all the students they serve. Boards often study complex issues using reductionist methods which end up generating policies which do not deliver equitable opportunities for all children. I aim to study how board members are using systems-thinking to discern equity-focused policies. I want to study how board members are keeping abreast of all aspects of the educational landscape.

Meanwhile, I also am interested in how California local board members are invested in the development, approval, and implementation of LCFF, ESSA, SB 98, SB820, AB86, AB130, and Federal COVID-19 Relief Funding Acts which currently define many aspects of their districts' political systems and resource allocations. With the results of my study, I would like to propose systems-thinking to facilitate the local development of governing boards equity-focused policy enactment. Additionally, with more emphasis placed on socio-emotional issues brought on by COVID-19, I would like to investigate how boards make sense of equity-focused policy-making during the pandemic.

To summarize, given the complexity of issues that local governing boards regularly face, school governance is not an easy or formulaic affair. Governance of local community school systems is often controversial, confusing, and confounding. Since board members are meant to embody and represent the collective will of the community as elected officials, and because these individuals are entrusted with directing the education of our youth, it is the intent of my research to determine how board members and local boards as a whole have been able to focus on the development and implementation of local policy decisions that are rooted in equity. Because of my experience, I am a passionate believer in the alignment of

the law and local policies, funding, continuous professional learning, and the improvement needed to guarantee high quality education for ALL of our students. Through my study, I have sought to learn if (and how) equity perceptions of board members are translated into district policies that ultimately guide local actions for the holistic success of all our youth during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

### **Overview of the Study**

Chapter 2 provides a review of the research related to the concepts of the study. A discussion of the methodology used to conduct the study is presented in Chapter 3. The results of the data analysis and findings of the study are presented in Chapter 4. A summary of key findings, conclusions, recommendations, and epilogue are found in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction**

This chapter provides a review of the literature about (a) state policy and the role of school district local governing boards, (b) federal policy and the role of local governing boards, (c) the COVID-19 Relief Funding legislation, and (d) the effects that state, federal, and COVID-19 Funding legislation had on the decision-making processes of board members to enact equity-based policy. I close this chapter with a discussion of the theoretical framework based on Cooper et al. (2004).

### **Role of Local School District Governing Boards**

The National Center for Education Statistics (2002) reports how that by 1920 public schools relied on local government for 83% of their funds and state government for 17%; federal aid was less than 1%, and in this resource-dependent environment, school boards mediated major policy conflicts but otherwise left the determination of most important policy deliberation to the professional staff they hired.

The American people have long expected local boards to provide direction for the operationalization of state and federal policies at the local level. There is an expectation that local boards make sense of (and then assure the implementation of) the LCFF as well as the federal ESSA and its ensuing legislations. Both statutes point to the need of ensuring that local governing boards “own” their fiduciary responsibilities to develop local policies to meet the holistic educational needs of their disadvantaged students and their families. Since the American public has charged local boards of education with decision-making power to create policies that ensure student success, responsible management of fiscal and human resources,

and the development and maintenance of the infrastructure to support learning, it's of the utmost importance to study these policy actors' behaviors, beliefs, and perceptions regarding local policies they helped develop to ensure operational alignment with local, state, and federally legislated expectations.

Since in almost all cases the public-school board is elected by the community, the board's activity is usually political (Matthewson et al., 2003). Despite the political turbulence experienced by local governing boards, most Americans still strongly support the functioning of local school boards. The public wants to maintain its basic institutional role and democratic structure. In general, the American public views school boards as the governance mechanism to keep schools close to the people and avoid excessive control by professional educators and state authorities (Phi Delta Kappan, 2006).

### **State and Federal Policy and the Role of Local School Governing Boards**

In California, the LCFF was enacted in 2013–14 to replace the previous K–12 finance system which had been in existence for approximately forty (40) years. The LCFF seeks to (a) fund schools more equitably; (b) increase local-level decision making; (c) evaluate school and district performance utilizing multiple measures, not just test scores; and (d) encourage schools and LEAs to improve, without punishing them for failing.

As required by the LCFF, the LEAs/Districts, County Offices of Education (COEs), and charter schools are required to develop, adopt, and annually update their LCAP using a template adopted by the California SBE. The LCAP identifies goals and measures progress for student groups across multiple performance indicators. The governing boards of all LEAs

throughout the State of California have currently approved their 2020–23 LCAPs in alignment with SBE-adopted requirements.

In December of 2015, Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and passed the ESSA which redefined the role of the federal government in education. The ESSA attempted to appease popular sentiment against the No Child Left Behind Act's (NCLB) overreliance on standardized testing and punitive sanctions. The ESSA reverses the federal role in education and returns nearly full discretion to the states. The ESSA boldly presumes that states will voluntarily improve educational opportunities for low-income students despite their historical tendency to do the opposite (Black, 2017).

The implementation of ESSA and LCFF legislation defines the LEA's political system whereby federal/state authorities, the local school board, the superintendent and central office administrators, school professionals, and voters all coalesce to meet the educational demands of the community. This creates a place of policy deliberation as these forces combine to result in the political determination of who gets what and why (Lasswell, 1936).

Local governing boards are trusted to provide direction on how to achieve the holistic education of all students in their district, and board members are expected to keep abreast of all aspects of the educational landscape. In California, public school boards are expected to be fully invested in the approval and implementation of the LCAP which defines their respective districts' political systems wherein the SBE, the local governing board, the superintendent and district administrators, school professionals, and voters coalesce to meet the educational demands of all children and the community.

Across the districts in California, stakeholder engagement for the development of the LCAP has been identified as a problem. Advocacy groups which include Californians Together, Education Trust West, PTAs, teacher unions, and various other legal advocates argue that districts have focused on the development of the LCAP without duly consulting and engaging their stakeholders as required by statute. There are numerous different parties advocating for different individual and group issues. These contesting agendas and multiple other operational issues related to the implementation of the ESSA occupy the time and actions of California boards and other stakeholders. All of this activity is purported to be in pursuit of efficient stakeholder engagement and effective advocacy to create and implement equity-focused policies to help close opportunity gaps.

The institutional focus of school conflict is on the local school board. LCFF and ESSA, which local boards are expected to implement, are the result of years of local, state, and national political actors impacting policy. The education reforms during the 1970s that influenced the advent of LCFF and ESSA are rooted in policy issue networks and interest groups (Salisbury, 1984). Salisbury categorizes the following as interest groups: political movements, voluntary organizations of members recruited through the selective use of incentives, and institutions which Cibulka (2001) identified as *transfer agents*. For LCFF, interest groups converged around the notion of improved academic outcomes for students depending on the engaged local decision-making powers of district parents, teachers, school boards, and superintendents.

Advocacy groups, who regard LCFF as a ripe opportunity for education equity, have taken a very active role in studying and pointing out the challenges of LCFF implementation.

One of these groups, Education Trust-West (2016), studied 40 school LEAs across California and reported concerns about the fidelity to what was meant to drive administration of the LCFF vis-a-vis local control and LCAP adherence. The issues identified include lack of effective stakeholder engagement, lack of budget transparency, lack of budgets earmarked for actions and services to meet educational needs of educationally vulnerable students, and failure to provide information in a community friendly format. Advocacy groups continue to call for greater involvement of the state in the accountability system.

By 2016, the California SBE had gradually adopted elements of an accountability system that serves multiple functions, which include providing guidance to parents, highlighting their schools' strengths and diagnosing their weaknesses, and helping educators design and implement strategies to assist schools. The accountability system includes essential components of a successful school such as high school graduation rates, attendance, suspension rates, career and college readiness, and English learner progress. The SBE requires that the accountability measures and continuous improvement system track all of these areas and provide a more complete picture for parents and the public of how schools are serving all students. The system also focuses attention on how student groups (including English learners, low income students, and foster youth) are performing in these areas, helping to identify achievement gaps and promoting efforts to improve equity at the local level.

As part of the accountability system, The California School Dashboard data is published online to allow parents, educators, and the public to access current school and district progress information, with the option of focusing on the specific information they believe to



be most valuable. The expectation is that this data will make it easier for parents to hold their schools accountable for any problem areas. It is designed to foster the continuous improvement of all schools with three levels of support, namely general support for all schools, support for a subset of schools that are struggling on several measures, and intensive support for schools with persistent, significant problems. A critical component of this system is helping LEAs pinpoint the areas where they need help; however, from the beginning, a number of parents and advocacy groups have expressed distrust for (and disagreement with) LEAs' implementations of their LCFF accountability plans. Fensterwald (2016) succinctly summarized the flaws and shortcomings of implementing the LCFF and LCAP as follows: (a) there is a lack of transparency; (b) there is too little funding for basic operating expenses; and (c) LCAP is too burdensome on systems to be able to actually implement.

Other areas for concern among California advocacy groups are related to the implementation of the federal ESSA which also requires states to hold schools accountable based on more than just test scores, namely on the delivery of appropriate equitable services to disadvantaged students as well. From its inception in 1965, the ESEA/ESSA was designed as a tool to ensure equal educational opportunities for poor and disadvantaged students.

The SBE accountability system seeks to align the state and federal accountability systems through the state plan for implementing ESSA which was approved by the US Department of Education in July of 2018. The resources allocated for the implementation of LCFF and ESSA, and the spotty engagement of stakeholders in the development of the LCAP, are the ongoing subjects of discussion and controversy among interest groups and policymaking bodies. The local control of school finance, which has long been an emblem of American

education, along with the bureaucratic oversight, the policy development and initiatives, and the setting of goals and objectives for school districts, are all now the responsibility of local governing boards. Since the community that elects local boards is comprised of multiple factions (stakeholders), local board coalitions are often short-lived and most educational issues are never permanently resolved. In this environment, learnings from prior experiences are suitable. Taking into consideration the Michigan, Vermont, Texas, and Kentucky school financial reform case studies discussed by Yinger (2004), it can be likewise argued that California policymakers will need to keep advancing the support of equity issues in education to inform local governing boards in their pursuit of local equity-policy.

In California, local governing boards are charged with the responsibility of crafting policy and allocating resources to meet requirements established in LCFF, ESSA, and ensuing legislations that came with the COVID-19 Relief Funds/Acts as well as with the advocacy for quality, efficient, and equitable systems which provide choices for stakeholders. As McFarland (1979) established in his review of the *American Theories of Power*, in the cases of large-scale political or social movements, coalitions form with established interest groups and elements of political parties. This is the case in the implementation of LCFF and ESSA. The bandwagon phenomenon has generated definite interest group positions which are broadly disseminated through the media. This in turn influences local boards along with state and federal legislators. Meanwhile, lack of effective stakeholder communication makes implementation difficult.

The LCFF (along with its ensuing legislation, its implementation challenges, and its promising practices) has mobilized stakeholders across California. Since LCFF requires

active participation by district/community stakeholders, advocacy groups, local governing boards, parent groups, and district and school staff, different stakeholders are asserting control and taking more active roles in navigating the political challenges of its implementation.

Detailed reports, briefs, and communications from groups such as Californians Together, Public Advocates, The Education Trust-West, and the California PTA are constantly informing the political ecosystem of the LCFF and ESSA implementation efforts. This social behavior was already manifested in an earlier era, but it was heightened during a time of active news coverage and social media influence on public school governance.

### **COVID-19 Relief Funding Legislation and its Effects on Local Governing Boards**

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges for K-12 education. However, it also provided an opportunity for potential transformation and systemic reform across the hundreds of differently situated public school districts in the state of California. There is plenty of evidence that inequities in educational access have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and it has been noted that local school boards have been presented with the opportunity to leverage the lessons learned during the 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22 school years as catalysts for change in order to address the widening educational gap, lack of teacher training, and lack of mental and social-emotional services that exist within the context of public school districts facing declining enrollment across California.

According to a report from EdSource (Fensterwald, 2016), school boards are expected to make sense of the California accountability system as well as the federal accountability

system. During the COVID-19 crisis, local governing boards were required to create equity-driven policy to implement the mandates of state LCFF policies, SB 98/820, and AB 86/130 along with the newly adopted State and Federal COVID Relief Funding Acts. Additionally, boards are required to make sense of implementing ESSA and effectively allocate all Federal COVID-19 Relief Funds. The amalgamation of the state, federal, and local requirements affects all stakeholders involved (i.e., California's approximately 6 million students (including 1.5 million English language learners), approximately 300,000 teachers, roughly 10,000 schools, and over 1100 school districts. During the pandemic, local school board meetings became more uncivil and politicized nationwide. "Board meetings, far from being quiet, by-the-books affairs, turned into ground zero of the nation's political and cultural debates" (Sawchuck, 2021).

Hopkins (2018) reports that local disagreements on pandemic related mandates and school reopenings took on the rhetoric of national partisan divides. The influence of social media and a decline of local newspapers' education coverage are changing the public's perceptions of local schools. People turned to national media sources that aligned with their own views and interests. This socio-political landscape discouraged incumbent school board members to run again and prompted narrow-interest candidates to run for the school boards. Governing boards were challenged to balance debates over race and equity with the responsibilities of allocating significant amounts of federal and state funds while adjusting to the ever-changing uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sawchuk, 2021). As governing boards sought to make decisions on when to reopen schools, in 2021 there were 55 attempted election recalls targeting 140 school board members in California. (Ballotpedia, 2021).

## **Effect of the COVID-19 Crisis on Decision-Making Processes and Equity**

As indicated by Fensterwald prior to the pandemic (Fensterwald, 2016), to determine whether the California education system can respond adequately to make a significant difference, some of the issues and challenges acknowledged by advocates of the SBE-approved accountability system would require answers to the following questions:

1. Do the public, state, and federal governments embrace the student achievement data?
2. Is the data reliable?
3. Do LEAs embrace the chance to narrow achievement disparities among student groups?
4. How are LEAs identified for help?
5. Where do schools and LEAs go for help?
6. Do COEs rise to the LCFF/LCAP challenge?
7. Would the state redefine its role?
8. How do LEAs get more resources for “continuous improvement” of the schools’ work?
9. Is “continuous improvement” given time to work?
10. How are the principles of equity outlined in LCFF and ESSA translated into meaningful, purposeful, and manageable policy at the local level?
11. Are LEAs building new frameworks to respond to COVID-19 that are rooted in equity?
12. How will the COVID-19 crisis foster trauma-informed practices?
13. How will the digital divide be overcome?

14. Are resources appropriately allocated to wellbeing programs?

15. How are stakeholders trained to engage students and parents in the post pandemic educational landscape?

Considerations of these questions are important if we are to understand how the mid-pandemic and post-pandemic socio-political environments affected the decision-making processes and equity-informed policy engagement of local governing boards. To further assess the effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, answers to the following questions can help illuminate how governing board members' decision-making processes are affected:

- Based on the eight (8) SBE Priorities rooted in LCFF/LCAP, what are the decision-making challenges to ensure equity policy for California local governing boards of education?
- What are the governing board members' equity perspectives on state and federal policy and the requirements that came with COVID-19 relief funds?

In their study of policy issue networks, Kirst and Meister (1983), and Kirst et al. (1984) reported how special interest groups coalesce to influence policy and outcomes. Given the mix of current stakeholders and conflicting values in local education, there have been many and varied efforts at educational reforms in recent decades. One of these educational reforms included the advent of charter schools. However, according to Plough (2014), educational reform movements have paid little attention to school district governance. Much of the effective school research has ignored the role of district level leadership, including school board governance. Research regarding the link between school governance, student academic achievement, and issues of equity is limited.

Opinions regarding the effectiveness of governing boards vary. Carol et al. (1986) along with Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) posit that requiring school board members to have greater experience and training would strengthen the governing board's effectiveness, while others sustain that unless the very structure and role of school boards is changed, even the most capable leaders may be unable to improve student success (National School Boards Foundation, 1999). Carol et al. (1986) along with Danzberger (1994) and Todras (1993) found that many boards are unclear about how their role is different than that of the superintendent. The confusion is compounded by a constant shifting of state and federal policy agendas (Ziebarth, 1999) and the further challenges of the competing political interests during the pandemic hobbling board members' abilities to work as a cohesive group (Carol et al.,1986).

It is helpful to remember and understand that every organizational culture is nested in another larger culture which in turn influences its subculture (Schein, 2017). Thus, for successful implementation of LCFF and ESSA, local boards and educational leaders seek to understand the culture of the different groups and stakeholders affected by the LCFF and ESSA. Furthermore, local boards and educational leaders need to attend to capturing and fostering policy strategies that empower educators by implementing short-term wins-victories that nourish faith in the change effort and emotionally reward the hard-working educators involved (Kotter & Cohen, 2002).

In 2014, as a response to the 2008-09 Big Recession, LCFF and ESSA funding mechanisms were restructured. The California school and district funding mechanism, which had relied on categorical funds to support equity, was re-engineered to a system espoused to

be grounded on the principles of subsidiarity (local control), transparency, and equity. Boards are charged with the responsibility of creating and implementing local policy to ensure equity strategies to support the education of all students and to guarantee that all educationally disadvantaged students are appropriately served.

To provide opportunities for success for all youth, the SBE focused attention on the following eight (8) state priorities which are intended to be fully addressed by local school boards:

1. Basic Services
2. Implementation of State Standards
3. Stakeholder Engagement
4. Student Achievement
5. Student Engagement and Chronic Absenteeism
6. School Climate
7. Course Access
8. Other Locally Defined Educational Priorities.

Under this paradigm, local governing boards seek to secure equity-informed policies ensuring educational opportunities for all youth that are better aligned to assist them in overcoming the uncertainties they currently face due to issues of poverty. This requires paradigm shifting and time for policy development and implementation at the local, state, and federal levels. Examples of the paradigm shifting required in this include the developmental focus on culturally proficient school environments and the implementation of alternative discipline models (restorative, reflective, instructional) which involve all



stakeholders and the redefinition of our schools, all of which must ultimately be led by local governing boards and their staff. Other important issues on which governing boards must intentionally focus include the following matters below.

### ***Achievement Gap***

Local governing boards have been charged with the responsibility of developing equity-informed policies to help narrow the achievement gap (i.e., the historically predictable differences in academic performance or educational attainment between student groups). To this end, boards must also consider their influence on eliminating the opportunity gaps that refer to the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities within society. These gaps keep whole student groups from receiving the quality education that would support their success.

The goal of closing the achievement gap is one of the greatest challenges facing American schools today. For example, in the county of the surveyed board members, 2 out of 5 students (40%) are either Black/African American or Hispanic/Latino, 1 out of 3 (33%) is socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 1 out of 4 (25%) is an English learner. Based on the pre-pandemic graduation data, the percentage of students who did not graduate by subgroup was 16.6% for Hispanic/Latino, 16.8% for Pacific Islander, and 23.3% for Black. The statistical trends indicate that Latino students won't meet math standards until 2054, Black students will not achieve math standards until 2069, and English learners will never achieve math standards (Brighthouse et al., 2018).

Taking a closer look at the data related to the socioeconomic status of the different groups of students attending schools in the board member's surveyed county, we

immediately realize that of the 95,608 students enrolled, 38,552 (40.32%) are stricken by issues related to poverty. This group of “unduplicated (for the funding mechanism)” students is made up of those from low-income families, foster youth, English learners, and homeless pupils. Of the total number of unduplicated students, 30,652 (32.06%) are eligible for free and reduced meals, and 21,987 (23%) are English learners. Similarly, across California, a total of 3.85 million unduplicated students (61.93%) are contending with issues of poverty on a daily basis. Among all unduplicated students, 3.6 million (58.09%) are eligible for free and reduced meals, and 1.3 million (21.36%) are English learners. Our current school paradigm does not square well with the fact that almost 62% of the students in our schools are facing poverty issues and sustained generational trauma on a daily basis. Educating our “poor” will require intentionality and an unflinching focus on the specific needs of our students as we implement reform initiatives aimed to guarantee that all youth are able to thrive.

Across California, the data indicate that socioeconomically disadvantaged students continue to lag behind in English Language Arts achievement. For example, the percentage of third grade students who did not meet standards by subgroup are as follows: African American (73%), Latino (69%), Native American (69%), and Pacific Islander (64%). It was also reported percentages of students by subgroup who (based on 11<sup>th</sup> grade Smarter Balanced assessments) are not considered to be ready for college-level work are as follows: African American (85%), Latino (80%), Pacific Islander (75%), and native American (77%) (Reardon et al., 2013).

## *Assessment*

Since the 1995 ESEA reauthorization of the “Improving America’s Schools Act,” high-stakes testing and accountability formulas have colored the political landscape and arguments regarding student achievement. Accountability policies have used standardized tests to determine progress and allocate resources across the United States (Vasquez Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Inexpensive standardized testing, while not the most efficient mode to measure student progress, was chosen over more expensive authentic assessment methods that are arguably more effective and efficient.

At the height of the ESEA NCLB era, about half of the states had instituted High School Exit Exams as a requirement for high school graduation (Vasquez Heilig & Home, 2013). The assessments that were adopted responded to the theory that the students and schools that were held accountable to these assessments would automatically increase output due to accountability pressure. It is also important to note that high-stakes testing has now moved to online testing. The potential negative cognitive and affective impacts of online testing have not yet been fully studied and pondered. Rasmussen (2015) identified and documented serious flaws with the use of technology for high-stakes testing. Marachi (2015) and Rasmussen (2015) pointed out and documented the flaws and user-access barriers present during the 2015 online testing of millions of children.

Reardon et al. (2013) demonstrated that, in spite of the theory of action that generated NCLB assessments, achievement gaps persisted, and they posited it would take eighty (80) years for achievement gaps to close at this rate. Assessments for assessment’s sake did not have the expected impact. Empirical research has demonstrated that high-stakes testing has

caused a negative impact on the emotional responses of students (Reardon et al., 2019). Repeated feedback of failure and issues of poverty wear on students' spirits and impede their progress. Furthermore, Basch (2010) provides compelling evidence that unless our schools address the deep and systemic health gaps that drive the roots of student functioning and learning, we will not likely see progress in closing the achievement gap. Our schools are challenged with coordinating economic, social, and psychological opportunities along with promote resilience-building message campaigns to build students' strengths and guide them to optimal, positive outcomes.

### ***Student Social-Emotional Wellbeing***

Holbein and Ladd (2015) demonstrated how accountability pressures influenced “non-achievement student behaviors” and concluded that accountability pressures had the unintended effect of increasing misbehavior, suspensions, fights, and offenses reported to law enforcement. This negative response was most prevalent among minorities and low-performing students. The student resilience expected from this approach was not realized. Olson (2003) and Masten and Powell (2003) define resilience as the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure and coping successfully with negative trajectories associated with the risk.

Psychological research indicates that “grit” (i.e., resiliency) is not achieved as the result of engaging in high-stakes testing. Instead, Werner and Smith (1992) found that what really worked for 30% of the at-risk students who succeeded in the study was the fact that they had at least one person who accepted them as they were (whether teachers, counselors, or other adults who served as role models). Most recently with the advent of LCFF in California,

more emphasis is placed on school climates to address the fields overlapping with resilience, namely the social, affective, and educational neurosciences.

Waxman et al. (2004) conclude that family and peer support, supportive feedback, and meaningful involvement in school are key for success of at-risk students. Thus, Milstein and Henry (2008) suggest that schools need to build better connections with families and communities if they are to help reduce educational segregation within schools and help support student resilience to consequently improve student retention rates, positive climates, and student outcomes in public schools.

Stipek (1998) established that students who have failed at tasks in the past tend to erroneously believe that they are incapable of improving their performance in the future. Students learn “helplessness” (Maier & Watkins, 2005) and give up trying to gain respect and a sense of belonging through academic performance (Ramirez et al., 1992). For that reason, successful implementation of the ESEA will require a framework of equity, accountability, assessment, and evaluation in line with the socio-emotional needs of each student to close the achievement gap (Fuller et al., 2007).

According to Horsford (2011), the politicization of education has resulted in a high-stakes accountability culture conducive to the privatization of public schools and proliferation of charter schools. During the pandemic, governing boards endured political pressures related to the conditions for the closure and reopening of schools. Local governing board policy must address how school structures can foster school climates and cultures that support school, family, and community relations; it is assumed this is to be built with the mutual respect, caring for, and trust of underserved communities to promote student

resiliency, grit, perseverance, and motivation. Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented crisis for governing boards and school leaders to educate, feed, and care for students from afar. Governing boards were expected to adapt to a global crisis and adopt policies to lead during the turbulent times of the pandemic.

Local governing boards are charged with the delicate and elusive task of ensuring the design and delivery of equitable educational services for each and every student in their district. However, equity is not easily achieved in an organization that is nested in similarly inequitable governmental and societal systems; ethical and practical issues are ever present in governance as policy development and its implementation are also subject to biases and unfair practices that are nested in the surrounding political environment. Ethical issues inevitably are framed by the perceptions and intrinsic biases of board members, staff, and citizens related to the academic abilities, legal status, and socio-economic strata of their students, families, and neighbors.

Given the complexity of issues that local governing boards regularly face, school governance is not easy and requires efforts toward systemic guidance which are not always readily present. School governance is often controversial, confusing, and confounding. As community elected officials, governing board members are assumed to embody the collective will of the community and are entrusted with directing the education of our youth. Since the literature is scarce with regards to the equity-informed policy-making trends in California, it is the intent of this research to determine how board members and local boards as a whole focus on the development and implementation of local policy, rooted in equity, to implement LCFF and ESSA along with locally developed initiatives.

A local governing board's most critical responsibility is to safeguard the public's trust in public education (Dawson & Quinn, 2004, p. 28). Since boards are charged with the responsibility of developing equity policy to guide the holistic development of all children, a clear understanding and a defined perspective of what that entails are necessary. The National School Boards Association (2011) depicts the characteristics of an effective governing board to be: commitment to a vision, shared beliefs and values, accountability driven, collaborative, data-savvy, use of aligned and sustained resources, leadership as a team, and participation in continuous training to build shared knowledge.

These characteristics serve as the infrastructure upon which equity policy ought to be best developed and achieved. This should represent the basic infrastructure for functioning as a coherent board. However, the vast complexity of issues related to equity-informed policy calls for a framework for organizing issues and conducting equity-based data analyses. The literature abounds with different studies of board relationships and disagreements, but literature on specific methods to construct and deconstruct equity issues that affect public education is scarcer. Models copied from the business world have been adapted to education; for example, in the late 2000's, the notion of boards and schools being viewed as learning organizations was popularized with the notion of *systems thinking* as a discipline for seeing wholes (Senge, 2006) and, more recently, the *Improvement Science* movement led by Anthony Bryk et al. (2015).

The plethora of political issues and considerations local governing boards must study to effectively and efficiently deploy equity policy is enormous. Thus, boards are expected to keep focused on policy development and away from the staff-led details of implementation

processes. A framework to achieve a policy focus ought to be at the core of a governing board's agenda. Based on the myriad of details relative to equity, the framework should provide flexibility for boards to navigate the 30,000 (30K) foot vision as well as those presented at the 20K, 10K, 1K, and ground zero levels. This framework ought to have ethics and social justice at its core (Cooper et al., 2004).

Crafting better education policy entails confronting conflicting values, particularly because education "... is, and always has been, inseparable from broader social, political, and economic goals" (Pratte, 1978, p. 161). Deliberating and implementing effective equity-based policies are not easy tasks, and a clear awareness by board members of what that process entails is required. Thus, this study looks at board members' perspectives on the number of equity elements in their decision-making actions and their perceptions of how external contexts affected their policy-making.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To explain the complex issues of governing board policy making, a systems analysis is useful in breaking the policy effort into its component parts while keeping the sense of interdependencies of the processes at the forefront (Cooper et al., 2004). However, in attempting to include all forces that affect a policy, the policy loses its level of effectiveness. Systems analysis is, nevertheless, a good tool to measure a board's 30,000 (30K) feet vision as well as at the 20K, 10K, 1K, and ground zero vision levels.

An interest-group theory perspective to board policy-making can help researchers focus on the human interactions in those groups. Sabatier (1999) asserts that policy is the product of interactions of competing advocacy or interest groups operating within specific interests.



However, policy that is developed as a result of advocacy coalitions only tends to ignore the structure of organizations that implement them. Thus, policy may become empty decrees that lack language and methods for aligning purpose to outcomes. Therefore, a theoretical framework to understand the development of local governing board equity policy developed by Cooper et al. (2004) will serve as a backbone for this study and will make use of the following dimensions:

- *Normative Dimension*: Includes beliefs, values, and ideologies that drive local governing boards toward equity policies for improvement and change. High-normative policies express the purposes of the community that elected the board membership.
- *Structural Dimension*: Includes governmental arrangements and policies provided by the LCFF and ESSA.
- *Constituent Dimension*: Includes theories provided by interest groups, networks, ethnic/gender groups, end-users, and beneficiaries.
- *Technical Dimension*: Includes educational planning, practice, implementation, and evaluation. Systems thinking theory is useful in understanding developments in this dimension. Systems analysis helps trace the instrumental effects of policies and their consequences.

My research used a mixed-methods procedure to collect, analyze, and make sense of quantitative and qualitative data. Data files from the CDE related to LCFF and ESSA funding served to categorize the school districts in the geographical area selected for this study. Members considered for this study were identified and targeted.

For the quantitative component of the study, I designed a five-point scale survey to collect descriptive, self-reporting data from board members. The fifteenth item survey was sent electronically and contained three open-ended questions.

The qualitative phase of this study included a focus group interview process of board members. I investigated beliefs and perceptions of board members regarding issues related to state and federal policy in context of the COVID-19 crisis and COVID-19 Relief Funds policy.

This literature review served to document the multiple dimensions that interacted in board member decision-making processes as they aimed to focus on equity within local contexts while guiding the enactment of state and federal policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature cited helped me conceptually frame a mixed methods study that combined quantitative and qualitative research to answer the research question regarding the effect of COVID-19 on the decision-making processes of local governing boards to enact state and federal policies along with COVID-19 Relief Funds pursuant to government legislation. The literature also provided me with a more holistic perspective on how to interrogate the ways in which board members perceived equity centered policy development during the pandemic.

## **Chapter 3: Methods and Procedures**

### **Introduction**

This chapter summarizes the methodology and design used to address the research question for this dissertation study. The chapter includes the purpose statement, research question, positionality, research design, population and sample, instrumentation, data collection procedures and analysis, and limitations of the study.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Question**

Within the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the purposes of this study were to (a) describe the perceptions of school governing board members related to the effects that COVID-19 had on their decision-making processes to consider and enact state and federal policy, (b) identify the systems that local governing boards use to assess and prioritize equity policy development, and (c) understand perceptions of local governing board members regarding local equity policies rooted in federal, state, local, and COVID-19 Relief Funding legislation. The following research question guided this study:

*What effect did COVID-19 have on decision-making processes of local governing boards with regard to considering and enacting state and federal policies?*

### **Positionality**

I have worked in education for over forty years and have served as a math and science teacher (grades 7-12), a resource teacher managing federal grants, a site and district administrator across different areas of responsibilities, a COE employee providing district support, and a CDE compliance consultant on state and federal policy requirements.

Throughout my experiences and years in education, I have observed that students are better

served when a local board of education's members act coherently to embrace their roles as policy developers who democratically and harmoniously support educators. Conversely, I have observed how learning and educators experience setbacks when local boards operate in a dysfunctional manner, do not embrace their role as local equity policy developers, and/or do not concern themselves with the effective enactment of state, federal, and local policy.

My intention as researcher in this study was to look at effects the COVID-19 crisis had on the decision-making processes of local governing board members to consider and enact state and federal policies. I also wanted to learn about board members' perceptions of how their decision-making processes were affected by the COVID-19 Relief Funding legislation that came in response to the pandemic and the equity policy it required.

### **Research Design**

This study utilized an exploratory, descriptive, convergent parallel mixed methods design (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017).

The goal of exploratory research is to formulate problems, clarify concepts, and form hypotheses. Exploration can begin with a literature search, a focus group discussion, or case studies. If a survey is conducted for exploratory purposes, no attempt is made to examine a random sample of a population; rather, researchers conducting exploratory research usually look for individuals who are knowledgeable about a topic or process. Exploratory research seeks to create hypotheses rather than test them (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In my research I targeted board members who served on governing boards during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Descriptive research describes people and situations. This type of research frequently aims to describe characteristics of populations based on data collected from samples. Data

from descriptive research may be qualitative or quantitative, and quantitative data presentations are normally limited to frequency distributions and summary statistics, such as averages (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). In my research, I sought to study perceptions of local governing board members related to issues of my research question (decision-making, state and federal policy, COVID-19 Relief Funding, and equity).

A convergent parallel design consists of taking qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis, comparing/relating the two, and then interpreting them together. In my research, I collected quantitative and qualitative data through a mixed methods survey which included close-ended questions with five-likert level response types along with open-ended questions. Additionally, I conducted a focus group interview of some board members who participated in the survey. Areas of convergence or divergence between the qualitative and quantitative results were then analyzed and informed my findings (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). I used qualitative and quantitative data collected via a mixed methods survey and a focus group interview.

The mixed methods (quantitative, qualitative) provided a description of select board members' perceptions about their governance roles and preparedness to develop local equity policy in the context of COVID-19. The descriptive study shed light on the types of support that board members identified as helpful to them in informing and improving their equity policy development processes.

According to Edmonds and Kennedy (2017), a descriptive study involves collecting data in order to test hypotheses or answer questions concerning the current status of the subject of the study. According to Issac and Michael (1995), the purpose of descriptive research is to

“describe systematically the facts and characteristics of a given population or area of interest, factually and accurately” (p. 50). Issac and Michael (1995) suggest using surveys (a) to collect detailed factual information that describes existing phenomena, (b) to identify problems or justify current conditions and practices, (c) to make comparisons and evaluations, and (d) to determine what others are doing with similar problems or situations and benefit from their experience in making future plans and decisions. This study is descriptive because it helped determine and document existing perceptions of a set of board members about their views on their preparedness to generate local equity policy for their respective districts during the COVID-19 pandemic, simultaneously eliciting views on the ramifications presented by the pandemic and the surrounding policy influences on their governing board decision-making opportunities.

As the sole researcher who conducted this study, I developed different instruments to gather data, each aiming to address the research question. I collected, analyzed, and shared data gathered from board members’ descriptions of their perceptions concerning how the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic affected their decision-making processes to effectively develop equity policy aligned with state and federal policy for their districts. In this study, I also documented supports and training that board members perceived were necessary in their work to improve their effectiveness.

The selection of a research design is a function of the situation itself and the appropriateness of the measures to that situation. The use of mixed methods research has been selected for this study in order to blend both quantitative and qualitative methods and allow me to gather both closed-ended and open-ended data by which a researcher may draw

interpretations based on the combined strengths of both sets of data (Creswell, 2013). Survey research provided quantitative data on descriptions of trends, attitudes, and/or opinions from a sample population (Creswell, 2013) as well as an account of the relationships between state policy, federal policy, and the policy derived from the implementation of COVID-19 Relief Funds legislation.

Qualitative data was collected through focus group interviews to offer several perspectives on the effects of decision-making processes during the COVID-19 crisis. This method of collection provided me with a multifaceted picture of the situation, adding to a comprehensive and supplementary understanding of the phenomenon. The focus group interview served to gather qualitative data by creating conversations with a purpose (Creswell, 2013). The interview conducted via zoom allowed me to find out what was “in and on the board members’ minds” who participated in the focus group interview (Patton, 2015, p. 426).

Semi-structured focus group interviews were used to allow me the opportunity to gain demographic information while facilitating and promoting a discussion on the phenomena via a set of open-ended questions. This method provided an opportunity for a mixture of variably structured questions throughout the interview process when specific and desired information was needed from all respondents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Following Creswell (2013), the qualitative methods component was appropriate to address the focus of this study because it helped explore issues within the context in which the participants addressed problems or concerns. A convergent parallel mixed methods research design for this study considered board members' philosophical assumptions which

guided the collection and analysis of a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data. Thus, a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches provided a better understanding of the problem than either of the two approaches alone.

### **Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research**

Guba (1981) cites four criteria for establishing research trustworthiness. The criteria include: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Below are the measures that ensure the trustworthiness of my study.

#### ***Credibility***

My research methods are well established and broadly used, and throughout my research I continuously checked with my superintendent and advisor. My superintendent is very knowledgeable of issues related to governing boards (*member check*). In addition, I consider myself to be very familiar with the content and context of the issues that were the object of the study. I triangulated the data to include qualitative, quantitative, and review of the literature (*Triangulation*). For the qualitative data collection, I used semi-structured data techniques during the focus interview and questioning techniques to gather the best, accurate data (*Questioning Techniques*).

#### ***Transferability***

Since my research was limited to board members in Northern California, conventional generalization of my findings would not be possible. However, since the scope of this research dealt specifically with decision-making, perspectives of equity, COVID-19 Relief Funding policy, and familiarity with core state and federal policy, local governing boards across the board had these issues in common. Thus, my findings can be used as general



foundational data of the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the decision-making processes of a sample of governing board members related to the role equity had on enactment of state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Funding policy.

### ***Dependability***

Throughout my research, I sought to maintain the integrity of my research design. I was faithful to the detail of data gathering. Throughout my study, I sought to maintain an introspective/reflective appraisal of my research.

### ***Confirmability***

Given my familiarity with the functioning of governing boards, I sought to continuously triangulate the data and information for this research to lower the probability of introducing my own bias. I paid careful attention to the data and my own analysis of it, and I questioned my own thinking on a regular basis to remain objective.

### **Sample and Selection Criteria**

The population for this study included seated and former board members across local governing boards in Northern California. For the focus group, a representative sample of board members was selected. This study included board member participants from varied ethnic and gender backgrounds. All participation was voluntary, and the participants had the option of opting out of the survey and/or interview phases of the research study at any time. In this study, I sought to identify the thoughts of board members that pertained to (a) how their decision-making processes were affected in relation to state and federal policy in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and its ensuing legislation and relief funding and (b) how

their decision-making processes were affected in relation to their own equity policy development processes.

Purposive sampling was used to identify and select researched district board members (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010) based on the purposes of this study. This study focused on Northern California board members. I used data from the California School Boards Association, consulted with superintendents, and county offices of education leaders to define the sample. To better understand the populations that each board member in my sample served, I downloaded the 2021–2022 Free and Reduced Program Meals County and School-Level Data file from the CDE website (California Department of Education, 2023). This study applied purposive and convenience sampling methods to identify individuals who serve or have served as board members in districts according to the LCFF/ESSA funding and poverty levels of students who attend their districts. Each of these sampling methods was determined to be the best means of acquiring the appropriate data to address the research questions. Purposive sampling “provides information that is useful, that helps us learn about the phenomenon, or that gives voice to individuals who have not been heard” (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 252).

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, I used convenience sampling for the focus groups because some board members were not physically accessible. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assert that convenience sampling allows for specific individuals and/or institutions to benefit from the research problem and central phenomenon of a study. The focus group interview was conducted using the Zoom video conferencing application.

## **Instrumentation**

For this study, I developed and analyzed two instruments since no specific instruments existed that assessed the purposes of this study. Instrument design is acceptable when “no instrument may exist for measuring the variable of interest so the researchers need to develop their own instruments” (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 189). The instruments included a survey and a set of interview questions. Both instruments are described in the following section below.

### **Survey**

The survey data (see Appendix) collected allowed me to answer my research question by (a) examining the attitudes, opinions, and or behaviors of a sample group of board members, (b) gathering information and describing trends in the data, and (c) making conclusions about the effects of COVID-19 on board members’ decision-making processes related to the consideration and enactment of state and federal policy. Plano Clark and Creswell (2010) assert that the use of surveys represents an adequate procedure by which one can identify trends in attitudes, opinions, behaviors, or characteristics of a large collection of individuals. Additionally, surveys assist in identifying significant views and attitudes of individuals within a specific period of time.

In Phase 1 of the survey, I asked board members to complete a fifteen (15) item survey that contained three open-ended questions. The survey sought to investigate board members’ perceptions concerning their knowledge and proficiency in state and federal policy, COVID-19 Relief Funding and its legislation, and equity policy development as they also were asked to reflect on their perceptions of their decision-making effectiveness within the context of the

COVID-19 pandemic. The survey in this study was designed and developed to assess individual board members' thoughts, opinions, and feelings (Creswell, 2013).

The survey participation provided me with subjects who could participate in the second part of the study. I conducted focus group interviews with board members who took the survey and then subsequently agreed to participate further in the focus group interview process.

### **Focus Group Interview Protocol**

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "(i)interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them" (p. 108). In Phase 2, I developed and used a focus group interview protocol (see Table 1) to gather information that could help deepen my understanding about (a) board members' understandings of the effects that COVID-19 had on decision-making processes related to state and federal policy and the COVID-19 Relief Funding legislation and (b) board members' perceptions of effects COVID-19 had on their development of equity policy.

The interview protocol provided the board members with an opportunity to (a) describe their background in education, (b) describe their experiences regarding the effect that COVID-19 had on their decision making processes, (c) identify components of equity policy development, (d) express their own thoughts on local reculturing of districts in the aftermath of COVID-19 and how that affected their decision-making processes, and (e) provide me with closing comments on any of their responses discussed during the interview. This information could not have been obtained with the survey alone.

**Table 1**

*Interview Protocol Guide*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Question</b>
1	<b>What is your understanding/concept of <u>Board members as decision-makers</u> and as <u>local policy developers</u> for a school district?</b>
2	<b>As a <u>Board member charged with decision-making responsibilities to respond to the COVID pandemic</u>, what did you find to be the <u>three biggest challenges</u>?</b>
3	<b><u>As a decision-maker, how did you reconcile</u> the LCFF, ESSA, and COVID-19 <u>funding equity requirements</u>?</b>
4	<b><u>During the COVID-19 crisis</u>, as a board member, <u>how did you support students of all different socioeconomic statuses and cultures</u>?</b>
5	<b><u>As local policy developer and decision-maker during the pandemic</u>, what did you consider to be your <u>responsibilities in responding to the socio-emotional needs of students and staff</u>?</b>
6	<b>As a Board member, what is your responsibility to ensure district response to the eight (8) State Board of Education priorities?</b>
7	<b>How do you <u>reconcile the principles of local control, transparency, and equity with your district's response to the pandemic</u>?</b>
8	<b><u>Rooted in equity, what are your three (3) top priorities for education policy</u>?</b>
9	<b>How do you reconcile your understanding of the <u>SB98/820 and AB 86/130 budget implications with your decision-making role as board member</u></b>
10	<b>Are there <u>any other issues you would like to address related to Board members as decision-makers</u>?</b>

**Data Collection Procedures**

My explicit goal in this study was to use collected data to answer my research question in the most valid and ethical manner possible (Creswell, 2013). All board members that were involved in the study participated voluntarily and willingly.

To gain access to board members, I asked for superintendents' permission to address their governing boards and send communications via email to board members with an invitation to participate in the survey. The emails included access to the survey. The survey included a letter of consent. Only participants who indicated that they agreed to the conditions outlined in the letter of consent were advised to proceed to take the survey. Those who indicated that they would like to "opt out" automatically exited the survey. Within the survey itself, participants were asked to provide their email address only if they wished and agreed to being contacted for a follow-up interview.

## **Organization of the Data Analysis**

### ***Quantitative Analysis***

Board members' data from the survey included respondent accounts of their proficiency with state and federal policy and their perception of the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic had on their decision-making processes. It also included ways to document board member perceptions of the effects they perceived COVID-19 may have had on their equity policy development.

To analyze the data and assess the familiarity of board members with state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief funding policy, I first sorted and organized the responses of the five-likert survey items into the following categories:

- LCFF and LCAP Implementation Effectiveness
- California SBE Priorities
- ESSA and Federal Funding Policy (Special Education and COVID-19 Relief Funding Policy)

- Overall State and Federal Policy including COVID- Relief Funding
- SB/98/820, AB 86/130, and COVID-19 Relief State Funding Policy

The analysis of the quantitative data provided me with a rich description of the board members' own perceptions of their familiarity levels with state and federal policy.

### ***Qualitative Analysis***

Qualitative analysis was used to group and analyze the data from open-ended questions and the focus group interview questionnaires. To organize the data, the researcher created an instrument alignment table. Responses were subsequently placed in the appropriate section and aligned with the research questions.

To organize, analyze, and interpret the qualitative data I collected from open-ended questions in the mixed-methods survey and the focus group interview, I used a narrative analysis approach and a discourse analysis approach.

For the narrative analysis, I read the open-ended questions in the survey and listened to the board members' answers to the focus group interview questions. I used a semi-structured approach to allow interview participants to tell their perceptions in their own words. For the discourse analysis, I studied the relationships between the information provided by the participants and its context. This allowed me to explore “how they felt the way they felt” regarding equity, state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Funding policy in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study to be considered when analyzing the findings include:

- a) **Sample size:** The sample size is relatively small. Participation of a larger number of board members in the survey would have yielded a more accurate generalization of the conclusions from the data analyzed. The total number of board members in the geographical area under study was 115 (n=115) that represented 24 school districts. This included the COE because COEs in California are local educational agencies with a governing board. I was able to access forty-two (n=42) board members representing 12 school districts to participate in the survey. These board members received an invitation to participate both in the survey and focus group interview. Of the 42 board members who were invited to participate, 12 (n=12) completed the survey. This represented a return rate of twenty-nine percent (n=29) which meets the standard practice for survey response rates, including the criteria set forth by the dissertation chair for a minimum 10% sample size.
- b) **Scope of discussions:** While the survey and focus-group tools sought to narrow the scope of discussions with board members to their decision-making related to state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Funding during the pandemic, the scope and depth of discussions with board members yielded other data out of the scope of the research (e.g. national political agenda, district specific challenges not related to the study, et cetera).



## **Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion**

### **Introduction**

As discussed in Chapter 3, quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed. The quantitative data was collected via an online survey, and the qualitative data was gathered through open-ended items in the survey and through a focus group interview via zoom. The survey and focus group interview sought to gather governing board members' perceptions about the effects that the COVID-19 crisis had on their decision-making processes with regard to enacting state and federal policies. It also served to elicit data regarding their perception of state and federal equity policy governing the COVID-19 Relief Funds and the impact those funds had on their local policy development and implementation. Finally, the survey and focus group interview gathered information regarding Board members' familiarity levels with the California SBE eight (8) priorities, their familiarity with state and federal policy and funding mechanisms, their familiarity with state and federal policy equity requirements, and their familiarity with the state and federal COVID-19 relief funding mechanisms.

This chapter presents the findings of the study and is organized into descriptive and analytic sections. The chapter begins with an overview of the sample. It continues with a report of the findings that emerged in the following areas: (a) the board members' familiarity levels and understandings of state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Policy and funding, (b) the effect of COVID-19 on the decision-making skills of local governing boards, and (c) the effect that COVID-19 had on equity perspectives of local governing boards during the pandemic.

The theoretical framework borrowed from Cooper et al., (2004) helped me structure the findings of this study. The tools I designed (mixed-methods survey and focus interview study guide) helped me gather information related to beliefs, values, and ideologies of governing board members who participated in the sample (*Normative Dimension*). Similarly, the tools I used provided me with data to assess their proficiency in LCFF, ESSA, and COVID-19 Relief Funding policies (*Structural Dimension*). Through the theoretical frame's *Constituent Dimension*, I was able to frame different theories related to the interest, groups, networks, ethnic and gender groups, and ultimately, the beneficiaries of the policy developed by local governing boards (*Constituent Dimension*). Lastly, using the framework (*Technical Dimension*), I was able to interpret the findings for this study.

### **Population and Sample**

In the geographical area object of the study, there are twenty-three (n=23) school districts and one (n=1) COE. Table 2 presents the principal characteristics of the study population and sample along with the quantity and type of data collected from board members in this study.

Table 2 describes the population and sample for this study. The total number of board members in the geographical area under study was at least 115 (n=115) that represents 24 school districts (some boards have more than five board members - up to seven are allowed in some districts in the geographical area of the study). The COE is included in the 24 local school districts because they are also a local educational agency with a governing board.

I received permission from superintendents to access forty-two (n=42) board members representing 12 school districts to participate in the survey. These board members received

**Table 2***School Board Member Characteristics & Distribution of Surveys and Focus Group Data*

Profile Characteristics	Number of School Districts in Geographic Area of Study	Number of Schools districts represented by respondents (by school level)	Total Board Members by School District	Total Online <u>Surveys Completed</u>	Focus Group <u>Interview Sample</u>
K-8 Districts	17	5	85	5 (29%)	1 (5.8%)
9-12 Districts	3	3	15	3 (100%)	1 (33%)
K-12 Unified Districts	3	3	15	3 (100%)	2 (66%)
County Office of Education	1	1		1 (100%)	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>

an invitation to participate both in the survey and subsequent focus group interview. The invitation and survey were transmitted using Google forms via email. Of the 42 board members who were invited to participate, 12 (n=12) completed the survey. This return rate of twenty-nine percent (n=29) more than met the standard practice for survey response rates, including the criteria set forth by the dissertation chair for a minimum 10% sample size.

**Demographic Profile of the Sample**

Table 3 provides a demographic profile of the sample for this study.

The demographics of the participants in this study reflect a consistency with the California composition of governing boards (United States Census Bureau, 2022). Most school district governing boards in California are composed of five to nine board members, typically five. The majority of California school board members are White.

**Table 3***Demographic Profile of the Sample*

Characteristic	Category	# of Responses	% of Responses
Gender	Male	1	9%
	Female	11	91%
Ethnicity	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1	8%
	Black or African American	1	8%
	Asian	2	17%
	Hispanic or Latino, or Spanish Origin	2	17%
	White	6	50%
	Some other race, ethnicity, or origin	0	0%
	Decline to state	0	0%

*Note:* N=12.

In its document *Today's School Boards & Their Priorities for Tomorrow* publication, The National School Boards Association (2018) reported the results of a survey completed by school board members between November 2017 and February 2018. The reported data indicates that, although school governing boards are becoming increasingly diverse across the nation, they do not reflect the rapidly changing demographics of the K-12 student population. National projections from the US Department of Education for the 50.7 million students entering prekindergarten through grade 12 in 2017 were White 48%; Black 16%; Hispanic 27%; less than 1% each Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaska Native students; and nearly 3% identifying as two or more races (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Most board members in the 2018 survey were White (78%), followed by

African American/Black (10%), Hispanic or Latino(a) (3%) and American Indian/Alaskan Native (1%). Board members who self-describe as Multiracial comprised 1% of survey respondents with an additional 7% who preferred not to answer. While Black board members saw gains from 2002 (when they held 7.8% of the board seats) to 2010 (when that number increased to 12.3%), there was a decline in 2018 to 10%. Among survey respondents, 45% reported fewer than 25% of their districts' students represented ethnic minorities; 22% indicated their minority student population was between 26% and 50%; 18% indicated 51% to 75% were minorities; while 12% indicated their district student population was between 76% to 100% minority (National School Boards Association, 2018).

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

Analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data was organized and aligned with the research question. Quantitative data from the survey was analyzed first in order to determine key trends or patterns resulting from the highest response rate from the quantitative data (surveys). The quantitative data was first organized by major categories identifying whether the data indicated board members' familiarity levels and proficiency with state and federal policy. The data was analyzed next to evaluate the effects that the COVID-19 Relief Funding and its ensuing legislation had on the participants' decision-making processes related to state and federal policy and the COVID-19 Relief Funding legislation. The analysis also included the focus on equity of the board members participating in the study.

To study the familiarity of governing board members with state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Funding policy, the data was organized and quantified (percentages) around the following strands: familiarity with LCFF/LCAP and its implementation effectiveness;

purpose and goals of the LCFF and LCAP; ESSA and federal funding policy (including Special Education and federal COVID relief funds; overall state and federal policy and funding mechanisms; and, more specifically, how the California funding mechanisms responded to the COVID-19 crisis through SB 98/820, AB 86/130, and the state and local COVID relief funding.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Open-ended questions from the survey and the qualitative data gathered through the focus group interviews were analyzed by identifying emergent themes and common strands. The themes and common trends were compared to the quantitative data for similarities and differences. Examination of the responses for each open-ended survey question along with comments and answers provided during the focus group interview offered a deeper exploration and understanding of the survey responses. This is in alignment with the convergent parallel mixed method design which involves collection of qualitative and quantitative data, followed by the combination and comparisons of the multiple data sources (survey, focus group interview, literature). This approach involves the collection of different but complementary data on the same issues (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017).

### **Findings and Discussion of Research Question**

The data analyzed sought to answer the question:

*What effect did COVID-19 have on the decision-making processes of local governing boards with regard to considering and enacting state and federal policies?*

## Quantitative Data from Survey

Fifteen (15) questions were asked of the participants to assess their understanding of state and federal policy and their decision-making process within the context of COVID-19.

Participants were asked to rate their familiarity with LCFF state policy and ESSA federal policy.

Table 4 displays the result from the survey of familiarity and understanding of state, federal policy, and COVID-19 Relief Funding.

**Table 4**

*Familiarity and Understanding of State, Federal, and COVID-19 Relief Policy and Funding*

Items	None %	Slightly %	Somewhat %	Quite a Bit & Fully %
<u>SB 98/820, AB 86/130 and COVID Relief State Funding Policy</u>	0	0	58.3	41.6
<u>Overall State and Federal COVID Relief Funding Policy</u>	0	0	41.7	58.3
<u>ESSA &amp; Federal Funding Policy (Special Ed, and COVID Relief included)</u>	0	0	33.3	66.6
California <u>SBE Priorities</u>	0	0	33.3	75.0
<u>LCFF/LCAP Purpose and Goals</u>	0	0	16.7	84.3
<u>LCFF/LCAP &amp; Implementation Effectiveness</u>	0	0	0	100

Table 4 indicates that none of the participants assessed themselves as not understanding the LCFF and ESSA policies. Most of them indicated a level of understanding of state,

federal, and COVID-19 Relief funding policy at either level 4 (Quite a Bit) in the Likert scale or level 5 (Fully). It's noteworthy that 100% of the sample indicated a full understanding of LCFF/LCAP policy implementation and effectiveness. This would imply that board members are very familiar with LCFF funding and all functions of the LCAP. In triangulating data from the survey to align it with the response to board members' familiarity levels with the eight (8) SBE priorities which are intricately related to the LCAP, only 75% of the board members surveyed reported being "quite a bit" or "fully" familiar with the SBE priorities. Similarly, the surveyed board members indicated that only 84.3% were "quite a bit" or "fully" familiar with the purpose and goals of the LCFF and the LCAP.

Regarding federal policy, the participating board members in the study reported 66.6% to be either "quite a bit" or "fully" familiar with the provisions of the ESSA policy and the federal funding received by school districts to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, while 33.3% declared to have a "somewhat" level of familiarity with federal policy. Again, it's worth noting that zero (0) members of the survey participants considered themselves either "none" or "slightly" familiar with federal policy.

In further interrogating and triangulating the data regarding board members' familiarity levels with state and federal COVID-19 Relief Funding policy, the survey data indicated that only 58% of the participants in the study considered themselves "quite a bit" or "fully" familiar with the state and federal policy and funding mechanisms to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Deeper analysis of the level of familiarity of state funding in response to the pandemic (SB/820, AB 86/130) report that only 41.6% rated themselves as "quite a bit" or "fully" familiar, while 58.3% considered themselves "somewhat" proficient.



The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new levels of professional and public bewilderment by adding rapidly issued new governmental mandates to the already large body of state and federal policies and their funding mechanisms (LCFF and ESSA). The data analyzed indicate a level of confusion with and/or board members not fully understanding the full provisions of state and federal policy. Furthermore, the COVID-19 funding policy that was aligned with state and federal policy augmented the turmoil on the varied board members' local political landscapes. Since local board activity is usually political (Matthewson et al., 2003), board members who might not fully understand state and federal policy might have perceived themselves to have a deeper knowledge of familiarity with state and federal policy.

As Ziebarth, (1999) reported, confusion is compounded with constant shifting of state and federal policy agendas. While local governing board members can receive training from superintendents, staff, colleagues, and professional associations on state and federal policy, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic demanded prompt and effective alignment of local policy to the state and federal COVID-19 Relief Funding policy. The challenges of the competing political interests during the pandemic confounded board members' abilities to work as cohesive groups, a finding which is in alignment with the literature (Carol et al., 1986).

Table 5 reports the board members' perceptions of the effects that COVID-19 had on their decision-making skills related to state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Funding policies.

Seventy five percent (75%) of the board members surveyed reported that their decision-making skills were affected "quite a bit" (level 4) or "fully" (level 5) in the likert scale survey responses gauging their decision-making impacts due to the COVID-19 crisis. This

**Table 5***Effect of COVID-19 on Decision Making Skills of Local Governing Boards*

Items	None %	Slightly %	Somewhat %	Quite a Bit & Fully %
<u>Decision-making skills affected by COVID -19 crisis for LCFF policy implementation</u>	0	8.3	16.7	75.0
<u>Decision-making &amp; policy affected by COVID Relief Funding</u>	0	8.4	33.3	58.3
<u>Decision-maker integration of state, federal, and COVID Relief Funding</u>	0	16.7	41.7	41.6

represents a very significant percentage which aligns with Hopkins (2018) and their assertion that local disagreements on pandemic-related mandates and school reopening during the pandemic took the rhetoric of national partisan divides. This is also in alignment with Sawchuck (2021) who pointed that since local governing boards are required to make sense of state and federal policy and the funding mechanisms inherent to COVID-19 Relief Funding, board meetings went from being quiet, by-the book affairs sessions to becoming ground zero of the nation’s political and cultural debates. This validates the Kirst and Meister (1983) and Kirst et al. (1984) studies of policy issue networks on how special interest groups coalesce to influence policy.

Table 6 reports the effect on equity perspectives of local governing board members.

To study the equity perspectives of local governing boards, the data was organized around the following strands: How the COVID-19 crisis affected the equity prioritization perspectives of local governing boards; the challenges that COVID presented for the

**Table 6***COVID-19 Effect on Equity Perspectives of Local Governing Boards Members*

Items	None %	Slightly %	Somewhat %	Quite a Bit & Fully %
<u>Equity prioritization perspectives affected by COVID-19 pandemic</u>	0	8.3	16.7	75.0
<u>Equity Policy articulation challenges during COVID-19</u>	0	25.0	33.3	41.7
<u>Equity &amp; decision-making challenges during COVID-19</u>	8.3	16.7	33.3	41.7

articulation of governing board members' equity policy development; and the equity and decision-making challenges that the COVID-19 crisis presented to governing board members.

Seventy five percent (75%) of the surveyed board members indicated that COVID-19 affected their prioritization abilities to ensure equity aims across the local educational landscape. In the survey, board members reported that their equity policy articulation and decision-making challenges had been “somewhat” (level 3 in the Likert scale) affected (33.3%) and “Quite a bit & Fully” affected (41.7%). While this is not significant in the quantitative analysis of these items, it was significant in the qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions and the group interview discussed below.

**Qualitative Data from Open-Ended Survey and Focus Group Interview Question**

The four board members who participated in the focus group and the survey were asked the following open-ended survey questions:

- For decision-making and development of education policy through the COVID-19 crisis, please describe how important you think Board conversations about race, disadvantaged youth, family engagement, student engagement, and school climate are to your work as a district leader? How important have been these conversations to reaching district goals?
- In your perspective, what are the most important decision-making skills a new board member needs to serve in a local governing board?
- Please address the impact of equity on Governing Board decision-making within the context of LCFF, ESSA, and COVID-19 ensuing legislation.

Focus Group Questions:

1. What is your understanding/concept of Board members as decision-makers and as local policy developers for a school district?
2. As a Board member charged with decision-making responsibilities to respond to the COVID pandemic, what did you find to be the three biggest challenges?
3. As a decision-maker, how did you reconcile the LCFF, ESSA, and COVID-19 funding equity requirements?
4. During the COVID-19 crisis, as a board member, how did you support students of all different socioeconomic statuses and cultures?
5. As local policy developer and decision-maker during the pandemic, what did you consider to be your responsibilities in responding to the socio-emotional needs of students and staff?

6. As a Board member, what is your responsibility to ensure district response to the eight (8) State Board of Education priorities?
7. How do you reconcile the principles of local control, transparency, and equity with your district's response to the pandemic?
8. Rooted in equity, what are your three (3) top priorities for education policy?
9. How do you reconcile your understanding of the SB98/820 and AB 86/130 budget implications with your decision-making role as board member?
10. Are there any other issues you would like to address related to Board members as decision-makers?

### **Summary of Qualitative Responses**

The qualitative analysis includes the report of the findings that emerged in the following areas: (a) the board members' familiarity levels and understanding of state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Policy and funding, (b) the effect of COVID-19 on the decision-making skills of local governing boards, and (c) the effect that COVID-19 had on equity perspectives of local governing boards during the pandemic.

Below are salient qualitative data excerpts of the qualitative data organized by the areas that served to answer the research question regarding the effects of COVID-19 on the decision-making processes of local governing boards with regard to considering and enacting state and federal policies.

#### **1. Familiarity and understanding of state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Policy and funding**

Using semi-structured interview strategies, I prompted the focus groups interviewees' understanding of state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Funding Policy. Participants did not provide significant comments regarding their understanding of LCFF/LCAP, ESSA, SB 98/820, AB/86/130, and COVID-19 Relief Funding Policy. There is a significant difference between the data analyzed quantitatively and the data analyzed qualitatively. The qualitative data does not indicate that the participant board members expressed/exhibited the same level of proficiency expressed in the quantitative (survey) portion of the study. Their familiarity with state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Funding Policy was not as clearly articulated as expressed in quantitative items. This suggests a need for further training for board members regarding the state and federal policies which are the major motors of school districts' guidance and funding. The test of understanding brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic which used state and federal existing funding structures to deliver COVID-19 Relief Funding Policy indicates that superintendents need to facilitate adequate training to support local governing board members. As Carol et al. (1986) along with Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) posit in the literature, boards that have experience and training strengthen levels of governing board effectiveness.

Their answers veered toward the role of a board member and equity issues. Examples of their comments include:

Our goals, both for the Superintendent and in the LCAP, are equity-driven and focused on being equitable and anti-racist.

[Board members should:] 1) Represent those they serve in their area (if low income then listens and work to address those needs, etc.), 2) Work with the aligned admin and cabinet to move the district forward, 3) Visit and get to know directly each school within that district and the leads, 4) Be student forward.

I think the ability to see what can be done within the constraints of the law and funding, and to see how to make the best calls for all our youth. Dreaming is a great skill, but if you can't make real-world decisions, you are not much use on a school board.

Boards should set goals for student achievement and then hire a superintendent that is able to lead the work in meeting those goals. Too often, individual board members use their position to push their own agenda and get in the way of letting the Superintendent run the day to day work. In my perspective, the most important decision-making skills a new board member needs to serve all students is that they look at the whole system and hear all perspectives. New board members often bring their own agenda. They must be able to listen to all constituents and study the issues/policies affecting the district and provide guidance to the superintendent. They must not micromanage. They are tasked with refining and making policy, balancing the budget, carrying out the LCAP goals and mission of the district, and hiring/firing and evaluating the superintendent.

I believe that the COVID-19 crisis served as an opportunity for [our district] to make greater changes to the allocation of resources than ever before. The upside has been that boards that have progressive members and that are truly vested in the idea that ALL students should succeed, regardless of demographic, were able to support district staffs in reorienting the use of funds to address equity issues. The unfortunate downside is that districts that are of a "status quo" mind set, were also able to direct resources in the opposite direction. The difference between the two groups had/has a lot to do with the majority demographics in their respective communities and political leaning of the constituency and/or with board members' vulnerability to attacks from organization from outside the district; such as conservative groups in California like Parent Revolt.

I believe that race, disadvantaged youth, school climate, and student and family engagement are at the core of our [LCAP] goals and conversations. If we are to support our goal of being more equitable, then we have to include all of these significant factors. We can't truly help meet the needs of our children and families without knowing their situation. This is something we continue to address even after the pandemic.

Board conversations have been integral for us in [our district]. We would not be able to reach our goals and guide district policy without those relevant conversations.

These conversations are vital and rewarding when handled effectively.

[Constant conversations and] discussions are what will flush out the students' needs, and related staff/schools/district needs. When the conversations and practices are in place (i.e., implementation to full implementation) of root cause analysis [improvement science & systems thinking], districts make steady and sometimes

significant improvement. Since this takes significant time to establish, many districts implement in segments or inconsistently and therefore tend to progress or plateau.

## **2. Effect of COVID-19 on the decision-making skills of local governing boards**

The governing board members' responses indicate that the most salient issues and challenges expressed are related to issues of equity, race, challenges of disadvantaged youth, and the highly charged local political climate during the pandemic. Open-ended questions and focus group interview participants' input included the following comments below.

Equity needs to be at the forefront of all our decision-making when it comes to how we use our funds. COVID-19 funding has been a game-changer for our district especially.

These programs have the common thread of requiring, on some level, governing boards to get feedback from multiple constituencies when making decisions regarding the allocation of resources. While I think that it is important that board of education members do not do this personally (I think that [our board] members doing this directly can cause constituents to simply agree with everything or disagree with everything), it helps to distribute the mindset of listening and using data to drive decision making.

While everyone suffered during the pandemic (whether they fell behind academically, lost a loved one, or experienced social-emotional issues), we know that our low-income students had fewer resources to weather the pandemic. There were many challenges to overcome in addressing their needs – ensuring every student had a device, access to internet, food to eat, and engaged in the continuity of learning remotely and also in the summer. The district levied all of its resources for this purpose.

[Decision making needs to engage in crucial] conversation when we are talking about education. If we are not thinking of the above, we are not doing our job. Period. I am incredibly proud of my district in that we are having those uncomfortable conversations, and they are leading to action via policy changes and budget shifting. The first thing that was needed was trust building. We all have to trust each other so we can be honest about not just success but failure. It's ok to acknowledge that some of the gaps are OUR doing by holding on to sure systemic tenants of education that are unconscious. It is how we have always done things, and it is hard to see if you have benefitted from that system and how it can also be causing harm. So those conversations are essential.



Learning to truly listen to learn and not just to respond. Being ok with discomfort and saying things that may cause discomfort. Learning how to challenge ideas and recommended initiatives without making staff feel like you don't trust their educational expertise. Learning how to understand data and ask for the data you need to make intelligent decisions around equity in both funding and curriculum. A new board member should (1) understand that their number one priority should always be how to best serve our students. If they have any question about anything coming before them, they just need to ask, "Is this decision in the best interest of our students?" It helps to center them. (2) You are one person on the board and cannot make decisions without the majority of your board. (3) Be prepared – do your homework and ask lots of questions. (4) Get to know your community – visit schools, attend events. These are your constituents.

Patience: Often time, many people who decide to run for [a board seat] are spurred on to do so because of a single problem or issue that has spurred them into entering politics. I have found that successful board members are able to have the patience to not act in a radical fashion and to work to develop relationships and understand how their issue impacts the organization writ large. Then they are able to truly make change that is consistent with their own values.

There are a few skills that are needed as a board member. Some of these skills are learned through experience and rationalization. Others like keeping an open mind, being able to work as a team, and listening are important. Communication and staying informed are equally as important. But there are also some very important skills that you have within like passion and love for serving for the better good of the community. Being able to make sound decisions based on the needs, even if that means going against what is popular. Being ethical is essential and ongoing for any board member. The rest will fall in place.

Board members need to understand the dynamics that make up the community they serve. That allows them to more easily define the problem and evaluate solutions that are aligned to what is actually happening.

Most of the leadership had a completely different experience during COVID. I know I did. It was one of inconvenience, but no one in my family died. So how do people with no lived experience of what most of our students went through create a space so they can heal? And that needs to happen simultaneously as we bridge the educational gaps that took place during remote learning. So I used my platform to give direction toward building that safe space in an equitable, not equal, way. That was my guiding light when making decisions. School districts are still woefully underfunded. LCFF was a good idea but did not take into consideration that the wealthier districts also are funded by education foundations and higher parcel taxes so the less affluent districts still struggle. Even additional Title I monies don't make a huge difference; Title I monies should follow the child, not from district to district. Sometimes a district with

Title I students feed into a district that might have one Title I school so won't get the funding. ESSA funding has helped with our special education students, but especially after COVID it has been difficult trying to measure the success of our long-underserved groups of students. We have fallen backwards. The state changing the LCFF Dashboard so frequently gets frustrating.

Equity is crucial as it pertains to all the decisions made [within] the government policies. The pandemic came without warning and/or precedent. Knowing what we needed to do in order to be safe and move forward was important. Being able to give children and families what they needed when it was needed was absolutely necessary. Working as one voice our discussions were focused on supporting everyone but prioritizing needs. Keeping an equity lens in mind and trying to give everyone an even playing field to succeed is what we aim for. Our district and board have spent a lot of time defining what equity is. Each board member has developed an equity statement and committed to equity being the foundation that everything is looked at through the lens of equity. Everything is decided based on equity. Equity must be a priority moving forward in all aspects of public education. The pandemic simply magnified what we were getting right and what we were getting wrong.

### **3. Effect that COVID-19 had on equity perspectives of local governing boards during the pandemic**

The data related to board-member decision-making skills affected by the COVID-19 pandemic corroborate the quantitative data which indicates that 75% of the decision-making skills of the board members surveyed were affected by the conditions of the pandemic. This qualitative data is intricately linked to the notion of equity expressed by the board members interviewed and surveyed. It also expresses concerns for the achieving gap of disadvantaged students, the assessment used to determine student success as expressed in the literature (Vasquez Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008), and student social-emotional wellbeing as amply discussed in the literature (Holbein & Ladd, 2015).

The responses during the focus group interview and answers to the open-ended questions gravitated toward issues of equity. The responses include the following:

I don't know; I am pretty cynical right now. I hope that boards look through an equity lens when making decisions, and certainly it looks nice to put that in one's plans, but I think the pandemic has left everyone scrambling to serve as many students as possible in the best way they can, and I think that equity takes a back seat. Making decisions through the COVID-19 pandemic with an equity lens was challenging because many members of the public were angry about the pandemic and racial challenges across the country and with board meetings being virtual, the number of participants and the number of individuals making public comment increased exponentially. With Zoom board meetings, members of the public who didn't even live in the community joined board meetings to make public comments. While some public comments were respectful, many were accusatory, included profanity and attacked staff, trustees and even other public speakers. As other members of the public who commented started getting regularly verbally attacked in public comments, some people became scared to speak up which made making decisions with an equity lens challenging because trustees did not have all the information. Other things that were challenging was that trustees also got attacked on social media and physically for making decisions with an equity lens; for some members of the public trustees didn't push an equity agenda far enough and for some members of the public trustees pushed an equity agenda too far.

[Equity] conversations are very important. It does become challenging when Board Members are elected officials with each representing a distinct area of the District. Rather than seeing what the needs are across the district, board members prioritize needs for the schools and communities they represent. Thus, these important conversations really turn into advocacy for each of their schools. Board conversations have been critical to the policies and equity challenges in our county. It was the board's belief to continue education with much disruption. These conversations were critical to reaching our district goals. The guidance from CDPH, CDE, Cal OSHA, and the CDC made things more difficult to implement. It became politically charged and the guidance was ever changing. And the legislatures continued to add fuel to the fire but adding additional plans outside of the LCAP. Districts had "pandemic" within the pandemic. The guidance and policies from the state level created the increased chronic absenteeism rates and gaps in learning for our students as parents were asked to keep students' home for sniffles and allergies. It made it nearly impossible for teachers to get in a groove as students were coming and going constantly due to close contacts and quarantine protocols. We were proactive at trying to keep our students in school and learning through the entire pandemic with the exception of the three months at the start of the pandemic. However, we saw declines in achievement, and many of our students, especially our at-risk students, are further behind.

Equity and excellence are inextricably linked – the greater we can continue driving focus on MTSS Tier 1, the more resources we have to do Tiers 2/3 well for those who truly need it.

I don't know how to define the impact on the rest of the board, but it changed me personally. I saw our students suffering. I noticed the loss of life in my district that was pocketed in specific communities. The resilience through extreme emotional trauma and then, due to outside political pressure, we brought everyone back to school without the proper infrastructure to deal with a large group of students now all back together that went through a collective trauma individually.

Equity, dismantling systemic barriers and giving voice to historically underserved students, is some of the most important work of trustees and educators. The COVID-19 crisis only elevated the importance of making decisions with an equity lens. The district where I serve as a trustee has equity as one of the three board and district priorities. This work requires staff, student, and family engagement in order to have hard conversations and hold up a reflective lens. Several years ago, we developed an equity policy with support from Nicole Anderson and input from students and families. We have an equity committee with student, staff, community, and trustee members who have helped identify key projects to move forward with an equity agenda. Some key projects include removing letter grades for elementary students on report cards, implementing Grading for Equity, and implementing Alternative to Suspension programs. Our goals, both for the Superintendent and in the LCAP, are equity-driven and focused on being equitable and anti-racist.

These conversations have been necessary and have further driven our focus on equity. Prior to the pandemic, our district was already having community conversations about race and equity and brought this to other county school districts via our local school board association through consultant-led workshops. The pandemic immediately showed our limitations – and strengths – in serving our students, staff, and community at large. COVID funds were invaluable as we are the lowest funded high school district in the county and have communities of underserved. We went into remote learning and found that so many of our students did not have access to wifi. We delivered Chromebooks and MiFi Hotspots to students. We had drive-up food distributions and delivered food to those who could not reach a school. We continued working remotely with our Student Advisory Council of students from almost every school in the district, and we learned how our students of all learning levels were struggling – including that they were at risk of losing housing, that they had to work because their parents needed help, and that they needed wellness services. Through some communications with our communities, we also were bombarded with anger and ignorance – some that were racist and intolerant. All of this strengthened our need to focus on equity and, as our equity statement states, our District "commits to engaging, educating, and empowering ALL students, with an intentional focus on those under-served, inadequately served, or disenfranchised by educational institutions and systems."

Equity is (or should be) at the very core of all education legislation. The qualitative data analyzed and the qualitative data interrogated converge at the fact that the school board members' perceptions of challenges for prioritization of resources brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic were well founded. To attend to all the different layers to implement equity requirements of ESEA/ESSA (Ramírez et al., 1992), the documented socio-emotional needs (Fuller et al., 2007) that were exacerbated by the pandemic, the LCFF and ESSA required connections with families and community as advised by Milstein and Henry (2008), and the very COVID-19 crisis itself highlighted a need for local governing boards to focus on issues of equity to meaningfully allocate state and federal COVID-19 Relief Funds and enact its legislative requirements.

Using a discourse analysis approach, the qualitative data indicates that local governing board members felt that issues of equity and allocation resources were at the core of their concerns during the COVID-19 crisis. However, they reported that issues related to race and the debates resulting from the national agenda also interfered with their decision-making roles as developers of local policy.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

The analysis of the data resulted in the following findings. The findings that were determined to be significant in this research were selected in two ways as recommended by my advisor: (a) if the findings represented at least fifty percent (50%) responses from the quantitative data analyzed and/or (b) if the findings represented at least fifty percent (50%) of the responses from the qualitative data analyzed. The narrative is intended as a summary of

key findings but does not contain a complete listing of the data presented and discussed in Chapter 4.

Research Question:

***What effect did COVID-19 have on the decision-making processes of local governing boards with regard to considering and enacting state and federal policies?***

### ***Governing Board Lack of Clarity About State and Federal Policy***

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced a level of bewildering new policy to the already large body of state and federal policies and funding mechanisms (LCFF and ESSA). The data analyzed indicate a level of confusion with and/or board members not fully understanding the full provisions of state and federal policies. New COVID-19 funding policy increased turmoil in the boards' local political landscapes. Significant differences in response were identified between data analyzed quantitatively and data analyzed qualitatively. Qualitative data does not indicate board members exhibit the level of proficiency they expressed in the quantitative (survey) portion of the study.

### ***Governing Boards' Lack of Proficiency with State and Federal Policy***

Board members' familiarity levels with state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Funding Policy were not as clearly articulated as expressed in the quantitative items. The quantitative data indicated that board members had a clear understanding of the state and federal policy and its ensuing legislation (LCFF & ESSA and its funding mechanisms, LCAP & SBE Priorities, and the COVID-19 Relief Funding policy). The qualitative data does not validate the reported levels of board members' familiarity with policy as reported in the survey.

### ***Impact of COVID-19 on Decision-Making Processes***

As discussed in this chapter, the quantitative and qualitative data validated the challenges that affected the decision-making processes of local governing board members during the COVID-19 pandemic. The political landscapes of local governing boards were highly politicized as governing boards had to balance conceptual debates over race and equity with the tangible responsibilities of spending significant amounts of state and federal funds while they were adjusting to the very nature of health and human safety responses required of COVID-19 itself and its emerging new variants.

### ***COVID-19 Relief Funding Policy Impacted Governing Board Ability to Address Equity Issues***

Enacting state and federal policies along with the state and federal COVID-19 Relief funding policy resulted in high stakes equity issues which put local governing boards at the very center of national and state political issues. Deciding on school closures, deliberating on testing and vaccinations, feeding students in need, providing distance-learning, addressing the digital divide, attending to student and staff social-emotional well-being, and designing ways to promote learning recovery converged all at once as issues on local governing boards' landscapes. The core responsibilities of local governing boards were questioned and challenged. Their responsibility to ensure accountability; provide support to students, families, teachers, and administrators; assure safety and ongoing advocacy for students and schools; and ensure policies to carry out state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Funding policy all combined and exacerbated the countering opinions and points of view which created political tension and local turmoil.

## **Summary**

This chapter reported and analyzed the survey and open-ended responses data collected through the online Board member survey and the focus group interview conducted via Zoom with board members. Board members were quoted to ensure accurate representation of their perceptions. The next and final chapter will summarize key findings, discussions, conclusions, and recommendations.



## **Chapter 5: Key Findings, Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendations for Future Research**

### **Introduction**

Chapter 5 includes the purpose of the study as well as the research question. It summarizes the key findings and presents conclusions generated from the findings. Also included in this chapter are potential implications for actions as well as recommendations for future research.

### **Statement of Purpose**

Local governing school boards are held accountable for the education of all students in their community. School boards are responsible for directing the education of their youth as an investment in the future productivity of the community (Belfield, 2023). Governing board members are elected with a charge to ensure all students have access to high quality education that prepares them for life, careers, and post-secondary education. They meet regularly to discuss and decide issues related to local schools. They base decisions on input from superintendents, families, teachers, students, and the community members they serve. In California, school boards are elected to pursue and lead a vision for their local schools to meet all of their students' educational needs, the wishes of the voters, and the consensus of the community.

Elected members of local governing boards are entrusted with a fiduciary responsibility to make sure all taxpayer funds are spent on the different purposes for which they were allocated to the school district in which they serve. Most funding resources allocated to school districts are linked to either state policy (LCFF) or federal policy (ESSA). To mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the state of California and the federal government

responded with the allocation of large pockets of cash that were allocated to school districts through a number of one-time categorical funds (COVID-19 Relief Funds), each of which was legislated in alignment with existing state and federal policy (LCFF and ESSA). Thus, COVID-19 Relief Funds policy was aligned with state and federal policy. These funds flowed to the districts, and governing school boards were expected to exercise their fiduciary responsibility to determine and allocate the funds as appropriate.

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly challenged and disrupted the political landscapes of local governing boards. A few months into the pandemic, the national political agenda found its way to local governing boards, and governing boards found themselves in need to balance debates over race, equity, and other issues not typically related to normal education functions. On top of their regularly assigned roles as elected local governing boards, these governing bodies were forced to contend with socio-political issues that emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. They were expected to ensure safety, continue delivery of instruction to students via remote learning, close the schools, later reopen the schools, attend to the socio-emotional and mental wellbeing of students and staff, and address other issues considered germane to the pandemic.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the decision-making skills of local governing board members were affected through the COVID-19 crisis and how board members enacted state and federal policy which provided COVID-19 Relief Funding.

### **Research Question**

I conducted my research to answer the following question:

*What effect did COVID-19 have on the decision-making processes of local governing boards with regard to considering and enacting state and federal policies?*

### **Summary of Key Findings**

- 1. Governing board members' understandings of state and federal policy differed when comparing qualitative and quantitative responses.** The data analyzed indicated a level of confusion in the board members' understanding levels of the full provisions of state and federal policy. In general, board members often operate in tumultuous circumstances. However, COVID-19 funding policy increased the turmoil of the board members' local political landscapes. A significant difference was identified between the data analyzed quantitatively and the data analyzed qualitatively. The qualitative data gathered through open-ended survey responses and a focus group interview revealed that board members did not exhibit the espoused levels of proficiency that were expressed in the quantitative (survey) portion of the study. Their familiarity with state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Funding Policy was not as clearly articulated in qualitative responses as what was reported in the quantitative response items. The qualitative data indicated that board members did not have a clear understanding of state and federal policy and its ensuing legislation (LCFF and ESSA funding mechanisms, LCAP and SBE Priorities, and the COVID-19 Relief Funding policy). The qualitative data does not validate the level of board members' self-reported familiarity levels with policy as seen in the survey.

2. **COVID-19 impacted the decision-making processes of local governing board members.** As discussed in Chapter 4, the quantitative and qualitative data validated the challenges that affected the decision-making processes of local governing board members during the COVID-19 pandemic. The jurisdictional landscapes of local governing boards were confirmed by participants to be perceived as highly politicized, and it was evident that national political agendas were found to have influenced the local governing boards. The work of local governing school boards became more visible than ever in this time, and their decisions were subject to immediate dissemination (via multimedia access) and often judgmental misinterpretation of many of the community members they served. Thus, their decision-making processes were seen as highly impacted by the new way in which information found its way to their stakeholders. The advent of tele-conferencing that required governing boards to meet remotely invited a much larger participation from the public, but it also exposed board members to a higher level of transparency and vulnerability. Their decisions were seen as being more highly scrutinized than ever.
3. **COVID-19 relief funding policy presented challenges to governing boards' abilities to address equity issues.** Governing boards were tasked with a challenging new responsibility to address pandemic-generated social issues while still being expected to ensure academic accountability. This included ensuring tailored support for students, teachers, and administrators; promoting safety and resource advocacy for needy students and schools; and ensuring the enactment of policies to carry out state, federal, and COVID-19 Relief Funding policy. This generated countering opinions

and points of view which created political tensions and turmoil among governing boards and constituents.

Enacting state and federal policy along with the state and federal COVID-19 Relief funding policy resulted in deliberation over high stakes equity issues which put local governing boards at the very center of national, state, and local political issue debates. These political challenges converged all at once in the local governing boards' COVID-19 landscape. The core responsibilities of local governing boards were questioned and challenged. Challenges included attacks on governing boards from all different aspects of the political landscape related to the national and state agenda.

However, in spite of these challenges, school boards were seen as being proactive in centering their decisions on families, educators, and students. Some of the issues they addressed included enacting school closures, administering vaccinations, feeding students in need, providing distance learning, addressing the digital divide, attending to student and staff social-emotional well-being, and delivering on the learning recovery needs of their students. Thus, board members indicated equity informed their decision-making.

## **Conclusions**

Based on the quantitative and qualitative data collected, the data analysis conducted, and the key findings presented, the following conclusions were reached by this researcher.

### ***Professional Development for Board Members is Imperative***

Board member qualifications are important to the effectiveness of governing boards. To improve the effectiveness of board members' leadership abilities in the post-pandemic era, local governing boards would benefit from learning ways to improve their proficiency in

state and federal policy administration to effectively develop local policy that aligns with the state and federal funding mechanisms. This kind of professional development would allow for articulation and enactment of district policy coherent with external policy influences and the local governing boards' goals, vision, and mission (Carol et al., 1986; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000).

Since local governing board members are responsible to constituencies that elect them, post-pandemic board members would benefit from comprehensive trainings on decision-making strategies to ensure decisions are considered from different perspectives, including those of different stakeholders, differing racial and ethnic groups, and the general public (Carol et al., 1986; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000). Governing boards are expected to be trained to be able to engage in serious debate (without undermining other board members) to make student-centered decisions with solid rationales based on constituent needs.

### ***Understanding a Systems Approach Could Help Contribute to the Efficacy of Governing Boards***

Developing a systems approach to assess and prioritize equity policy development to help mitigate the effects of large scale environmental and societal problems could support the effectiveness of governing boards (Cooper et al., 2004). Systematic approaches to conducting strategic planning, continually collecting input from the communities they serve, facing community and societal crises, analyzing student achievement, conducting regular equity audits, and attending to all functions of the local governing boards would further promote their ability to serving all students in an efficacious and equity manner.

### ***Governing Boards Must Keep Their Focus on Equity at All Times***

Although the COVID-19 pandemic was a unique crisis, it is important that governing boards maintain their commitment to equity. Policies, programs, and curriculum must be audited for equity regularly.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

I propose that further research should be conducted regarding local governing boards' post-pandemic decision making processes related to the following issues: the promotion of equity; the use of technology; the need for a focus on teaching and learning (in contrast to a focus on assessments of student achievement); the need for effective communication; the role of district cultures; and the impact of budgeting and spending decisions. Any and all of these variables could be studied to illuminate decision-making functions of local governing boards as informed by their experiences during their elected governance terms in the time of COVID-19.

The new research would illuminate the unprecedented new challenges brought upon the public education sector by the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges included how instant reports of state and national political issues via multimedia affected decision-making processes of local governing boards and others. My research identified the significant role that multimedia sources played during the pandemic to further confuse K-12 leaders and the public they serve. Because mass media producers can misinform the public and weaponize information, and because this activity increases the levels of stress and vulnerability that local governing board members experience as key public agency decision makers, it would

be important to study and report its effect on the decision-making processes of governing board members.

## **Epilogue**

Local governing school boards exercise local control over public education. They are responsible for articulating and pursuing their communities' diverse expectations for the youth they are elected to serve. Their role is to stress equity, promote access, and assert local control while complying with state and federal policy. The challenges faced by local school governing boards during the COVID-19 pandemic affected the local governing boards' roles as decision makers and equity policy developers. The post-pandemic expectations of local governing boards have now been redefined, and boards are expected to be decision-making bodies that commit to laudable but challenging goals: promoting equity, ensuring accountability, supporting cultures of safety and inclusiveness across the district, communicating effectively using updated technology, and keeping a paramount focus on teaching and learning. While the learning loss due to the pandemic is considerable, the National Education Policy Center reported in January of 2023 that other dimensions of human and social capital along with school productivity might have been permanently shocked (Belfield, 2023; Hanushek, 2023). The report goes on to mention that it is unlikely that any policy responses will be adequate, efficient, or equitable to really reverse these impacts. This challenge will be best faced when local governing boards are continuously supported, trained, vigilant, and focused on the holistic needs of our youth. The fundamental role of local governing boards is to prioritize the beliefs and values of their communities to ensure the best education for the children they serve. They are responsible for enacting local



policy that is aligned with state and federal policy to serve all students. Study of decision-making is crucial.

Governing school boards are the baseline of our democracy (Pierce, 2020) and are the very seed of our democracy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, governing boards were challenged beyond what was expected of them previously with regard to policy setting and management of budgets for the school systems that educate our youth. The political climate that emerged during the pandemic frayed our norms and institutions. The governance of American public education by local governing boards is largely misunderstood by the public and inadequately researched by the community of scholars. Yet public school governance is a crucial democratic institution that merits greater study as it has continued (and should ideally improve) to directly inform and fundamentally serve all Americans regardless of how our nation is stressed at more macro levels (whether by global pandemics, media misinformation, political upheavals, or racial tensions.)

During this research, many (if not all) local governing boards across the nation were challenged in ways never seen before because of a confluence of aforementioned societal factors. As a result, the stability, trust, and viability of local governance was threatened. It's imperative we preserve, foster, and support the function of local governance boards as a core bastion of public education, equity, and (ultimately) our democracy. To maintain and improve upon our delivery on the promise of public education, we need to further study and support effective governance at the most direct and local levels, namely American public-school boards.

If school boards are seen as the seeds of our democracy, we must study and understand their successes and failures to know their impacts on the American people. The intentions and decisions of these political actors shape the very roots of our communities: American children. As researchers, we should further study effective educational governance practices so we can inform improvement efforts by our fellow professional practitioners, other political stakeholders, and the public we serve.

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## **Appendix**

### **Part I – Survey Introduction**

Governing Boards oversee public educational systems with a need to adhere to principles of local control, transparency, and equity. Adhering to all the different requirements of Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), its Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), federal policy (Every Student Succeeds Act - ESSA), and COVID Relief Funds statutes has been challenging for local governing boards. The requirements brought forward by California SB 98/820, AB 86/130, and other state and federal COVID Relief funds provisions have been a paramount challenge for local Governing Boards. The additional political and economic pressures of the pandemic also have augmented the needs and expectations of local Governing Boards, causing uncertainty and volatility.

This survey will collect data needed to study the effect of COVID-19 on the Decision-Making Process of Governing Boards Related to Equity Requirements of State and Federal Policy.

### **SURVEY**

**The following questions will be closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions are on a scale of 1 to 5:**

- 1.       None**
  
- 2.       Slightly**

3. Somewhat

4. Quite a bit

5. Fully

**Please read the definitions and respond to the questions in this survey. Please note that questions 16, 17, and 18 are open-ended questions.**

**Definitions: The California State Board of Education (SBE) priorities guide the development of the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) is the legislated funding mechanism for schools in California. The Every Student Succeeds Act is the Elementary and Secondary Schools (ESSA) reauthorization which contains the current federal education policy.**

1. What is your understanding of and familiarity level with the eight SBE priorities?

1            2            3            4            5

2. The LCAP serves three interrelated functions: Comprehensive Strategic Planning, Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement, and Accountability and Compliance. How familiar are you with these functions?

1            2            3            4            5

3. What is your level of familiarity with the relationship between LCFF funding and how your district works to operationalize LCAP goals and the monitoring of its effectiveness?

1            2            3            4            5

4. How familiar are you with the federal funding mechanisms for education (ESSA, Special Education, COVID Relief)?

1            2            3            4            5

5. How familiar are you with the COVID Relief state and federal funding mechanisms?

1            2            3            4            5

**Definitions: Equity is at the heart of and an integral part of LCFF, ESSA, and COVID-19 Relief funding initiatives. Throughout the pandemic, California has emphasized equity throughout its budget provisions in the SB98/820 and AB 86/130 statutes.**

6. What is your understanding and familiarity of SB98/820, AB 86/130 statutes, and COVID-19 Relief funding?

1            2            3            4            5

7. As a policy creator for your school district, how have your decision-making abilities been affected by the provision of COVID-Relief funding?

1            2            3            4            5

8. Through the lens of equity, how has your prioritization of educational perspectives been affected by the COVID-19 crisis?

1            2            3            4            5

9. Local control, transparency, and equity are guiding principles of the LCFF. How have your LCFF decision-making skills been affected by the COVID-19 crisis?

1            2            3            4            5

10. Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, how challenging have you found it to make district policy decisions related to access and equity?

**Definitions: SB 98/820, AB 86/130, and AB 181/185 are California Budget Acts and ensuing legislation that deal with the management and funding of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.**

11. How familiar are you with provisions of SB 98/820, AB 86/130, and AB 181/185?

1            2            3            4            5

12. As a district policy maker and decision-maker, how proficient are you in integrating state and federal equity requirements to your fiduciary responsibilities to LCFF, ESSA, and COVID-19 Relief funding?

1            2            3            4            5

13. From your Board member perspective, how effective have local governing boards been in articulating policy to meet the challenges of COVID-19 in the context of LCFF and ESSA?

1            2            3            4            5

14. From your Board member perspective, how effective have local governing boards been in articulating local policy to meet the challenges of COVID-19 using the equity lens?

1            2            3            4            5

15. In response to COVID-19, policies regarding distance learning, independent studies, socio-emotional learning, discipline, and other school related processes were redefined and modified. What is your level of understanding of the redefined and modified processes?

1            2            3            4            5

**Open-Ended Question**

16. For decision-making and development of education policy through the COVID-19 crisis, please describe how important you think Board conversations about race, disadvantaged youth, family engagement, student engagement, and school climate are to your work as a district leader? How important have been these conversations to reaching district goals?

**Open-Ended Question**

17. In your perspective, what are the most important decision-making skills a new board member needs to serve in a local governing board?

**Open-Ended Question**

18. Please address the impact of equity on Governing Board decision-making within the context of LCFF, ESSA, and COVID-19 ensuing legislation.