

# RESEARCH BRIEF

## The Effects of Differentiated Assistance on Student Achievement

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### DIFFERENTIATED ASSISTANCE AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

California's efforts to support low-performing schools is known as differentiated assistance. It's been two years since it began, and this report looked at student achievement data to determine whether it has helped students during that time.

Our research showed that while the idea of differentiated assistance as a school support and accountability measure is sound, there is limited evidence that students have benefited from DA so far. That doesn't mean it should be discontinued; our report authors found DA could show improvement with time and effort.

There are nearly 1,400 local educational agencies with more than 10,000 schools in California, which makes it a challenge to help struggling districts better support each student. That's why legislators passed the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in 2013. It was a big shift from how things had been done and gave local communities more flexibility in how funding is distributed. The LCFF came with accountability features that look at multiple measures (not just test scores) and provide unique support through differentiated assistance, which is customized for each low-performing district or school.

This report looked at whether DA improved student achievement and reduced the achievement gap two years after it was put into place. To estimate DA impact, we compared districts receiving assistance to changes in districts that never received support, but were similar in terms of their performance on the California Schools Dashboard.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Both English language arts (ELA) and math scores of assistance districts improved fractionally, but not meaningfully, compared to similar districts during the report study.
- Differentiated assistance did not significantly reduce the achievement gap between low-income districts receiving assistance compared to other similar districts that did not receive assistance.
- Only having two years of research makes it difficult to measure the effects of differentiated assistance. It may take three to five years to get an accurate assessment.
- Sometimes, just being labeled a "low-performing school" leads to a decrease in school performance, regardless of the assistance level.
- County offices of education don't implement differentiated assistance consistently across agencies.
- Differentiated assistance is more successful compared to other states' accountability reforms, but it lacks clear, measurable outcomes, which would help county offices' efforts.
- Building capacity at the district level and holding a district accountable for improvement might mitigate many of the unintended consequences of accountability that result when schools feel punished for actions beyond their control.

## POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

While this report shows limited evidence that differentiated assistance effects student achievement, two recommendations are clear.

1. **Stay the course.** The research supporting differentiated assistance is sound. It aims to get at the root cause of low student achievement, not just find a Band-aid or temporary solution. It also focuses on district systems, which is the place where the greatest change can happen to improve schools.
2. **Wait.** Improvements in student achievement could take three to five years. Also, the pause in accountability due to the pandemic offers the opportunity for county offices of education to make strides in what's working, what isn't and make improvements as well as increase consistency in how differentiated assistance is delivered and measured.

## BACKGROUND

### LCFF AND SHIFTS IN COUNTY OFFICES OF EDUCATION

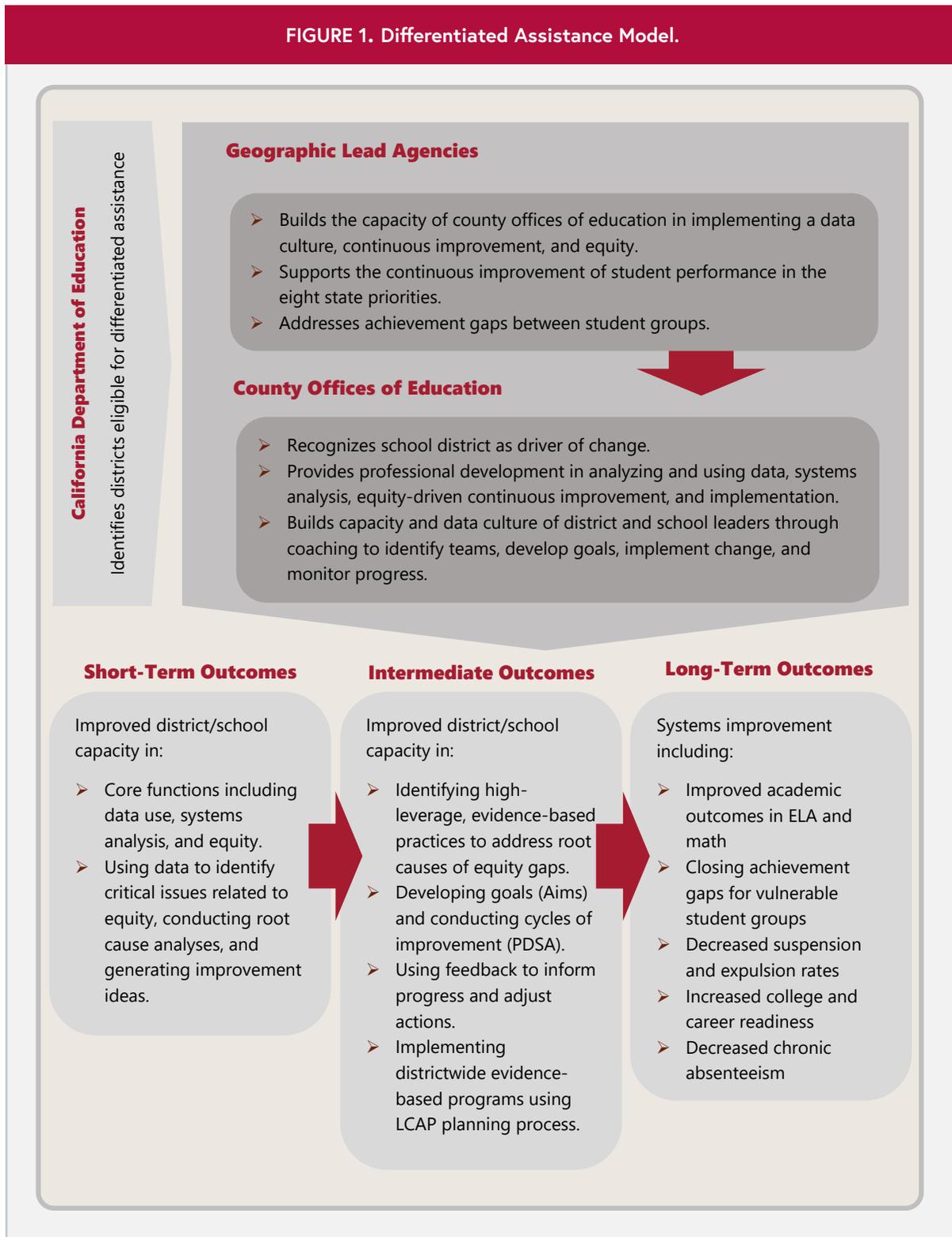
In 2013, the California Legislature passed landmark legislation that created the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). This changed K-12 funding across the state by directing more money to districts that serve larger percentages of historically marginalized student groups. Districts show how they're using that funding in their Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). Along with this shift in funding, the state also changed the roles of its 54 county offices of education (COEs) by requiring COEs to approve districts' three-year budgets and directing COEs to support districts with gaps in performance.

### THE CALIFORNIA SYSTEM OF SUPPORT

Differentiated assistance, which is part of the California System of Support, is one of the mechanisms through which COEs support districts to address performance gaps. Modeled after a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework, California's statewide System of Support supports districts using three levels of supports: General support, differentiated assistance, and intensive intervention. Differentiated assistance helps districts as they work to understand the underlying causes that led to their low performance. It also strengthens the districts' ability to evaluate the effectiveness of its programs.

### DIFFERENTIATED ASSISTANCE PROCESS

When the state started DA in the 2016-17 school year, approximately 218 districts were eligible for assistance based on results from the California Schools Dashboard. As explained in detail in the graphic on the next page, DA starts with a district-based team that works with a team from their county office of education, which provides individual support and improvement coaching. They work together on a needs assessment, root cause analysis, and continuous improvement action planning. That means they look at the district's data together, learn about what's working and why, then they take action to improve student outcomes that's aligned with their LCAP. These teams include important district decision-makers including superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors, principals, and frontline staff.



## ACCOUNTABILITY MODELS

There have been many different accountability models over the years and California's System of Support uses many of the promising elements from accountability research. The California System of Support focuses on a process for determining the needs of districts and carrying out a plan to address the needs versus replacing structural components in the system such as principals and teachers. It also focuses on a process to learn and improve, instead of punishing schools and districts.

Accountability interventions often show mixed results. For context, Los Angeles Unified's Public School Choice Initiative (PSCI), an accountability intervention, found improvements in English language arts (ELA) achievement in its lowest performing schools (Strunk, Marsh, Hashim, Bush, & Weinstein, 2016). Tennessee's iZone schools also showed gains in student achievement when districts continued to manage daily operations and when schools had the autonomy to determine resources and make structural changes (Zimmer, Kho, Henry, & Viano, 2015). Boston's Pilot Schools also operated as individual school districts within the Boston Public Schools system, with allowances in autonomy for staffing, budgeting, curriculum, governance, and school calendar. However, results in Boston suggested no effects on student achievement (2011). Unfortunately, for every study finding improvements in student achievement resulting from accountability interventions, there is a complementary study finding no difference.

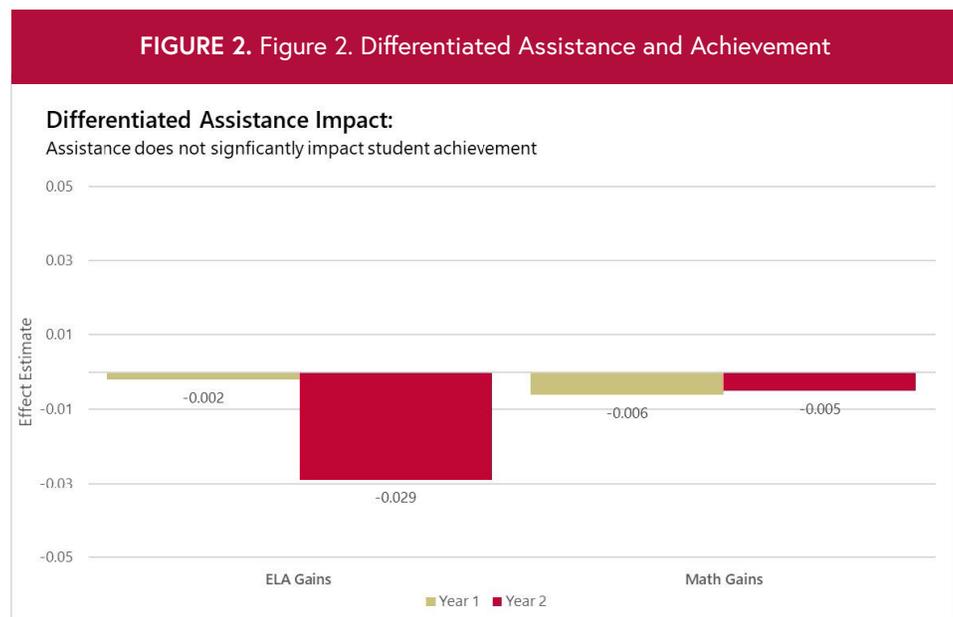
## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report aimed to answer the question: "Given what we know about differentiated assistance, how effective is it at improving student achievement?" Looking at two years of data, we estimated DA's impact by comparing changes over time in districts receiving assistance to changes in districts that never received support, but were similar in terms of their performance on the California Schools Dashboard.

### HOW HAS ASSISTANCE CHANGED STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT?

Our data suggests that districts receiving differentiated assistance performed about the same as districts not receiving assistance. In other words, the additional assistance has yet to improve student achievement. Practically speaking, after two years of implementing differentiated assistance, there is little evidence to suggest that the assistance improves student achievement at this point.

We displayed the effects of assistance on gains in ELA and math in the figure to the right. (Access the full research study with a detailed description of the methodology at <https://www.sdcoe.net/lls/assessment/Pages/Program-Evaluation.aspx>.)



This figure shows the difference in both ELA and mathematics achievement between districts receiving assistance compared to similar districts not receiving assistance. In ELA in year one, the effect of the assistance is practically zero at .002. That effect grew slightly negative to 0.029 in year two. In mathematics, the effects across both years were -.006 and -.005 respectively; neither effect is different from zero. That is to say, districts receiving assistance were no different in terms of achievement gains compared to districts not receiving assistance.

### HOW HAS ASSISTANCE CHANGED THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP?

We also estimated the change to the achievement gap resulting from the additional assistance. To do this, we compared low-income districts receiving assistance to other districts that were similar but did not receive assistance. We defined low-income districts based on the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. We compared student performance in these low-income districts receiving assistance to the other districts in our study to determine if DA narrowed achievement gaps.

The figure to the right shows the impact of the assistance on the achievement gap. In ELA in year one, assistance shrank the achievement gap slightly by 0.042 between low-income districts receiving assistance compared to other districts. However, the change disappears in year two. In mathematics, assistance shrank the achievement gap in low-income districts receiving assistance by 0.028 in year

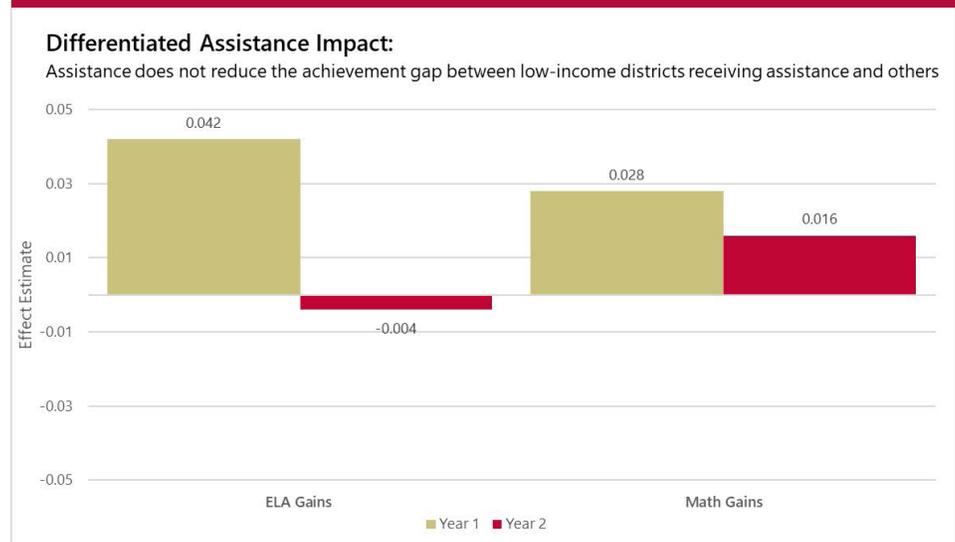
one and slightly less (0.016) in year two. While reductions to the achievement gap are important, it is important to note that the magnitude of these differences are quite small. Currently, it is too early to say that DA reduces the achievement gap between low-income districts receiving assistance compared to other districts.

### WHAT LIMITS THE IMPACT OF DIFFERENTIATED ASSISTANCE?

One factor limiting the impact of DA is time. California's technical support model is a complex set of actions. It is designed to provide funding to districts to improve their systems without forcing districts to make impulsive changes to personnel and resources. The DA process focuses on driving change locally, on understanding schools' needs and knowing what actions will address the needs. This all happens by using local data and focusing on improvement over judgement. Research suggests it may take three to five years to see improvement given these actions (Berends, Bodily, & Kirby, 2002).

It is also important to note the initial, negative impact caused when districts become eligible for DA. Sometimes, just being labeled a "low-performing school" leads to a decrease in school performance, regardless of the

**FIGURE 3.** Figure 3. Differentiated Assistance and the Achievement Gap



assistance level. There's evidence the social stigma of accountability labels may lead to declines in school performance that are difficult for any intervention to overcome. Policymakers should keep in mind that labeling schools as needing support could negatively affect their performance.

Another limiting feature of DA is the model itself. While research suggests that district-level interventions have an impact on student achievement, the magnitude of these effects vary considerably. In fact, the effect sizes for these kinds of accountability interventions range from moderately positive to moderately negative with the average intervention revealing no change in student achievement. By this definition, we might consider DA an average intervention in terms of its effect on students learning. Because district interventions focus on system changes and are removed from the classroom, they may not have as big of impact on achievement as interventions that directly affect students.

A final limitation is the struggle of county offices of education to implement differentiated assistance consistently across agencies. Other studies of California's DA implementation have revealed varying levels of capacity and expertise in COEs, loose implementation and facilitation of the DA process, and delays in the process (Humphrey & O'Day, 2019). These differences affect the ability of DA to improve student achievement.

## CONCLUSIONS

While this report shows limited evidence that differentiated assistance affects student achievement, two recommendations are clear: California should continue differentiated assistance and wait to see improvements in student achievement. The research supporting differentiated assistance is sound. It aims to get at the root cause of low student achievement, not just find a Band-Aid or temporary solution. It also focuses on district systems, which is the place where the greatest change can happen to improve schools. Studies have shown that improvements in student achievement could take three to five years. Also, the pause in accountability due to the pandemic offers the opportunity for county offices of education to make strides in what's working, what isn't, and make improvements as well as increase consistency in how differentiated assistance is delivered and measured. For the complete set of recommendations, please read our full report located at <https://www.sdcoe.net/lls/assessment/Pages/Program-Evaluation.aspx>.

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