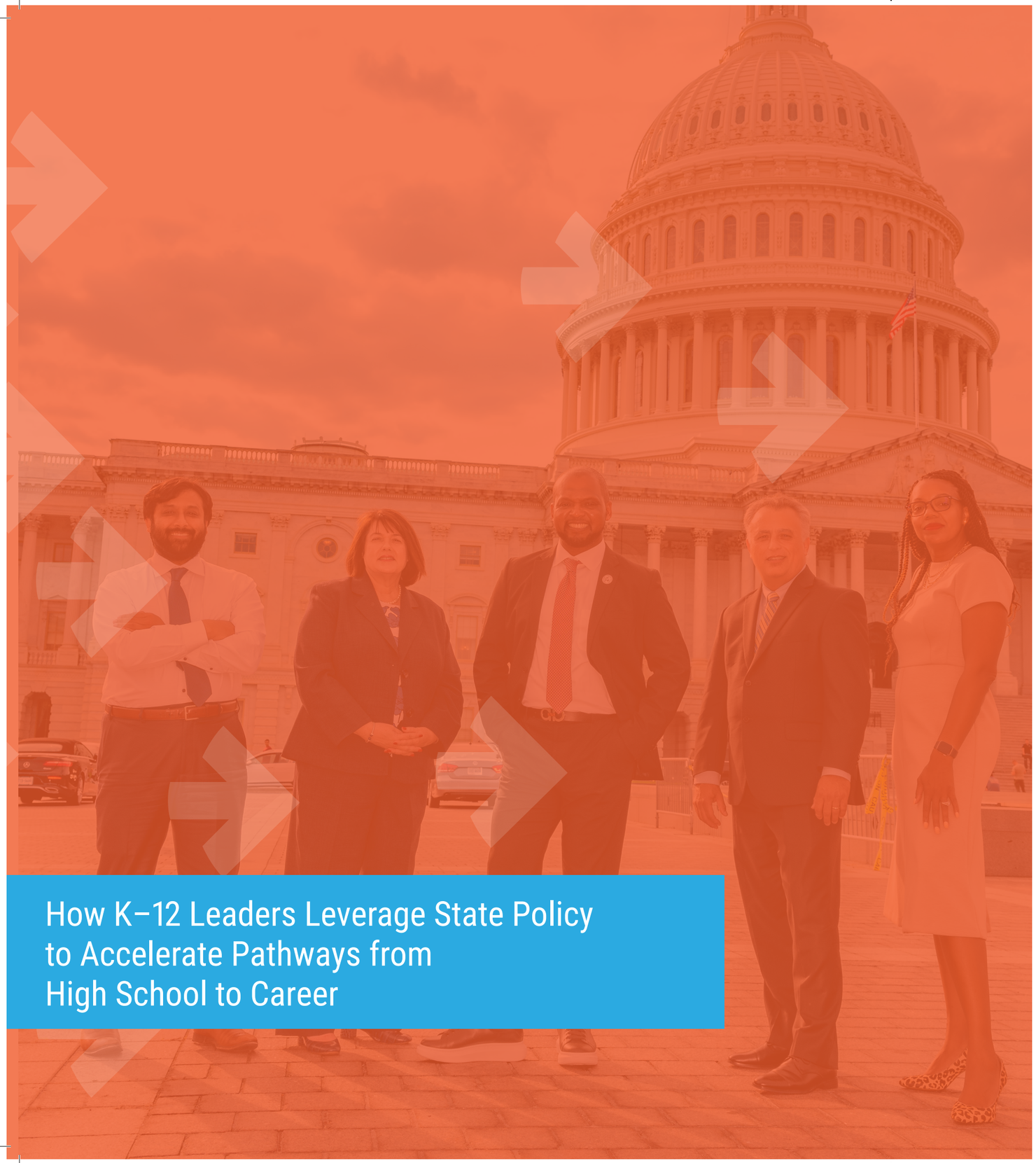
CHIEFS for CHANGE 10 YEARS

TWO STATES, ONE GOAL

How K–12 Leaders Leverage State Policy to Accelerate Pathways from High School to Career



How K–12 Leaders Leverage State Policy to Accelerate Pathways from High School to Career

Across the nation, education leaders are redefining how high schools prepare students for success after graduation. Both **California** and **Texas** have made bold moves to align K–12 learning with postsecondary opportunity and workforce needs—recognizing that traditional systems have too often failed to connect what students learn in school to the skills and credentials they need to thrive.

In early 2025, **Chiefs for Change** examined how **California's Golden State Pathways Program (GSPP)** and **Texas's House Bill 8 (HB 8)** are shaping postsecondary pathways policy. These two states, different in political culture but aligned in purpose, reveal how thoughtful policy can unlock opportunity for students and set the stage for district innovation.

Chiefs for Change conducted desk reviews and interviews with 24 stakeholders across both states — including district superintendents, higher education leaders, business coalitions, and advocacy organizations — to explore:

The **policy conditions** that made passage and implementation possible

Messaging that built bipartisan support

Who shaped these policies, and how superintendents were involved

Early impacts on practice at the district level

The research surfaced five key themes that illuminate how K—12 leaders can leverage state policy to accelerate progress from high school to career:

1. Naming urgent problems
2. Leveraging existing pathways policies
3. Building leadership coalitions beyond K—12 for bipartisan support
4. Crafting workforce- and opportunity-framed messaging
5. Positioning to drive future policy development

Although superintendents were not always central to policy design, they are essential to turning vision into practice—leading implementation, shaping future reforms, and ensuring policies deliver for students.

POLICY CONTEXT: TWO STATES, SHARED CHALLENGES

Texas: Reform Rooted in Workforce Need

Texas faced a dual challenge: a growing population and an urgent shortage of skilled workers. Leaders also recognized inequities in community college enrollment and outcomes, which had worsened during the pandemic. The legislature created the **Texas Commission on Community College Finance,** which included legislators, business leaders, and postsecondary officials, to propose a new model. Their recommendations informed **House Bill 8,** which ties funding to student outcomes and emphasizes the value of **credentials.**

Texas built on a strong foundation of dual-credit partnerships dating back to 1995. As one Texas superintendent reflected:

"In the state of Texas, [we] have a lot of low-income students. The dual challenge with that is that our EL populations tend to be one and the same. What [we] were seeing was a huge gap [between them and] the kids who had access…the gap is shrinking."
— Texas Superintendent

This focus on workforce relevance and measurable outcomes transformed funding reform into a bipartisan effort that united educators, legislators, and employers.

California: Equity and Economic Imperative

California's **Golden State Pathways Program (GSPP)** emerged from the need to address persistent gaps in postsecondary attainment and to invest the required budget surplus. State leaders saw an opportunity to connect students to high-wage, high-growth industries while addressing disparities that widened during the pandemic.

The GSPP built on a long lineage of dual enrollment and career initiatives—including the **Career Pathways Trust, AB 288 (College and Career Access Pathways),** and **K–16 Education Collaboratives**—to strengthen alignment between K-12, higher education, and the workforce.

As one California education policy leader explained:

"Golden State Pathways is a culmination of, and builds on, decades of work that the field has done." **— California Education Policy Leader**

Common Threads

While Texas's reform grew from a bottom-up, business-led coalition and California's from a top-down, state-led initiative, both focused on aligning education and workforce systems. Both built momentum through clear problem definition, bipartisan framing, and a commitment to equitable outcomes.

FIVE THEMES AND LESSONS FOR K–12 LEADERS

1

Naming urgent problems

Leaders in both states advanced pathways reforms by clearly defining problems and framing them as urgent, solvable, and shared.

In **Texas,** policymakers emphasized the state's need for a skilled workforce and equitable access to postsecondary credentials.

In **California,** policymakers focused on disengagement, low attainment, and inequities that grew during the pandemic.

District leaders reinforced the message. **Long Beach Unified School District** described persistent gaps in achievement and engagement for Black students, English learners, and students with disabilities. The district views pathways as a chance to reimagine high school and reengage students.

How Superintendents Can Lead

- **Use district data** to define the problem
- **Elevate examples** of challenges and barriers and communicate urgency to internal and external audiences
- **Share ownership of the problem** with partners to build collective momentum
- **Show how districts are already addressing known problems** by highlighting career pathways, dual enrollment, or CTE models that can inform policy development

2

Leveraging Existing Pathways Policies

Both states built upon existing initiatives rather than starting anew. In **Texas,** the Commission's recommendations and dual-credit laws dating back to 1995 shaped HB 8's focus on equity and outcomes. In **California,** policies like AB 288 and prior career pathway investments provided structure for GSPP.

Districts used existing practices as "proof points." **Spring Branch ISD,** for example, had already established its T-2-4 goal—that every graduate "will attain a technical certificate, military training, or a two-year or four-year degree." This model demonstrated the kind of outcomes HB 8 later sought to incentivize.

A Texas business leader emphasized the importance of adaptability:

"We have to keep an eye on what's the impact to see if there are unintended consequences of [HB 8]. Continuing to maintain it as a dynamic model that's responsive to workforce needs is really important." **— Texas Business Leader**

How Superintendents Can Lead

- **Use implementation experience** to help state leaders refine, clarify, and strengthen policies through rulemaking or future policies
- **Gather feedback from schools and partners** throughout implementation to understand what is and is not working
- **Where policy lags, lead with practice** and "proof points" to set the policy agenda and show what is possible

3

Building Leadership Coalitions Beyond K—12

Broad coalitions beyond K-12 proved essential in both states. In **Texas,** the Commission brought together legislators, business leaders, and higher education officials. The result was a sense of shared ownership that made HB 8 politically durable.

"Although the task force was state-created, the heavy community college involvement contributed to the perception of HB 8 as a ground-up initiative." — Texas Stakeholder

In **California,** state leaders spearheaded GSPP while advocacy groups like **Fast Forward California** galvanized field support.

San Antonio ISD: District leaders collaborated with higher ed and IBM to build scalable P-TECH models. Their partnerships aligned with state workforce priorities and positioned the district as a ready partner for legislative investment.

How Superintendents Can Lead

- **Engage partners early** and build relationships with business, higher ed, workforce, and local and regional postsecondary partners before policy is on the table
- **Communicate priorities** to staff, which can foster greater internal and external collaboration
- **See partnerships as groundwork** to inform policy design and support smooth implementation

4

Crafting Workforce- and Opportunity-Framed Messaging

Successful messaging in both states appealed across political and regional lines. Texas's narrative centered on workforce strength and student opportunity, while California emphasized equity and responsiveness to community needs.

Texas Community College Leaders: All community college presidents supported HB 8. The day the bill was heard, legislators arrived to see a letter of support on their desk signed by all 50 community college presidents.

"It's a winning issue on all sides. One of the things that did work well is that pathway spoke to everybody. Our more conservative folks in the legislature are really interested in workforce. This speaks to them. And then our folks in the majority are very interested in pathways and equity. This wins across the board."
— California Education Advocacy Leader

How Superintendents Can Lead

- Understand the **local context** and identify which messages will resonate with different audiences
- Consider the **timing of local initiatives** to avoid unnecessary distractions
- Know when to **lean in** and when to let other districts or team members lead
- **Share local stories** that make the connection between the district's core academic strategy, pathways policies, and outcomes for students

5

Positioning to Drive Future Policy Development

In both states, superintendents played limited roles in shaping initial legislation but are well-positioned to drive what comes next. In Texas, HB 8 was largely a higher education initiative; in California, involvement varied, with advocacy groups and some individual superintendents stepping in.

California Op-Eds: Advocates believed that superintendent-written op-eds were persuasive to lawmakers in funding the Golden State Pathways Program.

***"The associations or the education management groups are helpful, but it would also [have been] helpful to have individual superintendents… Of course, having them at the table is helpful to know whether or not this is going to work on the ground is really valuable. It's too late after the fact"* — California Education Advocacy Leader**

How Superintendents Can Lead

- **Engage with local partners,** including employers, advocacy organizations, and higher education institutions, to identify common needs within your community.
- **Leverage relationships** with **local legislators** in support of postsecondary policies aligned with the needs of your students.
- **Use your platform to communicate** to the local community, through op-eds or other public statements, the need for greater alignment between K-12, higher education, and workforce development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DISTRICT LEADERS

Implications for District Leaders

Lead with data and urgency.
Define the problem clearly and make it real through local evidence.

Invest in partnerships.
Collaborate with institutions of higher education and industry to create credibility and shared purpose.

Elevate proof points.
Show how district innovations work in practice.

Frame around opportunity for every child.
Link pathways to economic mobility and workforce strength.

Stay engaged.
Policy evolution depends on superintendent leadership and feedback.

CONCLUSION

California and Texas represent two distinct but converging approaches to the same challenge: preparing every student for college, career, and life. Their experiences show that when state vision meets district leadership, systems can move toward greater equity and opportunity.

Superintendents may not write the laws, but they bring them to life. **By leading boldly, collaborating across sectors, and communicating with purpose, K-12 leaders can transform policy into lasting progress—building real pathways from high school to career.**

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