Education Leaders Discuss Big Visions to Connect K-12 and Higher Education

By Thad Nodine, Senior Fellow, Education Insights Center
(Cross-posted on the Californiana Blog, a project of the Center for California Studies)

Three state education leaders—from K-12 education, the California Community Colleges, and California Competes, a nonprofit organization—welcomed a new cohort of 20 Fellows to the California Education Policy Fellowship Program (EPFP) during its first three-day seminar of the year, in Asilomar in October. In their remarks, each of the speakers said that California needs to improve its ability to set and assess statewide goals across K-12 schools, postsecondary education, and workforce training programs. Currently, California has no statewide coordinating body or data structure that spans its K-12 and higher education systems.

A professor emeritus at Stanford University, Michael Kirst said that bringing together K-12 schools and higher education is challenging even at the top levels of state leadership. “There’s a lack of formal opportunities to meet, deliberate, and talk about policy, challenges, and opportunities to work together,” he said. He’s hoping that California EPFP can help to bridge some of the educational divides. “This program is important in building cross-level understanding between K-12 and higher education, and between policy and practice,” he said. Forty-five years ago Kirst founded California’s first EPFP, which serves as a model for the current California EPFP. Kirst, who has served for the past eight years as State Board of Education President, led a range of significant policy reforms, including the Local Control Funding Formula, adoption of new state standards and assessments, and creation of a new accountability system. These efforts have been the lynchpin of California’s approach to K-12 education during Jerry Brown’s tenure as governor. Kirst’s term ends when Brown steps down in January 2019. He said that the state’s efforts to have local
districts take greater responsibility for improvements is “still evolving” and will require an ongoing investment in capacity building. “The thing to examine with the new administration is whether they stay on the same path,” he said. “The trend [in politics] is to ratchet up accountability much more than capacity building. My advice is to watch that balance.” He also hopes that local school boards will get more involved in the Local Control Accountability Plans that are approved every three years by the boards: “Where we’re getting discussion, it’s parents and it’s administrators, but it’s not so much the school boards.”

In addressing California’s statewide needs across education systems, Laura Hope, executive vice chancellor for educational services at the California Community College Chancellor’s Office, said that students bear the main burdens caused by the lack of statewide priorities or outcomes for education. “There are a lot of disconnects across the systems, a lot of misalignment,” she said, which leads to too many students not being prepared for college, or being placed in the wrong courses in college, or wasting time retaking courses they already completed at a different institution. Hope pointed to dual enrollment and pathways programs as effective ways to connect high school and college curriculum for students. Without a statewide data system, however, the state cannot track student progress across these kinds of programs, nor can researchers readily identify patterns of student progress. “As we move to [the use of] artificial intelligence and data algorithms, not having a statewide data structure is killing us,” she said.

Speaking about the community colleges, Hope said that the system is going through “a complete re-imagination of the capacity of our students to do well in higher education.” She said this means focusing all college functions around students: “We’re looking at structural reform rather than programmatic reform. We’re moving from islands of innovation to innovation at scale. We’re linking policies together.” To get funding to implement Guided Pathways, for example, the Chancellor’s Office is requiring colleges
to link their work to reforms in assessment and basic education (as required by AB 705) and in student equity and achievement. “We can’t make change mandatory,” Hope said, “so we’re making it irresistible. We’re creating levers that are built on incentives.”

Lande Ajose, executive director of California Competes, a nonprofit organization working to improve higher education and workforce opportunities in California, discussed California’s challenges in living up to the major principles outlined in California’s Master Plan for Higher Education. She described these as access and equity, affordability, accountability for academic quality, and preparedness in the K-12 system. Each of these components has eroded, Ajose said, and the state needs to summon the political will to address them individually or collectively. Ajose is also chair of the California Student Aid Commission. She said that in the absence of a coordinating body for higher education, the Commission is sometimes pressed to provide various aspects of that role, “but it’s not robust enough to serve that function.” She pointed to promising reforms by the education systems, including CSU’s Graduation Initiative 2025 and the community college’s Guided Pathways initiative. “These are important,” she said, “but they are not a statewide structure. There needs to be ways to develop statewide goals and priorities.”

California EPFP is administered by the Education Insights Center (EdInsights) and the Center for California Studies at Sacramento State. California EPFP strengthens education policymaking in California by supporting the development of a new generation of skilled, informed leaders across K-12 and higher education. The applications period for the 2019-20 cohort will open in late spring 2019.