



AB 519 (California Ed Code 52055.59) Evaluation Final Report: Executive Summary

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Prepared by:

**Theresa Westover and Katharine Strunk (PIs),
Andrew McEachin, Amy Smith, Shani Keller,
and Mary Stump**

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Introduction

This is the final report of a three-year independent evaluation authorized by California (CA) *Education Code (EC)* Section 52055.59 (AB 519/2008) to study California's implementation of Title I corrective actions in school districts failing to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) and subject to sanctions as required by the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

As per CA *EC* Section 52055.57, the California Department of Education (CDE) identifies local educational agencies (LEAs), including both districts and county offices of education, as in Program Improvement (PI) and provides technical assistance and resources (as legislatively available) to assist these LEAs in making AYP. LEAs failing to do so advance in PI and, after three years, are subject to one or more sanctions as described at CA *EC* Section 52055.57 (c).

Beginning in April 2008, the California State Board of Education (SBE) assigned Corrective Action 6 to these PI Year three (PI3) LEAs arguing that this was the least onerous of the sanctions and the most likely to build district capacity to improve student achievement. LEAs received a state grant based upon the pervasiveness and severity of their achievement problems and were required to "institute and fully implement a new curriculum (defined as full implementation of the SBE-adopted or standards-aligned curriculum), and provide appropriate professional development for local educators." Based upon the pervasiveness and severity of their achievement problems, PI3 districts were grouped into three categories: (a) PI3 districts in "severe" need of assistance were required to contract with a specific district assistance and intervention team (DAIT), selected for them by the state; (b) PI3 districts in "moderate" need of assistance were required to select and work with a DAIT of their choosing, and (c) PI3 districts in only "light" need of assistance were required to access technical assistance from a source of their own choosing in order to initiate and monitor implementation of Corrective Action 6. Under AB 519, the State Board of Education was directed to allocate differential amounts of funding to PI 3 districts with light, moderate, or severe performance problems. DAITs were approved and trained by CDE.

This evaluation has been conducted by the Center for Education and Evaluation Services (CEES) at the University of California at Davis in partnership with a research team at the University of Southern California. The purpose of the evaluation is to

examine results of the implementation of CA EC 52055.57 (c), defined to include implementation, impact, and effectiveness associated with implementation of the corrective action and reform strategies undertaken by LEAs. The evaluation study examined the first two cohorts of PI 3 districts to receive the SBE sanction (county offices of education identified in these cohorts were not included in the sample). Cohort 1 districts received the intervention beginning in 2008-9; Cohort 2 districts received the intervention beginning in 2009-10. The evaluation focuses primarily on the impact of the DAITs as intermediary organizations providing capacity building support to districts judged as most in need of assistance, compared to the impact of other technical assistance approaches implemented by PI3 districts in the light category, which were not required to contract with a DAIT. The evaluation study employed a mixed methods approach to examine the outcomes of the intervention in terms of both student achievement and district capacity building. There have been two interim reports submitted to CDE, the Governor, Department of Finance, the Legislature and the Legislative Analyst's Office. This is the third and final evaluation report.

Evaluation findings indicate that PI3 districts that worked with DAITs both improved their capacity to support their students and showed promising early improvements in student achievement relative to similar PI3 districts that did not utilize a DAIT. While it is too early to definitively determine what the long-term impact of the Corrective Action 6 intervention may be on these two initial cohorts of PI3 districts, this report details the short-term outcomes (e.g. 2-3 years after identification as a PI3 district), including impact, implementation, and effectiveness, particularly in districts working with DAITs. Key findings from the evaluation are described below.

Impact: Improved Student Achievement

Key evaluation findings related to the impact of Corrective Action 6 include:

- 1. Students in Cohort 1 districts with DAITs (categorized as severe or moderate) outperform students in non-DAIT Cohort 1 districts (those in the light category and not required to contract with a DAIT) in math, particularly in years two and three.***
- 2. Students in Cohort 1 districts with DAITs do not have significantly higher test results in ELA; however when combining results from both cohorts 1 and 2, there is evidence of a positive impact on ELA scores.¹***

¹ Qualitative results suggest that districts in Cohort 1 tended to focus on improving their math curriculum and supports first, turning to an emphasis on ELA in the subsequent years. It is possible that the recent identification of a new SBE approved math curriculum just prior to the identification of Cohort 1 districts may have been a factor in this.

- 3. Analysis of results for specific student subgroups finds stronger positive outcomes for some groups of minority students (African American and Hispanic), students who qualify for the free and reduced lunch program, and English learners (ELs).**

Findings

The Impact of Corrective Action 6 on Student Achievement:

- Students in Cohort 1 districts with DAITs outperform students in non-DAIT Cohort 1 districts in math. This impact is strongest in years two and three.
- Combining both cohorts, we find the DAIT impact on math achievement is muted by the inclusion of Cohort 2, indicating that the positive effect of DAITs on student math achievement is weaker for students in the second cohort.
- DAITs do not have a statistically significant impact on Cohort 1 student achievement in ELA.
- There is a stronger positive impact of DAITs on student ELA achievement in the combined Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 sample indicating that the positive effect of DAITs on student ELA achievement is stronger for students in the second cohort.
- Analysis of results for specific student subgroups finds stronger positive outcomes for some groups of minority students (African American and Hispanic groups), neutral for Asian Americans, and slightly negative for white students.
- We find no significant impact of DAITs on achievement of students who do not qualify for federal lunch program assistance but rather sizable effects for students who do qualify. Similarly, we find uniformly positive impacts of DAITs on the achievement of English language learners (ELLs).
- Students enrolled in PI3+ schools within Cohort 1 DAIT districts perform significantly higher on both math and ELA achievement tests than do students in higher-performing schools in these districts over the three years of the study. This pattern does not hold when data from both cohorts are combined.

We find these results to be reliable under a variety of tests for sources of bias.

Quantitative Methods

Student Achievement Outcomes Analyses

Outcomes analyses were conducted using a panel difference-in-difference regression design to estimate the impact of DAITs on student math and English language arts (ELA) California Standards Tests (CSTs) relative to non-DAIT technical assistance in the first three years of program implementation. These analyses draw on a six year panel of data from California's student-level administrative dataset (from 2005-6 to 2010-11) that tracks approximately 29.1 million student-year observations across approximately 9,000 schools and 1,000 districts, including the 95 districts that are designated as PI3 and received some form of technical assistance.

While results were closely examined for sources of bias, there remain limitations to the quantitative analyses including the limited time frame, the lack of norm-referenced and vertically aligned test scores, and the inability to completely separate the impact of the intervention from the general accountability threat of being identified as a PI3 district in severe or moderate need of assistance. In addition, the limited number of PI3 districts in Cohort 2 made it impossible to analyze the impact of DAITs on students in Cohort 2 districts separately from the impact of DAITs on students in Cohort 1.

Implementation: District and School Capacity Building

Key evaluation findings related to the implementation of Corrective Action 6 include:

- ***DAIT providers engaged with their districts as anticipated, performing initial needs assessments, engaging district staff and local school boards in reviewing their recommendations and developing action plans, and, for the most part, remained engaged in assisting their districts for an average of two years.***
- ***Areas experiencing the most growth, reported via surveys measuring implementation levels of various systems and activities pre and post intervention, were (a) data systems and monitoring, (b) curriculum, instruction and assessment, (c) governance, and, (d) English language development (ELD).***

- ***Cohort 1 districts both started with lower levels of implementation than did Cohort 2 districts and reported more growth, compared to Cohort 2 districts.***

Initial Activities

CDE's expectations were for DAITs to engage with their district(s) to: (1) diagnose district needs, usually using assessment instruments provided by CDE [CA EC Section 52055.57 (b)], and then summarize their findings in a capacity study. Capacity studies are submitted to CDE and districts are required to rewrite their LEA plan (or plan addendum) to incorporate the recommendations provided in the capacity studies, (2) support districts in preparing their plans, and (3) provide specific support for implementing the recommendations they have provided.

Survey and interview results confirm that these activities occurred in the majority of districts working with DAITs. Based on our interview responses, there appeared to be some confusion and ambiguity around authority for DAIT activities in Cohort 1, issues which were subsequently resolved prior to Cohort 2. This may be in part due to the CDE's refinement of the diagnostic tools and provision of additional training to DAIT providers before they began their work with the Cohort 2 districts. District leaders mentioned in interviews that they found implementing these assessment tools to be valuable learning experiences.

High Leverage Areas for Improvement

Surveys addressed the implementation of high leverage areas for improvement as defined in CA EC Section 52059: (a) governance, (b) curriculum, instruction, and assessment, (c) professional development, (d) fiscal operations, (e) supports for students with disabilities and English language learners, (f) parent and community involvement, (g) human resources, and (h) data systems and monitoring. Analysis of survey responses combined district and DAIT ratings in each area in districts with DAITs. In PI3 districts which were not required to work with a DAIT there was no access to TA providers and only the district responses are available. We examined the changes in implementation (measured on a four point scale from 1=minimal implementation to 4=fully implemented) in each area (comprised of several specific items).

While implementation increased in all of these areas, the largest improvements were in:

- Data systems and monitoring;
- Curriculum, instruction and assessment;
- Governance; and
- English language development (ELD).

We compared the implementation ratings of districts with DAITs (the severe and moderate rated districts) with those available from the non-DAIT (light) districts. Results suggest that districts with DAITs experienced more growth in each area, particularly in governance, compared to the non-DAIT districts. However, there are several sources of possible bias that require that these results be regarded as suggestive rather than definitive.

Comparing implementation ratings between the Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 districts with DAITs, we find that:

- The Cohort 1 districts started with significantly lower implementation ratings in each area, compared to the starting point of the Cohort 2 districts.
- While both cohorts showed improvements in each area, the Cohort 1 districts remained slightly lower in implementation ratings in most areas in year two, compared to the Cohort 2 second year results.

However, in terms of change, Cohort 1 grew significantly more between years one and two in ratings of implementation in several areas (overall, governance, and human resources) than did Cohort 2 districts.

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative data were collected via surveys of all Cohort 1 and 2 PI3 districts and interviews with all DAIT providers and district leaders within the districts they served. DAITs and districts completed interviews and surveys separately. All DAIT providers completed the surveys and interviews, as did the majority of the districts with DAITs.

Limitations of the qualitative data include the limited number of interview respondents for any single district, the low response rate for the PI3 districts that received the light sanction and were not required to work with a DAIT, the retrospective nature of both the survey and the interviews which required respondents to recall initial conditions two years afterwards, and the inherently subjective nature of qualitative data.

Effectiveness:

Key evaluation findings related to the effectiveness of Corrective Action 6 include:

- ***Regression analyses that examined the relationships between a measure of district-level achievement growth and areas on which DAIT districts focused their improvement efforts (determined by responses to the***

implementation surveys), showed that achievement growth was associated with: (a) using data to inform instruction; (b) focusing on high expectations for all students; (c) focus on within district accountability; (d) policies related to recruitment, support, and retention of high quality principals and teachers; and (e) improving instruction.

- **District and DAIT providers have similar perceptions (as determined by interviews) of the most significant changes instituted during the intervention. They identify (a) improved data systems and use of data to inform instruction; (b) professional development and teacher collaboration related to curriculum and improving instruction; (c) English language development and supports for English learners; (d) coaching and professional development for principals; and (e) changes in district culture and improved accountability for student achievement as the primary drivers of district improvement.**
- **Key barriers to effectively implementing reforms in the districts with DAITs were identified (in interviews) as (a) turnover at the superintendent level (some districts had two or more superintendents/interim superintendents during the two years that the DAIT was engaged); (b) contentious relationships among the district, teacher union, and/or school board, including politically charged community issues that were played out within the school board and district contexts; (c) severely under-resourced districts due to either persistent financial problems or locations where it was difficult to adequately staff district offices and schools; and (d) districts where under-achievement had become the “norm,” where changes to existing practice and assumptions were regarded with suspicion if not outright hostility.**
- **This evaluation did not include a detailed cost effectiveness component. However, compared to other large scale state intervention programs (e.g. QIEA), Corrective Action 6 appears to be a fairly cost-effective approach to building district capacity to more effectively support their students.**

Associations Between District Capacity Building Activities and Student Achievement in Moderate/Severe (DAIT) Districts

Improvements in student achievement in math and ELA in DAIT (moderate and severe) districts are associated with reported increases in district implementation in the areas of:

- Using data to inform instruction;
- Focus on high expectations for all students;
- Attention to within-district accountability;
- Policies to recruit, train, support and retain high quality school principals and teachers; and
- Improving instruction.

There was no measurable difference in student achievement attributable to whether the DAIT was a private or public (County Office of Education) organization or the strength of the teacher union contract.

Results were also examined for evidence that districts might restrict student access to Algebra in the eighth grade in order to keep test scores higher. While, overall there was no evidence to suggest this practice, there was a pattern of fewer students taking Algebra in eighth grade in PI schools in Cohort 1 districts that worked with DAITs, but not in Cohort 2.

District and DAIT Provider Perceptions of the Most Significant Changes Made and Key Activities Associated with These Changes

Interview respondents were asked about what they believed were the most significant changes made in the district during the DAIT process. Their remarks mirror the findings above. They identified as most significant:

- Improved data systems and use of data to inform instruction;
- Professional development and teacher collaboration related to curriculum and improving instruction;
- English language development and supports for English learners;
- Coaching and professional development for principals; and

- Changes in district culture and improved accountability for student achievement.

Sustainability, Key Barriers and Facilitators to the DAIT Work

While in interviews both district and DAIT respondents expressed some reservations about whether the changes they had made over the course of the DAIT work could be sustained in the face of increasing fiscal pressures, ratings of district capacity to sustain changes in the survey results were relatively strong. Two-thirds or more of the severe and moderate districts in both cohorts rated their abilities to sustain changes in each of the nine focus areas as high or adequate.

Barriers and facilitators to district capacity building activities identified from the interview process include:

- District, local school board, teacher union, and other key stakeholders' willingness to engage in the DAIT process;
- Teacher union contract restrictions;
- Stability and characteristics of district leadership (e.g. length of tenure, qualifications and priorities of district staff, etc.);
- Ability of DAIT and district leadership to build a trusting, collaborative relationship characterized by mutual respect;
- District culture – expectations about student achievement, conflicts among stakeholders, , attitudes about both internal and external accountability, etc.;
- District resources (human, financial, infrastructure, etc.);
- Expertise and persistence of the DAIT.

Generalizing about the impact of any specific set of barriers to the work is difficult. A factor that presents a “bump in the road” in one district’s progress may essentially derail the entire process in another. Anecdotally we can report that some of the situations DAITs found very difficult to navigate, and which sometimes served to block implementing needed changes for a significant period of time include:

- Turnover at the superintendent level (some districts had two or more superintendents/interim superintendents during the two years that the DAIT was engaged);
- Contentious relationships among the district, teacher union, and/or school board, including politically charged community issues that were played out within the school board and district contexts;
- Severely under-resourced districts due to either persistent financial problems or locations where it was difficult to adequately staff district offices and schools; and
- Districts where under-achievement had become the “norm,” where changes to existing practice and assumptions were regarded with suspicion if not outright hostility.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In general, we find that requiring the lowest performing PI3 districts to contract with an approved external technical assistance provider, in this case a DAIT, appears to be a cost-effective, targeted, and flexible approach to building district capacity to support their students’ academic achievement. Employing an expert intermediary (DAITs) appears to assist districts in effectively identifying where they need to focus their improvement efforts and staying on course to do so. While there were “bumps” along the road in districts’ work with their DAIT, and sometimes a steep learning curve for many districts and providers, the student achievement results are encouraging and our respondents appear to be fairly well satisfied with their experiences with this intervention. It appears that focusing attention on building district capacity to support schools, rather than focusing exclusively on individual schools, may be an efficient approach to supporting students and providing a coherent instructional program. These findings echo those described in other recent research.

We recommend continuing to fund the DAIT intervention or a similar external, approved technical assistance provider, for struggling PI3 districts. However, based on our evaluation findings and the recommendations of our interview and survey respondents, we also suggest the following possible modifications to the program:

- Increase accountability requirements of both districts and DAITs to facilitate “early warning” of problems that impede the process in particular districts and to

provide both DAITs and district staff with more leverage to bring about necessary changes.

- When there are early indicators of a lack of district “readiness” or willingness to engage in the recommended improvement efforts, the SBE and CDE should intervene to insure that students will receive the support they need without additional delay.
- Insure that both local school boards and teacher union leadership receive adequate training and information to support district improvement efforts.
- As resources permit, provide a longer period of funding and assistance for persistently low performing districts (coupled with increased accountability). For example, instead of advancing the intervention annually to each new cohort of districts identified as PI3, allow the initial cohorts, which are most in need of assistance, a longer time and more funding to address their problems before funding later cohorts where student achievement baseline is still well above that in earlier identified cohorts. With limited funds, it seems prudent to focus where the need is greatest.
- Continue to identify and develop the capacity of technical assistance providers, including encouraging providers to collaborate and learn from one another. With increasing numbers of districts (and schools) coming under sanctions, there is concern that the state’s capacity to provide assistance to these LEAs may be compromised. Implementing the above recommendation regarding the focus and timing of the intervention also serves to focus the available resources on the districts in most need of assistance.
- Reduce the focus on whether a provider is private or public (COEs). We found little difference between the private and public providers. In fact, during our interviews, it appeared that there was more variation in skills and approach within each type of organization than there was between them, and we found no evidence of better or worse performance among districts working with private or public providers.
- We urge the state to consider what this intervention has demonstrated about the effectiveness of flexible, “customizable,” collaborative, and broadly focused technical assistance in contrast to narrow and prescriptive sanctions, which assume a “one size fits all” approach to district and school reform.