

Synopsis of March 7, 2025 Webinar, “A Policy Conversation with the Longest-Serving President of the California State Board of Education”

Guest: Dr. Michael W. Kirst

Moderators: Dr. Brent Duckor and Dr. Carrie Holmberg

Beyond the Shell: Michael Kirst on Policy, Reform, and the Tortoise’s Journey

California’s longest-serving State Board of Education president, **Dr. Michael Kirst**, has spent over six decades shaping education policy at the state and national levels. In a recent conversation with **Dr. Brent Duckor** and **Dr. Carrie Holmberg**, Kirst reflected on **California’s education reforms**, the challenges of implementation, and what lies ahead for policymakers, educators, and students. Throughout the discussion, he invoked **metaphors—from turtles to deserts and islands—to illustrate systemic problems** in education. His insights suggest that while California has made strides in policy coherence, the **“last mile” of implementation remains elusive**.

From Standards to Systems: What Worked and What Didn’t

Reflecting on his tenure, Kirst acknowledged that **California successfully aligned key state education policies**, including academic standards, curriculum, assessment, and teacher training. However, the **failure to ensure deep implementation in classrooms has been a persistent challenge**.

“We had islands where we had very deep implementation... But most of the state was not an island, but a desert. And it was superficially implemented and didn't get anywhere near the standard.”

California’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) provided **flexibility for districts** to address unique challenges, but Kirst cautioned that **state guidance remains critical**. While some districts fully embraced the reforms, **many struggled due to uneven capacity-building and a lack of support for teachers**.

Kirst emphasized that **California’s reform efforts often stalled at the classroom level**. Despite well-crafted policies, the reality of implementation resembled **a turtle with a strong shell but uncoordinated moving parts beneath**:

“Education policy is like the shell of a turtle. It’s important—a turtle needs a shell—but underneath are the moving parts. And so I built a really good shell. But we never really got to the moving parts.”

This metaphor underscores a **fundamental flaw in standards-based reform**: policies may look coherent from the outside, but **without investment in teacher capacity and classroom-level application, they remain hollow**.

The “Water” of Reform: Reaching Every Teacher and Student

One of the central challenges in education policy, according to Kirst, is **scaling reforms beyond well-resourced districts and schools**. He likened California’s education system to a **landscape of islands and deserts**, where effective implementation flourishes in some areas but **fails to reach many classrooms**.

Duckor extended the metaphor, asking Kirst what **“the water”**—the missing ingredient for successful reform—might be. Kirst’s response was clear:

“The water needs to be distributed to 349,000 teachers and 9,700 principals. California has a water flow that reaches all its citizens... We need to figure out how to get implementation [of reforms] to every classroom.”

While money plays a role, **funding alone isn’t enough**. True reform requires **teacher training, instructional resources, and long-term support for educators**. Kirst pointed to **Ontario, Canada, as an example of large-scale implementation**, where professional development and policy coherence allowed reforms to **reach 80% of classrooms statewide**. California, in contrast, has struggled with fragmented efforts and inconsistent professional learning opportunities.

The Role of Teachers: Capacity Building at Scale

Kirst stressed that **policy change without teacher preparation leads to failure**. While California has adopted **Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) and a more conceptual approach to math**, teachers—especially in elementary grades—**often lack the training and resources to teach these subjects effectively**.

“How equipped are they to teach math? And how are they equipped to teach the Next Generation Science in fourth and fifth grade? Not well.”

He acknowledged that **professional learning needs to be embedded within schools**, rather than relying solely on **top-down training from external experts**. Kirst suggested that **teacher collaboration, coaching, and ongoing professional development** must become a priority.

“We need time for teachers to do it. To be able to grasp the standards in terms of how to teach them.”

Rather than sporadic professional development workshops, Kirst argued for a **structured, sustained approach to teacher learning**. He pointed to **models in Louisiana and Mississippi**, where teacher collaboration and **instructional coaching** have helped **deepen standards-based instruction**.

Assessment and Accountability: A System in Flux

Kirst also tackled **the persistent tension between standardized testing, formative assessment, and deeper learning**. While **Smarter Balanced assessments were initially designed to provide richer data on student learning**, they ultimately failed to deliver **usable insights for teachers**.

“We were state of the art... But there was no way that teachers could move from whatever we were reporting to how they would teach anything.”

California attempted to bridge this gap by offering **interim assessments**, but Kirst noted that these still **didn't provide teachers with actionable information**. Instead, **teachers need formative assessment tools** that directly inform classroom instruction.

When discussing the **role of AI and technology in assessment**, Kirst remained skeptical. He recalled past cycles of **education technology hype—from radio to handheld computers—none of which revolutionized learning as promised**.

“I've lived in my long life... when I started, radio was going to change things. Then television sets were sent out under Title I. Then desktop computers. Then handhelds: Well, they're stored as you come into the school. And now AI. So, you know, this is something, I'll believe it when I see it. But...I don't know. We have somewhat of a vision, but we don't have a strategy, and AI is still in an embryonic phase.

Duckor noted:

“Point well-taken. And I always think of the revenge of Dr. Cuban. Larry has been the one saying this in his sixth decade. We imagine somehow that personalized learning or that personalized assessment or that personalized feedback is all going to change as a

result of a technology or tool. And we notice again and again that it gets adopted by early adopters. We would expect that. It gets hyped by those who have an economic interest in hyping it, but that pretty soon [the AI wave] sort of peters out. And before we know, we're back to more traditional [assessment and teaching] methods.

While Kirst **didn't dismiss AI's potential**, he emphasized that **policymakers must be cautious of overpromising** without a clear strategy for integration.

Beyond K-12: Strengthening College and Career Pathways

Kirst has long advocated for **stronger connections between high school, postsecondary education, and workforce development**. He criticized California's **disjointed governance structure**, where K-12 and higher education function **as separate entities**:

“When I was State Board President, I met twice with the leaders in higher education in eight years. And when I came back in 2011 to 2019, I met once. We are just two separate governance entities.”

This **disconnect creates barriers for students**, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds who need clear pathways to **college or career opportunities**. Kirst noted some progress in **dual enrollment programs and career pathways**, particularly in **healthcare and technical fields**, but urged a **more coordinated effort**.

Kirst also addressed the **California Master Plan for Higher Education**, originally written in **1960**. While it established a **three-tiered system (UC, CSU, and community colleges)**, he argued that **it no longer meets the needs of today's students**.

“The master plan is a treaty among three systems... We need an entirely new approach.”

Instead of attempting to **amend the outdated Master Plan**, Kirst suggested that **California policymakers create a new framework that integrates K-12, community colleges, and workforce development**.

Looking Ahead: What's Next for California?

Duckor widened the scope of the discussion to examine the tension between federal and state policy making:

“I love the tortoise metaphor. You know, the tortoise moves very slowly from my understanding. So maybe you just haven't given the tortoise enough time to settle in. Having said that, the tortoise doesn't live by him or herself or themselves, do they? The tortoise lives in an ecosystem where there are hammers coming down on that shell as well. And I was thinking about right now with having you here with six decades of experience, this is a time when a lot of us are confused. I'll speak for myself about what it would mean to talk about standards-based reform in the era of the current presidency. That is, only told us that not only the federal bureaucracies have no more role in mediating or moderating state policy, but that, more importantly, everything is going to be shoved back as quickly as possible to every state. Now, even if we don't like that in the sense that we'd like a more coherent national strategy. What does it mean for California in six months, a year, or two years from now? If, are we given more freedom by essentially by the federal government, are we given more opportunities to innovate or are we also being left anchorless? I guess I don't quite understand what you would think is the proper relationship between, let's say, the federal Department of Education and our own state Department of Education in your policy story.”

Kirst replied:

“Well, I think that we have it pretty much right with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). I think Obama overreached. The teacher evaluation systems they brought in were a disaster. And they in many ways tried to micromanage through waivers of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). And so the Congress revolted. It was a bipartisan act, and they really clipped the power of the federal government.”

“What they're trying to hang on to now in Washington is the adherence of ESSA to preserve the testing. Otherwise, a lot of states would drop the testing [components].”

“So, to answer your question directly, there's a tremendous contradiction in the Trump policies. On the one hand, [President Trump] wants to leave it to the states and abolish the department. And the other hand, he's trying to purge DEI, bring back patriotic education, and change various parts of Title IX. So, he's got a detailed intervention into curriculum that is explicitly denied him by law and ESSA.”

Kirst widened the lens to a bigger elephant in the room:

“Federal aid is down 8% in our, in our money, our total spending. They have not talked about yet deep cuts or eliminating--when they eliminate the department, they're going to eliminate Title 1 and money for students with disability and so on.

“I think that we can ride out the money. The biggest threat to us is the elephant of finance and California's 81%-82% state. If we have to pick up Medicaid at the state level and the federal cuts offloads that, then we're really going in the soup.”

Further emphasizing the interconnectedness of education to other social and economic policy challenges. Kirst noted:

“One idea floating around and I think Trump would be smart to do this is to combine education with labor and have a continuum of education as we talked about earlier, so that we're in not just a separate Department of Labor for adults, and then [another Department of Education] for students. It's difficult to predict, but I'm more afraid of the cuts in Medicaid than I am anything they're doing with the Department of Education.

As the conversation concluded, Kirst outlined **emerging priorities in California education policy**, including:

- **Whole-child approaches** that integrate education with **health and social services**.
- **Expanded social-emotional learning** despite growing political opposition.
- **A push toward community schools** as hubs for **wraparound support services**.
- **Expanded career pathways and micro-credentials**, particularly in technical fields.
- **Continued investment in professional development for teachers**.

Kirst also underscored **the need for California to take the lead in policy innovation**, given the **uncertainty of federal education policy**.

His final remarks reinforced **the importance of implementation over ideology**. Reform efforts, he stressed, must **move beyond rhetoric and political cycles to real, classroom-level change**.

Conclusion: The Long Journey Ahead

Kirst's reflections make one thing clear: **education reform is a slow, complex process**—more like the **deliberate pace of a tortoise than the sprint of a hare**. California has built a **strong policy shell**, but **success will depend on ensuring that the moving parts—teacher capacity, professional learning, and classroom implementation—are fully developed**.

For policymakers, educators, and researchers alike, Kirst's message is both **a challenge and a call to action**: It's time to **move from tinkering to transformation**. The tortoise is still on its journey—will California ensure it reaches the finish line?