

Integrated Policymaking for California's Youth

Keeping the Whole Child Central from the Start

I. Introduction

California has long strived to serve California's most vulnerable youth.¹ But many young people, including, but not limited to, those in foster care, experiencing poverty, or living with disabilities, continue to fall through the cracks of siloed public systems.² While several recent initiatives have sought to encourage collaboration among child-serving agencies and partners at the local level to better serve the whole child, fragmentation across state agencies, funding streams, and policies often works counter to these efforts.

To address this, better integration among local child-serving agencies and partners can create a more responsive, practical, accessible ecosystem that better serves the whole child.³ But integrating service delivery is challenging when the policy driving it is developed in siloes and incentivizes a siloed system.

This brief presents findings and recommendations based on research and analysis conducted by its authors. The following information is designed to help policymakers in both the Legislative and Executive branches advance an integrated approach to policymaking for California's youth to improve California's child-serving systems and enable young people and those supporting them to realize the conditions necessary for their success.

This investigation was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the California policy-making process support integrated service delivery for California's children and youth?
2. What incentives would effectively promote integrated service delivery for California's children and youth?
3. How can we enhance the policy-making process to ensure it yields more integrated service delivery for California's children and youth?

¹ California Government Operations Agency. [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#). State of California. Sacramento, CA. Accessed on June 21, 2025.

California Department of Social Services. [REIB Initiative - Frequently Asked Questions](#). State of California. Sacramento, CA. Accessed on June 21, 2025.

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² Children Now. 2024. [The 2024 California Children's Report Card](#). Sacramento, CA.

³ California Health and Human Services. (2023, February 6). [Working Paper: California's Children & Youth Behavioral Health Ecosystem](#). Sacramento, CA.

II. Research Methods

Interviews

To understand how California can promote integrated policymaking, interviews were conducted with over 70 policy actors, both inside and outside the California government. This included representatives from the Executive and Legislative branches, as well as advocates and membership associations. The authors then analyzed data from these sources to identify barriers and opportunities to integrate policymaking.

Researchers employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of interviews with individuals involved in the policy-making process, with policy analysis of legislation passed in California for children and youth over the last five years. Interviews were conducted using a standard protocol by type of individual, such as those who worked in the Legislative or Executive branch, and data were collected along with citations to examples expressed by interviewees regarding the policymaking processes. The insights presented in the following section summarize the key findings.

Conceptual Frameworks

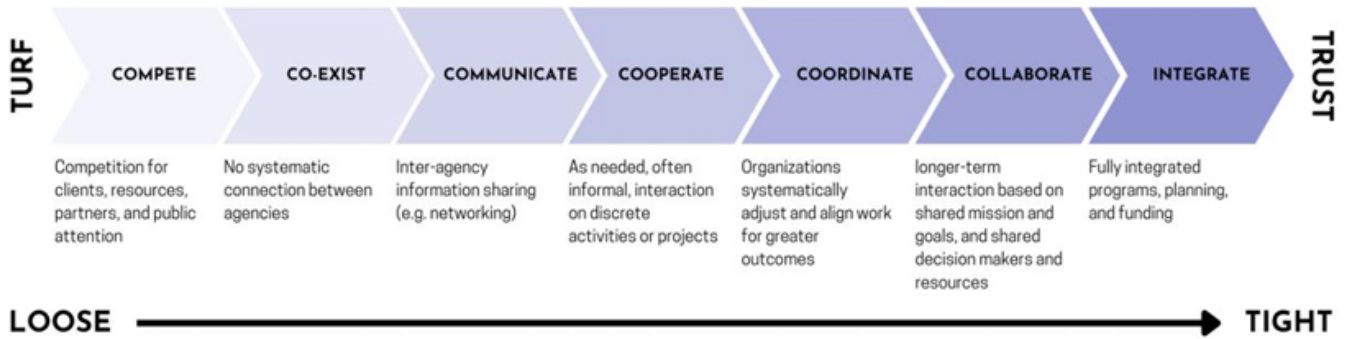
Researchers used two foundational conceptual frameworks to help contextualize the data gathered throughout the research. Each of these two conceptual frameworks was identified through a literature review and is described in further detail below.

Collaboration Spectrum

The Tamarack Institute constructed a spectrum that theorized how organizations relate to one another.⁴ Tamarack believed that the behavior of organizations could be observed and that this behavior could be characterized on a spectrum ranging from competition to the apex of the framework, integration. Each stage is associated with various observable behaviors. Researchers used this spectrum as a fundamental framework upon which to understand where on the spectrum the current California policymaking process and the organizations involved were placed.

⁴ Tamarack Institute. May 2017. [Collaboration Spectrum](#).

Exhibit 1. Tamarack Institute's Collaboration Spectrum



Core Definitions

Researchers identified key terms and used them throughout the study, including in the interview and survey questions.

- *Integrated service delivery is a collective cross-agency effort that unifies young people, families, communities, and the professionals that serve them in shared goals, shared accountability, and shared support for the whole person, from birth through early adulthood.*
- *Integrated policy process is an evolution of the current policymaking process that would more substantively integrate actors in the system to establish policy that supports a more coherent, collective effort of communities to support the whole person, from birth through early adulthood.*
- *Horizontal integration refers to the ability of government departments to collaborate across policy areas.*
- *Vertical integration refers to consistency, coordination, and collaboration across different levels of government.⁵*
- *Incentives refer to regulatory, financial, or employment parameters that induce specific, desired behaviors.*

III. Insights from the Research on California's Policymaking Processes

This section highlights common themes, observations, and feedback shared by interviewees involved in policymaking processes in California.

Insight 1: The majority of interviewees believe a more integrated policy process would lead to more integrated service delivery.

Nearly 80 percent of interviewees agreed that a more integrated policy process can contribute to better-integrated service delivery at the local level for children and youth. Interviewees highlighted the

⁵ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2022). [Horizontal and vertical integration are more necessary than ever for COVID-19 recovery and SDG implementation](#) (Policy Brief No. 115).

influence that policy and funding can have on driving shared local structures and decision-making. Examples cited by interviewees included recent policies that required, rather than encouraged, partnering between county agencies. Specifically mentioned was the School-Behavioral Health Incentive Program (SBHIP), an initiative under California's Children, Youth, and Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI), and the Mental Health Student Support Act (MHSSA) grants. Emergent evidence from these initiatives suggests that, under these programs, organizations across sectors have come together in greater numbers and for more extended periods compared to other state policy initiatives.⁶ Also worth noting is how often mandated cross-sector data sharing agreements were referenced during interviews as examples of how cross-sector collaboration can be incentivized. However, such agreements by themselves do not ensure integration across child-serving systems.

Insight 2: There are natural opportunities to integrate policymaking, but these opportunities are not being fully utilized.

Interviewees noted several natural opportunities for collaboration in policymaking, including cross-sector meetings within the executive branch, double referral of bills, joint budget subcommittee hearings on crossover issues, and joint informational hearings. These parts of the existing process are sometimes used to significant effect, and collaboration in these forums is on the rise. But often they represent missed opportunities. For example, double-referred bills could be an opportunity for collaboration and knowledge sharing. However, due to time constraints noted below, this process is often treated simply as a passing of the baton.

Insight 3: Personal long-standing relationships are the currency of collaboration across sectors.

Interviewees, in nearly 60% of instances, noted how personal and often long-standing relationships among staff were important linchpins for any type of cross-sector collaboration. Interviewees referred to their working relationship across committees (in instances of the Legislature) or across departments (in cases of the Administration) as an example of the power of relationships in enabling integrated policymaking. This raises the prospect that, unless a more systematic approach to developing collaboration across sectors in the policymaking process is adopted, the future of those opportunities may dissipate as existing elected or appointed leaders transition out of their current government roles.

Insight 4: Too many proposals, too little time.

Interviewees shared that while California's policymaking process offers opportunities for input at multiple stages, it becomes especially challenging during constrained periods, such as the annual budget cycle and legislative session. In the 2023–24 Session, over 4,800 measures were introduced in the Assembly and Senate, and thousands of issues were considered through the budget process. During these periods, legislative staff must analyze legislation, write and revise proposals, meet with stakeholders, and negotiate—all under tight timelines and political pressure. Interviewees shared that this pace often leads to policies that are rushed. Most notably, the intense workload and limited time make it difficult to coordinate

⁶ California Department of Health Care Services. (2024, May 16). Student Behavioral Health Incentive Program (SBHIP) Application, Assessment, Milestones, and Metrics. SBHIP Overview and Requirements 05-16-2024. <https://www.dhcs.ca.gov/services/Documents/DirectedPymts/SBHIP-Overview-and-Requirements-05162024.pdf>

across policy areas. As one interviewee explained, “The time when collaboration is most important is also when I have no time to do it.”

Insight 5: Turnover among policymakers makes collaboration and long-term planning challenging.

Interviewees noted that term limits and staff turnover can lead to fragmented policies and make it difficult for policymakers to develop the expertise, experience, and relationships necessary to tackle entrenched problems and advance integrated policy.

Insight 6: Competing incentives and the absence of institutional supports impede integrated policymaking.

Interviewees reported that there are few incentives to integrate policymaking and that these efforts face headwinds due to competing priorities and insufficient support and structures for integrated policymaking. Further, incentives between those involved in the policy process are often misaligned. For example, legislative staff reported that the most common incentive was ensuring that the budget and policy align and address the needs of the children being served by different programs. Administration staff reported that their most significant incentive is to ensure representation of the Governor’s interests and priorities. Membership associations and advocacy groups reported that their primary incentives are to ensure that policies are genuinely beneficial to the students they represent. Interviewees emphasized the absence of institutional supports, such as cross-committee meetings or shared data systems, to facilitate integrated policymaking.

Insight 7: Politics strongly influences policymakers’ priorities and can divert attention from work on long-term goals.

Integrated policymaking on major issues requires sustained effort over time. Interviewees frequently cited politics as very influential in the policymaking process. That is, the focus on immediate and sensational issues may cause elected officials to divert attention from long-term integration efforts. Interviewees also noted that the media has a significant influence on which state-level issues elected leaders address and that sometimes media attention can reorient leaders’ focus from planned agendas.

Insight 8: Policymakers have limited opportunities to monitor policy implementation, and they lack a “feedback loop” to make them aware of policies that impede integrated service delivery.

Many policymakers and supporting actors who were interviewed indicated they lack an understanding of how new policies are being implemented at the local level. Once a policy has been adopted, they must move on to new proposals, resulting in an “out of sight, out of mind” scenario. As a result, they do not know how effective the policies are, and lack a “feedback loop” that informs them when policies create barriers to integration. Site visits, legislative hearings, and monitoring of the executive branch provide members and staff with an opportunity to understand how policy is working; however, these efforts are insufficient to provide a comprehensive picture of implementation. Many legislative and administrative

staff members mentioned that while they craft budgets and policies, they do not directly implement them. However, they recognized the importance of oversight to discern the impact of their work.

Insight 9: To incentivize integrated policymaking, several individuals in the process need to be responsible for ensuring integration occurs.

Interviewees frequently cited the need to incentivize integrated policymaking by making it an explicit part of staff responsibilities. While interviewees recognize that they are well-positioned to integrate programs and policies, they acknowledge that it is rarely a formal or expected part of the job. One interviewee shared, "It's a huge lift. It's a much bigger lift at the state level, as you can imagine. Especially because everybody has their lane. People are very committed to their lanes." Another echoed this, saying, "Where there is collaboration across different issue areas, it's because the consultants agree that it's important, and that's when it happens. It's not because there's an expectation to do it."

IV. Recommendations from the Research on California's Policymaking Processes to Improve Integrated Service Delivery at the Local Level for California's Youth

These recommendations, developed from the findings above, outline specific action steps for key groups involved in California's policymaking process, including policymakers in the legislative and executive branches.

Recommendation 1. Launch efforts to promote a culture and practice of integrated policymaking.

ACTION STEPS	
<i>For the Legislative Branch:</i>	<i>For the Executive Branch:</i>
<p>1. Legislature: Legislative leadership communicates clearly to legislators that integrated policy-making is a priority, and supports efforts by Committee and Subcommittee Chairs to work together across policy areas through joint policy committee hearings, budget subcommittee hearings, and joint site visits, among other measures.</p> <p>2. Legislature: Create and support a community of practice among policy and fiscal staff of the child and family-serving committees, which would provide a forum where staff can establish and strengthen relationships, learn about each other’s policy areas, identify common goals, and work toward integrated policy solutions. This would require support from legislative leadership.</p> <p>3. Legislature: Create and support a Select Committee in at least one house of the Legislature, composed of the Chairs of the child and family serving Committees, which would be responsible for working, in an integrated manner, on problems of policy which cross multiple jurisdictions, and to propose integrated policy solutions which multiple Chairs could jointly author. This would require support from Assembly and/or Senate leadership.</p>	<p>1. Governor’s Office: For multi-sector policy proposals, convene relevant state agencies to develop proposals jointly. Key steps include mapping agency involvement, identifying shared policy principles and goals, and inviting community input.</p> <p>2. Department of Finance (DOF): Conduct a scan of policy areas to identify the common issues that could benefit from cross-agency collaboration for youth and children, ensuring that responsibility is given to DOF analysts to ensure cross-sector fiscal alignment.</p>

Recommendation 2. Identify effective policy mechanisms for promoting integrated service delivery and supporting the use of these practices in policy development.

ACTION STEPS	
<i>For the Legislative Branch:</i>	<i>For the Executive Branch:</i>
<p>1. Legislature: Identify best practices for developing policy that fosters effective integrated service delivery at the local level (by requiring or incentivizing collaboration, for example), and apply them across policy areas in developing and analyzing legislation.</p>	<p>1. State Agency Leaders: Establish a review process for proposed initiatives that assess opportunities to collaborate across agencies.</p> <p>2. State Agency Leaders: Establish MOUs between state agencies to improve integrated services for children and youth. These agreements will guide staff on collaboration principles and goals, helping expand cross-sector culture.</p>

Recommendation 3. Strengthen integration by creating tighter feedback loops between providers, community members, and state policymakers.

ACTION STEPS	
<i>For the Legislative Branch:</i>	<i>For the Executive Branch:</i>
<p>Legislature: Through the Select Committee proposed above, or through existing Committees, conduct integrated oversight processes to ensure policy is effectively achieving common goals (i.e., youth behavioral health).</p> <p>Legislature: Establish a feedback loop that allows integrated local teams to share points of friction between sectors with an integrated state team (such as the Select Committee recommended above or with existing Committees), so that the state can address them.</p>	<p>Governor’s Office: Direct state agencies to gather local community feedback on policy effectiveness and install a feedback loop to ensure continuous improvement and policy relevance.</p>

Recommendation 4. Support and sustain integrated policymaking by clarifying who is responsible and investing in the capacity of all individuals through professional development.

ACTION STEPS	
For the Legislative Branch:	For the Executive Branch:
<p>Legislature: Identify staff to the Committees participating in the Select Committee(s) referenced above, or existing Committee staff, to guide and sustain focus on integration. These individuals could also assist in facilitating professional development opportunities, such as joint site visits.</p> <p>Legislature: Support joint site visits and briefings—coordinated with Legislative staff—to help staff learn about shared issues. Ensure skilled facilitators guide these visits and combine them with quantitative, actionable feedback.</p>	<p>Governor’s Office: Support joint site visits and briefings—coordinated with Legislative staff when possible—to help staff learn about shared issues. Ensure skilled facilitators guide these visits and combine them with quantitative feedback, as modeled by the Little Hoover Commission.</p> <p>Governor’s Office: Direct agency leadership to build professional development for leadership and managers to implement meaningful collaboration opportunities across policy areas.</p>

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