



September 17, 2021

Hon. Eloise Gómez Reyes
Assembly Member, 47th District
Room 319, State Capitol
Sacramento, California 95814

Dear Assembly Member Reyes:

You asked our office to interview several state entities that have advisory bodies with youth and family representatives. Specifically, you requested that we obtain information from these state entities on the actions they are taking to ensure that there is meaningful youth and family engagement in their advisory bodies. This memo summarizes our findings from these conversations and identifies issues for legislative consideration.

Background

Youth and Family Engagement in State Entities. State entities convene a number of councils, commissions, task forces, teams, and workgroups that are intended to advise the state on specific issues. For example, the Practitioners Advisory Group administered by the California Department of Education (CDE) advises the state on education accountability issues. The establishment of these advisory bodies are often required by state or federal law. At the request of your office, the California Research Bureau (CRB) developed a list of 53 state bodies that advise state entities on children and family issues. CRB's inventory includes information about each of the entities and their relevant advisory bodies, such as whether the entity's advisory bodies dedicate a seat to a family representative and who appoints members to the advisory bodies. In responding to your request, we sought to build upon CRB's more quantitative work and conducted qualitative interviews with a select set of the identified state entities to learn about how youth and family feedback is collected and used to administer state programs.

LAO Meetings With State Entities. Based on conversations with your staff, we met with representatives from the CDE, California Health and Human Services Agency, Department of Developmental Services (DDS), and Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) to discuss nine advisory bodies administered by these state entities. Figure 1 (on the next page) provides a list of these advisory bodies. These advisory bodies range in size between 13 and 64 members. Of the members on the advisory bodies, between 1 and 20 members represent either youth or family. The content of this memo is based on our conversations with the above entities and may not necessarily reflect the experience of other advisory bodies across state government.

Figure 1

State Entities and Advisory Bodies of Interest

State Entity	Advisory Body
California Department of Education	Child Nutrition Advisory Council Practitioners Advisory Group State Parent Advisory Council
California Health and Human Services Agency	Child Welfare Council
Department of Developmental Services	State Interagency Coordinating Council on Early Intervention
Department of Health Care Services	Medi-Cal Children’s Health Advisory Panel Behavioral Health Stakeholder Advisory Committee California Children’s Services Advisory Group

During these meetings, we asked staff from the various state entities a number of questions to help us understand how they use input from youth and family representatives that participate in the advisory bodies. We also asked staff if they could (1) identify existing barriers to collecting and using input from youth and family representatives and (2) share ideas that they may have for removing these barriers. The questions we asked in these meetings were developed with input from your staff. In addition, we discussed with state entities other ways they collect feedback from youth and family outside of the advisory bodies.

Key Findings

State Entities Use Various Forums Beyond Statutory Requirements to Collect Feedback From Families. The state entities we interviewed mentioned that the formally established advisory body was one of several ways they obtain feedback from families. Entities also commonly get feedback from families through other forums such as surveys, focus groups, town hall meetings, and one-on-one meetings between departments and family representatives. These activities often are in addition to the statutory requirements to administer formal advisory bodies. For example, CDE recently created a family engagement office in an effort to ensure schools have the necessary resources to support quality family engagement. As part of this work, the family engagement office has collected feedback from families by working directly with community-based organizations and school district family engagement offices, as well as conducted listening sessions with parents. Entities also collect feedback from families participating in advisory bodies that exceeds state or federal requirements. For example, the voting membership of the State Interagency Coordinating Council (ICC) on Early Intervention administered by DDS is specified by federal law. While federal law does not require a nonvoting membership, DDS further added community representatives to the ICC as nonvoting members. This has allowed for additional perspectives to be heard during ICC meetings. Similarly, DHCS identified gaps in the required membership of the Behavioral Health Stakeholder Advisory Committee and it accordingly added two members representing youth.

While Advisory Bodies Can Be a Useful Tool for Departments, Assessing the Direct Impact on Policy Decisions Is Difficult. In our conversations with state entities, staff indicated that the feedback they received from youth and family involvement in formal advisory bodies was helpful for developing policies and administering programs that addressed the needs of youth

and families. The state entities gave us a number of examples where they sought the input of an advisory body when developing a major policy. For example, when DHCS was developing its updated policy on telehealth, it actively sought the input of the Medi-Cal Children's Health Advisory Panel. In some of these examples, engaging an advisory body appeared to have a clear and direct impact on the policy decision. For example, as DHCS was deciding whether to pursue a new federal funding opportunity to expand access to residential mental health services, it engaged with a behavioral health workgroup created to deliberate over the California Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal reforms. This allowed the members of this body ample input on the policy decision in the early development stages. In most cases, however, it was unclear how engaging an advisory body specifically informed or changed final policy decisions. Because state entities often collect family perspectives from a variety of forums, determining the independent impact of the perspectives collected from a specific sole advisory body can be difficult. For example, in 2019 DDS solicited feedback on draft service provider reimbursement rate models from many stakeholders, including the ICC. Since DDS received similar feedback about the rate models for early intervention services from numerous stakeholders and stakeholder groups, it is unclear if the conversation held with the ICC specifically led to the subsequent changes to these rate models. That said, there is value when the advisory body process serves to confirm what ended up being a relatively consensus view of various stakeholders.

Varying Levels of Engagement From Families in Advisory Bodies. In our conversations, staff indicated that youth and family representatives of the advisory bodies are often reluctant to share their perspective during committee sessions. This is because youth and family representatives may face certain barriers to fully engaging in advisory body meetings, such as not having programmatic or technical expertise. For example, the Child Nutrition Advisory Council advises on a wide range of nutrition topics, such as strategies to increase participation in school meal programs. This requires council representatives to know the various federal and state requirements of the specific nutrition program that set constraints on the policy options. Not having programmatic or technical expertise could limit participants' willingness to contribute during meetings. Other barriers may include requiring participants to travel to meeting locations and the time commitment required to prepare and participate in advisory body meetings. Notably, the fiscal support provided to members varies across the advisory bodies. For example, the State Parent Advisory Council provides funds for lost wages, while no fiscal support is provided for the California Children's Services Advisory Group.

Shift to Virtual Meeting Format Increased Participation. In response to the pandemic, several advisory bodies shifted to virtual meeting formats to accommodate social distancing requirements. During our conversations, staff mentioned that the virtual meeting format generally led to greater attendance. DDS mentioned it would typically have 80 to 100 people attend an in-person stakeholder meeting (including participants and audience), whereas in a virtual setting they may have 1,200 people in attendance. While some barriers still exist with regards to a virtual format (such as the need for computer and internet access), a virtual format removes other barriers, such as those associated with travel. In a virtual format, state entities are also able to offer accessibility services such as closed captioning or translation.

Issues for Consideration

Based on our findings, we identified some issues that the Legislature may want to consider in order to maximize input from youth and families.

Consider Alternative Ways to Collect Feedback From Youth and Families. While participation in formal advisory bodies is one way to collect helpful feedback from youth and families, the state can, and does, also collect valuable feedback through other forums, such as surveys, focus groups, town hall meetings, or one-on-one meetings between departments and family representatives. When the Legislature is determining whether to formally create advisory groups and the required membership composition of these groups, it may want to consider the full suite of options available to collect feedback from youth and families. Depending on the Legislature's goals, other forums may be better suited to leverage the expertise of youth and families and capture the feedback of a broader group of youth and families across the state. These other forums may also have a lower time commitment compared to participation in formal advisory bodies. This could help the state address problems and make programs better meet intended outcomes, while also minimizing the burden for youth and family participation.

Consider Advisory Body Formats That Better Distinguish Youth and Family Feedback From Other Stakeholder Feedback. If the Legislature's goal is to understand whether a policy decision incorporates the feedback of youth and families, it could consider formats of advisory bodies that distinguish the youth and family feedback from other stakeholder feedback. For example, one way to distinguish youth and family feedback from other stakeholder feedback is to have a separate subcommittee of youth and family representatives to share their perspectives. Reporting from a separate subcommittee would allow the Legislature to more easily determine whether the policy decision taken by an advisory body incorporates input from family representatives. Given the additional administrative work associated with a separate subcommittee, this approach may not always be warranted. For example, if the Legislature creates a short-term body to advise on a narrowly focused reform effort, specifying a certain number of members that must represent youth and families may be an adequate approach to ensure the youth and family feedback is incorporated in policy decisions.

Ensure Youth and Families Have Necessary Support to Be Meaningful Participants. To increase the likelihood that youth and family representatives are actively engaged in advisory bodies, the Legislature could consider requiring that state entities provide robust onboarding and training associated with relevant programmatic and technical expertise. For example, youth members of the Child Welfare Council receive support from the California Youth Connection. If providing quality onboarding is not feasible or considered too burdensome, the Legislature could consider an alternative approach to obtaining feedback, such as through town hall meetings. To address the financial barriers that may prevent meaningful participation, the Legislature could also ensure that all youth and family representatives receive financial support, such as covering travel costs.

Consider Engaging Youth and Families in Ways That Best Align With Their Expertise. Several advisory bodies advise on policy issues that may require youth and family representatives to acquire additional technical expertise. The Legislature may want to consider whether a youth or family representative is helpful in these cases, given the additional

onboarding requirements can be a barrier to active participation. The Legislature could decide that a youth or family representative is not warranted given the technical nature of the advisory body and instead direct state entities to collect youth and family feedback outside the advisory body, such as through focus groups.

Maintain and Improve Virtual Meeting Capacity. Since virtual meetings have increased the number of stakeholders able to engage directly with state entities, the Legislature could consider requiring departments to maintain and improve virtual meeting capacity. Since in-person and remote options each have associated barriers (such as the need to travel or have computer access), having both options could increase the number of youth and family representatives that provide feedback to state entities.

I hope you find this memo helpful. If you have any questions or would like to further discuss this issue, please feel free to contact Edgar Cabral of my staff at Edgar.Cabral@lao.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gabriel Petek". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent.

Gabriel Petek
Legislative Analyst