

# State Board of Education President Mike Kirst announces he'll retire — and reflects on changes he has led

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Photo courtesy of Michael Kirst.

Kirst, one of the early policy experts on Title I and what became the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, meets with his boss, President Lyndon B. Johnson, in 1965.

State Board of Education President Michael Kirst, whom Jerry Brown brought into state government after his election to a first term as governor 44 years ago, will go out with Brown when he retires later this year.

Brown's contemporary at age 78, Kirst has been the governor's chief education advisor for four decades and his choice as president of the state board for Brown's four terms in office. He ended several months of speculation Wednesday when he announced that he would not seek a fifth term under a new governor.

## [Michael Kirst, father of new school funding formula, looks back and at the work ahead](#)

Brown had renominated Kirst and board members Patricia Rucker and Ting Sun to another 4-year term earlier this year. But with Senate hearings coming up this summer, Kirst was pressed to decide this month whether to retire. He had considered the benefit of sharing his knowledge from decades of policy work with the next administration, but in the end decided against it.

### **In his own words**

You can listen to Michael Kirst's 50-minute lecture on April, 16, 2018 to the American Educational Research Association, followed by a half-hour of questions, [by going here](#). To read his biography, [go here](#).

"Governor Brown and I have enjoyed a unique and rare working relationship," he said in a short prepared statement at the state board meeting on Wednesday. "We'll have a new governor in 2019 and I will not share that same relationship with him or her. I couldn't unless we had somehow met in 1974 and begun working together then. And so it feels right to leave the board simultaneously" with Brown. He said he would continue to participate in education policy and to continue writing.

Working in tandem, Kirst and Brown reshaped K-12 education in California during the past eight years. The state introduced and oversaw the implementation of new academic standards and assessments in math and English language arts and adopted new standards in science. Through the Local Control Funding Formula, which Brown shepherded through the Legislature in 2013, the state shifted control over budget decisions from the state to school districts and created an

equity-based financing system that directs more money to low-income students, English learners and foster youth.

Kirst seeded the idea as co-author of a paper laying out the concept of a weighted student formula. Largely through state board regulations, Kirst and the state board have put in place a new school improvement and accountability system that reflects Brown's dislike of federally imposed prescriptions of school reform. It also reflects his trust in local administrators, teachers, parents and school boards to decide how to make schools better.

The state is relying on data from an online dashboard of indicators to highlight weaknesses in student and school performance. It is turning to county offices of education and networks of educators to spur improvement for districts and schools.

Kirst announced his retirement without fanfare or discussion at the state board meeting. But earlier this month, in [a lecture to a national conference of education researchers](#), he reflected on a career in public policy spanning five decades. He offered a mostly upbeat but also candid perspective on the evolution in his own thinking about federal and state roles in education, his relationship with Brown and the policies that will be Brown's education legacy. Kirst gave the hour-long talk in New York upon receiving the American Educational Research Association's lifetime public service award.

Kirst is a professor emeritus of education and business administration at Stanford University and the author of more than a dozen books. He is also the rare academician with the opportunity to turn writing and theory into public policy in the nation's most populous state. That's why he described the past eight years as his "best years."

Kirst said he spends much of his time telling the public and legislators to give the sweeping changes time to work. "This is a 10-year process to get to a point where we are beginning to show" that it is working, but he said there are encouraging early signs, including significant increases in high school graduation rates and in the numbers of students qualifying for admission to California State University and the University of California. He noted the better-than-average improvement of California students on the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress tests.

But he also acknowledged, "Our results in Common Core math are not good." Only 38 percent of California students overall, a quarter of Hispanic students and 19 percent of African-American students [tested at grade level in math last year](#).

Big changes in policy happened, Kirst said, because a confluence of forces opened a "policy window" a year after Brown's election in 2010 to a third term as governor. The state's recovery from the 2008 recession and the new revenue from a tax increase that Brown championed jump-started the transition to the new funding formula. Then Brown was able to assemble a "united political coalition of education groups, business groups, even the Republican Party" into a "sustained coalition" behind the funding formula and other "big ideas," Kirst said. Another factor was a "deal" that Brown cut with the California Teachers Association, which Kirst paraphrased as "We won't do (test-based) teacher evaluations while we phase in Common Core if you support us on everything else."

Elaborating in an interview this week on a decision he had not previously talked publicly about, Kirst said the agreement led the CTA to shift its position on the Local Control Funding Formula from neutral to full support. Without it, "our coalition would have busted up quickly." A fight over teacher evaluations based on test results — an issue vital to the CTA — "would have gummed things up." It also would have created "policy overload," which Kirst said he has learned to avoid.

At the time, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was pressing for states to make standardized test scores a dominant part of teacher evaluations and made it a condition for states to seek a waiver from testing under the No Child Left Behind Law, whose renewal was stalled in Congress. Kirst said that he told Duncan, “That’s crazy.”

The state was in the middle of a crucial period of implementing the Common Core standards and teachers were just learning how to teach them. On top of that, the state was switching to online standardized tests — a huge shift. It made no sense to evaluate teachers at that point, so “we passed on that, and California was in the dog house in D.C.,” he said in his talk.

That was five years ago. Kirst told researchers that it’s time for California to revisit the issue so that knowledge and effective instruction of the new academic standards are incorporated into teacher evaluations. This can be done without using standardized test scores, he said.

### **Rejecting the rules he once wrote**

A native of Pennsylvania, Kirst’s first job, after getting a Ph.D. in political economy and government from Harvard, was writing regulations and guidelines for Title I, then a new and tiny program providing federal aid to poor, minority children, some still attending segregated schools, as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society program. It became part of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which, in its latest incarnation, is the Every Student Succeeds Act.

“The whole concern in Title I early on, was, ‘Well the locals are diverting the money out of the low-income schools.’ So the word was to “keep tightening the screws” with tighter accountability.

“So I participated in building this monster that I am now trying to decapitate,” he added, referring to the state’s pursuit of giving local districts maximum flexibility to use federal and state funds to close gaps in achievement.

Kirst said the decades of policy work have taught him lessons in patience, persistence and, most of all, humility. Experience and research showed that top-down dictates didn’t work. “You can’t do that much from the center. (California) is too complex, too large. You can’t be too prescriptive,” he said.

Kirst, Brown and Bill Honig, who served with Kirst on the state board and later was elected state superintendent of public instruction, were all in their mid-30s when Brown came into office in 1975. “Our view of the state board was we need to get these old guys out of here in Sacramento and we’ll solve these problems. We’re the smart guys.”

“And we all come back (35 years later) and we’re a humble bunch of people, proceeding with great humility, plunging into the unknown.”