



Money Matters - For All Schoolchildren

Melissa F. Weiner, College of the Holy Cross

Low-income parents and parents of color have long demanded well-funded schools to provide their children with the same level of education as that provided for wealthy white children. Often the answer to their pleas is “no,” as educators, politicians, policy makers – even many people in the general public – claim that “money doesn’t matter” for school quality.

But the facts say otherwise, as spelled out in reports from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Center for American Progress, and other organizations that have compiled local school data from across the United States. In Massachusetts specifically, the top ten school districts whose students score highest on the Standard Aptitude Test spend an average of \$16,010 per pupil, while the schools whose students score lowest spend an average of \$13,799 per pupil. That’s a difference for each student of more than \$2000 a year – approximately the same gap in school spending per pupil that separates U.S. states ranked in the top fifth versus the lowest fifth in terms of student performance on tests. The funding gaps between top-performing schools and states and the lowest performers are not a coincidence. Money matters.

What Good Funding for Schools Can Do

Money translates into tangible resources that make a real difference. Qualified and experienced teachers, laboratory equipment, attractive school grounds, heat and air conditioning, and buildings without asbestos, rats, and lead – all can be paid for with adequate funding. More money per pupil can also boost technological facilities, ensure more diverse and rigorous course offers, and pay for after-school and extracurricular activities that have been shown to be important to maintain student attendance and prepare youngsters for college and university admission. Students in underfunded schools without all these special resources do not perform as well academically as their peers in resource-rich schools.

It is not just a matter of resources either, because school children take messages from their surroundings about their own worthiness and life prospects. If they attend poorly resourced schools with crumbling buildings, overcrowded classrooms, barred windows, old textbooks, and not enough desks and skilled teachers to go around, children realize that they are less valuable than other children who appear to go to nicer schools with better teachers and facilities. Schools should not convey discouraging messages that dash pupils’ dreams and aspirations from the start.

Why Funding Gaps Happen

Americans believe in equal educational opportunity, so why do glaring gaps in school resources happen? Resource inequalities happen because U.S. schools rely on fragmented and complicated funding arrangements. Local property taxes are the primary source of school funding, supplemented by various state and federal contributions. The United States is the only Western industrialized nation that funds its schools based on the value of the homes located nearby.

When economic times are good, the U.S. funding structure greatly boosts schools for children in living in wealthy districts. But in times of economic duress and fiscal pressures – such as we find ourselves in now – reliance on local property taxes hurts all schools and pupils. Obviously those living in lower-income neighborhoods always fare worst, yet when housing values decline, schoolchildren in wealthy, middle- and low-income districts alike suffer as property tax collections decline. A relatively well-to-do school district may react to dips in property tax collections by doing extra fundraising among parents, but this band-aid is not usually available for middle-class and low-income parents who are struggling to buy groceries, pay electric bills, and make mortgage payments.

Critics of purely local funding have long argued that government, not parents, should be responsible for equal and adequate educational funding. To compensate for uneven and often low property tax revenues, many states provide supplementary funding. But such state funds do not always work to fill in local gaps. Although

some states (such as New Jersey) have policies that equalize funding across wealthy and poor districts, other states (such as New Hampshire) actually make inequalities worse by allocating more to wealthy districts than to poor ones. In a 2011 report on *Return to Educational Investment*, the Center for American Progress found that, on average across the nation, schools in affluent areas receive \$825 more per student than those in high poverty areas. Given the tight fiscal situation following the 2008-09 recession, many schools will continue to face budget shortfalls for years to come.

The Quest to Do Better

In the last thirty years, U.S. leaders have tried one approach after another to improve our schools. But the one obvious step we have not taken is a concerted effort to equalize resources for schools in wealthy, middle-class, and low-income neighborhoods. Reformers have tried vouchers, tests, “accountability” regulations, charter schools, and the deployment of new instructors from Teach for America. But politicians and reformers have not had the common-sense and courage to insist that every schoolchild should be backed by the same level of resources to help him or her succeed academically. Arguably, U.S. education reformers have been rearranging the deck chairs on a sinking ship that does not have enough infrastructure or resources to stay afloat.

To right this ship, all schools need more adequate and equal resources – which of course must also be spent wisely. Available research tells us that improved infrastructure, programmatic offerings, and teacher quality will boost student engagement and lead to higher levels of academic achievement and higher rates of high school graduation and college attendance. Equalized school funding could also reduce deeply entrenched racial gaps, which shamefully persist almost six decades after the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* that was supposed to set America on course toward educational equality.

Of course, increasing school funding is not easy at any time – and especially not in hard economic times. There is “never enough money,” as the Superintendent of Worcester Public Schools explained at a recent Martin Luther King Day luncheon held at the College of the Holy Cross. But we should not accept this lightly. On average, the United States spends \$11,665 per year to educate each child, but \$88,000 per year to incarcerate each prisoner. Money spent on schools can avert poor life outcomes costly to individuals and society. It’s our choice to make.