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Urban Education Issues

Urban Issue: School Funding and Racial Divides

It is an undeniable fact the students in urban schools perform across the board at lower achievement levels than suburban schools, and that students in high-poverty neighborhoods perform at a lower level than wealthier neighborhood schools. Why is that? Don't we all start out the same? I've heard arguments that urban students, and by extrapolation minority students, are inherently unable to achieve at high levels. Some have argued that the teachers, administrators, and Local School Council's, etc, are to blame. Our teachers don't care. Our administrators are only in it for the money. The LSC doesn't know how to manage a school. Wrong. I feel that school funding in the state of Illinois manages to keep the status quo going while undermining the communities that need the most help. State funding for schools should be an equal division of property taxes across the board per student, instead of the current area property tax model.

The nature of the funding model in Illinois is utterly insidious. Basing school funding on area property taxes protects the wealthy and quells any opportunity to rise above poverty for those students living in poor areas. For example, last year I taught at Gage Park High School, one of the worst high schools in the city. GPHS serves 1,700 students and spends approximately \$5,500 - \$6,000 per student. The

CPS average is \$11,000. How can the discrepancy be so wide in school funding? The answer is simple; Gage Park is a violent, gang-ridden neighborhood where the houses are very cheap. The worth of the properties will never rise due to the extreme violence in the neighborhood. Also, most of the living spaces are rented – there just aren't that many people that own homes. Therefore, property taxes are low, virtually non-existent. When there is no money, education cannot adequately be accomplished; much less can excellence occur.

To put these numbers in greater perspective, consider the funding breakdown at one of the best high schools in the state: New Trier High School. The spending per student is \$17,000. That number seems unreal in comparison. The gap to me clearly delineates the educational inequity that is occurring between white and minority students, especially black students. In many of the most poorly funded schools, the majority of the student population is Black or Latino. When the divide in education is as systematized and obvious as this, I can't help but think that this kind of inequity is racially charged. All students are supposed to receive equal access to a quality education – not equal access to a school building. The quality of instruction, materials, curriculum and myriad other resources should be the same across the board. In order to do this, there should be a reorganization of funding distribution so all schools in Illinois receive the same amount of funding per student, regardless of property taxes in the area.

The wealth is staying with the wealthy. The poor are given poor access. How can we hope to correct the achievement gap if the students who need the help the

most are given the least amount of resources, and the students who need help the least have access to every facet of educational enrichment? The Chicago Reporter clearly outlines the racial and economic divides for students who live in less privileged areas of the state:

Due to the primary reliance on local property tax revenue for school funding, there are massive cumulative gaps in per-pupil spending, particularly in poor or minority communities. The 6,413 students who started elementary school in Evanston in 1994 and graduated from high school in 2007 had about \$290 million more spent on their education than the same number of Chicago Public Schools students.¹

The northwest suburb of Barrington, which funds Barrington High School, has homes that are worth millions and millions, sometimes billions, of dollars. My little lower-middle class hometown sits on the edge of this fount of wealth, and I was friends with students who had 2 or 3 cars *of their own*, most of which were BMW's. Are these the students who need extra funding for test prep to meet AYP? No. No, they are not.

I've met significant resistance to my ideas on school funding, mostly from parents who live in wealthier school districts. They want their money to stay in their schools. They want the best for their children—admirable wishes from parents who are trying to ensure their children succeed. The problem is, the success of the lucky,

¹ Jeff Kelly Lowenstein, Alden K. Loury and Matthew Hendrickson (2004). Wildly Disparate Funding. *The Chicago Reporter*. Retrieved from http://www.chicagoreporter.com/index.php/c/Web_Exclusive/d/Wildly_Disparate_Funding

avored few comes at the price of the entire rest of the student population. I believe this attitude comes from the capitalist mindset of our country—perhaps the communists have it right. This system should be equal access and enforced achievement for all, not a melee of trying to grab what you can, where and when you can. When unequal funding leads to unequal access, a skewed system of rewarding the rich and punishing the poor comes into being. Wealth stratification remains constant and reinforces the stereotypes of the lazy, undeserving poor. Education is a right, not a privilege. The Young Democratic Socialists detail how the attitude toward education rights has developed:

We have moved away from that ideal [of making secondary and higher education available to all], not because it was a failure, but because there has been a political and ideological shift in this country away from the idea that education can serve a purpose other than to enhance the productivity of business—or to be a business in its own right. Even in its embattled state, education holds out the promise of an alternative to the cutthroat competition, authoritarian structure, and inhuman motivations of the corporate world. For that reason, alone, it is worth defending.²

The idea of a business model version of the education system is reminiscent of the practices that Ron Huberman is putting into effect in the Chicago Public Schools system. While performance management may be used with good intentions, it is not addressing the real problem of resource needs. I believe that in order to use the

²Young Democratic Socialists. (09.20.2004). *Higher Learning and Capitalism*. Retrieved from <http://www.campusactivism.org/displayresource-313.htm>

most efficient way to address the needs of students in low-income areas and property tax deserts, the funding for students must be distributed in such a way as to level the playing field of education as a whole.

I know that funding rules and distribution models cannot simply be changed overnight to an equal distribution model. That would be naïve, and quite frankly, stupid. I believe that this can be accomplished using a timeline of gradual funding reallocation, process metrics-based analysis of schools which need more of a helping hand to get on track, and allowing for schools which need more funding to run buildings adequately. For example, Gage Park is a very old building which has a high overhead cost for maintaining and running the heating/cooling systems. They would need much more of an allowance for building upkeep than a more updated, efficient school.

My plan has two monetary dispensation phases. First, more funds will be distributed to poorly performing schools over well-performing schools until the gap between performance levels has substantially leveled out. The second phase will be a graduated redistribution of funds that equally balances the needs of students in each district based on facilities overhead costs, student access to needed resources, and various other factors. I would like to base my model somewhat on the Evidence-Based Funding Model, which is outlined in detail below:

The evidence-based approach provides an unbiased assessment, using the best research, of what it truly costs to provide a world-class education to all students. It looks at budgets, program by program, and asks whether or not

there is research to justify spending money on certain items in the name of student achievement.³

These measures provide insight into the idea that, while schools are held to the same level of accountability overall, there is a discrepancy of access to the resources needed in order to meet these educational standards. I don't know how the metrics involved would play out the funding determinations over the course of time—I am not a building administrator or a facilities manager—but I know that this correlation is too significant to ignore. The wealthy are succeeding. The poor are not. It does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that there is a system of inequality at work that needs serious reconfiguring. I propose we get to it.

³ *Michelle Turner Mangan and Ted Purinton* (March 2010). Wildly Disparate Funding. *The Illinois Association of School Boards*. Retrieved from http://www.iasb.com/journal/j030410_07.cfm