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Public Education Funding

Most people can agree that public education is more than just a privilege and with the legal requirement to attend until at least 16 years old it should be more equitable. Many of the inequalities are due to financial inequalities and poor distribution of funds. There are many things that schools lack that puts students at an obvious and studyable disadvantage.

Bruce J. Biddle and David C. Berliner discuss studies that prove the connection between funding and student achievement. Lower funding leads to lower average standardized test scores; less involvement in extracurriculars and less advancement to secondary or trade school education. Currently a vast proportion of the country relies on property taxes to supplement school funding. In New Jersey the average annual expenditures were 8,801 dollars and Utahs were 3,804 dollars. Furthermore, in specific states there are still very large discrepancies. For example, in New Jersey some districts had per-student funding as high as 13, 709 dollars and other districts were as low as 8, 401 dollars (Biddle and Berliner, 2002). It's important to understand that the differences in budget aren't mere dollars, it's noticeable disparities. The issue of funding stems from unreformed use of property taxes supplementing school funding and the inability to understand that fixing this issue isn't political nor does it promote bringing wealthy students down.

Currently property taxes dictate school funding which makes it so wealthier areas have substantially larger school budgets creating a very large socioeconomic achievement gap. There

needs to be complete restructuring of the school funding and rather than relying on a very unequal system of local property taxes there needs to be a move to utilizing the sales and use tax. To make public education equitable, underfunded schools need to be given money/grants immediately. The use of property taxes could be replaced by either switching to the sales and use tax or creating longitudinal fund distribution.

In schools with students with lower socioeconomic status (SES) it's much more likely for the teachers to be new and under trained. Motoko Akiba and fellow authors also note that these schools have less stability with teachers meaning teachers are less likely to stay at the school for more than three years and "Inequalities in access to qualified teachers are likely to play a significant role in the long-lasting achievement gap in the United States (Akiba et al, 370). Schools with significantly lower budgets are also much more likely to be overcrowded due to less classroom space or teaching staff. This results in too large of class sizes for elementary students, which is any amount above 18 students, or too large of school size, which means over about 800 students. Douglas Ready and Valerie Lee describe the results of a study called STAR which stands for Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio and it was discovered that even with teacher aids the students in larger class sizes were almost a month behind in their curriculum than the students in smaller class sizes (101). In another study these same authors also talk about the advantages of having a smaller school size compared to larger schools because teachers are more likely to "take responsibility for their student' learning" (Ready and Lee, 2006). Also underfunded schools aren't able to provide as many extracurricular activities. This leads to a further socioeconomic achievement gap because students with higher SES are given more opportunities to go into extracurriculars and have the resources to thrive within them. That statement is explained further when Convey and Carbonaro (23) write, "EAs [extracurriculars]

improve students' noncognitive skills, which are positively related to academic achievement.”

This is saying that extracurricular activities provide a positive environment that correlates with higher achievement in school putting kids with lower SES at a disadvantage.

Schools currently receive very minimal federal funding; some state funding and the rest as local property tax funding. The change from property taxes would most likely be to a sales and use tax. A sales tax is any tax collected by the merchant at the time of purchase and a use tax is very similar but it's taxing a merchant out of state that is registered in the state. Sales and use taxes can be implemented at under 1% when combined with correct distribution between counties and current federal, state and other local funding aid to be able to replace the use of property tax in funding schools. It's important to understand the main flaws of using a sales and use tax; they are much more volatile and require voter support which property taxes already have. William Fowler writes, “The local property tax is quite resistant to economic recessions, but state taxes, such as income and sales are not” (69). The reason they are volatile is because during recessions a sales and use tax is much more likely to create substantially less revenue than it did prior, whereas a property tax (barring any severe economic disasters) is able to withstand recessions with little negative effect. The reason that this sales tax is advantageous though is because it causes a much more equal and equitable distribution of funds and allows for poverty stricken districts to thrive (Reinagel, 2014).

Another solution would be to consolidate school districts because then distributing funding longitudinally across the schools would be much simpler. For obvious reasons many want to avoid this because it leads to either larger class sizes or overcrowded schools; it's also not beneficial to students to change schools unnecessarily. Longitudinal distribution methods are across schools and districts versus vertical distribution which means the funding comes from the

state. This may also allow the continued use of property taxes to fund schools because rather than having a border between a very wealthy area and an impoverished area they would have to distribute the tax revenue fairly. An article by NPR talks about two neighboring districts in Alabama. Jefferson County and Mountain Brook City. Mountain Brook city has 1/9 of the amount of students which is already better because smaller school size is beneficial to students and the total revenue per pupil is 14,327 dollars versus Jefferson County that has a total revenue per pupil of 9,220 dollars. Consolidation would also help the vast amount of money that is put to superintendents and other administrative costs that are associated with having more districts than necessary. In Pennsylvania alone there are 500 school districts and only 67 counties. Each district has a superintendent with a national average salary of over \$160,000 which comes to about \$80 million dollars that just goes to the superintendent salary in Pennsylvania alone and doesn't even include the other administrative costs that each district has. Rather than that money going to the students it goes to a larger achievement gap because wealthier districts don't want to be associated or take responsibility for neighboring districts. (Berry, 2006)

In conclusion, vast differences in school budgets greatly affect students' academic achievement which creates a system that is often holding back poor students. Replacing the property tax revenue with a sales tax revenue would create a more equal way to fund schools. However, maintaining a property tax (or the sales and use tax) but using a longitudinal distribution method that shares revenues between districts and schools will create a more equitable system because schools can be given the immediate funds that they need. It's important to understand how unequal funding and distribution isn't what public education promises and therefore isn't fulfilling the right that underprivileged students deserve. In no means do people

want to bring down financially privileged students' achievement, rather restructure the current system to accommodate and benefit students with lower SES.

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