

Chapter 16

Unequal Opportunities and Inequitable Outcomes: Rethinking Education Finance Policy Design for a Global Society

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews social, economic, and political forces that cause and exacerbate educational disparities across and within states and considers how federal and state education finance policies are contributing to the persistence and growth of differences that deprive some children of needed learning opportunities. Many school finance experts and policy makers believe that providing the same number of dollars for each pupil will purchase similar educational opportunities. However, an expectation that different conditions require schools to spend different per pupil amounts has been guiding analysis in school finance challenges. The efficacy of equalizing per pupil dollars as a strategy for ensuring equal educational opportunity is tested empirically by comparing learning resources across Maine school districts. The results reveal educational resources available in schools where there are larger proportions of needy children are notably lower than those in schools with smaller percentages of needy children.

INTRODUCTION

Education is unique among public services. Hickrod, Chaudhari, Pruyne, and Meng (1997, p. 53) note that it is the only government function that has its article in every state constitution. They reason: “the founding fathers of every state apparently believed that there was something very special about education that deserved this kind of unique legal treatment in the states’ constitutions.” Ladd and Hansen (1999, p. 67) remind us that the faith of Americans in the power of education persuaded citizens “to create the most comprehensive system of public schooling in the world.” Kramer (2002, p. 1) states: “Education is of critical importance to our nation. Not only does it impart social values and allow children to attain skills necessary to participate in both our labor market and our democracy, but it is the underpinning

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of our self-image as “the land of the free.” Ensuring access to high-quality educational opportunities for all children regardless of place of residence or family income promotes social and economic justice and access to the American Dream. As Rank, Hirschl, and Foster (2014, p.2) describe: “The American Dream has ultimately been about the manner in which our lives unfold and the ability of the individual, no matter where he or she comes from, to exert considerable control and freedom over how that process occurs. In a sense, it is about being able to live out our individual biographies to their fullest extent.”

Although most Americans share a vision of personal and social progress, access to the American Dream is increasingly elusive for many (Ladd & Hansen, 1999; Rank, et. al., 2014). Duncan and Murnane (2014, p. 3) contend: “stagnant educational attainment and growing inequality in educational outcomes call into question America’s vision of itself as a land of growth and opportunity.” The United States “leads the developed world in the extent of its income inequality, the depth of poverty, and the concentration of wealth...with the haves becoming fewer and wealthier and the have-nots becoming more numerous and more vulnerable” (Rank, et.al., 2014, p.5). Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz (2015) echoes and expands upon this depiction of growing imbalance, noting a persistent and strengthening link between the life prospects of young people and their parents’ social connections, income, and education levels. Stiglitz (2015) explains that the past thirty-five years have witnessed expanding household income and wealth gaps between those living in poor places and those living in affluent suburbs, with dire consequences for educational opportunities in poor areas.

Children segregated in resource-poor school districts are denied essential learning opportunities. In 1991 author and educator Jonathon Kozol painted a vivid and troubling picture of “savage inequalities” in opportunities available to students attending urban schools. He described truncated curricular offerings that did not prepare children for college, decaying school buildings that lacked essential educational resources like books, students warehoused in large, overcrowded classes, and unqualified teachers who failed to challenge students to learn. The intractability of differential educational conditions “exacerbate educational inequality and limit educational achievement among more disadvantaged populations” (Duncan and Murnane (2011, p. 8). Verstegen (2002, p. 758) advises that abbreviated learning opportunities compound adverse circumstances by “hobbling [students] in securing a viable passport out of poverty: a quality education.” Stiglitz (2015, p. 141) admonishes: “while outright race-based segregation in schools was banned [by the U.S. Supreme Court], in reality, educational segregation has worsened in recent decades.” Rouse and Barrow (2006, p. 116) conclude that “rather than encouraging upward mobility, U.S. public schools tend to reinforce the transmission of low socioeconomic status from parents to children.”

The importance of education to the lives of children and the sheer volume of federal, state, and local dollars devoted to elementary and secondary public education require us to answer several important questions. First, why do educational resource disparities arise and persist despite a significant amount of intergovernmental aid directed to local districts? Second, why are resource differences widening rather than shrinking? Third, why are some states doing better than others? And finally, is there something we are missing that may be hindering progress? This chapter examines why fiscal disparities are tenacious and intensifying. Causes and effects of school funding dissimilarities are reviewed from the complementary perspectives of relevant education finance research and recent state-level finance data and trends. On what we may be missing, the widely held belief that equal per pupil expenditures purchases equivalent learning resources is probed. Some well-known experts argue that acquiring equivalent learning resources requires unequal dollars per student because both student and district characteristics differ widely, which means costs of education production differ (Downes & Pogue, 2002; Duncombe & Yinger, 1998; Reshovsky, 1994). Whether and to what extent equalizing per pupil spending equates with the level of available

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