Monday, December 5, 2011

The Comparability Question

The Education Department last week weighed in on the sometimes thorny issue of equitable funding among public schools, unveiling original research showing that disadvantaged schools (those eligible for Title I funding) receive less money from local governments than more well-off schools. The law requires districts to provide equitable state and local resources to both their low-income and their higher-income schools, but there are a number of ways that districts can tweak the numbers. For example, they can ignore years of experience in teacher compensation, thus zeroing out differences between schools in the overall experience levels of their teachers.

The Education Department's findings are no surprise to civil rights groups that have been squawking for years about disadvantaged schools being shortchanged. But the administration's painstaking study of $13,000 school districts adds gravity to the argument that the comparability loopholes cause inequities.

Some local school administrators chafe at the current comparability provisions in No Child Left Behind, saying the requirements hamper their ability to freely move money to the schools that need it the most. Other policymakers say the whole point of federal funding for education is to ensure that kids at all schools, rich or poor, have experienced teachers and good curricula. That's why the comparability requirements are there.

What is an appropriate way to regulate equitable funding for schools? Is this an area that requires federal involvement? Should school districts be allowed some leeway (like the current 10 percent variation) in resource levels for different schools? Or should the funding be absolutely equal? What should be included or excluded in comparisons between school resource levels?

-- Fawn Johnson, NationalJournal.com

R
Responded on December 7, 2011 4:15 PM

Improve Data & Understanding Differences

Karen Miles
Founder and Executive Director, Education Resource Strategies (ERS)

At Education Resource Strategies (ERS), our work with urban school districts targets how to allocate and organize resources in ways that lead to excellence for all students and schools, equitably and efficiently. The DOE report shines a light on the critical need to insure resource equity. It also highlights the need to improve data and the understanding of the reasons for spending differences as well as the strategies for addressing the differences- which do not always include equalizing spending. Those responding to the report should understand that:
1. **Tracking of school-level spending is typically bad.** Most districts don’t do a good job tracking spending to the school level ---so a key next step is to do this more consistently. We find that districts range from reporting 40% of spending to the school level to around 80%, making it hard to be sure whether DOE calculations reflect reality. When districts do take care to allocate all of the resources down to each school, many will find that they DO spend more in high poverty schools because they track coaches and some itinerant staff that work in high poverty schools as central spending. (Other districts will find that they keep magnet school and advanced program spending like International Baccalaureate centrally which would typically add dollars to lower poverty schools and thus exacerbate inequity).

2. **School size has the biggest influence on inequity.** Even if they do track spending, the largest driver of differences in general education spending across schools is usually not teacher salaries but school size (by a large factor). In some districts, the high poverty schools are the smallest and most under-enrolled leading to significantly higher costs and in other districts the reverse is true. The point is this driver is unrelated to opportunities to learn.

3. **Teacher salaries are the second biggest influence.** The second biggest driver is usually teacher salary. But, since teacher salary levels don’t currently link to teacher effectiveness, a straight equalization of dollars- even with a 10% leeway- isn’t necessarily the right policy solution. Instead, extra support for novice teachers might be a short term solution and revamping teacher compensation certainly is the long term answer.

Strict mandates on expenditure levels without regard to the reasons for them, will not improve equity and excellence, but improved transparency in financial and human resource reporting and problem solving around the reasons for the differences in spending will.

To learn more about school funding systems and how to better calculate spending in a district see the ERS guide, [School Funding Systems: Equity, Transparency, Flexibility](http://education.nationaljournal.com/2011/12/the-comparability-question.php#2129743).

Also, as a quick response to Checker Finn’s point on weighted student funding, ERS has a series of resources that evolved from a summit that brought together districts that have moved to this system. Weighted Student Funding systems do indeed usually result in Federal dollars being more equitably distributed. In addition, districts and state funding is more flexibly allocated which further improves efforts to meet student needs. See Annenberg Institutes for School Reform’s [Special issue of VUE](http://education.nationaljournal.com/2011/12/the-comparability-question.php#2129743), as well as our [summit report](http://education.nationaljournal.com/2011/12/the-comparability-question.php#2129743).