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Editorial: The role of local school districts in distributing resources equitably

The Daily Herald Editorial Board



The Ronald D. O'Neal Elementary School in Elgin received \$9,094 per student in 2019 in state and local funding compared to \$10,559 per pupil at Centennial Elementary in Bartlett. Both are schools in Elgin Area School District U-46. *Paul Valade | Staff Photographer*

An extensive series of Daily Herald reports in 2015 provided data unmistakably tracing the direct relationship between financial resources for education and student success. Students in schools and school districts that spend the most money succeed at high rates. Those in schools and school districts with the least resources struggle.

We titled the series "Generations at risk: Our promise to our kids" as a challenge to the future, and it's encouraging to note that in the five years since, Illinois government has made appreciable improvement in the way money is allotted to poor and wealthier school districts.

But new research shows that advancing equity is not a broad state function alone. It also requires distinctly local attention. In two days of reports this week, writer Tara Garcia Mathewson described research by the education foundation The Hechinger Report showing that inequitable funding frequently occurs at the school level within a particular school district. Sometimes knowingly, sometimes in spite of their best efforts, districts spend substantially less per-pupil at schools they oversee in poor neighborhoods than at schools they operate in wealthier areas.

In a study of 700 districts with 15 or more schools, the Hechinger Report found 53 that reflected this tendency. Elgin Area School District U-46 and West Aurora School District 129 were among them, and they show both the challenges and the complications in striving for financial equity.

U-46 administrators were surprised and disappointed by the data. They noted that they have applied significant resources toward staffing, management and programs at schools in poorer parts of the state's second-largest district. District 129 administrators point out that differences in transportation costs, staffing in smaller schools and specialized programs justify disparities that don't affect overall educational programs.

So reading the data requires prudent study, and applying it requires determination and resourcefulness. It's worth noting that in addition to the 53 districts with broad disparities in funding, the Hechinger Report found 263 that allocate funds without consideration for poverty levels. But moving toward equity can be done. Superintendent Tony Sanders vowed that U-46 will intensify its efforts next year, and Community Unit District 300 Superintendent Frederick Heid told Mathewson his Algonquin-based district has made

measurable progress, distributing extra funding to schools with large populations of disabled students and of English learners as well as of students in poverty.

"It does result in different funding amounts going to different schools, but we believe that is the best way to get to equity for our students," Heid said.

This is the first year this level of data has been available, marking another reason to be careful about drawing broad conclusions. But the report does emphasize that keeping our promise of a meaningful education to our kids -- all our kids -- involves more than just the broad funding of individual school districts and requires strict attention to how local school leaders allocate the money.