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Evidence Based Funding in Illinois: A Discussion of Equity in Urban Education

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Abstract

In this pilot study, we examine the realities of differential funding structures across the US, which disproportionately disadvantage historically marginalized communities (Black and Brown students) and students living in poverty, contributing to an intractable opportunity gap. Prior research indicates that equitable funding can, in fact, decrease the opportunity gap between dominant and non-dominant-culture students. We use the new funding structure in Illinois as a case study in funding equity that should be applied nationally. We critique the current funding structure of public schools in general, which has defamed the public sector in favor of school choice, vouchers, and charter schools—all with less oversight than public schools and structured to profit from public monies. Finally, we address the impact of COVID-19 on existing funding inequities.

Keywords: school funding, Illinois, school choice, evidence-based funding, COVID-19

Introduction

A few years ago, because of a job change, a friend moved to an affluent suburb of Chicago from a rural small town in central Illinois. Her 45-minute drive to the closest Walmart became a five-minute drive to multiple and varied superstores. Her children began attending one of the top five funded school districts in the state of Illinois. While visiting her after her move, she lamented the fact that her children's middle school may have to relinquish one or more of their student clubs because of the proposed funding ideas for Illinois schools. She complained that her children should not have to give up a games club, crafts club, or one of the multiple girls' choirs to "send money to other districts." After all, this is exactly why she chose this community upon their move, and she argued that other districts should simply manage their money better to have similar opportunities as her children. Despite a 45-minute commute for her husband, they selected this district for its affluence and what it afforded the children of the community. I challenged her to think about children in less affluent communities and what kind of world her children may live in as adults when 38% of other people in their age grew up in low-income households. (National Center for Children in Poverty)

Education, and public education in particular, benefits the general public. As many citizens believe, the world would be a better place if more people had the opportunity for a quality education and real access to opportunities. Some infer that such a reality would result in a reduction in crime, but, equitable education is and must be more than simply a utilitarian proposition.

For some students, school is a "home-away-from-home." For others, school is a place of privation where their bodies, minds, and personhood are not respected. As Nelson Mandela once stated, "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children." In fact, the US spends more money incarcerating its citizens than it does on educating its children (Darling-Hammond, 2013). What would life be like if we could provide just one generation with equal footing and equivalent opportunities in school? We may learn the answer to this question as we witness how Evidence Based Funding (EBF) in Illinois is implemented and sustained. Public Act 100-0465 is also known as the Evidence-Based Funding for Student Success Act and became law in August of 2017. EBF is defined on the Illinois State Board of Education website as follows:

This law enacts evidence-based funding (EBF) and comprehensively changes the way that school districts receive the bulk of state funds. EBF sends more resources to Illinois' most under-resourced students. EBF takes the necessary first steps toward ensuring all schools have the resources they need to provide a safe, rigorous, and well-rounded learning environment for all students. EBF demonstrates new mindsets for understanding the relationship between equity, adequacy, and student outcomes. (Evidence-Based Funding, n.d.)

According to the Illinois Constitution, as cited in Broadway (2020), "The purpose [of EBF funding] is to ensure that, by June 30, 2027 and beyond, this State has a kindergarten through grade 12 public education system with the capacity to ensure the educational development of all persons to the limits of their capacities" (para. 7). Funding equity matters because it is indicative of the breach between the US national ideal of equal educational opportunity and eventual national educational and economic success (Berlinger & Glass, 2014).

In this preliminary pilot study, we examine the realities of historical funding structures in Illinois, which have disproportionately disadvantaged marginalized communities and students living in poverty, contributing to an intransigent opportunity gap. Prior research indicates that equitable funding can, in fact, decrease the opportunity gap between dominant and non-dominant-culture students (Berlinger & Glass, 2014; Carter & Welner, 2013). We use the new funding structure in Illinois as a case study in funding equity that may be applied nationally. As funding equity in Illinois becomes a reality, we follow the trends and changes through interviews with a legislator and a journalist and a survey of educational leaders in order to record the changes noted as a result of the new funding model. We provide a critical historical review of the introduction, advocacy, and passage of EBF in Illinois, and its implications on institutions, with an analysis of the fifty highest funded districts in Illinois. Finally, we address the impact of COVID-19 on existing funding inequities.

Background: What Is Evidence-Based Funding?

For decades, public education has been seen as a panacea, the one US institution responsible for correcting all of society's ills, from the space race to the crisis that the US was

falling behind other countries in math (see Hill, 2017). State Report Cards and accountability measures have shaped public opinion on local school district performance (Barrows et al., 2016). The result has been a public outcry and pervasive opinion that characterizes public schools as underperforming with the blame falling on teachers, teacher unions, and ultimately, the system of urban public schools wholly. Hill (2017) notes that the oversaturation of news reports describing public schools as defective and broken begets the quest to determine if schools are rightfully to blame for unequal student achievement. It has also contributed to the policy arguments in support of school choice and school vouchers (Barrows et al., 2016).

The truth is: today's US public schools are not underperforming in comparison to charter schools and the public schools of the past (Berlinger & Glass, 2014). The purpose of this false narrative is to justify the funneling of public money into private for-profit entities in the name of "school choice" (namely, charter school or school voucher expansion). Moreover, part of this false narrative involves the idea that equity can be gained via "cost-free" solutions, having nothing to do with actual financial parity (Baker, 2018, p. 2). In fact, public schools have also become *more* efficient over time. Research clearly indicates that the most impactful interventions for low-income students involve increased human capital (Baker, 2018). Many Black Americans agree and are more largely supportive of increased spending on public schools evidenced by their overwhelming support of operating levies, referenda, or ballot initiatives (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005).

Historically, the issue of school funding, and the inherent inequities embedded within, led to lawsuits. Only five states have not had a school finance court case (Berlinger & Glass, 2014). Court decisions typically favor plaintiffs, but change comes slowly—if at all. Rather than striving for equitable funding systems (if just to avoid lawsuits), nearly all states have found ways to legislate equity, then allow exceptions that promote inequities again. Inequities lead to further inequities. More experienced teachers cost more and are more effective, and better-funded districts can afford to pay teachers more and retain them. These districts can also afford to reduce class size, hire additional supports for special education students, English Language Learners (ELL), and overall mental, social and emotional health; while poorer districts have less access to such resource allocation (Berlinger & Glass, 2014).

In the US currently, there are 51 separate and distinct educational funding systems providing different resources to schools and students. Most school districts do not possess the

resources to provide adequate, let alone equitable, schooling for students (Baker, 2018). For example, in 2015, the state of Illinois was one of the least equitably funded states in the nation. According to Baker, “By 2015 the average school district nationally was roughly at a ten-year break-even point on per-pupil spending; that is, per-pupil spending hasn’t risen for a decade and has barely risen for over two decades (2.5 percent)” (p. 11). Thus, school funding reform in Illinois was urgently needed.

In Illinois, a new funding model was enacted in 2017 that aimed to distribute state dollars to school districts in a more equitable manner (see Evidence-Based Funding Distribution Calculation). With the Evidence Based Funding (EBF) for Student Success Act, districts submit an annual spending plan and resources are allocated based on service to identified student groups of a higher need (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020). First, EBF guarantees a “hold harmless” provision that all districts will receive the same amount of funding as it had previously. This ensures that the first allocation of funding is used for the Base Funding Minimum (BFM), which provides all districts with the same amount of funding given the year before. Second, years of data are used to determine the Adequacy Target Calculation (ATC) for each district, which considers special groups’ needs to determine what a district requires to adequately teach its students. Third, the property wealth of each district is used to determine the amount of local funding the district can generate independently, which is the Local Capacity Target (LCT). While some districts are able to fund a great majority of their ATC through local funding, other districts produce just a small percentage of the ATC within their district boundaries. Finally, this leads to the Distribution Formula which allots funding to school districts identified in Tiers (Stand for Children, n.d.).

There are 921 school districts in Illinois. According to Figueira et al. (2017), each school district in the state is assigned to one of four tiers that indicates the level of funding the district needs to reach the level of fully funded. The districts are assigned to a tier based on their Percent of Adequacy. The tiers are assigned a fixed percentage of new state funds. The districts in each tier receive funding at that percentage to close the funding gap. Tier 1 districts have the most need, are the least locally funded, are operating below 70% funding adequacy, and receive 50% of new state dollars. Tier 2 districts include those that are below 90% adequacy in their funding; these districts receive 49% of new state dollars. Tier 3 districts are already funded above 90%, and receive only .9% of new state dollars. Tier 4 districts have adequacy levels above 100%, and receive only .1% of new state dollars. Ultimately, through

Evidence Based Funding in Illinois, district leaders in Tiers 1 and 2 are able to identify their students' needs and invest in what will have the greatest impact on learning (Figueira et al., 2017).

Literature Review

Inequitable Funding in the US

School funding determinations are made at the state and district level. States may provide a small baseline level of per pupil funding, and districts supplement these funds with “voter-approved” local taxes or bond sales. Further inequities result when districts with larger tax bases are able to provide higher levels of per-pupil funding. According to Berlinger and Glass, “Most of the suggestions on how to improve schools involve more standardized testing, supposedly a cost-effective way of keeping teachers, parents, and students accountable and motivated” (p. 171). Results of standardized tests, then, lead to the cutting of school budgets. When comparing schools with sufficient resources to schools without, academic achievement is higher in the former (Berlinger & Glass, 2014). Baker (2017) substantiates this claim by concluding that schooling resources with higher costs yield greater outcomes. Furthermore, Baker argues that while funding alone is not the solution for the educational inequities, it does sustain greater student outcomes through the innovative strategies and interventions employed from the financial resource.

Not only are there inequities between school districts, there can also be inequity within districts: where one school within a district receives more funding than another. According to Baker, “the obligation of the state is to ensure that all children, regardless of their background and where they attend school, have equal opportunity to achieve those common outcome standards” (p. 22). The state has never held true to this obligation.

Per Pupil Expenditures (PPE) are correlated with student achievement, yet equitable school finance is rarely a part of the conversation on school reform. PPE for instruction and administration of schools are associated with achievement because they can reduce class size and hire fully credentialed, more experienced teachers—which raises student achievement. According to Baker, “US schools on average have shown significant improvement on national assessments during periods when average spending has increased across states but have declined in more recent years as average spending declined” (p. 6). Houston (2018) argued that

a new funding model that considers funding equity would provide for greater outcomes in postsecondary enrollment, completion and social mobility.

School Funding in Illinois

In Illinois, the greatest source of revenue for public schools is property taxes. According to Kersten (2020), in 2019 approximately 52% of all revenue for public schools came from property taxes. Illinois, like many other states, do not factor in district taxable wealth differences in its state funding allocations (Houston, 2018). A school district's revenue typically consists of taxable property within district boundaries--whether that property be residential, business, or vacant. According to Kersten (2020), "Because of such wide discrepancies in Illinois school district tax bases, a great deal of inequity exists between the highest and lowest wealth school districts" (p. 10). The funding formula in Illinois has remained unchanged for over forty years, which has created this achievement divide. Taxable property in Illinois is based upon one-third of market value—where homeowners and businesses are both taxed at 33%. That being said, Cook County, where Chicago is located, utilized a tiered system of assessment, where businesses are assessed higher (25%) than residential properties (10%). The State Equalization Factor (or "multiplier") is a state created balancing system whereby counties are assigned a factor to bring the average county-wide property assessment to the one-third required level (Kersten, 2020).

In 2017, when the Illinois legislature passed the Evidence-Based Funding law (or Evidence-Based Funding Model, EBFM), traditional funding models were altered from foundation level based to a new formula. In this model, ninety-nine percent of all new state allocations will be distributed to districts with higher numbers of lower income students (Houston, 2018). According to Kersten (2020), "Prior to this change, Illinois was widely recognized as having one of the most regressive and inequitable state education funding systems in the country. Students who most needed support received the least. Consequently, the EBFM was designated to address the large funding inequities between the wealthiest and poorest school districts in the state" (pp. 18-19). With this new model, proponents hoped that Illinois would improve its school funding equity steadily over the course of the next ten years.

The Evidence-Based Funding Model in Illinois was created to close the equity gap between the most socioeconomically advanced school districts and the least while also considering various groups considered to be at-risk, such as special education and bilingual student populations. The Evidence-Based Funding Model was also considered to be a long-

term solution to financial disparity. According to Kersten (2020), “Under the prior funding system, a substantial portion of state school funding was provided regardless of local school district wealth. Because wealthier school districts had strong property tax bases, they were better positioned to provide more programs and services than poorer school districts” (p. 19). EBF fundamentally shifted the basis for funding to student needs. That is not to say that EBF would cut financing from more financially stable school districts; in fact, all school districts would retain their current level of funding under EBF. What EBF does change is the reliance on property tax dollars as the largest source of district revenue. Additionally, in order to ensure that Illinois is following research based best practices, EBF will be monitored and evaluated by a Professional Judgement Panel each year, and annual changes may be made to the formula.

Table 1

2021 Evidence Based Funding Formula

Adequacy Target (AT)	Local Capacity Target	Percent of Adequacy	Distribution Method
Level of funding needed to provide a high quality education for each student in every district	After determining the AT, the amount of funds the district can contribute to reaching the AT	Below 66%	Tier 1
		Between 66% and 90%	Tier 2
		Below 90% and 100%	Tier 3
		Above 100%	Tier 4

Note: Under the EBF model, all districts move closer to 100% adequacy with those furthest from the adequacy target receiving the most state funds. With the previous funding model, even wealthy districts could obtain poverty grant money based upon the number of low income students they educated. In other words, poverty grants were not based upon the ideals of equity.

According to Kersten (2020), “The formula did not include consideration of local district wealth but only the low-income student count. As a result, even wealthy school districts received the same level of funding as the least wealthy if they had the same percentage of qualifying students” (p. 21). As Kersten (2020) reminds us, the Illinois constitution only states that equitable funding is a goal, not a requirement. Therefore, there are no laws to suggest this system is unconstitutional. Due to the pandemic and the lack of

longevity of EBF model utilization in Illinois, there is a dearth of literature regarding its impact; Kersten (2020) and Houston (2018) were the main sources used for this section.

The EBF formula requires that districts use data verification through the Illinois State Board of Education to ensure that reported data is accurate. In a recent special edition of *Leadership Matters* (May 2021) Jason Nevel from the Illinois Association of School Boards reported on the broad range of uses of EBF funds from districts in each of the 9 regions of Illinois. Reported frequently was the purchase of new curriculums with needed books and materials as well as professional development for educators implementing those curriculums. Improved technology, such as the purchase of Chromebooks or iPads, was not a surprise use of EBF funds for many districts during the pandemic protocols that closed schools for an extended time. Reducing class sizes and fully staffing schools was a top priority across the state. This included adding lines for psychologists, school counselors, and social workers to support students' mental, social, and emotional well-being. The possibilities are many and EBF funds are open to documented routes toward improved student learning.

School Finance and Funding Models: Overview

The funding of public education is the responsibility of the states as it does not appear in the US Constitution as an explicit right of citizens. Courts have failed to declare it a fundamental right because of this fact (Lundberg, 1999). However, all states do have some type of education clause requiring the education of its youngest citizens (Berlinger & Glass, 2014; Kelly, 1995). Historically, school finance and property taxes have been linked to the way municipalities support public education (Barlow, 1970; Fischel, 2001). The reliance on property tax disadvantages students in poorer districts; guaranteed minimums have further exacerbated this challenge because wealthier districts are able to exceed those minimums with their higher property taxes (Berlinger & Glass, 2014; Kelly, 1995). Kozol (1991) highlights that gross inadequacies in school funding create *savage inequalities* presaged by zip code; this has not changed in the 25+ years since Kozol's text was published. This fact is further complicated by the reliance on voters to determine to what extent education is funded in individual municipalities.

Barlow (1970) asserted that the use of property taxes is not efficient because it does not accurately reflect the benefit and burden of those voting on new levies. Voters decide whether or not to support a school levy based upon the relative, perceived financial burden the spending proposal would have on them, and not necessarily the need of the school or students

(Barlow, 1970). Fischel (2001) notes the utility factor that voters often employ to determine whether a school levy will be utilized by them or their household. Therefore older and single residents, and some renters, may not be as eager to support new levies for funding schools.

Additionally, an examination of whether or not school funding based on property taxes reduces or increases student achievement must be considered. Baker, Farrier, Johnson, Luhm and Sciarra (2017) highlight great disparities between states when adjusted for regional financial differences. The greatest concern is school districts with higher populations of low-income students in their national report card on fair school funding (Baker et al., 2017). If we are truly concerned about differential student achievement outcomes, there should be a focus on other factors that may contribute to those disparities rather than blaming students, teachers, and unions.

Lundberg (1999) demonstrated that school funding models are critical sources of determining achievement and disparities through a 50-state analysis of state court decisions. Verstegen (2002) argues for the reinvention of school funding models; the models currently used are obsolete and archaic. Flat funding models have many disadvantages, although everyone receives a standard dollar amount and does not assume actual cost to educate students (Verstegen, 2002). The full state model where the state assumes a larger role in the financing of schools may not consider local characteristics; therefore, there is no perfect model. However, evidence-based adequacy models are deemed to use data on achievement and availability of funding to determine the level of state support (Banicki & Murphy, 2014).

The opportunity gap has been well studied, specifically the lack of resources that disproportionately impact Black and Latinx students. Baker (2016) concludes that per-pupil spending is a determinant in student outcomes and that districts with more resources are able to provide a higher quality education for students. Lafortune, Rothstein and Schanzenbach (2018) examined many of the 1990s school reform policies, including increased spending initiatives for poorer districts, which illustrated that increased achievement occurred when funding was prioritized to districts with higher rates of poverty. It is essential for us to examine school finance models in conjunction with issues of inequity in order to determine a better system as a nation.

Furthermore, Baker (2016) shares his concern regarding the persistent attack on public schools and arguments that money does not matter despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. A prime example of this inequity is the decision that many districts delayed

making around investing in online learning tools. With deferred maintenance of buildings and other challenges, investing in online learning tools was not as much of a priority as it should have been. As the country's education system was thrust into responding to a 2020 global pandemic in which in-person learning was eliminated, inequities such as access to broadband and devices required to access online and remote learning post-COVID were highlighted.

Failed Cost-Cutting “Solutions”

According to the National Education Policy Center (2019), desegregation peaked in 1988, but since then segregation for Black students has risen in every region of the US. Additionally, although racial diversity is greater than ever, public schools have become more segregated—resulting in long-term consequences for Students of Color, such as achievement differentials, un/underemployment, and income discrepancy (National Education Policy Center, 2019). As Orfield argues:

Segregation is expanding in almost all regions of the country. Little has been done for a generation. There has been no meaningful federal government effort devoted to foster the voluntary integration of the schools, and it has been decades since federal agencies funded research about effective strategies for school integration. We have to do more. (as cited in the National Education Policy Center, 2019, para. 8)

White flight, and educational policy (specifically the proliferation of charter schools), have done much to dismantle the intentions of *Brown v. Board*. In terms of educational reform efforts, charter schools that profess to provide students in “failing” schools the opportunity to obtain a high-quality education have most negatively impacted urban schools by promoting segregation: White students flee struggling urban schools to attend charters causing the transfer of public funds from urban public schools into charters. Economic resources follow the students; when students leave urban schools so too does the money, ultimately causing even more severe inequities in school funding. Additionally, there are mechanisms in place that reinforce racial inequities and couching them in more innocuous terms, e.g., websites that rank schools, which many parents utilize to determine where to live.

One of these sites is *GreatSchools.com*: a nonprofit website that ranks public schools and shares this information with real estate sites. *GreatSchools.com* relies heavily on test scores, graduation rates, and Advanced Placement exams—all factors that are highly correlated with race. This site serves to provide some potential homebuyers examining these ratings with a scapegoat—they do not have to exhibit any outward racial animus to avoid certain neighborhoods with sizable populations of People of Color. Instead, they can use *GreatSchools.com* filters to pass over listings located within areas with poorly rated schools. Potential homebuyers who can afford to move into areas with highly rated schools are largely White and Asian, which results in these scores potentially reinforcing the separation of neighborhoods across racial lines.

According to Sean Reardon, a Stanford University professor, “They [*GreatSchools.com*] start to overtly link people’s residential choices to what seems to be a measure of school quality. While that makes lots of sense if it’s a high-quality metric of school quality, if it’s more of a measure of socio-economic composition of schools, then it runs the risk of creating incentives for more socioeconomic segregation” (as cited in Vock, 2020). In general, public schools are performing better than charter schools, but public monies are being reallocated to charters and taken from urban schools, which only serves to muddy the waters (Beese & Martin, 2016). If we are remiss in our communication of these realities to policy makers, then segregation will only increase among various identity markers: race, ethnicity, income, religion, as well as for students who need special education services or English-language instruction.

State policies created to expand charter schools are likely only to increase segregation and exacerbate funding inequities for the most vulnerable populations (Beese & Martin, 2016). Investing in public school principals, teachers, support systems, and innovations might yield better results (Burks & Hochbein, 2015). Policymakers, educators, and researchers invested in the success of urban public schools must advocate for the expansion of instructional practices and resources (Milner, 2013). The funding models reviewed in this paper are largely focused on income disparities. However, the equity we need must be more inclusive of race (Aleman, 2007; Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018). Racial equity should be a primary factor for analyzing and developing funding policy (Aleman, 2007).

Methods

Theoretical Framework

The lens through which we examine school funding equity, or lack thereof, is a hegemonic one. We draw from Gramsci's conception of hegemony by which to understand the self-interested nature of school finance historically. The assumption is that the hegemonic class will take the interest of all economic classes under their purview into consideration. However, sacrifices are always made in order to promote the greater good for the hegemonic class itself. In addition to financial leaders, the hegemonic class also maintains political, intellectual, and "moral" leadership of the system: political propaganda leveled against the public good, while championing privatization and austerity measures—all ideals and goals that equate to a divestment in public school funding, which benefits the wealthiest.

Research Protocol

To examine the potential racial disparities in terms of school funding, we determined the fifty highest funded districts in the state of Illinois and compared them with those districts' racial demographics. We also examined the efficacy of the Illinois EBF measure based upon firsthand accounts of educational leaders by conducting two in-depth interviews. Our interview participants included one Illinois state senator and one Illinois superintendent. Our desire was to get a broad sense of how the new funding law (EBF) impacted school districts' overall planning and spending as well as public perceptions about the change in legislation. Guided by the work of Saldaña (2016), we used verbatim coding, which is particularly useful in educational research as it honors the voices of the participants with their actual words. To do this, we highlighted portions of our data where words, phrases, and short examples struck us as relevant and germane to our research foci.

In order to gain a wider perspective representative of districts in urban, suburban, and rural districts, we also randomly surveyed 130 Illinois superintendents. Through an email invitation, we asked these superintendents to respond to only two questions. Since EBF dollars must be spent to have an impact on student learning, we asked the following:

- I. In what way did EBF shift what you are doing in your district to positively influence student learning outcomes?

2. With the pandemic in progress, what message do you want people to hear about the funding needed to meet EBF goals?

The response rate was 9% (n = 15). We identified the following common themes: Overall support of EBF, COVID disruption of EBF, and a sense of hope for the resumption of EBF in Illinois leading to post-pandemic funding equity.

Of the 130 emails sent to Illinois superintendents, only 15 superintendents responded. Of these participants, districts in three of the four tiers identified in the Evidence Based Funding model were represented. Responses included representation from three Tier 1 districts, five Tier 2 districts, zero Tier 3 districts, and seven Tier 4 districts. All were male, fourteen were white and one was Latinx. As a reminder, tiers are identified through placement criteria identified by the state of Illinois with Tier 1 being the least-funded districts through Tier 4 which has a funding adequacy level above 100%.

Findings

50 Highest Funded Districts in Illinois in 2018

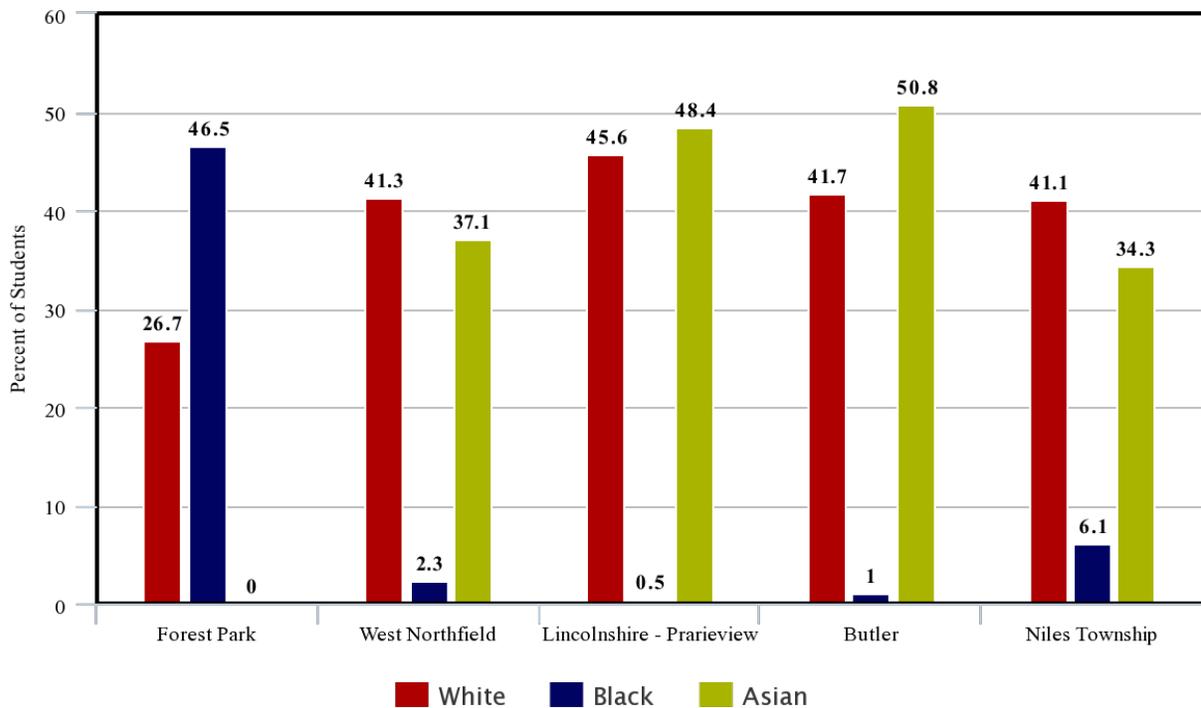
While Evidence Based Funding provides marginalized communities with additional monies to close the funding gap, it is notable that race plays a significant role in the highest and lowest funded districts. The student racial demographic breakdown of the fifty lowest funded districts, all of which are labeled Tier 1, is as follows: 41.8% white, 29.7% Latinx¹, 24.5% Black, and less than 1% Asian.

Of the top fifty highest funded school districts in Illinois, all are labeled Tier 4. Again, Tier 4 districts possess funding adequacy levels above 100%. Of these 50 school districts, only five of them (10%) contain student populations with less than 50% majority white student populations. That being said, only one of these five majority non-dominant student populated districts contains a higher percentage of Black students (46.5%) than white (26.7%), and that school district is Forest Park School District 91. Forest Park School District is a unique urban district with only 800 students, located 10 miles west of Chicago's downtown loop.

¹ Authors elected to replace the word Hispanic, used in Illinois School Report Cards, with Latinx. Latinx is the newly accepted term of this group acknowledging the understanding of gender and racial progress.

Interestingly, the other four Tier 4 districts that contain less than a 50% majority white student population also contain a paucity of Black students. For example, West Northfield District 31 (with a 41.3% white student population) reports only 2.3% Black students, and 37.1% Asian students. Lincolnshire-Prairieview School District 103 (with a 45.6% white student population) contains .5% Black student population and a 48.4% Asian student population. The Butler School District (with a 41.7% white student population) reports a 1% Black student population and a 50.8% Asian student population. The Niles Township Community High School District (with a 41.1% white student population) reports a 6.1% Black student population and a 34.3% Asian student population.

Figure 1. Five schools with the lowest majority populations



meta-chart.com

In examining the most financially well-funded public school districts in the state, it is clear that the student demographic group who benefits the most, proportionately speaking, is white students. The least represented racial demographic group in the top 50 most well-funded school districts in Illinois is Black students. This speaks to historical and existing

practices of segregation, exclusion, and hegemony (Rothstein, 2017). Practices such as red lining, housing covenants, Jim Crow, police and state sanctioned violence have served to dismantle the ability to create generational wealth, and even the ability to own and bequeath property (Rothstein, 2017). Many do not realize that there are great financial disparities within public school systems based upon zip code.

Interviews

In the summer of 2019, we interviewed Illinois state senator Andy Manar, sponsor for the evidence-based funding model. Manar has a background in education and was inspired by his own undergraduate reading of Jonathan Kozol's classic text *Savage Inequalities* (1992). Kozol's text spotlights the Illinois city of East St. Louis. As Kozol states:

East St. Louis was the poorest small city in America, virtually 100 percent black, a monument to apartheid in America. The city was so poor, there had been no garbage pickup for four years. There were heaps of garbage in the backyards of children's homes and thousands of abandoned automobile tires in empty lots. (as cited in Scherer, 1992/1993, para. 4)

Despite a high tax rate, the city still cannot adequately fund the schools because of the low value of property in East St. Louis. It is a case study in the inadequacy of a system that disadvantages the most disadvantaged. Having taught in Chicago, Senator Manar was well aware of funding inequities. He was also troubled by the fact that his daughter's art class was being housed in a janitor's closet at the local public elementary school in the city of Bunker Hill. This school also had no functional gym.

Manar argued that the law sets up the inequity with unfunded mandates—they are essentially compelling inequality. Manar used the school district of East St. Louis as an example, as did Kozol decades before. Manar stated that the wealthy districts would question why poorer districts would not simply raise their taxes in order to increase school funding, but not all districts have a tax base robust enough to do so. As Manar stated, "East St. Louis could not tax themselves into equity." Manar argued that the resistance to school funding equity came in the form of superintendents from wealthy districts, i.e., "We don't want to compromise our greatness so you can succeed."

EBF removes this resistance and injects stability into the school funding model. Manar argued that the superintendents in Illinois can now plan ahead because they know their budget ahead of time. The state now acts as a partner as opposed to an antagonist. According to Manar, “School districts can now take chances because they have comfort in funding.” Manar also stated, “If we get the ‘how’ right, then we can debate the ‘how much.’”

In their interview Superintendent A, a veteran superintendent of a Tier 2 district in central Illinois, indicated that EBF is generally seen as positive and a step in the right direction to equalize the field of education for students across the state. Although Tier 4 district leaders feel they do not gain anything from the EBF formula, they also acknowledge that they are not harmed. For superintendents in Tier 1 and 2 districts, however, EBF has allowed the districts to improve curriculum, hire needed faculty and staff, decrease class sizes, and fully fund special education with timely payments. Superintendent A predicted that financial implications may occur due to COVID, when Illinois stalled the EBF funding schedule needed to bring all districts to a higher percentage of adequacy.

Superintendent A believes the way educators speak about funding will change as a result of Evidence Based Funding. He believes it *must* change. Instead of thinking about what resources may need to be cut or what will be less harmful for the students, he believes school funding will transition to decision making about where we need to put our resources for the best learning outcomes. He firmly stated, “We have shifted from a model of what can we cut or what can we do away with that is going to do the least harm for kids to now talking about where we are implementing our resources that will impact student learning outcomes. And, we need to tell our public, our community, not just our legislators, this is what we are doing, here is how we are spending your dollars, and this is the true learning outcome as a result of this fair funding.”

With Evidence Based Funding in place from 2017-2020, 100% appropriation for EBF has not yet been met. To meet the goal of 90% adequacy funding for all districts in Illinois by 2027, \$650 million is needed. Currently, half of what is needed for districts has been appropriated by the governor thus far. Through their advocacy for students and education at the state level, superintendents strive to reach the goal of a minimum of 90% adequacy for all districts. Superintendent A is unsure that Illinois will reach the benchmark of 90% for all districts; however, he is sure that the request from advocates in the field must be \$650,000,000 because that is, “what it is going to take to get schools to 90% adequacy if we are serious about

this goal.” Through EBF in Illinois, he believes “We have certainly taken a huge step in the right direction.”

Questionnaire: Superintendent Perceptions

Of the responses to question one, (“In what way did EBF shift what you are doing in your district to positively influence student learning outcomes?”), superintendents from Tier 4 districts did not see any change or new impacts from the implementation of EBF to their districts, but believe it will overall have a positive impact on lower Tier districts who are in need of increased funding. Superintendents from Tier 1 and Tier 2 districts responded that they were able to afford new curriculum and hire personnel for much needed positions (e.g., social workers, instructional coaches, and teachers).

In a show of support for EBF, one Superintendent from a Tier 4 district, responded:

I am a full supporter of EBF, even though my own district only gets a few thousand dollars per year through this new formula. We are broke, but only through our own making, and we will fix it. The EBF formula rightly directs funds to districts that need it more to support students who should get more support that historically has not been available to them. So EBF has not changed my own district’s ability to change student outcomes, but it has changed *our* ability statewide and that is good for everyone, including my community.

There were a variety of responses from superintendents to question two, (“With the pandemic in progress, what message do you want people to hear about the funding needed to meet EBF goals?”), with three prominent themes. Some superintendents believe that COVID-19 will significantly impact the effectiveness of EBF and create new funding needs in order to provide the best education for their students. Others are thankful for EBF during the pandemic, as it kept them afloat during these times. However, many do not believe that they will see more funds than they received the previous year. These respondents hope state legislators, district personnel, and community members do not take steps backward in terms of support for Evidence Based Funding.

A Superintendent in a Tier 2 district disclosed an important issue that COVID-19 exposed, “The pandemic and school closure have shined a light on inequities that still exist.

For example, in my district, 67% of kids have limited or *zero* internet access at home. As you could imagine, this made staying connected to our kids difficult at best and impossible (for some kids) at worst.” Despite the intentions of EBF, no one could have predicted how COVID-19 would transform the landscape of schools. This has served to exacerbate already pre-existing inequities.

The questionnaire resulted in only a 9% return. Additional responses may confirm the beliefs of this small sample group or add other perceptions of EBF. The previously discussed direct interview with Superintendent A from a Tier 2 district provided additional insight to the use of EBF in a district that falls in the level of 66-90% adequacy.

Limitations and Future Research

As this was a preliminary pilot study during an unprecedented time (COVID-19), we asked a small number of questions of a small number of participants. Further research and analysis are necessary in order to glean an accurate picture of EBF in Illinois and the positive changes it can make on the most vulnerable populations. Additionally, the realities of COVID-19 have altered the implementation of EBF, and it may take a few years to determine the true outcomes of this new funding model. Because of the realities of the global pandemic, we surmised that superintendents were scrambling to put contingency plans in place just prior to the fall of 2020, and thus did not take the time to complete our questionnaire—contributing to a low response rate. Finally, our findings are limited by the low participant response rate as well as the homogeneity of demographic representation of participants.

Discussion

This shifting of funding priorities is an important step toward addressing the systemic inequities and exclusion of historically marginalized people in educational opportunities historically. Evidence Based Funding is one way to address inequities directly. With an understanding of the funding disparities, districts are using EBF dollars to positively impact student learning. Discussion about the need to invest more in strategies to ensure that their teaching demographics mirror their student demographics, that there is support for students and families whose primary household language is not English, and that overall infrastructure (broadband access, building facilities, and curriculum) is improved. These realities could

create barriers for families and students if districts are not attending to them intentionally and directly.

On March 17th, 2020, the governor of Illinois, J. B. Pritzker, required all schools in Illinois to close until March 31st because of growing COVID-19 concerns. The closure ultimately extended to the end of the academic year. This drastic change to our world required educators to redevelop education models and systems of delivery in a very short time. Unfortunately, the Illinois State Board of Education indicated that Evidence Based Funding would be stalled in the next fiscal year: “In fiscal year 2021, per Public Act 101-0637, no new tier funding will be provided” (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.).

The impact of mandatory school closures, and the remote learning that followed, did include a rollback of the more equitable funding model finally enacted in Illinois in 2017. The future of EBF in Illinois is currently in question. The tragic irony of this is that the most vulnerable students and neediest districts are susceptible to falling even further behind with fewer resources after years of being underfunded. The pandemic has and will increase the disparities between the top funded and lowest funded school districts in the state. At the time of this writing, Governor Pritzker announced that the 2022 fiscal budget would include \$350 million dollars directed toward the Evidence Based Funding model.

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APPENDIX A

Survey Questions

1. In what way did EBF shift what you are doing in your district to positively influence student learning outcomes?
2. With the pandemic in progress, what message do you want people to hear about the funding needed to meet EBF goals?

APPENDIX B

Superintendent Interview Questions

1. Have you participated at the state level on the Evidence Based Funding development?
2. What's the public reaction as you see it to this new funding model?
3. Tell me about what it means for your district to be in Tier [3]? What is a comparison for your district?
4. How is EBF compared to other states on a national trend? Where does this leave Illinois now?
5. What do you think is the best thing we can do as educators or as writers to help support schools and this school funding model to continue to benefit districts as we move forward?

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