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Risks of Allocating Academic Resources Based on Socioeconomic Status

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High school acts as the point in students' academic careers in which they decide whether to continue onto higher education or invest their time and efforts into the workforce in some way or another. Yet, what are the risks that coincide with resource allocation based off of socioeconomic status? And what potential methods may help to improve the outcomes of resource allocation to best promote student success?

Resource Allocation

While many laws, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, have attempted to eliminate the challenges of educational inequity, most students in lower socioeconomic classes still experience academic disparities.¹ In large part, this is due to the fact that only “8-9 percent of school budgets nationally” actually come from the federal government.² This includes funds that support lower income students such as Pell Grants and other grant programs initiated under the Obama administration.³ Given that so little of school funding comes directly from the federal government, academic resource allocation is heavily reliant on property taxes.

Risks

One of the most relevant risks in this decision-making process, as seen in Los Angeles school districts in California, is the lack of transparency in regards to resource allocation. In July of 2019, Public Advocates filed a complaint that “more than \$2 billion in funding intended for high-need students” was not allocated to those in need, and the budget did not accurately reflect how this money was spent.⁴ Furthermore, the education funding formula proposed by Governor Newsom for Los Angeles County, explained that it would only allocate an increased amount of academic resources to a school “when at least 55% of students are designated as high needs.”⁵ Distributing resources based on the school as a whole, may lead to an additional risk for individual students. For instance, if a student is able to transfer from a poor to a wealthier school, but still resides in a high-poverty neighborhood, they may need additional academic resources and support than the remainder of their peers in order to attain equitable academic

1 The No Child Left Behind Act aims to minimize the achievement gap by providing students with equal access to higher equality education. See Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (<https://www.k12.wa.us/policy-funding/grants-grant-management/every-student-succeeds-act-essa-implementation/elementary-and-secondary-education-act-esea/no-child-left-behind-act-2001>)

2 Semuels, Alana. “Good School, Rich School; Bad School, Poor School.” *The Atlantic*

3 Equity of Opportunity? Equity of Opportunity | U.S. Department of Education, <https://www.ed.gov/equity>.

4 Luu, Duc. “LAUSD Complaint.” Public Advocates, Public Advocates, 17 Nov. 2020, <https://www.publicadvocates.org/lausd-complaint/>.

5 Fensterwald, John. “California’s K-12 Funding Formula Likely to Change, but Disagreement over How.” EdSource, EdSource, 4 June 2021, <https://edsources.org/2021/californias-k-12-funding-formula-likely-to-change-but-disagreement-over-how/655552>.



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opportunities and overall success. However, given Governor Newsom's plan, the student would not be able to receive this support since the school, presumably, would not reach the 55% high needs requirement.

It should be noted that academic resources are more often than not, provided to schools or programs in areas of higher socioeconomic status. A study of Chicago Public Schools conducted by Lisa Breger found that "Test scores are significantly lower for impoverished schools, indicating that these schools face higher pressure to meet state standards than neighboring schools with students from higher income homes."⁶ Given this information, we assume that greater access to academic resources leads to higher test scores, and in turn may lead to a larger gap in academic achievement between socioeconomic classes/neighbors.

Academic Resource Allocation Proposal

In order to alleviate the issue of lack of transparency between the public and the local funding of the school districts, a secondary review process should be implemented. This may be in the form of a public volunteer group, local political or officials, or an academic committee consisting of local teachers and school staff.

This committee will serve to review and approve the proposed budget with the primary goal of ensuring that the allocation of funding and resources is equitable despite the school's socioeconomic status. Additionally, this group will ensure that all of the money given to the state or district by the federal and local government is accounted for in the final budget. Ideally, this will eliminate the lack of transparency in funding that was seen in Los Angeles County. If the committee chosen to conduct this task is varied, maintaining a diverse group of people from different socioeconomic districts and neighborhoods, then this process can also serve to eliminate any bias that may come into play when distributing property tax. Essentially, people in higher socioeconomic neighborhoods who pay higher property taxes will not have the authority or power to give all of that money to the schools in their areas, or vice versa.

It may also be beneficial to shift from a property tax-based funding to a state wide tax funding process. In other words, funding would not come directly from local property taxes, but would instead be based on state taxes. Therefore, once the state taxes are collected, they will then be distributed in a more equitable way by the state itself, rather than to local governments and then to the individual schools, as the process stands now. While this may hold some adverse consequences such as a change in state budgeting processes or lack of control on behalf of local governments, it may also enact positive change that leads to a more equitable society overall.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, is the need for clear risk communication on two levels. One, between school staff such as advisors, counselors, or teachers) and their students. The other, amongst experts across different fields as it pertains to the resource allocation decision-making process. One of the suggestions offered here is to collect student information regarding their financial situations and socioeconomic backgrounds in public high schools across the United States. This information would remain confidential, and would only be reviewed by the student's academic advisor/counselor and the school's principal. However, by providing these staff members with this information, they will be able to develop a better understanding of the student's personal situation and where more academic assistance/resources may be needed.⁷

In order to do this in the most efficient manner, the school can provide the student and their parents with a packet or survey to fill out, which should include their current address,

6 Breger, Lisa. "Poverty and Student Achievement in Chicago Public Schools." *The American Economist*, vol. 62, no. 2, Sage Publications, Inc., 2017, pp. 206–16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26754415>.

7 Price, Jennifer A. "Sharing Student Background Information with Faculty: Does It Make a Difference?" *Graduate School of Education of Harvard University*, ProQuest, 2012, pp. 80–95.

family income, and perhaps the student's past academic records and test scores. From this, the staff can assess the individual student's needs and suggest to the parent and student particular after school or in-school programs and/or classes that may help the student academically. These additional resources should be free of charge, as it should be regularly incorporated into public high schools, especially those considered to be of high need or in areas with high poverty rates. This is extremely important given that "One study reports that high-poverty students require 25 percent more resources than their peers"⁸

Another form of risk communication that can be improved moving forward, is the communication between experts in different fields when deciding on how resources should be allocated to public high schools within a state or district. Bringing in experts from economics, educational fields, as well as family or social workers would allow for a large range of perspectives on the topic of resource allocation. Additionally, this will ideally alleviate internalized costs.⁹ Doing this should prevent bias amongst individuals who may live in the particular neighborhood or state being discussed, while also allowing for a better understanding of the economics for the academic experts that may not have as much knowledge on this particular aspect of the decision at hand.

While there is a common consensus about the value of education, the understanding of how allocation of academic resources plays a significant role in educational productivity and overall student success is not as often acknowledged.

⁸ Roza, Marguerite. "Funding Student Types: How states can mine their own data to guide finance policy on high-needs students." Edunomics Lab - The Study of Education Finance at Georgetown University, <https://edunomicslab.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/State-PP-funding-cost-FINAL-3.pdf>.

⁹ Internalized costs in decision making are borne by the decision maker and can often lead to poor procedures in decision-making processes.