

The New Haven Board of Education is currently considering a Weighted Student Funding model for the New Haven Public Schools. WSF strives for funding equity among schools by allocating resources on a dollars-per-student basis, with certain students "weighted" more heavily according to instructional needs (for example, special education).

WSF doesn't address actual inequity well, and it may sacrifice coherent functioning of individual schools.

The metric of per-student funding equity is a misleading one, distracting from true educational equity in practice. The quest for appropriate weights distracts from the bigger goal: equity in the actual educational experience, which is not solved by funding alone. Even if the district could achieve the perfect mix of weights, such "equity" is then completely negated by school-specific grants and magnet funds.

In reality, the weights are arbitrary. No evidence-based or even well-thought-out decision has been made that a student qualifying for free lunch actually adds 50% more to the cost of running a school. The .50 weight is arbitrary, adjusted to make all the other numbers work out. There is no requirement that the funds associated with student characteristics be employed to help those particular students. Funds a school receives based on its English-learner population can be used to pay for another gym teacher. Or a laptop cart. Or glossy brochures and a professional development workshop on internet safety. WSF claims to fund schools according to student need, but there is a chasm between the stated need and its fulfillment.

Equity is a lovely goal, but not at the cost of coherence. According to New Haven's School Change plan, the school should be the unit of change, and therefore coherent functioning of the individual schools should be the focus. If a school has a core functional educational need -- aquariums at Sound School, gardens at Barnard, small class sizes at Lincoln Bassett -- it will not receive program-specific support under WSF. A hybrid funding model, such as that currently under debate in New Haven, can set aside an amount (here, \$2 million) "off the top" for these programs district-wide, but there is no prior designation as to which schools and which programs will be supported. Pay close attention in the coming years to whether that set-aside proves to be sufficient, durable, and strategically distributed.

Market economics have no place in public education.

The market-based, survival-of-the-fittest philosophy has no place in a public institution. All children have a right to a good public education, and governments have a responsibility to spend tax dollars to ensure that they get one. Schools are not businesses; they are public goods like clean water, sturdy roads, and capable fire departments. Nothing is, or should be, for sale. WSF commodifies students. It creates perverse incentives, and it forces principals to view students and their particular characteristics as pieces of the revenue stream.

WSF is designed to produce winners and losers, where some schools lose funds, teachers, supplies, and support staff to others as "the money follows the child." WSF introduces an atmosphere of zero-sum scarcity, a "fight over the crumbs" which distracts from the abundance paid to district administrators, outside consulting firms, and other non-classroom costs. You can tell where the district's priorities are: central office costs are always taken "off the top," prioritized over costs incurred in the classrooms and school buildings. Outsourced extended day programs are nice and all, but if schools can't afford textbooks, calculators, and social workers, then the district cannot afford them.

"Principal autonomy" and "control over budgets" sound empowering, but they are only so when resources are sufficient. Otherwise, principals are given an impossible task. WSF shifts the blame for

the failure to work miracles from central office to 47 principals, diluting public critique. If a principal cannot meet essential needs with the budget provided, the school's performance and climate may deteriorate, but insufficient budgets at a school level are more difficult to appeal than district-wide underfunding. Principal mismanagement will always be the presumption.

WSF is not need-based budgeting.

How do you budget for your own family? Do you take each month's paycheck and divide it equally by all family members? Perhaps you weight the grown-ups more by age or calories to reflect their greater need? Or maybe you follow a hybrid model, where you take the mortgage, taxes, and utilities off the top, and then allot the rest equitably on the weighted-family model, charging back for groceries and gas?

Probably not. Unless you work on Wall Street, this exercise likely strikes you as quite silly. Most likely, you spend your family's collective income on your family's actual needs, individual and collective. Sometimes, the new baby or the college student needs a larger share; sometimes everyone has to sacrifice to cover an expensive repair. Some years may be lean and others luxurious, but families spend their funds to maintain the coherent, collective functioning of the entire family, rather than to achieve dollar-by-dollar equity.

We've all seen the cartoon about equity, with the little guy standing on a higher stack of boxes to see over the fence. Equity is only a virtue where it actually has an equitable effect. Let's not make the mistake of giving him a taller hat in the name of fairness.

