

**JUST A RIVER BETWEEN THEM: A STUDY OF INEQUALITY
IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES**

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ABSTRACT

Growing up, I attended a predominantly white, Catholic grade school, and I lived in a nice, middle class neighborhood. I received new books regularly and I enjoyed many educational experiences such as a trip to Washington D.C. Educationally, I was privileged. My first taste of educational inequality had to do with a friend of mine. Academically, we didn't have the same opportunities. I visited her school once. It looked *old*. Not the kind of old that makes buildings look quaint but the kind of old that makes buildings look as though they might fall down. I didn't say anything to her, but I secretly felt relief that it wasn't my school. As I grew older I found out that it was all around me. As an aspiring teacher, I spent countless hours a week in many elementary schools and there I noticed many differences. I would spend a few hours of the morning in one elementary school and the afternoon in another. In the first, the building was only a few years old. It was practically sparkling. There were new books, new desks, and even a bathroom in every classroom! In the school in the afternoon, the story wasn't the same. It was an older building, some of the classrooms were cramped, and many of the books were hand drawn by some of the students. It just didn't seem fair. These two schools were less than 20 miles from each other, yet the differences were astounding. How could someone think that the students each received an equal education? These experiences provided the inspiration for this project.

Introduction

Growing up, I attended a predominantly white, Catholic grade school, and I lived in a nice, middle class neighborhood. I lived with both my mother and my father, and I had one brother, Joe. I received new books regularly and I enjoyed many educational experiences such as a trip to Washington D.C. I even had a computer before most of my friends! Educationally, I was privileged. My first taste of educational inequality had to do with a friend of mine. We had been friends all our lives. We first met at a daycare center where our moms became fast friends. She went to public school and lived in a lower income section of Aurora. She didn't go on vacations, lacked a computer and I don't remember her personal library being as vast as mine. Academically, we didn't have the same opportunities. I visited her school once. It looked *old*. Not the kind of old that makes buildings look quaint but the kind of old that makes buildings look as though they might fall down. I didn't say anything to her, but I secretly felt relief that it wasn't my school.

This, however, wasn't my only realization on the inequality of education. As I grew older I found out that it was all around me. As an aspiring teacher, I was always looking for ways to get involved with children. I spent countless hours a week in many elementary schools and there I noticed many differences. I would spend a few hours of the morning in one elementary school and the afternoon in another. In the first, the building was only a few years old. It was practically sparkling. There were new books, new desks, and even a bathroom in every classroom! In the school in the afternoon, the story wasn't the same. It was an older building, some of the classrooms were cramped, and many of the books were hand drawn by some of the students. It just didn't seem fair. These two schools were less than 20 miles from each other, yet the

differences were astounding. How could someone think that the students each received an equal education? These experiences provided the inspiration for this project.

Background

At the time of this study, the researcher was a junior honors student at Aurora University majoring in elementary education. She was also a member of Future Educators at Aurora University. She spent much of her time during the week volunteering at various elementary schools including schools in both North Aurora and Aurora, IL. In addition, she worked in the Friends of Aurora’s Afterschool Programs as a reading mentor at three East Aurora elementary schools three days a week. This researcher grew up in Aurora, IL and had a lifelong dream of becoming a teacher.

At the time of this study, the researcher was influenced by many current events. First was the researcher’s observation of two schools less than 15 miles from one another. The state report card for each school revealed staggering differences. The following chart compared these two school districts using the 2006-07 school district information gathered from the Illinois State Board of Education:

Criteria	School District A	School District B
Total enrollment	12,036	13,116
Low income rate	45.3%	63%
Pupil-teacher ratio (elementary)	19.3:1	21.9:1
% of classes not taught by qualified teachers	.3%	.5%
Average teaching experience (years)	11.2	11.3
Average teacher salary	\$64,819	\$52,599

Funding from local property tax (%)	\$64,602,613 (56.4%)	\$33,726,124 (31.2%)
Other local funding (%)	\$5,152,449 (4.5%)	\$6,205,570 (5.7%)
State aid (%)	\$23,949,214 (20.9%)	43,039,252 (39.8%)
Other state aid (%)	\$12,459,912 (10.9%)	\$13,942,917 (12.9%)
Federal funding	\$8,454,744 (7.4%)	\$11,101,314 (10.3%)
Total Revenue for 2006-07	\$114,628,932	\$108,015,177
Total expenditures	\$113,034,350	\$124,705,143
Expenditures on education	\$85,318,962	\$87,389,929
Per pupil expenditure for instruction	\$5,741	\$4,943
Per pupil expenditure for operating	\$9,095	\$8,541
Overall performance on all state tests for 2006-07 (% that met or exceeded learning standards)	71.7%	59.3%
Performance on Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT) 2006-07	77.1%	63.8%
Performance on Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE) 2006-07	44.6%	25.2%

The differences between these two districts, purely from the facts provided, were staggering. It was clear to this researcher that there was a correlation between the low test scores, the funding provided to the districts, other factors such as low income rate, teacher qualifications, and pupil to teacher ratio. There was a \$6,613,755 difference between the total revenues of district A and district B. While district B receives more in federal and state funding, district A receives nearly double the amount of revenue from local property taxes as district B. This was reflected in the amount of spending that went towards pupil expenditures and teacher

salaries. Teachers in school district A made, on average, \$12,000 more than those teachers in district B. As a result of its higher pay scale, district A could be a more attractive district to prospective teachers. This could result in less qualified teachers to be in the classrooms in district B. Similarly, per pupil spending was affected by the decreased revenue total. District A spent \$798 more per pupil on education than district B. This sum, if given to district B, could have had a drastic impact on the education of a student depending on the way the money was spent. All in all, while not all educational achievements can be measured through standardized testing, the testing scores listed in the chart showed a measureable difference between the two districts. Overall, district A had 12.4% more of its pupils meet or exceed the learning standards than district B. District A has 13.3% more of its students meet or exceed the learning standards on the Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT) than district B. Similarly, district A has 19.4% more of its students meet or exceed the learning standards on the Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE). All of this data showed a definite gap between these two districts. Despite being only 15 miles from each other, these two districts are a world apart. While this researcher could only speculate the reasons behind the discrepancy between these districts, the data provided an inquiry that fueled the discussion of this paper.

The second event that had a profound effect on the researcher in developing this study was a protest of the Chicago Public School system by a religious organization. State Senator James Meeks organized 1,000 students to miss the first day of classes at their Chicago public school, and instead register at two schools in the wealthier North Shore school districts such as New Trier Township and Sunset Ridge (Sadovi, Malone, and Black, Oct. 21, 2008). The students received a “tutorial in civic action aimed at spotlighting the disparities in Illinois public education” (Sadovi, Malone, and Black, Oct. 21, 2008, ¶ 1). On the day of the protest, “thirty

buses collected students, parents and religious leaders from eight city churches for the trip north, including the Salem Baptist Church where Meeks serves as pastor” (Sadovi, Malone, and Black, Oct. 21, 2008, ¶ 10). This issue spawned from funding issues across the United States. In terms of the districts that were a part of the protest, “New Trier Township spent nearly \$17,000 per student in 2005-06 and Sunset Ridge spent about \$16,000, while Chicago Public Schools spent an estimated \$10,400 per pupil” (Sadovi, Malone, and Black, Oct. 21, 2008, ¶ 18). This staggering number was concrete evidence of the funding crisis in the public school system of Illinois.

Despite these numbers, there was public criticism of the boycott. Some educators worried that “keeping kids out of class, for one day or longer, could ultimately do more harm than good” (Kingbury and Gray, August 27, 2008, ¶ 8). Students were missing out on a day of learning which some believed to be more important than the demonstration. The critics of the boycott also cited the hypocrisy of the situation. The protest occurred due to the inequality of funding; however, “since school funding is in part tied to student attendance rates, Chicago Public Schools estimates it will lose \$110 for each student who doesn’t attend class” (Kingbury and Gray, August 27, 2008, ¶ 8). These criticisms must be taken into account before deciding on the success of the cause.

While the outcome of the demonstration was still unfolding, the Chicago Public Schools boycott brought the issue of school funding to the forefront of the news. While the issue had plagued the nation for many years, it was often overshadowed by more pressing matters. This issue and the observations of the elementary schools were pressing concerns of the researcher and motivated her to develop this study.

Importance of the Study

Equality of education is something that should be guaranteed to everyone in the United States. It was apparent to the researcher through personal experience that this was not the case even in schools less than 15 miles from one another. In the opinion of the educator, something needed to be done to ensure that all students received a fair and equal opportunity to attend high-quality schools.

Historically, “most public schools in the United States were chiefly financed by local property taxes (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 4). On average, “about half of the funding comes from the local communities and half from the state with the federal contribution remaining consistently small” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 4). This meant that typically school districts with more expensive properties within its borders brought in more money to fund their schools. This variation was the foundation of one of the biggest controversies plaguing the public education system: Does money matter? Many “school district and teacher union leaders claim that public schools can and will educate all children effectively, but only if they get more money” (Hill, April 2008, ¶ 2). These educators believed that funding was the main issue, but others believed that “the claim is valid only if, first, schools now use their money so efficiently that no further improvement is possible with current funding and, second, all schools would become more effective if they got more money” (Hill, April 2008, ¶ 3). Whatever the root of the issue, these inequalities have plagued our school system for many years.

To try to rectify these inequalities, the United States government passed one of the most controversial acts in 2001. The No Child Left Behind Act that was put into place by George W. Bush based educational achievement on state mandated standards. To implement at identified grade levels, students took a standardized test, and the results demonstrated if the school was

making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). His plan was that 100% of students would pass the test by 2014. However, the result was a countrywide debate over the effectiveness of the program. Many educational leaders believed that the results were unattainable, while others were pleased that it got the ball rolling on the topic. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) brought to the foreground the idea that education was crucial for success. While No Child Left Behind had succeeded in emphasizing that importance, the flaws in the system were proving to be the problem. School inequality continues to exist. Because of the multitude of factors affecting achievement and the lack of assessment tools, the underlying causes are not always clear. These issues were what encouraged the researcher to pursue this topic to explore options for eliminating the inequality gap that exists in the public school system across the United States.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to explore the issue of equalizing educational opportunities for all K-12 students in the United States. Many of the elementary schools mentioned in this study were less than fifteen miles away from one another, yet the differences were staggering. It was evident that these differences may have had an effect on the students' educational opportunities and quality of education.

Research Questions

There were multiple questions that the researcher hoped to answer by exploring ideas pertaining to equalizing education for all students.

- What are the major issues in the school inequality controversy?
- Why is an equal education for all so important in the United States?
- Does money really matter?
- Who should fund schools? What alternative models for funding schools are available?

Project Overview

This study began with research on the funding of the public elementary schools, as well as basic background information on the educational system in the United States and the state of Illinois. The researcher composed research questions that she hoped to answer during the study. During the next several months, the researcher gathered data and articles that were relevant to addressing the identified questions.

When the research was completed, the researcher compiled all of the information and concluded the study. The research took place from the fall semester of 2007 through the fall semester of 2008. The end result was presented at an honor's research symposium at Aurora University in April of 2009.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study was the researcher's own bias based upon personal experiences. Furthermore, it was necessary to limit the focus of the research to the aforementioned research questions.

Definition of Terms

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): The measurement used to determine if a school was meeting the state standards in a given year determined by results of the student performance on the state test.

Free or Reduced Lunch: A program offered by the government which allowed students to receive a free or reduced price for their lunch. The number of students who qualified determined if the school was labeled as low income.

Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT): The state test administered to grades three through five in public elementary schools in Illinois based on learning standards identified by the state.

Learning standards: State learning objectives and performances required to be taught and mastered by students at each grade level.

Limited English Proficiency: When a person's first language is something other than English.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): The law passed by President George W. Bush in 2001 that mandated state testing of learning standards in public elementary and secondary schools. It was put in place in an effort to improve student performance, giving more choice to parents regarding school selection.

Socioeconomic Status (SES): The relative measure of a family's income in a community.

Review of Literature

Why is an equal education for all so important?

An equal education was important to all students because education is the foundation for most everything else in life directly affected the future of all students in America. Research has shown the direct correlation between the quality of education and the future outcomes of a person's career and quality of life (Kozol, 2005). Kozol (2005) pointed out that students who received a better education typically went on to pursue higher education which directly influenced the amount of money they made in their later careers. This inequality stemmed from the lack of an equal education for all students beginning with early education (Kozol, 2005).

This issue could be perceived as two diverging roads. It was clear that "the longer this [inequality] goes on, the further these two roads divide, the more severe and routinized these

race-specific pedagogies may become, the harder it will be to find a place of common ground on which the children of the many ethnic groups and social classes in our nation's public schools will ever actually meet" (Kozol, 2005, p. 273). However, if the students were given equal opportunities and resources, these roads could run parallel, or even overlap. Kozol (2005) believed that an equal education was drastically important to ensure that all students were given a chance to succeed.

In the United States, "inadequacy in state education systems erect substantial barriers to the realization of equal opportunities for quality education" (Verstegen, Venegas, Knoeppel, Aug. 2006, ¶ 41). It was clear to the researcher that without equal education, the opportunities for personal and educational growth among students of different socioeconomic statuses were drastically different. The students who came from a poor family typically had "the deck stacked against [their] ability to succeed academically and beat the system" (Verstegen, Venegas, Knoeppel, Aug. 2006, ¶ 2). At the time of this study, it was apparent that "the American governmental system discriminates among the children of wealthy and the poor in the provision of resources for public schooling... There is something about this system that violates basic American standards of decency and fair play in a way that goes beyond ordinary political arrangements and compromises" (Kozol, 2005, p. 273). Public education in the United States, then, needed to be reevaluated in terms of equality and fairness to all students.

Does Money Matter?

The researcher found varying opinions regarding the issue of school inequality. One opinion was that if more money is spent on education, student achievement will increase and the gap between high and low income schools will be eliminated. Others believed that money was not the issue at all. Furthermore, others stated that it was the improper use of current resources that led to inequalities. Consequently these varying opinions fostered the controversy between

educational spending and student achievement. Recently, “there has been less agreement on the root causes of the problems and how best to tackle them” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 1). In fact, one of the major factors in the inability to come to an agreement on this issue was a lack of research. “While some would argue that insufficient funding is the primary factor, others would say that this is not supported by the evidence” which led to a key issue (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 1). It was “extremely difficult for anyone to know how money is used, much less whether different uses of resources are associated with different student learning outcomes” (Hill, April 2008, ¶ 10). In fact, the lack of research made it “impossible to observe natural variations in practice to distinguish more from less productive uses of funds” (Hill, April 2008, ¶ 11). To make the problem even more complicated, restraints and rules on spending made it nearly impossible to determine the importance of spending on student achievement. However, despite this lack of tangible evidence, those on every side of the issue continued to attempt to prove their point.

First, there were those who believed that money was the answer. Simply, if more money was given to schools, that would help close the gap between the poor and wealthy districts. Most public school funding came from local property tax revenue meaning that those who live in districts with expensive properties spent more money on education. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Chicago’s public school district, Arne Duncan, disagreed with this system and explained that, “public education is supposed to be the great equalizer, but the fact that the amount of money spent on education is determined by where you live is fundamentally unfair” (Kingsbury, Aug. 27, 2008, ¶ 3). Despite the lack of research, those who supported the opinion that money matters felt that the facts did not lie. In California, “when they passed Proposition 13, all schools received less money. People saved billions on property taxes. School performance declined” (“Trends in Educational Funding”, 2008, ¶ 7). Furthermore, in Chicago, “only 55% of

Chicago's public school students graduated high school compared to the 100% at Winnetka's New Trier High School. And just half of Chicago students go on to college versus a staggering 98% at New Trier" (Kingsbury, Aug. 27, 2008, ¶ 6). Although these statistics definitely demonstrated the existence of inequality, some argued that just giving schools more money may not be the cure.

Some researchers went further with the issue of the importance of school spending. While they believed that money was the issue these researchers believed that it was quality over quantity. Paul Hill of the University of Washington stated, "the greatest barrier to knowing how to spend money is our lack of a mechanism for developing, testing, and improving methods of instruction" (April 2008, ¶ 15) He believed that the issue did not completely lie within how much money was spent, but rather *how* the money was spent. He commented that "we know that schools serving the disadvantaged generally do not produce the outcomes their students need, but we have no reasons to believe that they make efficient use of the money spent on them. We also have no reason to think they could use more money except to pay more for the people and equipment they have now" (Hill, April 2008, ¶ 12). Hill believed that the effectiveness of the funds played a key role in the quality of education given by the school. However, "determining how much spending on public education is enough is impossible in the absence of a public education system in which funds from all sources can be used flexibly, ineffective activities must be abandoned, and resources can flow to more effective uses" (Hill, April 2008, ¶ 47). Again, the rigidity of the rules on educational spending had an impact on how we can be sure the spending was effective. However, these ideas added to the developing argument about how to fix failing schools in the United States.

Those who believed that giving failing schools more money deemed that "additional funding is likely to be wasted as long as our public education system is structured to spend more

for the same people and instructional methods” (Hill, April 2008, ¶ 14). In the book *The Shame of the Nation* (Kozol, 2005), the author explained this argument using the analogy of a car engine from a quote by President George W. Bush in 2001; giving more money to schools is like “pumping gas into a flooded engine...meaning that inner city “engines” (schools) had too much gas (too many dollars) flooding them already” (p. 59). This theory implied that relying on the concept that increased spending was the answer to the problem will only waste more resources and continue the cycle that furthers the inequality gap.

Some believed that labeling the idea of increased funding a waste of money was used by the wealthy who were able to send their children to high end schools as a justification when confronted with the issue of school inequality. Instead of facing these inequalities head on, parents dismissed them by denying the issue. In fact, according to Kozol (2005) the wealthy may have motives against closing the funding gap. For instance, the wealthy “understand that a considerably higher level of taxation for our public schools, if equitably allocated on the basis of real need, would make it possible for far more children from poor neighborhoods to enter the admissions pools for the distinguished colleges and universities their own children attend” (p. 58). This would result in stiffer competition and less room for those from privileged backgrounds. Kozol explained that “no matter with what regularity such doubts about the worth of spending money on a child’s education are advanced, it is obvious that those who have the money, and who spend it lavishly to benefit their own kids, do not do so for no reason” (p. 56). If money did not matter, then why would wealthy people choose to spend thousands of dollars a year on private education?

Who Should Fund Schools?

In order to establish equal funding for schools, the question about who should fund schools needed to be addressed. Historically, “most public schools in the United States were

chiefly financed by local property taxes. On average, as a rough estimate, about half of the funding comes from the local communities and half from the state with the federal contribution remaining consistently small” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 4). Typically, “state and local funds account for 93% of education expenditures” (“Trends in Educational Funding”, 2008, ¶ 3). This funding model allowed for inequalities “due to the substantial differences in the level of wealth in various states” (Reitz, 1993). If a state had a higher budget for education, the schools in that state generally received more money. Locally, “disparities in district wealth results in significant disparities in the tax revenues available to each district for education. (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 5). As with the states, districts that relied on property taxes to fund education saw definite differences in educational spending. These inequalities spawned many debates over the sources and control over funding.

There were many court cases that debated the issue of where school funds should come from. In these cases, “the most common claim is that the inequalities in public school finance violate the equal protection clauses of both the federal and state constitutions” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 2). A U.S. Supreme Court decision “in San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez... established that the inequalities in public school finance do not violate the federal Equal Protection Clause” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 19). However, that did not “prevent state supreme courts from ruling... that state equal protection clauses forbid such inequality in public school funding” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 19).

Locally, relying on property taxes from the district area fueled a debate over whether this allocation of revenue was fair and equal. People questioned whether it was “appropriate for some children to attend schools that resembled country clubs, while poor children settled for much less” (“Trends in Educational Funding”, 2008, ¶ 2). In the California case *Serrano v. Priest* in 1971, a court “ruled that a child’s access to public education could not be based on the wealth of

his or her parents (“Trends in Educational Funding”, 2008, ¶ 2). Sadly, these inequalities continued to persist.

Another issue with funding schools was the debate between local and state control over funding. As previously mentioned, most schools were funded through local property taxes and state funding. The debate over this issue left researchers and educators arguing over whether the local district or the state should have control. Those in favor of local control wanted “control over the schools themselves, and control over the taxes levied to finance the public schools” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 12). The local school board wanted to “function as a truly intermediate structure rather than a mere agent of the state” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 12). Those in favor of local control preferred that the majority of funding for schools came from local property taxes to ensure that they had a say in how their schools were run. They also wanted to ensure that “the power to determine the level of tax burden. Local financing of public schools gives the voters an individual school district control over a segment of their tax burden by allowing the voters to decide the amount of property tax they wish to devote to public school education” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 13). Local funding allowed for local control; however, there were some who believed that this was not the best way to fund schools.

There were many criticisms of the issue of local control. First, “local control over the tax burden is often cruelly illusory for the poorest school districts. The school districts that have the least valuable taxable property often have the highest property tax rates” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 15). Poorer districts had a harder time swaying voters to increase the already high property taxes to alleviate the school funding issues. In other words, “the poor district cannot freely choose to tax itself into an excellence which its tax rolls cannot provide” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 16). Those against local funding also believed that “instead of protecting meaningful choice about the level of tax support for public education, the system of local financing operates primarily to prevent the kind

of wealth transfers between wealthy and poor districts necessary to achieve greater equality in public school funding” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 17). Those opposed to local financing believed that it was necessary for states to control the taxation levels, and, in turn, that would help to close the gap between wealthy and poor districts. Those in favor of greater state control over funding cited the court case, *Robinson v. Cahill*, which led the New Jersey Supreme Court to rule that “New Jersey’s system of public school financing failed to provide and ‘thorough and efficient’ public school system” (Reitz, 1993 ¶ 20). Also, “the court reasoned that the large disparities in funding resulting from reliance on local taxation indicated that the poor districts were receiving inadequate funding” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 20). Four other state supreme courts found similar evidence of these issues within their own public school systems. Because of these rulings, “a number of states have modified their method of public school financing to provide a larger role for state funding in an attempt to minimize disparities that result from local funding” (Reitz 1993, ¶ 21). In conclusion, “if schools were financed on a state-wide basis with equal per-student distribution of tax dollars to all school districts, it seems likely that the average voters would not be satisfied with the level of school funding until their students-and hence all students- received at least the same funds as the ‘average student’ now receives” (Reitz 1993, ¶ 18).

However, critics of this concept called this plan the “‘Robin Hood’ laws, taking money from the wealthy districts to give to poorer ones” (“Trends in Educational Funding”, 2008, ¶ 7). While it might have appeared to be a simple solution, those in the wealthier districts typically did not agree. Some states, such as Michigan, “voluntarily [moved] away from property taxes as the root source of education funding” (“Trends in Educational Funding”, 2008, ¶ 3). The state passed laws that would “boost revenues for Michigan’s poorest school districts” (“Trends in Educational Funding”, 2008, ¶ 3). However, “it limited annual increases for the wealthiest districts” (“Trends in Educational Funding”, 2008, ¶ 3). This was met with concern from wealthier districts. Issues

like these are “discussed as a clash between local freedom and mass democracy” (“Trends in Educational Funding”, 2008, ¶ 7).

What are Alternative Models for Funding Public Schools?

To try to alleviate the inequalities that existed in the public school system due to funding, many states and districts relied on alternative methods. Some of these methods included government vouchers to pay for private tuition, charter schools, and parent fund raising. All of these models had benefits as well as weaknesses.

First, many states discussed the option of allowing school voucher programs. An educational voucher is “a coupon redeemable for a maximum dollar amount per child to attend a private school” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 2). This gave parents a choice of where they could send their child. Public schools “have ‘monopoly’ power because children are assigned to attend their local neighborhood school,” but with a voucher system, the power would be given to the parents (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 2). Parents had always had a choice between private and public education, but “that means paying for schooling twice- once through property taxes (for the public schooling they are not using) and again through private school tuition” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 5). Those in favor of vouchers proposed the question, “If rich families have the means to opt out of the public school system, should not poor families have a similar opportunity?” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 49). Giving the power to the parents through vouchers may have meant a better fit between the students and the school, but vouchers gave more options, and “more options may improve the match between the educational interests and needs of students and their schools” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 5).

Barrow and Rouse (2008) described “two types of voucher programs...-those financed by the government (publically funded school vouchers) and those provided by the private sector (privately funded school vouchers)” (¶ 15). Many times, there would be “limitations on which

students are eligible to receive a voucher and the provision or reimbursement of transportation” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 15).

The main concept of school vouchers was to create competition between schools. Those in favor of vouchers believed that “if schools must compete for students, then they will take steps to ensure that the educational experiences they offer are valued by parents and students” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 2). A school voucher system meant that “schools will compete for students by providing better academics; alternatively, if parents value religious education or sports, then one would expect to see schools compete to serve these interests” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 5). Barrow and Rouse (2008) further commented that schools needed to not only be academically better, but they needed to offer extra-curricular activities to attract and retain students. With the current trend being the reduction and elimination of extra-curriculars and specials in schools, vouchers would benefit students who excelled in the areas beyond reading, math and science (Barrow and Rouse, 2008).

Vouchers also had an effect on staffing schools arguing that “competition is the best tool to stimulate creativity on the part of teachers and administrators” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 32). With the standards based education that was the most common form of education at the time of this study, teachers and curriculum were restricted. However, “freeing each school to compete in this manner may make careers in education more desirable for dedicated teachers and administrators by granting them more autonomy in designing the educational curriculum that they would have under a system of rigorous control” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 32). A voucher system may allow for a wider range of teaching styles, which in turn, would appeal to the already wide range of learning styles in students.

There would also be an indirect effect on students who chose to stay in the public school system. Competition created by school vouchers would force private institutions to better

themselves in order to attract students (Barrow and Rouse, 2008). However, “not only should the achievement of those who choose to attend private schools increase, but so should the achievement of those who do *not* choose as well” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 6). Consequently, public schools would have to increase their standards to retain students as well.

There were also criticisms of voucher programs. First, will the program will be cost effective? Some people believe that “an education voucher system should be no more expensive than the current system as the state (or some other public entity) would simply send a voucher check to participating schools for each participating child rather than to the local or public school or district” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 45). However, others believed that there may be “less obvious costs that would depend critically on the actual design of the program” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 45). Some examples of these costs included, “transportation of children to and from school, record keeping, and the monitoring of school enrollment” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 45). Those against the voucher system were concerned that large costs would be overlooked.

Other criticisms included fraud and abuse. According to Barrow and Rouse (2008), if vouchers were to take affect, those against the move worried that state control would be eliminated because all schools would take control over what they had to offer. So, “even if there is adequate competition to permit meaningful choice, the experience for private, for-profit schools suggest that state regulation must continue to set educational and social minimum standards and to guard consumers against fraud and similar kinds of abuse” (Reitz, 1993, ¶ 34).

A third negative, cited by Barrow and Rouse (2008), that was associated with vouchers was the ability for parent’s to locate school information. In many cases, “information on school quality may be costly and difficult for parents to obtain, so having more choice may generate less additional competitive pressure on schools than one would expect in a perfect information

environment” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 48). It was possible that with the changes in the availability of sports and extra-curricular activities that the competitive edge “may be achieved through changes in other areas of school life, such as religious education or sports, rather than academic achievement” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 48).

A final criticism pertaining to vouchers was the lack of clear and long-term research (Barrow and Rouse, 2008). At the time of this study, “the best research to date finds relatively small achievement gains for students offered education vouchers” (Barrows and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 47). Also, “very little evidence about the potential for public schools to respond to increased competitive pressure regenerated by vouchers also suggests that one should remain wary that large-scale improvements would result from a more comprehensive voucher system” (Barrow and Rouse, 2008, ¶ 47). So, research suggested that while vouchers appeared to be an efficient answer to the inequality in funding, the system had not proved to be a positive alternative model.

A second alternative method of funding schools was parental involvement. There was a “relatively new phenomenon of private money being used selectively to benefit children only of specific public schools” (Kozol, 2005, p. 46). This practice allowed for private donations made by parents of students in the school to help fund their education (Kozol, 2005). This method, too, was met with opposing view points.

According to Kozol (2005), those in favor of this option believed that “the parents in poor neighborhoods were free to do fund-raising, too” (p. 48). They believed that the options were available to all parents, so it was an equal playing field. One parent in New York City who had been raising funds for their child’s elementary school through grants noted that, “You have schools that are empowered and you have schools that have no power at all...I don’t bear any guilt for knowing how to write a grant” (Kozol, 2005, p. 48). Those in favor of private funding

believed that if they have the means to better their child's education, they should had the right to do so (Kozol, 2005).

On the other hand, there were many who believed that this system of funding only fueled the inequalities that already existed. They believed that it was “not fair to the children in those many other schools” (Kozol, 2005, p. 47). This inequality was indeed surfacing across the United States. It was “apparent that this second layer of disparities between the children of the wealthy and the children of the poor is no secret to the public any longer” (Kozol, 2005, p. 48). While parents in affluent communities were providing public funds, many donated secretly “because parents feared that they would otherwise be forced to share these funds with other schools” (Kozol, 2005, p. 48). This reflected the notion that parents realized the injustice of what they were doing, and if there was no funding gap, if things were equal between all students in the public education system, there would be no fear in where the funds went (Kozol, 2005). One parent acknowledged this unfairness by explaining that they can raise the money, “but it is sad that other schools that don't have a richer parent body can't. It really does make it a question of haves and have-nots” (Kozol, 2005, p. 48).

Discussion

The inequality that existed in the United States public educational system was the product of many factors. According to the literature review, socioeconomic status, race, parental involvement, and school resources all played a part in the widening of the achievement gap between students in wealthy and poor schools. Therefore, there must be many steps taken to resolve these issues closing the widening gap of student performance.

First, in the opinion of the researcher, the United States must provide early childhood education for all children. The early childhood years are when “children develop basic skills and abilities that provide a foundation for future learning” (Perez-Johnson and Maynard, 2007, ¶ 8).

Therefore, children need to be enrolled in an early education program that will help to scaffold the way they will continue to learn throughout their schooling. In fact, it was proven that “early, vigorous interventions targeted at disadvantaged children offer the best chance to substantially reduce gaps in school readiness and increase the productivity of our educational systems” (Perez-Johnson and Maynard, 2007, ¶ 2). These findings aided in uncovering the fact that providing a firm foundation early allowed for efficient and effectual spending.

At the time of this study, existing early childhood education programs in the United States only added to the inequalities (Kozol, 2005). Low income families did not have the same opportunities for early childhood education as middle class and wealthy families did. In some areas, “affluent parents pay surprisingly large sums of money to enroll their children in extraordinary early-education programs, typically beginning at the age of two or three, that give them social competence and rudimentary pedagogic skills ” (Kozol, 2005, p. 50). It was obviously important for these parents to enroll their child in a high-end educational program at an early age and the willingness of parents to spend thousands of dollars, along with the research that had been collected, should have been an indication of the importance of early childhood education, and the importance of providing this education to all students (Kozol, 2005).

Kozol (2005) explains that research has shown the differences between students who have and who have not attended an early childhood education program. Just in the educational time alone, children who have been in an early childhood program “since the age of two have been given seven years of education by this point, nearly twice as many as the children who have been denied these opportunities; yet all are required to take...the same examinations” (Kozol, 2005, p. 53). To judge both children equally on their achievement on standardized tests seemed to be the epitome of inequality (Kozol, 2005). Kozol (2005) suggested that if students were offered the same opportunities starting at a young age, the gap between the poor and the wealthy

may be much smaller by the time the students reached elementary school. If equality was the norm, it would seem as though “children of the poorest and least educated mothers would receive the most extensive and most costly preschool preparation, not the least and cheapest, because children in these families need it so much more than those whose educated parents can deliver the same benefits of early learning to them in their homes” (Kozol, 2005, p. 54). Children with educated parents were exposed to a more educational environment. For example, the vocabulary that the wealthier children were exposed to was much greater than that of the poor and children of educated parents were had more educational resources available, such as books and computers. In contrast, poorer children did not have these resources, and therefore, should have been the ones with access to early childhood education (Kozol, 2005).

Availability of early childhood education for all students in the United States would be a definite aid in helping to solve the issue of inequality in public schools. Findings have shown that early childhood education offered “the best chance to substantially reduce or altogether eliminate gaps in school readiness, lay a stronger foundation for learning, and increase the overall productivity of educational systems in the United States” (Perez-Johnson and Maynard, 2007, ¶ 2). By starting early, children would have more time in school which would help boost the students’ cognitive abilities and aid in helping all students to achieve their best (Kozol, 2005). Therefore, while early childhood education for all children would not completely solve the issues surrounding school inequality, it would definitely be a great start in closing the achievement gap.

Another element to bridging the inequality gap between high and low performing district schools was the need for teacher and staff development. While funding was an immense cause of inequalities, the issue of how much money to spend typically directly affected the quality of teachers. It was apparent that wealthy districts were “better able to attract and retain experienced

teachers and administrators” (Verstegen, Venegas, Knoeppel, Aug. 2006, ¶ 8). While increasing the desirability of the district was an obvious solution to that problem, it was also a more complicated issue. What seemed to be a more efficient solution was to train and develop the skills of the teachers that were already a part of the district (Verstegen, Venegas, Knoeppel, Aug. 2006).

In terms of funding, the debate will continue to live on until an adequate model can be agreed upon by all parties involved. This, however, seemed to be a losing battle. Worst of all, the children were the ones who suffered the most despite not having much of a choice or opinion in the matter. The true issue was “tension between altruism and self-interest: the altruistic wish for equity for all children and an enhancement of the general welfare of the society versus wanting the best for one’s own children and advancing one’s self-interest” (Dayton, 1995, ¶ 7). When faced with the facts, most people would have agreed that there was an obvious gap between poor and wealthy districts. However, despite being aware of these inequalities, any remedy that included taking money from their own children was quickly disregarded as unfair (Dayton, 1995).

All of the aforementioned models for resolving the school funding problem possessed pros and cons garnering supporters and critics of each. However, there was a key component to each one and that was the need for change and the need for those in charge of decisions about funding to be aware of this need and of the fact that the current funding models are not working. Furthermore, the debates and controversy over school inequality has triggered the need for change. In order for this change to occur, “advocates of more equitable school funding should communicate these arguments and similar points to the electorate” (Dayton, 1995, ¶ 27). Those who were truly affected by the inequalities that plagued schools in the United States did not necessarily have the loudest voice on the issue, so it is up to those who feel strongly about this

issue to make their voice heard “because in a democracy, it is ultimately the people who rule, to achieve lasting change school funding reformers must persuade the electorate of the need to provide a quality of education for all children” (Dayton, 1995, ¶ 28). All in all, it was unjust for a child’s future to be determined based on the socioeconomic status of the location of their birth. According to Kozol (2005), a child’s future is directly related to the education they receive and, therefore, every child should be given the same opportunities to achieve. School funding reform is necessary to ensure that the inequalities that currently exist are abolished and that all children in the United States are promised an equal education, an equal chance for their fair share of the American Dream.

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