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School spending-achievement relationship? Not much

By Jim Nowlan

This past week, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) proposed doubling 2019-20 state school funding, from \$8 billion to almost \$16 billion, the equivalent of raising the individual income tax rate from 5 to 7 percent. Should the money be available, which it won't be, the challenge would lie in translating the new resources into significant gains in student achievement. The historical record is not encouraging.

At the outset here, let the record show: I favor all the money for education that will make a difference. I favor equal spending for all schools, more for disadvantaged kids. I am not writing to "blame the victims." I am not writing to make a case for less school funding.

In the 1996, economists Richard Stout and Marty Eisenberg and I produced a report that ranked test performance of all Illinois public schools by the average household incomes of each district.

We found what umpteen research reports have found over the decades—that the incomes of district residents appear to drive achievement, rather than the amount spent in the schools. That is, the lower the incomes, the lower the achievement.

Since we wrote in the 1990s, efforts have been made to increase spending in low-income districts, via "poverty weighting" and other compensatory factors. Still, the wide gap between low and high-income districts persists.

The ISBE Report Card for the past year confirms this as well. Readers can go to ISBE's website and look at academic progress/performance scatterplots, where you can slice and dice

performance by all sorts of social and spending indicators. Look up your school district, even your school building. Put your cursor over a dot on the scatterplot and the school district pops up; nicely done, ISBE. See scatterplots for 2018 11th grade [math](#) and [English Language](#) “proficiency” against income and spending for each school district.

The scatterplots show a very strong correlation between achievement and income, and none that I can see between achievement and spending.

For example, the Dunlap and Mahomet districts (“suburban” schools just outside Peoria and Champaign, respectively) perform at or near the top of all districts on 11th grade math tests, yet spend between \$5,000-6,000 per pupil on instruction.

In contrast, the Chicago Public Schools spend twice that amount per pupil, yet perform near the low end on the same scatterplot. There are some districts in southern Illinois as well that perform poorly on the spending-achievement scatterplot.

Of course, readers say: Dunlap and Mahomet schools generally have intact, higher income, well-educated families. They place a high value on education, set high expectations for their children to do well and go to good colleges, and provide a rich educational environment (lots of books, good conversation, museum visits, whatever).

And that’s my point. I contend that what goes on outside the school building, in the home, neighborhood and community, is much more important than what goes on inside. This is not to take anything away from teachers. The ones I know in my rural district work hard and are committed to their students. Yet, they lament that so few parents come to parent-teacher conferences.

I applaud the new state school funding formula, which would allocate dollars, if the state had the money, according to “evidence-based” indicators of performance. Yet, these are “input” rather than achievement indicators, and the formula is still fundamentally more dollars to low-income districts, as in the past.

But how does a public entity like the state, through local schools, intervene in private home lives and the surrounding community, something we are understandably skittish about doing.

Maybe we require parenting classes on how to contribute to a child’s academic success? Maybe “parent aides,” similar to classroom aides—all on the premise that mothers, and fathers where the latter are around, want the best for their kids.

In really poor neighborhoods, where crime and violence are sometimes a problem, maybe integrate community policing (the old neighborhood cop on the beat; good in itself, I think) with social services?

Maybe we should disperse kids from low-income schools into schools in high-income neighborhoods, something that does indeed appear to make a positive difference in achievement?

I don’t know what to do. But it appears compensatory spending that sends ever more money to low-income schools hasn’t moved the needle much, if at all.

I am for spending more to achieve positive results. Our nation’s future depends on it. After all, the Chinese have more honor students than we have students, given that country’s 4-to-1 population advantage.

Scatterplot 1. Grade 11 percent “proficient” (test scores) in math and percent low income, high schools in unit districts, 2018. Source: Illinois State Board of Education

Scatterplot 2. Grade 11 percent “proficient” (test scores) in math and per pupil instructional expenditures, high schools in unit districts, 2018. Source: Illinois State Board of Education.