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How to Reach the Poorest Kids

By **Jean-Claude Brizard**

Like most educators, I got into the field because I wanted to make a difference for children. And I've been fortunate to have that opportunity. But it's heartbreaking to think how much more we could do if we just wrote the rules in a way that favored the children most at risk.

As both houses of Congress, governors, state chiefs, teachers' unions, the Obama administration, and various policy organizations debate the future of the federal K-12 education law known currently as No Child Left Behind, few people are talking about an issue that could do more to drive equity than any other.

One of the goals of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, of which NCLB is the latest reauthorization, was to foster "comparability" in funding by forcing states and districts to equalize the amount of money going to schools serving higher-income and those serving lower-income students, and then to provide the latter with extra federal funds. The theory of action, embraced by most other developed countries, is that it costs more to educate poor kids than wealthy ones.

America, on the other hand, **spends less to educate low-income children than wealthy children**. This is partly a function of school funding systems that are overly reliant on property taxes. In 2010, the state of Illinois, for example, provided as little as **28 percent of the cost of public education**, well below the national average of 43 percent.

Nationally, **30 states today remain at pre-recession funding levels**, and with less money coming from states, the disparities between wealthier school districts and poorer school districts grow even larger. A few years back, the wealthy northern suburbs surrounding Chicago served by the New Trier Township High School District spent \$21,465 per student, while the Farmington Central Community Unit School District in central Illinois **spent only \$7,259 per student**.

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schools that the federal funding **barely makes a dent in closing the gap between poor and wealthy students**. Worse yet, most states and districts are dodging the comparability provision of the law, thanks to a loophole written into the statute. The result is that even within school districts, quite often the kids who are most at risk still get the least. Here's how it works:

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Typically, in a large school district like Chicago, pricier, more experienced teachers work in wealthier schools. The poorer schools tend to have more turnover and mostly replace lost staff with younger, less expensive teachers. This means that the schools in higher-income communities are getting more of the district's limited resources to pay for these higher salaries.

The problem is that no one can really "see" this because current federal law allows districts to report "average" district-level teacher salaries instead of actual school-by-school salaries. This is sort of like agreeing to pay two different car owners enough gas money to travel a certain distance, and ignoring the fact that one of them drives a gas guzzler while the other drives a hybrid. The dollar amount will be very different, and as costs rise each year, the differences will grow even greater.

Political pressures also serve as a disincentive to take action at a local level. Every superintendent or school board member knows how hard it is to cut or shift resources away from schools serving high-income students, with their often-more-demanding parents and communities. There is little upside to fighting this battle or even being transparent if the law doesn't require it.

Congress could fix it by eliminating the loophole and honoring the intent of NCLB, which is to help equalize funding for the poorest children. This would require true financial comparability between poor and rich schools, measured with real-dollar accounting of all school-level spending, and full transparency to the public and to stakeholders.

It may not happen in the current political environment. But maybe there's a deal to be made.

America has an opportunity to better protect kids at risk and give districts more flexibility with scarce federal dollars. We should not let the opportunity pass without a more robust, honest debate on the issue of equity, comparability, and how best to serve America's low-income children.

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