



Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars

UW
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A Policymaker's Guide to School Finance: Approaches to Use and Questions to Ask

Briefing Report

February 2004

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report begins by examining why public and political attention has shifted from achieving equity in school finance to striving for adequacy in school performance. In 2000, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that Wisconsin's school finance system was constitutional on equity grounds. Yet the court suggested that an adequacy case could be brought, and even specified what the standard could be to raise all students up to adequate levels of school performance. Four approaches are reviewed that states can use to set an adequacy standard and to determine how much money would be needed to achieve it. Cost estimates are given for three approaches using Wisconsin data on spending and student performance.

To help legislators evaluate school funding formulas, this chapter includes a checklist of 15 questions that raises several of the issues that legislators should consider and identifies some of the trade-offs they will face. For example, calls for lower taxes conflict with calls to increase spending to meet the costs of educating students with special needs.

At the heart of many discussions of school finance is the question of whether or not increases in funding lead to increases in student performance. According to recent research, money can influence student achievement if it is used effectively and efficiently. For policymakers, the question turns as much on how to plan for effective use of school funding as it does on how much to allocate.

For example, in one study of low-performing schools in Texas, 15 schools were given an additional \$300,000 annually for five years to raise low achievement scores. Four years later, no change had occurred in 13 of these schools, but two schools had some of the best attendance records in the city and had raised test scores to the city's average. All schools had reduced class size, but the successful schools changed the curriculum and what happened in the classroom. Special education students were moved into mainstream classrooms, thereby freeing up a good deal of money for other purposes. The schools brought in health services, and used a large portion of their funds to get parents involved in their children's education.

"A Policymaker's Guide to School Finance: Approaches to Use and Questions to Ask" is the 20th Family Impact Seminar and briefing report in a series designed to provide state policymakers with objective, solution-oriented research on current policy issues. Family Impact Seminars analyze the consequences an issue, policy, or program may have for families. Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars are a joint effort of University of Wisconsin-Extension and the Center for Excellence in Family Studies in the School of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



Adequacy has shifted debate from inputs (e.g., pupil spending) to outcomes (e.g., student performance).

Policymakers interested in promoting school success must also look beyond the school door, according to the authors of the next two chapters. What happens in the home and the community can complement and extend what children learn in school. The last 15 years of school reform have focused on course curriculum, instructional methods, and teacher training, according to best-selling author Professor Laurence Steinberg. Yet Steinberg claims that these reforms have accomplished very little, because academic achievement is shaped more by children's lives outside the school walls, particularly their parents. Harvard Professor Robert Putnam agrees, claiming that if he were given a choice between a 10% increase in school budgets or a 10% increase in parent involvement, he would invest in parent involvement.

The evidence is clear. When parents are involved, students get better grades and score higher on standardized tests. Children of involved parents also have better attendance records, drop out less often, have higher aspirations, and more positive attitudes toward school and homework. What's more, these positive impacts seem most important for those children who need them most—children growing up in disadvantaged, highly-stressed families.

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What is less clear, however, is whether parental school involvement is a skill that

can be taught and learned. Programs that promote school involvement, particularly among disadvantaged families, are promising but still in need of replication. Researchers have found that funding for school, family, and community partnerships actually translates into higher quality partnerships. The good news is that the average cost for building these partnerships is \$20 to \$30 per pupil per year for all school, district, and state expenses.

Only 4% to 15% of teachers have had course work in parent involvement.

Policymakers can also help families educate their children with child care, summer school, and out-of-school programs. Studies that follow children into adulthood demonstrate that kids with higher quality preschool care are more likely to earn better wages and complete high school and college. In recent studies, summer school programs have helped reverse the decline in achievement that occurs among disadvantaged children during the summer months. In addition, out-of-school programs have been shown to benefit achievement when school children receive educational learning experiences in supervised settings.

State legislatures have passed a number of laws to support parent involvement: requiring businesses to allow their employees time off to participate in their child's schooling; granting state workers time to attend parent/teacher conferences or other meetings regarding their child's education; requiring course credits in family involvement for teacher certification; requiring schools to hold at least two parent/teacher conferences per year; providing supplemental funds in high-poverty districts for four-year-old kindergarten, summer school, and parent outreach activities; and requiring school district report cards to include progress on parent involvement.

The final chapter by Dave Loppnow and Layla Merrifield of the Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau reviews school funding and student performance in Wisconsin. The Badger State will spend approximately \$9,216 per pupil to educate public school students for the year 2003-04. Of the estimated \$4,747.2 million of state aid to education, almost nine-tenths are used to equalize the school property tax differences between school districts. Over the course of the past twelve years, state aid for K-12 public schools in Wisconsin has increased 137%. However, because of state revenue limits on how much school property tax money can be collected without local referenda, the level of school property taxes citizens pay has risen only 27%.

Just as state aid to education has risen in the past several years, assessments show that the percentage of Wisconsin students scoring at advanced or proficient levels on state standardized tests has risen as well. However, about twice as many students score at advanced or proficient levels on state standardized tests compared to national tests. Also, average gains in achievement across all students can mask the fact that some student groups continue to score lower than others. Children of color, English language learners, students with disabilities, and those from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds consistently perform less well than their White, middle-class, and English-speaking peers. While no single cause for this situation has been identified, Wisconsin has a variety of programs and strategies aimed at closing the achievement gap, including reduced class size, four-year-old kindergarten, and increased availability of school breakfast.

On average, K-12 spending in the U.S. has more than doubled each decade from 1940 to 1990.

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A complimentary copy of the full report is available to state legislators by calling Mari Hansen at (608) 262-0369. Copies can be purchased from Cooperative Extension Publishing Operations, 432 N. Lake Street, Madison, WI 53706, Toll-free (877) 947-7827 (877-WIS-PUBS); <http://www1.uwex.edu/ces/pubs>. For further information contact the Director of the Family Impact Seminars, Karen Bogenschneider, at 1430 Linden Drive, Madison, WI 53706, kpbogens@wisc.edu, or (608) 262-4070. Karen is a Professor and Extension Specialist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison/Extension. You can also contact Associate Director Bettina Friese and State Coordinator Elizabeth Gross at the Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars at (608) 262-9161 or (608) 262-5779.



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What Other Resources Are Available to State Policymakers?

A Researcher Hotline

Identify University of Wisconsin researchers who are studying child and family issues by calling (608) 262-5779.

Briefing Reports

Download 20 briefing reports written specifically for Wisconsin policymakers on topics such as education; helping poor kids succeed; juvenile crime; long term care; parenting; prescription drugs; welfare reform; and preventing youth crime, smoking, and substance use (<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/familyimpact/wifis.htm>); download 57 briefing reports written specifically for state policymakers on topics such as children with incarcerated parents, early childhood education and care, the effect of changes in the tax codes, family preservation, prostituted teens, and rising health care costs.

Family Matters Newsletters

Download eight issues of Family Matters, a newsletter written specifically for Wisconsin policymakers. Newsletters provide cutting-edge research and a family perspective on current policy issues such as prescription drugs, early childhood care and education, the role of families in policymaking, rising health care costs, and children of incarcerated parents (<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/familyimpact/newsletters.htm>).

Audio Tapes or Web Audio

Listen to audiotapes and web audio of most seminar speakers.






Family Impact Assessment Tools

Use family impact assessment tools for examining how responsive policies and programs are to families. Tools are available for conducting family impact analysis of schools, communities, adolescent treatment centers, and state child and family service plans (<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/familyimpact/impact.htm>).

Web resources

This website is designed specifically for busy policymakers and professionals, and includes 70 briefing reports and seven newsletters written specifically for state policymakers, 21 reports specifically written for federal policymakers, 17 policy newsletters, and over 100 links to leading policy sites. Browse these resources and more at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/familyimpact/wisconsin>

The Family Impact Seminars produce seminars, briefing reports, newsletters, and discussion sessions which provide state policymakers with:

-  **Easy Access** to state-of-the-art, solution-oriented research on current policy issues such as education, juvenile crime, long term care, parenting, prescription drugs, and welfare reform
-  **Relevant Research** that responds to the issues legislators are debating
-  **Objective Information** on a range of policy options rather than a specific legislative agenda
-  **A Family Impact Perspective** that examines the impact of policies on families
-  **Neutral, Nonpartisan Settings** outside the political environment for discussing issues and seeking common ground

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