

Correcting inequitable investment

Complexity financing overhaul essential to better, more consistent student outcomes

Melissa Rinehart

Education is a core value in my teacher-filled family, and I'm a proud public school graduate.

Growing up, the biggest differences among my classmates centered on appearance. Whoever had name-brand shoes and jeans was typically the most popular.

Although that memory disturbs me, I gained a deeper understanding of differences when I began working in the human services area. Far more people lack basic resources in our community than one would suspect – in fact, one in three Allen County residents lacks resources to make ends meet.

A youth who recently participated in Wellspring's afterschool program asked permission to get “a piece of water” when he was thirsty. His question made me wonder: What's his learning environment like at school and at home? Who are his peers?

Socioeconomic disparities are often rooted in one's educational experiences. Our educational system is built upon approved curricula that don't consider personal circumstances. Testing to gauge student performance measures the supposition of equal learning, leading to the allocation of “equal” funding. This is an outdated and erroneous way to look at funding public schools.

“Complexity dollars” is Indiana's calculation for additional funding for schools serving low-income families. These dollars have been declining in recent years because the formula for assessing eligibility is unclear and not entirely reflective of personal circumstances outside Temporary Assistance for Need Families, SNAP and foster care status.

For example, a family living in a motel that doesn't participate in any of these programs wouldn't immediately qualify, yet their circumstances would certainly warrant expedient use of complexity dollars.

Currently, 29% of Fort Wayne Community Schools students receive complexity dollars. Yet 65% of the total student population qualifies for the free and reduced lunch program.

What about the 36% gap between those in the free and reduced lunch program and those already receiving complexity dollars? This gap is concerning because the need for additional support has increased, not decreased.

In my daily work at Wellspring, I see how those living in poverty, including the working poor, require more assistance. People facing food, shelter or clothing insecurity, those dealing with addiction or mental health issues, and victims of abuse and unstable homes all require wrap-around services to produce healthier outcomes.

So why aren't education dollars based on equity over equality?

A child who comes to school hungry won't perform like one who's had breakfast. She may act out, may not finish school work, and may not be well rested if her home life is unstable.

This child, and her parents or guardians, will require wrap-around services including assistance from a guidance counselor, social worker and possibly others to be successful.

How does a school district afford this when the amount spent on each student is equal?

The pandemic has compounded these issues. More youth being home has taxed family food budgets, and unequal access to technology for remote learning has deepened the socioeconomic divide. Reliable broadband service isn't equitable throughout Allen County, and many households lack a desktop computer. As a result, many youths use cellphones for virtual learning, using up minutes on their plans.

Many parents/guardians are at work while their children are learning remotely, so the help their children would normally receive in the classroom is absent. Data released from the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Study in December 2021 determined that the most socioeconomically disadvantaged households don't use online educational resources for distance learning at the same rates as higher-income households. In other words, the pandemic has widened the learning gap as a result of inequitable access to learning tools and technology.

The social and emotional toll of the pandemic on youth has only begun to be examined. School officials have shared with me that there's been a noticeable increase in anxiety and depression among students, as well as suicidal ideation the past two years.

In a Department of Education report last year, more than half of public school K-12 teachers said the pandemic resulted in a critical learning loss for students academically, socially and emotionally. However, the key data point that stood out to me was at-risk students were even more gravely disadvantaged by the pandemic than affluent students.

With 42.5% of this year's state budget going toward education, how dollars are allocated is relevant to everyone. My tax dollars put my daughter through public schools and even though she graduated in 2018, I still want my tax dollars to support the education of other youth.

What better investment of my money than in those whom we'll rely on as future teachers, lawyers, plumbers, accountants, computer technicians and more?

Fort Wayne Community Schools is the largest school system in the state, with more than 27,894 students and 2,000 teachers. A total of \$10,262 is allocated to educate a single child in Indiana. However, this amount presumes all people's circumstances are equal. Unfortunately, that's not the case.

Such an ideology only works in a perfect world where all things are equal. It's shortsighted to expect similar results in student success when there's an inequitable investment in public education.

A more in-depth look at complexity dollars has never been more important than now.

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