

Current Issues in Public Urban Education

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Abstract

The 100 largest school districts in the United States educate 22.9 percent of our nation's K–12 students, yet they represent a mere 0.6 percent of the school districts serving these children. Often faced with older buildings and more children who are “at risk” for various reasons, urban districts face tremendous challenges in educating these youngsters.

A number of educational reforms taking hold across the country offer promise for improvement. Implementation of site-based management, which allows officials and teachers at the school level to focus on the specific needs of the children for whom they are responsible, offers promise for improving schools across the nation, particularly in urban areas. Other reforms are not as well tested but also show promise. Today there are a number of successful schools in urban areas, giving hope that, in the future, more children in our largest cities will attend schools that offer them greater opportunities.

Keywords: Policy; Education; Quality

Introduction

Although there are over 15,000 school districts in the United States, nearly one-fourth of the nation's public elementary and secondary students attend classes in the 100 largest districts.¹ Despite, or perhaps because of, their tremendous size, these districts face a number of intractable problems in providing educational services to their student populations. Metropolitan school districts frequently serve large concentrations of children who come from low-income families, are minorities, or speak limited English. The dropout rate is often considerably higher in central city districts. Most of these districts have higher concentrations of disabled students who require access to specialized,

¹ Although the focus of this article is on urban school districts, national data are available only for the 100 largest districts. While virtually all of the 100 largest districts are in urban areas, some of those districts do not exhibit the characteristics of a truly urban district. Despite the slight differences between these two groups, the terms “100 largest districts” and “urban districts” are used interchangeably in this article.

and hence extensive, services. These and other factors often lead to lower student achievement in these large districts.

Funds to improve schools in urban areas frequently seem limited, and many state school finance formulas do not provide funds to compensate these districts for the additional costs associated with greater service demands and higher costs of providing educational services. Moreover, urban school districts face considerable pressures from constituents. Taxpayers express concern over increasing property taxes, while teachers seek higher wages and smaller classes. Parents of children with disabilities seek more services for their children, while state funds for special education decline. Test scores in urban districts are often lower than in surrounding suburbs, leading to calls for breaking up the district or for establishing choice or voucher programs. These pressures often work at cross purposes, leading to breakdowns in management and organization, thus limiting the effectiveness of urban school personnel to provide a quality education for the children enrolled in the district.

This article provides a brief description of urban school systems in the United States and identifies the special problems these districts face in educating the children within their boundaries. It discusses current reform efforts that appear to show promise in improving not only urban schools but hopefully all schools.

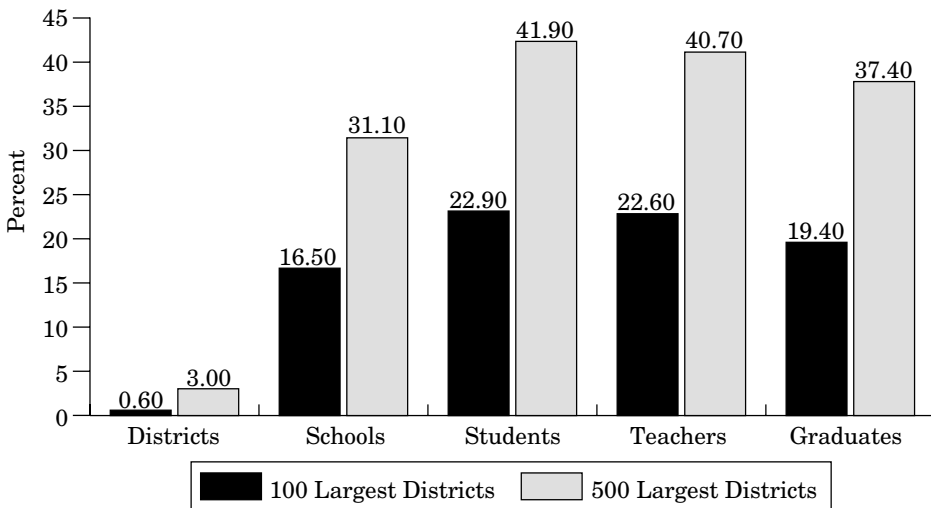
Characteristics of urban school districts

Because school districts are organized in different ways in each of the 50 states, it is difficult to establish a statistical portrait of urban school districts. States such as California, Illinois, and Texas each have approximately 1,000 school districts, and even suburban areas have a number of large districts that exhibit urban characteristics. Other states such as Florida, where the 67 districts are coterminous with county borders, have a number of large school districts centered around relatively smaller cities. Among the more than 15,000 school districts in the United States, there are 22 districts with over 100,000 students. In 1990–91, these districts enrolled 5.2 million students, or 12.4 percent of the total number of children in public schools across the country. That year, almost half (47.3 percent) of the nation's students were enrolled in the 683 school districts with enrollments exceeding 10,000 students (Sietsema 1993).

Student characteristics

The 100 largest districts in the United States include all of the major urban areas in the country. They range in size from nearly 1 million students and 1,000 schools in New York to almost 40,000 students and 82 schools in Pittsburgh. In 1990–91, the most recent year for data on urban districts, these 100 districts enrolled 9,627,140 students, or 22.9 percent of the 42,095,467 students enrolled in public schools across the nation (figure 1). These districts represent less than 1 percent of the total number of school districts, yet they contain 16.5 percent of the nation’s schools and 22.6 percent of the nation’s teachers. Just over 19 percent of the nation’s high school graduates received their diplomas from these 100 districts (Sietsema 1993).

Figure 1. Characteristics of the 100 and 500 Largest School Districts as a Percent of All U.S. School Districts, 1990–91



Source: Sietsema (1993).

The 100 largest districts have an average of 96,271 students, 5,147 teachers, and 142 schools. This results in a pupil/teacher ratio of approximately 19 to 1 and an average school size of 678 students. Across the entire nation, the average school district has about 5 schools, 137 teachers, and 2,521 students (National Center for Education Statistics 1994). This leads to a pupil/teacher ratio of about 18 to 1 and an average school size of 504 pupils. Thus, urban school districts tend to have slightly larger classes and bigger schools.

Urban districts also have a disproportionate share of minority students. In the 89 districts for which data were available, 43 reported that 50 percent or more of their students were white, non-Hispanic. Fifteen of those 43 reported minority representation of less than 25 percent, and 10 had less than 20 percent. In the remaining 46 districts, more than half of the students were ethnic minorities. In 19 of these districts, more than half the students were African-American. Another six districts reported that a majority of their students were Hispanic, and one district reported a majority of Asian/Pacific Islanders. In the remaining 20 districts, no single racial/ethnic group constituted more than 50 percent of the student population (Sietsema 1993).

Spending patterns

Few data are available on how per-pupil expenditures in urban districts compare with expenditures in all school districts. Recent work by researchers at the Finance Center of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) has looked closely at the question of how school districts spend their funds and allocate resources. While the overall findings indicate that school districts are remarkably consistent in the proportion of total resources devoted to various functions (e.g., instruction, administration, maintenance and operations, transportation, instructional support), some findings related to large urban school systems are noteworthy.

In analyzing data from the Schools and Staffing Survey and the census of governments of the U.S. Bureau of the Census, Picus (1993a) concluded that per-pupil spending tends to be higher in urban than rural areas. In general, as the community gets larger, per-pupil spending increases. However, spending in the suburbs surrounding a city typically exceeds spending in the central city itself. Moreover, Picus (1993b) found that the average pupil/teacher ratio tends to be somewhat higher in urban areas than in other districts.

Detailed analyses of national data and of state databases in Florida, New York, and California indicate that, on average, school districts spend 60 percent of their resources on instruction (Picus and Fazal 1995). Many have used this finding to argue that public schools, in large urban districts in particular, suffer from an "administrative blob." However, CPRE research (Picus and Fazal 1995) indicates that administrative expenses tend to be in the range of 12 to 14 percent of total expenditures, half of that at the school site and half in the central office. Moreover,

the research summarized in the Picus and Fazal (1995) study shows that costs for central administration in the largest districts in all three states—Florida, New York, and California—are well below the state average. Thus, despite the considerable size of the bureaucracy engaged in the operation of the Dade County, New York City, and Los Angeles schools, there are sufficient economies of scale to allow each of these districts to devote a smaller portion of total resources to central administration than other districts do in their respective states.

Revenue patterns

There is substantial evidence that urban school districts face considerably higher costs of education than rural and suburban school districts. Often the cost of living in urban areas is higher than in other parts of the nation, requiring districts to pay teachers higher salaries and increasing the costs of other staff as well as supplies and materials (Nelson 1991). Moreover, urban areas frequently have higher concentrations of children from low-income families or children requiring special education services (Odden and Picus 1992). In addition, urban districts often face substantial transportation costs either to meet integration requirements or simply because urban traffic conditions make bus travel more expensive in large cities (Wood et al. 1995).

Despite these considerable cost factors, most state school finance formulas do not take urban needs into consideration in the distribution of funds to the schools. Most school aid programs provide assistance to school districts in inverse relation to district property wealth per pupil. Despite low household incomes, most large cities generally are not “property poor” and thus do not generate large amounts of state aid through traditional school finance formulas (Odden and Picus 1992). Some states offer additional aid through categorical programs, and there are federal programs for compensatory education (Title I), bilingual education, special education, and a host of other special needs. However, these programs often are inadequate to meet the needs of the children in urban school systems (Goertz 1988).

Meeting the needs of urban schools

Despite all of the difficulties facing urban school systems, a number of educational reform efforts and policy initiatives are

under way that show promise in improving the quality of education and raising student outcomes in urban areas.

School finance

The two most common approaches to meeting urban school district needs through state school finance formulas are cost-of-education indices and categorical grants to fund programs for children with special needs (Odden and Picus 1992). Although the concept of a cost-of-education index is straightforward, developing an index that can be used to adjust the amount of aid to which a school district is entitled is both complex and fraught with political pitfalls. While a number of states rely on such indices in distributing state aid, the indices are frequently determined through political compromise rather than based on measured differences in educational costs across school districts in a state. Florida bases its cost index on a cost-of-living index, without regard to how this index corresponds to the costs of educational inputs (Nakib 1995); Texas has created an index based more directly on educational resources. However, the study on which the Texas index was based has not been updated in a number of years, and the current formula allows only half of the index to be used in the distribution of some of the funds (Picus and Toenjes 1994).

In addition to these difficulties, state school finance formulas do not account for other demands on local property tax dollars. As Levin, Muller, and Sandoval (1973) argued over 20 years ago, there are often more competing demands for property tax resources in urban areas, making it more difficult for big city school districts to garner support for higher school taxes. This “municipal overburden” is rarely addressed in the distribution of state funds to school districts.

One way this problem has been resolved in the past has been through the use of categorical grants. California is the only state that has actually provided assistance to districts on the basis of their “urbanness,” although many states provide a range of categorical funding schemes for districts with high concentrations of students with special needs (Gold 1993). While generally a successful way to ensure that the needs of children in urban school districts are being met, many of these programs are underfunded, or the eligibility requirements are so loosely stated that many other districts in a state are also eligible for funds. This looseness is often necessary to garner enough political support in the legislature to pass the program in the first place.

A number of states rely on pupil weighting programs to meet the needs of special children (Gold 1993). In these states, children in certain categories are given a special weight. The weighted number of students is then used to calculate the amount of funding a district receives. Thus, urban districts that have high concentrations of children with special needs can receive additional funds to finance the education of those youngsters.

Clune (1994) suggested that school finance should shift its focus from ensuring equity across school districts to making sure that all students have access to adequate funds so they will be able to perform at a high level. While data are limited on how much it would cost to reach Clune's goal of adequacy, he has estimated that implementing an adequacy system in the districts where most of the nation's poor children live (which are largely urban) would cost \$30 billion a year more than we are currently spending.

Even if state school finance formulas are able to provide additional resources to urban schools, there is no guarantee that these funds will make a difference in improving student performance. A number of other reforms have been attempted to improve urban schools in recent years. Some of the more important ones are discussed below.

Site-based management

The emergence of site-based management as a major component of school reform requires that it be given particular attention in any discussion of urban school systems. Site-based management places greater authority in the hands of school-site personnel and not surprisingly has been implemented in a number of different ways across the United States (Malen, Ogawa, and Kranz 1990; Wohlstetter and Odden 1992). The rationale for site-based management is a belief that the closer to the student a decision is made, the better that decision is likely to serve the student. In addition, movement to more decentralized management of school systems is believed to reduce unnecessary layers of administration and middle management.

Site-based management is a particularly powerful tool in large urban districts where there are a large number of schools. To date, schools have been given authority over some combination of three areas—budget, curriculum, and personnel (Clune and White 1988). Budget authority varies by school district, with some districts granting school sites only limited authority over

marginal spending decisions, and others granting sites the flexibility to trade personnel positions and vary the composition of the staff at the school. In settling a lawsuit aimed at equalizing school district expenditures within the Los Angeles Unified School District, district officials have agreed to establish a management information system that will give site administrators adequate information to consider salary levels in hiring new staff. It is hoped that once the system is fully implemented, spending differences based on teacher experience and education (which drive the level of teacher salaries) will be substantially reduced across the district, thus virtually eliminating differences in per-pupil spending across schools.

Many districts have also granted school sites more autonomy over curriculum decisions. Rather than telling sites what the curriculum for each subject will be, districts are beginning to grant the school sites greater latitude in deciding what will be taught when and what materials to use. In some models, links between school levels are required to ensure adequate articulation as students move from one level to the next.

Finally, many districts are granting school sites more autonomy in personnel decisions regarding who will be hired and what kinds of positions will be filled. Such autonomy gives schools the flexibility to trade an assistant principal for additional teachers to reduce class size, or to accept slightly larger classes in exchange for a guidance counselor to help problem children. Each site is given the authority to decide for itself what organization will work best in meeting its established educational goals (Wohlstetter and Van Kirk 1995).

A number of management approaches are used by local school sites as they take more responsibility for the management and operation of their schools. A model pioneered by the Edmonton, Alberta, school district grants school-site authority to the site principal, who is empowered to make many decisions. Moreover, the district has given spending authority for 95 percent of the budget to local sites (Wohlstetter and Buffett 1992). A second model, used in a number of districts and required in all Texas school districts for the past two years, requires authority to be shared among the members of a school-site council composed of the principal, schoolteachers, and community members (Picus and Hertert 1992). In Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring Now has developed a similar authority-sharing model that is being implemented in a number of schools across the district. A third model grants control to the local community. In Chicago, school-site councils are elected by

voters in the school attendance area, and councils have the authority to hire and fire the school principal. Little evidence exists about which of these models is most effective (Wohlstetter and Odden 1992).

Recent work by researchers in the private sector offers a conceptual framework for site-based management that may help districts decentralize important decisions. Lawler (1991) establishes a framework for shifting decision making to the production level, a procedure that may be applicable to the local management of school sites as well. Lawler suggests that four components are essential to the successful implementation of site-based management:

1. **Information:** The site must have access to adequate information about the inputs (resources) and outputs (student outcomes) of the system.
2. **Knowledge:** Individuals at each site must have adequate knowledge of educational research to know what methods and which curricula will work best in their particular circumstances.
3. **Power:** The local site must have the power to implement the programs it decides are appropriate to its circumstances.
4. **Rewards:** A reward structure must be established that rewards teams for successfully achieving their goals.

Current research sponsored by the Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement is studying the extent to which districts that have implemented successful site-based management programs use this framework.

Charter schools

A logical leap from site-based management is charter schools. Charter schools are independent public schools that choose to break away from their school district and operate on their own. Following Minnesota's lead, about half of the states have authorized the establishment of charter schools. These schools must prepare a charter describing their educational goals and how they will be achieved. Charter status typically must be granted by the school's district and by the state Board of Education. Schools that are granted a charter can waive state rules and regulations to the maximum extent, and they are supposed to

receive the same level of per-pupil funding that is available to their former district. The charters often expire after a stated period of time, and state policy requires that these schools show they have achieved their goals or are making progress toward achieving them.

Although charter schools are relatively new, a total of 10 charters have been granted to schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Two of the charter schools have been granted complete autonomy from the school district for budget and operations. Seven others maintain independent status only for curriculum, having chosen to remain with the district for fiscal management functions. Preliminary analyses of these schools by the author indicate that the basis for deciding whether to stay with the district or provide fiscal services on their own was determined mostly by the relative costs of teachers in the schools. Schools with average teacher salaries above the district average are at a considerable fiscal disadvantage if they opt out of the school district, whereas schools with relatively low teacher salaries can use the savings for other purposes when the district provides level per-pupil funding to all charter schools as required by state law. One charter school in Los Angeles recently had its charter revoked by the district's Board of Education because of administrative mismanagement that resulted in a deficit of \$1.3 million.

School choice

The solutions discussed so far for improving the quality of urban (and all other) schools have focused on self-determination of the school site. Another option is to let parents decide which school offers the best program for their children. While voucher programs have been proposed in a number of different forms for the past 20 years, a more recent innovation is public school choice. Under most choice proposals, parents are able to select which school their child will attend, regardless of where they live and whether or not they live in that school district. Parents are typically responsible for transporting their children to the school.

In some states, notably Minnesota, the only limits on school choice are based on school capacity and parental willingness to transport their children. In California, options are somewhat more limited. Parents may enroll their children in a school located in a district where they are employed if they are not satisfied with their local school or if they wish to be closer to

their children during the workday. While interdistrict choice is a restricted privilege granted to Californians, many districts in the state have begun choice programs within the district boundaries.

Proponents of choice models believe that schools will compete with one another for children and thus be forced to improve or close down due to lack of enrollments. While this market-based strategy has certain appeal, it seems unlikely that it will succeed in its pure form. Many parents choose to send their children to the local school because it is more convenient, and they expect the district to offer a quality program in all schools. Moreover, in a district that has no excess capacity at any of its schools, choice is a moot question since a school will have room for additional children only if some elect to attend alternative schools. Therefore, it is unlikely that choice models will succeed in weeding out poorly performing schools, although they may have some impact on the improvement of schools that are forced to compete for children.

Vouchers

Another issue that has gained considerable attention in recent years is school vouchers. Despite efforts to establish school voucher programs in many states, most notably California's failed effort in 1993, there are just two voucher programs in existence today. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the state provides vouchers to some 1,500 low-income students that can be used in private schools in the city. The value of the vouchers is the roughly \$2,500 of state aid provided to the Milwaukee school district. While participation in the program has been extensive, no evidence exists that the quality of education in these private schools is better than that in the public schools, and efforts to expand the program in Milwaukee have run into considerable opposition both among district officials and teachers and in the state legislature. In Cleveland, a similar voucher program that began in the fall of 1996 includes religious schools.

Recent polling in California indicates that if another voucher proposal had been on the ballot in 1996, it would most likely have been defeated by the voters. Given the strong opposition of the education community to vouchers, it is unlikely that this alternative will become a major funding mechanism in the near future.

Employee relations and professional development

Another important element to consider in improving urban schools is the teachers. Teacher salaries and benefits account for 60 percent of total educational expenditures nationally. The direct contact between teachers and students provides the greatest impact on student learning. Therefore, if a district aims to improve student performance, the teachers will play a crucial role in determining whether or not it succeeds.

Today, teacher compensation is based on the number of years a teacher has been teaching and the education he or she has attained since beginning to teach. There is no salary boost for performance, and merit pay and career-ladder programs have been unsuccessful in both raising average teacher salaries and improving the quality of teachers. Odden and Conley (1992) argue that teacher compensation should be based instead on what teachers “know and can do,” suggesting that increases in salary be tied to demonstrable knowledge of methods that lead to improved student achievement. Odden and Conley also suggest that to achieve a system where pay is tied to some measure of what teachers know and can do, and to ensure that local sites have adequate knowledge to manage themselves well, districts and schools need to devote substantially more resources to professional development. Odden and Conley argue that schools should spend as much as 2 to 4 percent of their budgets on professional development activities, rather than the less than 1 percent that is the norm today. Rewarding teachers who demonstrate knowledge of successful educational practices is at the heart of the national teaching certificate being developed by the National Board for Professional Teacher Standards.

Conclusion

Improving urban education will require more than the application of additional money. Current research on how schools allocate and use fiscal resources shows that regardless of the level of resources available to a school district, funds are spent for functions such as instruction, administration, and operations and maintenance in almost exactly the same proportions. Thus it seems safe to expect that if additional dollars are allocated to urban school systems, they will continue doing more of the same. Recent research by Hedges, Laine, and Greenwald (1994) questions earlier work by Hanushek (1986, 1989), which argued that additional money did not lead to improved student outcomes. It

seems that if money makes a difference, it will have a larger impact if districts and schools find alternative, better ways to use additional funds.

For example, teachers frequently argue that salaries have to be improved to attract more highly qualified individuals to the teaching profession. While this is no doubt the case, increasing the salaries of all teachers seems an expensive way to recruit new individuals and by itself does little to improve the quality of schools in the short and medium term. A more effective strategy might be to improve salaries for beginning teachers and provide opportunities for both new and current teachers to reach the highest levels of the salary schedule more quickly if they can demonstrate knowledge of teaching methods that research indicates will lead to improved student outcomes.

The single biggest resource available to urban school districts for staff development is the funds used to pay teachers for the education they receive. It is estimated that this amounts to \$260 million a year in Los Angeles alone. By changing the way teachers earn these funds, the district can create substantial incentives toward improving schools with little or no additional investment.

While urban schools face a tremendous number of problems in meeting the educational needs of the children living within their boundaries, there are many reasons to be optimistic about the future of the schools in our largest cities. Despite the continued barrage of negative discussion focused on urban schools, there are many examples of excellent schools in our cities as well. *Money* magazine may have said it best: "By and large, public schools are not lacking in experienced topnotch teachers, challenging courses or an environment that is conducive to learning. . . . If they [teachers] find an industrious student who is eager to learn, more often than not they will give him or her all of the personal attention that private tuition money could buy" (Topolnicki 1994, 112).

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