

Using Data, Research, and Strategically Allocating Finances to Improve Schools

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The American Dream is alive and well, but the educational system that we currently live in is broken. I believe that all students can receive a high quality education. I strongly believe that a child in Illinois has many more barriers to jump through to succeed depending on the zip code that she/he lives in. In 2018, Illinois ranked fiftieth on equitable funding for its public schools. This is because Illinois funds a majority of its public schools based off of property taxes. The per pupil funding that a school spends varies anywhere between \$5,000 at the low end and \$30,000 on the high end for per pupil spending. Many schools in Illinois are struggling to keep their doors open, but there are also many schools that have more money then they know how to spend in Illinois Schools.

Author Paul Gorski (2013) in his book, *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty*, shifted my paradigm on how I should run my school as a principal and has made me take a step back and reflect on how I address my personal poverty experiences and the disadvantaged students that I serve(d) throughout my principal career. Gorski states there are five social economic categories which include poverty, working class, middle class, (upper) managerial class, and the owning class. I grew up in the poverty class and have worked my way up to the upper managerial class. I have firsthand experience of what it is like growing up poor. At the time I was in middle school I thought it was odd that my friends received red lunch tickets and I received pink lunch tickets, which identified me as a free and reduced student. Looking back at it I

have come to the realization that I was labeled poor by my teachers and staff and maybe expectations were lower for me. In fact, when I was in fifth grade they split students for math into a high group and a low group for the first time. I was placed in the low group, but I felt like I was the smartest math students in my grade and each year prior to that in my opinion I thought I dominated the math curriculum and was at the top of my class before my school started student tracking at grade five. I believe that having the label of being a high poverty student with divorced parents with no educational background in a small rural town actually created lower expectations by some of my teachers. I believe rural principals have been seeing this happening with teachers when they have students that are struggling and comments are made about who the family is, where they live, types of jobs they have, and if their parents have been in jail or have a felony. Gorski says letting go of our deficit views and focusing, instead, on student strengths and resilience is good for teaching, but it's also good for teacher morale, a win-win (p. 135). I also tie that into setting high expectations for our students. If we look at our students for who they are and what they can become and drop our deficit views by setting high expectations for all students our student achievement should go up.

At the elementary level the old mentality was if students weren't ready for the next grade level we need to retain those students and repeat the work. I'm surprised how many schools in Illinois still retain students. John Hattie, *Visible Learning*, showed the research behind retention and the negative effects. I see retention in schools as an equity issue by the school not addressing the needs of our high poverty academically struggling students. This issue that I'm working on addressing takes me

back to Gorski principal #8 that reads equitable educators adopt a resiliency rather than deficit view of low-income students and families (p. 30). Low-income students that attend schools are not receiving the same equitable education that they could if they attended other schools. Recognizing who your at risk students are and bringing your staff together to problem solve and find ways to better serve failing students is key. Facilitating these conversations can be very tricky as a principal to your teachers for a couple of reasons: 1) emotions are involved with teachers 2) trust needs to be established between principal and teachers 3) past practices and teachers that have been teaching for 15 or more years 4) vision for a new direction and 5) professional development for staff.

Creating an equity leadership plan includes providing equity over equality. As an incoming superintendent to a district I think it is important to realize that your equity plan varies depending on the district that you are entering and what their current race, class, socioeconomic status, and gender makeup is and what they are doing to address the needs of their district. According to Robert Marzano, *School Leadership That Works*, the number one leadership trait for effective leaders is situational awareness. Being able to identify the discrepancies is vital but you must also be able to act upon them and also realize that there is no one set plan that covers each individual school in Illinois. Which is why local control is normally best for Illinois Schools. One area that a principal could improve for next year is the quality of education their students receive by overseeing class rosters. Past practice has been to divide students up into low, middle, and high groups as well as separating behavior students equally so it is fair to the teachers (not fair for students). Which means if for example you have four teachers

then four classroom teachers have the same or equal students when it comes to academic and behavior grouping. This model would work if the four classroom teachers at each grade level were identical in their teaching practices, skill, pedagogy and classroom management. Principals should make changes and make it more equitable making sure that more of the high risk students and/or underachieving students get the higher skilled teachers. Also, see that more of my higher achieving students get assigned to some of the average/weaker teachers. In addition, students that have a underperforming teacher can recover from that teacher the next school year. Students that have an underperforming teacher two years in a row are unlikely to recover academically.

Author Tim Wise (2012) in his book, *Dear White America*, brought to light the students that walk into our building day one as kindergartners who are already behind their peers due to social economic and ethnic/racial background. According to Wise (2012), Intense poverty primes personal dysfunction in any society. Desperate and defeated peoples often fail to put their best foot forward (p. 136). Many of our disadvantaged students or racially diverse students are entering our school not ready to put their best foot forward and it is important that we as educational leaders are their bridge or safe passageway to ensure that they can put their best foot forward and succeed. This process goes back to identifying your school districts needs and realizing that different districts have different needs. One way to address these needs is by starting a food pantry for students in your building which could be continued in the summer. Another resource I have utilized is working with a Salon who has donated free haircuts for students in need. In addition to free haircuts, another program that could be

offered is free dental cleanings. Many schools are switching to school services to provide all of their students with breakfast after the bell in the classroom. If you are a superintendent in a high poverty district this service should be free and you should already be doing it; however, if you are below 50% low income the district will have to pay to provide all students with free meals but your disadvantaged students and families will reap the benefits from the program and I highly recommend it. More students have the opportunity to eat a nutritious breakfast which will benefit high needs students.

Overall, student populations and school demographics are changing in Illinois. Many schools have a majority of social economic issues. Some schools might be seeing an increase in Hispanic population or other demographics. It is important to prime the pump and make sure our diverse populations are ready to learn. One way of doing this with a diversity plan is checking the basics such as looking at the lunch and breakfast menu. Do we serve food of Hispanic decent and how often do we do that? Also, do we hit minority menus on special holidays or certain dates of significance for those groups of students? That could be an area that is not addressed at a school which could mean a lot to a minority group. Another area that schools are addressing is minority language needs in the community which include updating the school website that has the option for parents to select a language to view the website in. I'm also a big believer in providing as many resources to families as possible such as starting a literacy reading program which includes online electronic books that students have the capabilities to read in English and/or in Spanish. Those are a few steps that a principal or superintendent could be taking to address language barriers with ELL students.

Author Alan Blankstein and Pedro Noguera (2015) in his book, *Excellence Through Equity*, provides administrators with guidance and leadership direction to increase achievement for all students. Blankstein and Noguera stated, the secret we discovered about improving our students' performance-it was not about the students, it was about the adults. When we started teaching differently with a tenacious focus on literacy, the students' performance improved and the culture of the school changed (p. 33). I see that statement as a guide to zoom in on our focus and to increase our tenacity. From the principals perspective, I have seen low achievement and a high number of excuses of why our students are not learning. I believe there are many factors that go into increasing student achievement but having a good teacher is the number one factor. It is important as equity leaders to hire the best teachers possible. This can be a difficult task with few teachers coming down the pipeline, low pay from poor schools, and having a school with high needs. Moving forward school districts professional development and building level principal leadership and vision is going to be crucial in the success of poverty stricken schools. In wealthier schools that have more services such as: assistant principal, curriculum director, behavior teacher/program, instructional coaches, librarian, multiple testing platforms, appropriate counselor to student ratios it is important to realize as the superintendent that the principal role is not as important when it comes to creating equity. By not as important I am saying it is more of a shared role and responsibility of multiple staff members to make sure all students are achieving and are receiving the services needed to succeed. In a smaller district an equity leadership plan would include being more assertive in the equitable education students are receiving. Superintendents need an open line of

communication with building principals, but I would also want superintendents to be able to gauge the students, families, and community to learn how to best serve their needs.

Overall, having the skills to be able to identify, analyze, interpret, and be able to put a plan into place to attack equity in the school district is vital to the success of all students. The strategies vary from district to district but I feel like principals and superintendents are equipped with the tools and skills necessary to create an effective equity plan for their districts.

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