Disentangling the Conceptual Blur in Policy Practice between WSF and SBA

Justin Dayhoff, Filippo Bulgarelli, & Jason Becker

Allovue

DISENTANGLING THE CONCEPTUAL BLUR BETWEEN WSF AND SBA

Introduction

State policymakers have long used weighted-student funding (WSF) formulas to address state-level fiscal equity issues (J. G. Augenblick, Myers, & Anderson, 1997; W. Duncombe, Ruggiero, & Yinger, 1996; Hanushek, 2006; A. R. Odden & Picus, 2014). Although state policymakers have used this mechanism to address inter-district funding disparities within states, local education agencies increasingly rely upon WSF formulas to address intra-district funding disparities (Malen et al., 2015).

District-level implementations of weighted-student funding formulas rely on a broader set of goals beyond fiscal equity (Malen et al., 2015; Curtis, Sinclair, & Malen, 2014, US Dept. of Education, 2019), including transparency, efficiency, and autonomy/flexibility. This autonomy aim is tightly coupled with the joint implementation of a weighted-student funding initiative and some form of a site-based management (also referred to as site-based autonomy) initiative. For example, 24 school districts in the United States currently implement WSF formulas and all of these districts utilize some level of site-based autonomy, albeit to varying degrees (US Dept. of Education, 2019).

This piece will lay out distinct conceptual definitions and distinctions between WSF and SBA and will subsequently level a critique of the tight coupling of these two initiatives. This piece will then posit potential policy remedies for districts looking to use research-based efforts around weighted-student funding OR site-based autonomy absent the joint implementation of the other.

Methodology

This work is a conceptual policy analysis in nature and, consequently, employs qualitative examination of existing research and practice to establish the underlying concepts of weighted-student funding (WSF) and site-based autonomy (SBA) and to subsequently level critique and discuss policy options. The review of literature and practice related to these two concepts is organized across the underlying concepts of WSF and SBA; and WSF and SBA in practice.

The Underlying Concepts
Weighted-student funding (WSF) formulas are funding allocation systems that rely on a series of weights, which are tied to corresponding student or school characteristics/subgroups, to allocate funds to schools within a district, or districts within a state (Berne and Steifel 1984; 1999; Dayhoff, 2018; J. G. Chambers, Levin, & Shambaugh, 2010; Curtis, Sinclair, & Malen, 2014; Malen, Dayhoff, Egan, & Croninger, 2015, US Dept. of Education, 2019). WSF formula designs vary widely in the types of weights and the magnitudes of those weights contained therein. The capacity of a WSF formula to advance fiscal equity pivots on the formula’s: 1) use of valid weights for relevant subgroups; 2) employment of weights with the correct magnitude and power; and 3) the running of dollars through the actual formula (Malen, et al., 2015, pp. 21).

Site-based autonomy (SBA), in contrast, is the method by-which principals use allocated dollars, FTEs, or other resources to purchase or assign FTEs and other resource items. SBA, specifically, refers to an initiative in which principals and other school-based personnel and community stakeholders make decisions around FTEs and discretionary resources using revenue or staffing allocations directed to the school (Ogawa, 1994, pp.537; Malen & Ogawa, 1988, pp. 253). Policy advocates for SBA argue that this independence allows those who know a school community best to control (and to be accountable for) the positions and programs that a school implements to best serve the children within that school (Furtick, K., & Snell, L. 2013; Snell, 2009).

WSF and SBA in Practice

The most recent comprehensive examination of WSF policies and practices coupled with previous reviews of WSF-using districts establish a long pattern of districts also using SBA (Furtick, K., & Snell, L. 2013; Snell, 2009; US Dept. of Education, 2019). The degree to which WSF districts provide autonomy and flexibility to school sites differs substantially, but they all allow at least some principal autonomy. Indeed, policy advocates promote WSF initiatives as ones whose very definition includes SBA (Education Resource Strategies, 2010; Furtick, K., & Snell, L. 2013; Roza, M. 2019). Interestingly, the
opposite is not true. While Edmonton, Alberta was the first known school district to use a WSF formula at the district-level in 1991, districts using site-based autonomy via site-based management/governance initiatives began in the 1970s in Dade County, Florida, among others throughout the country (Curtis, et al., 2014; Malen & Ogawa, 1988; Ogawa, 1994). This duality suggests room in school-district policy for the uncoupling of WSF and SBA for districts looking to implement WSF absent autonomy and flexibility aims.

**Discussion: Uncoupling WSF and SBA**

The policy linkage between WSF and SBA can create perceivably immovable roadblocks to policy makers who wish to advance goals associated with WSF initiatives but who see the combined implementation of both as insurmountable. Indeed, there are important reasons to reconsider and disentangle the tight coupling of these two initiatives, namely:

- Mustering the political will to undertake one, let alone two, large-scale policy changes in a district presents substantial challenge (Malen et al., 2015)
- To the extent that, in a given policy context, WSF may be more likely to succeed than an SBA initiative due to principal capacity, accountability, and/or collective bargaining, implementing both simultaneously may reduce the overall implementation success
- Stakeholder perceptions of WSF and SBA can be tempered by site-level administrators’ experience with an SBA initiative (Roza, 2019)

*Policy levers for implementing WSF in isolation*

The implementation of a WSF formula without principal autonomy is but one step removed from district utilization of a more traditional staffing formula. In this policy alternative, a district could use weights to determine revenue for each school/unit within the district and then apply centralized staffing business rules to that pot of money to determine FTE assignments and discretionary dollars (see Figure 1, below).
Figure 1. Hypothetical WSF System Absent SBA

Subsequently, districts have the option to allow non-school-based autonomy with weighted resource allocations to schools. Centralized, instructional or regional superintendents can serve as centralized decision-makers absent complete and clearly-defined business logic around planned personnel and non-personnel budgeted dollars and expenses.

Conclusion

Policy entrepreneurs espousing WSF as an initiative dependent on site-based autonomy/management risk broad disservice to districts who might otherwise have the capacity and political will to implement funding formula revisions in efforts to advance fiscal equity absent autonomy efforts. Disentangling conceptual differences between WSF and SBA allows districts to grapple with equity-focused policy remedies while attending to the very real challenges associated with change management. The enactment of WSF formulas in isolation from SBA initiatives also has broad implications for future research, particularly research that aims to isolate the causal effects of funding formula changes on the capacity of a school district (or districts) to advance fiscal equity concepts.


DISENTANGLING THE CONCEPTUAL BLUR BETWEEN WSF AND SBA


