On Equity: The Illinois Dilemma Revisited: A Response to a Response

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Purpose
Aristotle writes that "...the source of battles and complaints is either that people who are equal have unequal shares, or that people who are not equal have equal shares, distributed to them."(FN1) Similarly stated, the issue is that "equals have and are awarded unequal shares, or unequals equal shares."(FN2) This again comes to the fore in a Response(FN3) to our research on Illinois in which we analyze the equity, adequacy, and legal issues related to school finance. The Responders' quarrel with that portion of our research that addresses equity and create a de novo analysis, by treating unequals equally--an invalid endeavor fraught with difficulties to which we feel called upon to respond.(FN4) However, they accept what we consider the major contribution of the equity portion of our work--dissemination of a method to provide analysis for all districts in Illinois, including elementary, high school, and unit school districts. Previously, research resulted in three separate analyses, thus, begging the question of whether or not the finance system as a whole was equitable. The answer to that question, whether using the Responders' or our analysis, is an unequivocal "no."

The Article
In this article, we further review the analytic framework used in The Illinois Dilemma and contrast it to the Responders, concluding that theirs is flawed. Our approach is widely used and discussed elsewhere in detail. It draws on the philosophical and legal dimensions of justice and fairness in education. We also replicate our study that used weighted pupils based on size and need to develop baseline equity statistics using unweighted pupils for comparison purposes. Finally, we address the Responders' apparent rationale for inequity based on an arbitrary cut-off point that draws only on select elementary districts in the state. We find this approach without merit as all pupils are pupils of the state including students in high school and unitary districts.

What This Means for the Field
The analysis of the equity in school finance for the state of Illinois, whether using weighted or baseline analyses, shows that it is an unjust and disparate system that curtails equal opportunity for children and youth in schools and classrooms. The Responders challenge our approach in part and state they have completed a replication of the equity portion of our study, Educational Opportunity: The Illinois Dilemma. We disagree. Their response differs in overall approach, unit of analysis, underlying assumptions inherent to defining equity and fiscal neutrality, and in the data and methods applied. One key difference is that they provide an analysis of the funding formulae rather than its impact. A second critical difference regards their choice of the district as the unit of analysis over the pupil as the unit of analysis. The Responders' analysis does not take account of special-needs students through weighting, although it is purported to include partial costs for low-income students in the funding variable, but not the unit of analysis. This treats unequals equally--an invalid approach.
However, as their research and our research shows, the dilemma for Illinois remains. How might all children be afforded an equitable and adequate opportunity? Best practice, empirical analysis, and findings from both of our analyses indicate that ‘savage inequalities’ are present in the Illinois funding system and equal opportunity is abridged. Importantly, for the majority of children at the bottom of the distribution, funding is not only inequitable, but also inadequate. These are nontrivial issues that strain any notion of a constitutional system of public-school finance in the State of Illinois, while affecting the most vulnerable population and best hope for the future.

Citation

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