State Aid to Public Schools: An Analysis of State Responsiveness to School District Needs

John P. Pelosiro
Loyola University Chicago, jpeliss@luc.edu

David R. Morgan
University of Oklahoma

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STATE AID TO PUBLIC SCHOOLS: AN ANALYSIS OF STATE RESPONSIVENESS TO SCHOOL DISTRICT NEEDS

John P. Pelissero, Loyola University of Chicago
David R. Morgan, The University of Oklahoma

Despite decades of attempted fiscal reforms throughout virtually every state, most state school aid is still allocated on a per pupil basis. The chance exists, nonetheless, that the remaining funds are at least somewhat targeted to socioeconomic or fiscal need. This research, covering two recent time periods, finds little evidence that non-enrollment-based state aid is targeted to need.

A major issue in intergovernmental relations is the degree to which state or federal aid reaches those individuals, groups, or places with the greatest need. One of the textbook justifications for intergovernmental assistance, especially federal aid, is that such funds often perform an important redistributive function. This rationale is based on the assumption, of course, that such assistance to some extent does reach those that need it most. This issue of targeting has taken on new significance recently as the federal government, under Reagan's New Federalism, has attempted to return more power, discretion, and funds to state governments. To the extent a more state-centered federalism emerges, is this likely to improve or diminish intergovernmental responsiveness to the needs of lower-level governments? How effective have state aid programs been in the past in assuring that funds reach those most in need?

Recent literature at the city level has analyzed state responses to city need. For example, a number of studies (Dye and Hurley, 1978; Stein, 1981; Pelissero, 1984) have found that state aid programs are somewhat responsive to a combination of the social, economic, and fiscal needs of cities. Even though an enormous literature deals with state aid to local public schools, little research has focused on the extent to which such intergovernmental assistance is targeted on socioeconomic need. States continue to funnel vast sums of money to public schools; in fact, the proportion of state funding of local schools has risen steadily over the past several decades. Much of this aid has been designed to achieve educational equality, broadly defined, in short to partly overcome the vast differences in school district funding capacity found in almost every state. Evidence suggests that some progress has been made (Carroll and Park, 1983:155), but controversy still exists over the extent to which state funds have helped overcome the enormous socioeconomic and fiscal disparities that characterize local school districts in this country.

The purpose of the present research is to determine just how responsive states are to the needs of local school districts. Initially we begin with a brief account of the traditional basis by which states provide funds for local districts. Special attention is devoted to the concepts of equity and need as applied to school finance. The purpose here is to consider the rationale that states have a special obligation to provide extra financial resources to assist certain groups that have special needs. Then, an empirical analysis undertaken using data from the 173 largest public schools in the nation is described. The dependent variable is state aid to school districts, exclusive of federal pass-through funds, using a measure adjusted for student population differences across school districts. Our basic hypothesis assumes that states allocate the largest portion of non-enrollment-based aid according to school district needs.

State Aid and Educational Equity

As a recent assessment of equity in school finance observed, "Throughout the Twentieth Century, the criterion of fairness has been continually applied to the American system of education" (Berne and Stiefel, 1984:270). But fairness for what or whom? Berne and Stiefel (1984:7) contended that equity applies to two groups—children and taxpayers—and that most reform efforts try to take account of both in devising various state aid formulas. Although this is not the place to provide a detailed discussion of the history of the movement to equalize educational funding, we do need to consider briefly the various concepts of equity and to weigh the arguments in behalf of using state money to level up poor districts.

For a good bit of this century educational reformers have searched for ways to reduce interdistrict disparities in per pupil expenditures (see Friedman and Wiseman, 1978). The problem has been, quite simply, that, since local support for public education comes predominantly from the property tax, local school
funds are determined largely by the property wealth of the district. In fact, under one definition, equity exists when a child’s educational opportunity does not depend on his or her parent’s economic circumstances or geographic location (Wise and Darling-Hammond, 1981:298). State aid has been viewed historically as one important means of weakening this link between local resources and school spending.

More recently, a renewed effort to channel greater state resources to needy districts has swept the country. A number of states now distribute funds specifically for various categories of “disadvantaged” students, while nine states offer specific adjustments for poverty (Goertz, 1981). In all, this movement to improve equity has been termed the educational issue of the 1970s, as some 28 states reformed their system of school aid largely in hopes of improving funding equity (Fuhrman, 1982). Some contend this effort has paid off. According to Odden (1982), “important progress was made in reducing the relationship between per pupil expenditures and local property wealth per pupil, with the reform states making more progress on this goal” (p. 316). Others (Geski, 1982) have disagreed. Thus the extent to which recent events have reduced the historical nexus between local wealth and school spending appears to require further investigation.

An analysis of the extent to which state money reaches districts most in need should proceed within the context of an overall examination of those factors that determine the distribution of state aid to local schools. Empirical research on this subject in which a large number of districts are used is less prevalent than expected. Most of the studies include state aid as one of several variables to explain variations in per pupil expenditures, with a particular concern for the extent to which state funds have an equalizing effect. The basic conclusion: “Where there is greater relative use of state aid, there is consistently less inequality of expenditures” (Harrison, 1976:50). In effect, considerable research suggests that those districts with fewer financial resources tend to receive proportionately more state aid than other districts.

The literature on state funding indicates no clear-cut pattern with regard to the effects of the distribution formula itself. Cohn (1974:37) argued that the type of financial plan used and the percentage of state funds relative to total school costs are the two most important variables determining the equalizing effect of state aid. Brown and Elmore (1982:132), however, insisted that the type of formula employed is not the decisive factor in determining the equity impact of state funding. At this point, then, we will tentatively assume that the amount of non-enrollment-determined state aid received by local districts will be unrelated to the type of distributional formula used, when other variables are taken into account.

One other potential influence on state aid should be considered. Johns and associates (1983:167) insisted that where a state contains a large number of districts, each individual district is likely to receive proportionately less state money. It may be simply a matter of not enough money to go around. Thus we expect that districts will receive less aid in those states that have a large number of districts per unit total population.

A final issue must be dealt with before proceeding to a discussion of the data and methods employed in the analysis. Most grant-in-aid programs are heavily population based. For example, federal grants to states are allocated almost entirely on the basis of population (Copeland and Meier, 1984). Likewise, Pelissero’s (1984) research on state aid to municipalities confirmed the close association between total aid received and city population. Therefore any concern with the extent to which aid reaches those places needing it must come to grips with the impact of population.

By the beginning of this century state funds were distributed to local districts almost altogether on the basis of equal dollars per pupil (Garms, Guthrie, and Pierce, 1978:188). Despite a variety of schemes to equalize funding and to promote efficiency, most state aid programs in recent years have remained closely tied to district enrollments. Thus we fully expect total state aid to local schools to be enrollment driven. As suggested at the outset, however, our interest is in determining the extent to which aid reaches needy districts when enrollment differences are excluded. So the analysis here is based on a measure of state aid to school districts with the effects of enrollment removed.

Once enrollment-based influences on state aid have been removed, the expected relationships might be summarized as follows:

1. Districts with greater socioeconomic need will reflect higher aid payments;
2. Those districts with the greatest fiscal need will receive proportionately more state aid;
3. The more school districts in a state (per unit population), the smaller the amount of aid each will receive;
4. The amount of aid per district will be unaffected by the type of distribution formula employed by the state;
5. Efforts to reform the state aid system (over time) will only marginally increase state assistance to school districts.

Data and Methods

Initially a further elaboration is needed on the dependent variable—state aid to local public school districts. A common approach to handling population effects is to create per capita measures. Yet when dealing with...
State Responsiveness to School District Needs

1. percent minority (black and Hispanic) (1970, 1980);
2. percent poverty (proportion of children from poverty-level homes) (1970, 1980);

Several other variables representing state-level differences include:
1. number of public school districts per 10,000 population (1972, 1982);
2. a dummy variable representing whether or not the state significantly reformed its state aid program between 1971 and 1981;
3. a measure of the proportion of state aid allocated on some "equalizing" basis (1972, 1982).

Analysis

The first stage in the analysis involved testing the effects of enrollment on state aid. As expected, district enrollment is the principal determinant of state aid to school districts. The models below show the relationship between state aid to school districts and enrollment for both 1971 and 1981:

State Aid (71) = \(-3,083,839 + 393.35 \times \text{Enrollment}\)

\(r^2 = .88\)

State Aid (81) = \(-8,149,607 + 1,414.51 \times \text{Enrollment}\)

\(r^2 = .90\)

In 1971, 88 percent of the variability in state aid was accounted for by enrollment; by 1981 that figure had reached 90 percent. That explained variance is virtually identical for both time periods clearly suggests the lack of any growing impact of non-enrollment-based factors. The above figures also show that for every new enrollment the average district should have received about $1,415 for 1981 compared to only $393 in 1971. These figures may be a bit deceptive, however, since school funding increased so dramatically during the decade of the 1970s. In 1971, state aid to all local schools was $17.6 billion; by 1981 that figure had reached $50.2 billion, an increase of 186 percent. If that percentage increase were applied to the 1971 slope ($393), we would expect a slope for 1981 of only about $731 per pupil instead of $1,415. If state aid had become less tied to enrollment, socioeconomic need would be represented by the following school-district- (not city-) level measures:

1. school district budget deficit (revenue less expenditure) per pupil (1971, 1981);

These school districts include many large and areawide districts in addition to the majority of central city districts. Districts excluded because of incomplete information or strong deviations from the sample were: Hawaii Schools, Houston Independent, Los Angeles Unified; Louisville City, Montgomery County (Maryland), New York City, North East Independent (Texas); Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Sweetwater Union High (California).


Per capita measures of the socioeconomic variables were employed in this analysis because they were more readily available in the above sources. The use of certain residual measures of

...
a much smaller increase in slope should have occurred over the ten-year period.

In effect, it appears that for most large districts around the country all the state government during the 1970s to improve educational equity by state government the dominant force determining state aid has gone for naught. Enrollment is the most important question at this point. If we employ them as the new dependent variables for the remaining analysis. The ensuing matters: How much of the residuals that 10 or 12 percent of state aid not determined by enrollment is associated with district socioeconomic need? How much is targeted to the fiscal needs of the school districts? And, how important are state system variables in the determination of this residual?

Table 1 displays the multivariate model of residual aid and two of the need variables that are significant correlates. For 1971 both the socioeconomic need predictor, with school district unemployment also a prominent effect. This initial year model demonstrates that higher residual state aid payments were, in expected, associated with greater need in school districts. Specifically, for every dollar per pupil that a school district unemployment was able to raise on its own there was a corresponding decrease of $9,776 in residual state aid. Likewise, a 1 percent increase in a district’s unemployment was associated with more than a $1 million increase in such aid.

The 1981 model shown in Table 1 differs slightly from the earlier year’s equation. Again, own revenue per pupil is the strongest predictor, with each unit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>1971</th>
<th>1981</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Need</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment (%)</td>
<td>1,041,746.74*</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal Need</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own revenue/pupil</td>
<td>-9,775.84*</td>
<td>-.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>1,905,803.34</td>
<td>-9,094.39*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>10.20*</td>
<td>8.75*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Residual state aid is unstandardized. The dependent variable reflects the actual dollar difference between the observed state aid and that predicted by school district enrollment. A similar regression using the standardized residuals produced identical regression coefficients (beta, R, R², and F). Only the unstandardized slope coefficients (b) and the constants are different in the analysis reported here.

* p ≤ .05.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>1971</th>
<th>1981</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need Measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own revenue/pupil</td>
<td>-9,264.78*</td>
<td>-.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment (%)</td>
<td>1,061,655.68*</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State System Measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School districts/10,000 population</td>
<td>-1,250,467.44*</td>
<td>-.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School finance reform</td>
<td>4,582,230.93</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>2,396,273.79</td>
<td>-7,330,507.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>6.99*</td>
<td>5.37*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Residual state aid is unstandardized. The dependent variable reflects the actual dollar difference between the observed state aid and that predicted by school district enrollment. A similar regression using the standardized residuals produced identical regression coefficients (beta, R, R², and F). Only the unstandardized slope coefficients (b) and the constants are different in the analysis reported here.

* p ≤ .05.
State Responsiveness to School District Needs

Although these findings confirm much of the previous research on state aid to local schools, there are several ways in which this study is different. Our analysis focuses more directly than other research on that component of aid that is not determined by enrollment. And those assumptions about the interplay between district need and state aid have been tested with a sizable sample of the nation's largest school districts. The use of two time periods provides a perspective over time that has often been lacking in earlier research. More particularly, our knowledge of the determinants of aid has been extended in several ways. First, this analysis reveals that overall state aid is as enrollment driven in the early 1980s as it was a decade earlier. This finding supports those who have argued that on balance the various reforms to state aid systems implemented during the 1970s contributed little or nothing to greater educational equity. Second, the analysis of residual state aid shows little targeting on the basis of a district's socioeconomic needs. Some responsiveness to district fiscal needs is apparent, however. But perhaps less so now than ten years ago. Further, it is not the particular formula for distributing aid that matters, nor do state school finance reforms and the number of school districts in a state appear to affect state aid more than marginally. Finally, while the regression models do not explain the majority of the variance, we should remember that 90 percent of this aid variance has already been explained by district enrollment. We have simply attempted to explain a bit more of the remaining variability in school aid allocation.

We do not intend to suggest that these models of residual state aid provide a complete picture of how state aid is allocated to local districts. But some important assumptions have been tested using the best data available at this time. Hence, we believe the limitations of the model (or its specification) are largely attributable to the data at hand. Such limitations can only be overcome, we suspect, through a more detailed analysis of intrastate variations to school district need. This appears to be the next step for researchers seeking to understand the differences between the responsiveness of "State A" versus that of "State B" in the school aid area. A state-by-state examination of state policy in funding local school costs would also control for the effects of 50 separate state aid systems—the existence of which we tried to address by including the state-level factors as part of the cross-sectional analysis. 

At

9 The state governments for our 173 school districts supported an average of 73 districts for every 10,000 state residents in 1971. By 1981, consolidation in the states had reduced this figure to 52 districts for every 10,000 state residents.

10 One reviewer has objected to using cross-state data to test the basic hypothesis that residual aid is being targeted to local districts on the basis of need, insisting that only an intrastate analysis can answer this question. No doubt, intrastate analysis is crucial. But in the meantime we contend that information about whether St. Paul receives more or less residual aid than Gary, when certain characteristics of the state's funding system are taken into account, is indeed useful in addressing the issue of responsiveness. This cross-sectional analysis of pooled data also permits us to learn more about how the largest school districts in the country are treated by the states. These districts generally have the greatest problems and needs, which place a heavy burden on state governments. (These large districts represent only about 1 percent of all the school districts in the country, yet in 1981 they collectively received about 30 percent of all state aid.) Moreover, most states
this point we simply conclude that non-enrollment-based state aid is only somewhat responsive to school district needs. SSQ

REFERENCES


have only a few districts with large (25,000+) enrollments, and an in-state analysis of such states' responsiveness may not be very revealing. Therefore we think a pooled data set can be used to do a comparative analysis of state responsiveness to answer the question: do those needy districts around the country receive more state assistance than their better-off counterparts? Whatever the answer in general, a comparative intrastate analysis undoubtedly would reveal that some states are better targeters than others. Nonetheless, we contend that the overall question can be addressed profitably with the design employed here.
INTERGOVERNMENTAL AID FOR CITIES AND SCHOOLS: A COMMENT ON RESEARCH METHODS

John P. PELISERRO, Loyola University of Chicago
David R. MORGAN, The University of Oklahoma

The literature on intergovernmental aid and its responsiveness to needs in cities and school districts has been growing since the mid-1970s. Researchers have explored the fundamental political question of "who gets what" from alternative perspectives that have enriched our understanding of federal and state aid for local governments. This research has also stimulated discussion and debate over two policy analysis questions: (1) how to control for the confounding effects of different population bases in cross-sectional studies of aid receipts by city governments and school districts; and (2) how to account for differences in state aid systems when analyzing a pooled cross-state data set of local governments. These questions are again addressed in the Pelissero and Morgan article and the piece by Lyons and Fitzgerald in this issue. Since Lyons and Fitzgerald take a strong position regarding certain methodological issues evolving from these questions, a position that objects specifically to certain techniques we employ to control for the effects of population, we think a response and further elaboration on our part is appropriate.

Lyons and Fitzgerald deal first with the basic question of how to control for population differences in cross-sectional analysis of state responsiveness to city needs. This issue, first raised in the intergovernmental aid literature in Ward's (1981) critique of Dye and Hurley's (1978) responsiveness research, concerns the appropriateness of per capita measures of city government aid receipts and social and economic need. What we have done in the analysis of school district aid in this issue and in our separate research (e.g., Morgan and England, 1984; Pelissero, 1984, 1985) is to explore alternative means of studying state aid responsiveness. We have not and do not reject per capita measures as inappropriate in all state and urban policy research, as suggested by Lyons and Fitzgerald. Rather, we search for ways to better understand intergovernmental aid allocations that are population-driven—whether of federal (Copeland and Meier, 1984) or state origin (Ward, 1981; Pelissero,
A Comment on Research Methods

percentage) and residual measures of the same 1970 social need predictors used in Pelissero (1984):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{NonwhiteRes} - \%\text{Nonwhite} &= .82 \\
\text{ElderlyRes} - \%\text{Elderly} &= .82 \\
\text{PovertyRes} - \%\text{Poverty} &= .83 \\
\text{MobilityRes} - \%\text{Mobile} &= .62
\end{align*}
\]

The same concept is being measured with either indicator when the correlations are so high. The substitution of the per capita measures for residual need measures in the regression analysis produces different coefficients, but the same finding emerges; residual aid to cities in 1976 is responsive to economic and fiscal need but has not improved in its targeting to social need from the 1962 pattern (Pelissero, 1984: tables 3 and 4).

The second question—how to account for differences in state aid systems when analyzing pooled data—is an additional concern of Lyons and Fitzgerald (in their comments on Pelissero, 1985). This concern is addressed in footnote 10 in our article in this issue, in response to the same point made by one of our referees, and in our conclusion to that paper. First, we admit that the ideal design would allow for an intrastate analysis for the reasons outlined by Lyons and Fitzgerald. Quite often, however, data are not available for cities or school districts below a certain size, either 25,000 or 50,000 population. In such cases, the N within any one state may be quite limited, precluding a thorough cross-sectional analysis. In some instances, it may prove possible to gather enough data on a large group of local jurisdictions within certain populous states to reach a respectable total N. Unless one wants to generalize from only that one state or perhaps from only a very few such large states, or unless a massive nationwide data set is available permitting intrastate analyses within a large number of states, the problem is not easily resolved.

In our foregoing article we try to take account of various state differences in school structure as a partial substitute for individual state variations. This option is not altogether satisfactory, but should control for some of the potential level-of-analysis problems raised by Lyons and Fitzgerald. Their criticism, of course, can be levied at any effort to assess variations in targeting by state governments that relies on cross-sectional pooled data across a number of states regardless of the technique employed to create the independent and dependent variables.

In sum, the issues raised by Lyons and Fitzgerald are obviously worth further consideration and debate. We do not contend that our regression-based technique of controlling for population effects should be universally used in lieu of the ratio measures more commonly employed in cross-sectional analysis. In certain special cases where population is particularly dominant, however, it seems to us an attractive way to remove that confounding effect. No
one quarrels with the view that a comprehensive state-by-state analysis will produce the most precise estimates of the targeting effects of state aid. This approach certainly appears to be the next step in ascertaining whether, for example, Tennessee or Oklahoma more effectively employs state dollars to meet local government needs. SSQ

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