

Weighted Student Funding Report

League of Women Voters of Charlotte-Mecklenburg

29 March 2007

Summary

This report examines recent changes in the method that Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) uses to allocate teachers and resources to schools that enroll significant numbers of low-income students (measured by the number of a school's students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch, or FRL). Because these schools face especially steep educational challenges, it is essential that they receive the additional resources they need to meet these challenges.

CMS has been providing additional staff and resources to majority-poverty schools for nearly a decade, using a template of targeted resources. For the 2006-07 school year, however, CMS officials adopted a new method of staffing allocation called Weighted Student Staffing (WSS). CMS officials are also considering a move to a more comprehensive system of Weighted Student Funding (WSF).

Soon after Weighted Student Staffing went into effect, evidence surfaced that WSS harmed, rather than helped, many of CMS's majority-poverty schools. The weighted formula shifted teachers to lower poverty schools at the expense of higher poverty schools.¹ After examining this evidence the League decided to conduct a study of other school systems that have adopted "weighted" systems.

Members of the League's Education Committee gathered data on how communities were using WSF to distribute district funds to schools. Members contacted seven school districts known to use WSF: Seattle, WA, Columbus, OH, Denver, CO, Milwaukee, WI, Houston, TX, and San Francisco, CA. The data show a wide range of funding formulae in use around the country. Within North Carolina, members contacted the Public School Forum, NC School Boards Association, as well as Guilford, Chapel Hill-Carrboro, and Winston-Salem/Forsyth districts. As far as we can discern, no NC districts use WSF.

Our study indicated that compared to a template system, both Weighted Student Staffing and Weighted Student Funding offer few advantages and many disadvantages. These disadvantages include a lack of accountability, an inability to target funds where they are most needed, and a failure to account for the exponential rise in educational challenge that occurs as a school's percentage of FRL students rises.

The League of Women Voters of Charlotte-Mecklenburg (LWV) thus recommends that CMS stop using Weighted Student Staffing and return to its original, template-based method for allocating resources to majority-poverty schools. It also recommends that CMS drop any plans to move to Weighted Student Funding.

The national League of Women Voters supports and promotes a quality education for all students. The League of Women Voters of Charlotte-Mecklenburg has a long

¹ "Weighted Student Staffing Formula Impact Report", Mecklenburg ACTS, 2006, <http://www.mecklenburgacts.org/WSFimpactreport.pdf>

history of supporting equitable opportunities in the Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools. We see this report as another step in that process.

Background: Changing the System

In 2001, a federal court ruling compelled CMS to drop a student assignment plan that bused students to desegregate its schools. In 2002-03, CMS instituted a “Choice Plan” which reassigned students to community-based schools. This new plan created large numbers of majority-poverty schools. By 2006, 87 out of 145 schools had 45 percent or more of their students receiving free or reduced lunch. 40 schools had 75 percent or more.

It was clear that these schools would face great challenges. Students from low-income families often arrive at school with limited grounding in formal education. Low-income parents and communities also have far fewer resources than parents and communities in more affluent areas of town.

To deal with these challenges, CMS turned to the concept of equity. Equity means creating conditions in which all students are able to realize their full academic potential. Equal allocation of baseline resources is only the first step toward equity. Equity requires providing additional resources to schools that face additional challenges, so that they can meet their students' real needs.

The Template Approach

To ensure that students at majority-poverty schools received equitable opportunities, CMS staff and board members worked together to create a series of criteria, a template, for allocating needed resources to these schools. From 1997 to 2006 CMS used this template system to provide additional resources to high-poverty schools.

Under the template approach, schools with FRL rates above 40 percent received significant adjustments in teacher allocation. Greater resources were provided to schools with FRL numbers in the 50 percent range, along with those facing challenges that included large numbers of students below grade level, high turnover rates among teachers and/or students, or large numbers of students with limited English skills. These schools were designated as FOCUS schools (earlier called Equity, or Equity Plus). The template called for providing FOCUS schools with:

- lowered staff-student ratios, so that class size would be smaller
- enough space to provide room for small classes
- extra funds for materials
- teaching staffs with the same level of experience as those at non-FOCUS schools
- "red tag" services for maintenance issues.

It also called for other services, which included:

- A full-time Talent Development teacher at each FOCUS elementary school, to ensure that students who were ready for advanced work received advanced opportunities
- Staffing to promote parental involvement
- Efforts to ensure that schools offered extracurricular enrichment activities such as chess clubs, debate teams and Odyssey of the Mind competitions

Drawbacks to the Template Approach

It is difficult to fully assess the efficacy of CMS's template, because it was never fully funded. Still, it is clear that there were some drawbacks to the template approach. It was a stair-step system. Schools that passed the threshold for FOCUS received far more resources than schools that hovered just below that threshold. This problem grew as limited funding forced CMS to raise the FOCUS threshold from 40-50 percent FRL to around 70 percent for elementary schools and 60 percent for middle schools. Some large schools with high numbers of FRL students did not reach the FRL percentage threshold for services even though they had significant needs.

Weighted Student Staffing/Funding

For the 2006-07 school year, CMS shifted its staffing allocation to a system called Weighted Student Staffing. Under the weighted system, each student on free or reduced lunch (FRL) was given a "weight" of 1.3, as opposed to a "weight" of 1.0 for students not on FRL. Teachers were allocated according to the overall "weight" of a school's student body. For example, a school whose students were all on FRL would have received a teacher allotment one-third greater than a school of the same size with no FRL students.

Weighted Student Staffing was promoted as a way to eliminate the problem with the stair-step thresholds in the CMS template. It was also billed as a way to help large schools with high numbers of children eligible for FRL.

It has been recommended that CMS move to a more comprehensive system of Weighted Student Funding (WSF). Under WSF, each school's entire budget is calculated according to the "weight" of its student body. Each school's principal develops and implements a school budget based on the allotted amount.

Advantages of a Template over Weighted Student Staffing/Funding

LWV research indicates that the advantages of a template far outweigh its drawbacks. We believe that a template approach is superior to a WSF/WSS approach in several key areas:

Setting Clear Standards

Decades of educational research have clearly identified the points at which schools begin to need extra help. They have also identified factors that play important roles in educational quality at majority-poverty schools, most significantly small class sizes (15-17), and effective teachers.

- The template approach can draw on this research to set proven standards in key areas such as teacher-pupil ratio or class size. It can also specify the amount of funding needed to reach those standards. It is clear what resources will be available school-by-school.

- The template can also set standards for educational resources and programs needed to provide equitable educational opportunities.

- Weighted Student Funding/Staffing is simply a mechanism for distributing available funding. It does not set specific standards or measure whether they are reached.

Education over Politics

- A template-based approach focuses on specifying and funding research-based standards.

- There is no research that lays out the most effective formulas for "weighting" different kinds of students. In our research, we found that school districts using weighted student funding used a wide range of weights. Houston, for example, weights poverty at 1.2, gifted at 1.12 and English language learners at 1.1. Cincinnati, in contrast, weights poverty at 1.05, gifted at 1.29 and English language learners at 1.48. These weights were frequently determined through political negotiations, rather than by analyzing the real needs of students.

Transparency and Accountability

- The template approach makes the school district and county commission responsible for providing the funding required to meet specific educational standards.

- The WSF model allots dollars to schools, then leaves it up to the principal to plan and implement programs. As a result, it is difficult to monitor whether opportunities at individual schools are truly equitable. It is also difficult to determine if a school has received enough funds to effectively implement needed programs. If, for example, math scores at many majority-poverty schools are unacceptable, does the responsibility lie with the program decisions of those schools' principals, or with shortfalls in the overall funding for those schools?

The WSF model also makes it difficult for school systems to justify budget requests to taxpayers, since it does not make clear precisely what the requested money will be used for, or why specific sums are needed.

Targeting Dollars Effectively

- The template approach allows for effective targeting of district funds. For example, if high-poverty schools start showing weaknesses in math, additional funds can be targeted at programs to improve math skills.

- WSF does not allow for effective targeting. Under WSF, the only way to provide extra funds for additional math programs at majority-poverty schools would be to increase the entire system budget or change the entire funding formula. The WSF model thus forces individual principals to juggle needs, such as deciding whether to hire a parent advocate *or* a math facilitator when both are needed. While giving principals flexibility can be a good thing, the advantages of flexibility shrink rapidly when resources are insufficient.

Addressing the Aggregate Effects of Poverty

Research shows clearly that as a school's poverty level rises, its challenges grow exponentially. A school with 60 percent of students on FRL faces far steeper challenges than one with 30 percent of students on FRL.

- The template approach takes this exponential jump into account. The CMS template set benchmarks at which the amount of support a school received grew significantly.

- Weighted Student Funding does not account for the reality of exponential growth in challenges. Funding grows in a strictly linear fashion as poverty rates rise.

Conclusion

The League of Women Voters urges Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools to return to a template approach to allocating resources to schools.

Further, the LWV recommends that CMS address the weaknesses of the old CMS template by making the following changes:

- Specify actual class sizes rather than teacher-pupil ratios. Targeting teacher-pupil ratios raised false expectations among staff and parents for small class sizes.

- Increase the number of steps in the template so that it provides a range of targeted resources at multiple levels of need. According to research, the first adjustments should be made at schools with 40-45 percent FRL, with a significant jump at 50 percent.

Data from CMS schools supports this assessment.² Further adjustments should be made at higher levels.

- Provide additional services to schools with large numbers of FRL students, even if their overall FRL percentage is relatively low. Conduct research to determine precisely which additional services would serve these schools most effectively.

Most significant, in order to ensure that all students receive a high quality education, CMS must be sufficiently funded. The template approach offers the best guide to this funding. By allowing CMS to clearly allot staff and resources according to actual needs, this approach offers the best opportunity to build community understanding and trust.

² An analysis of 2005-06 school achievement levels – categorized as "Honor School of Excellence", "School of Excellence", "School of Distinction", "School of Progress" and "No Recognition" – shows a distinct break in achievement levels at about 45% FRL. Schools above 45% rarely reached the highest recognition levels of "School of Excellence" or "Honor School of Excellence," while most schools below 45% FRL earned this recognition.

APPENDIX

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