

Did Anyone Ask the Leaders?

Reviewing South Carolina School Finance Disparities in High Proportion LatinX School Districts during COVID-19 – Executive Summary

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Purpose of the Study & Research Questions

In November 2018, South Carolina's Post and Courier published an exposé, *Minimally Adequate*, detailing the historical stratification of educational opportunities against race/ethnicity and wealth, prominently on display in South Carolina's Corridor of Shame – the name given by state lawmakers to school districts located along interstate I-95.

These disparities are now exacerbated after widespread school closures and community isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Policy powerbrokers were once again forced to confront educational inequities as they designed solutions to address new challenges due to COVID-19 and consider which communities were invisible in the policy process. In South Carolina, school districts serving higher proportions of LatinX students epitomize this intersection. They are at greater risk due to bias that criminalizes or treats the LatinX community with indifference (Rodríguez, 2018; Rodríguez, et al., 2020; Winders & Smith, 2012).

The purpose of this study is to understand if high-proportion LatinX districts had the necessary resources to provide a salient program of instruction to their LatinX students.

The following research questions ground this study:

1. What education resource inequities existed prior to COVID-19?
2. Has COVID-19 exacerbated historical resource disparities and how?
3. What solutions could South Carolina incorporate to ameliorate resource disparity?

A Legacy of School Finance Disparity in South Carolina

South Carolina's nearly three-decade-long historic school funding lawsuit, *Abbeville County School District et al. v. State of South Carolina (Abbeville II)*, 410 S.C. 619, 767 S.E.2d (2017) ended in a 3-2 decision that released lawmakers from Supreme Court oversight. The court's decision to vacate plaintiffs' judgments nullified its earlier court-ordered funding improvement.

Essential to the significance of *Abbeville* is its ability to reify the educational insufficiency for minoritized communities in South Carolina. Concurrently, *Abbeville* exemplifies the political will of the S.C. General Assembly to mediate the state's courts (Tran, et al., 2022).

Hon. Chief Justice Donald Wayne Beatty's objection acknowledged the state's need to further explore a systematic school funding resolution but questioned South Carolina's capacity to self-initiate such changes.

In 2021, the continued educational malfeasance of the South Carolina legislature was fully displayed in the funding disparity of the state and challenges associated with COVID-19.

To understand South Carolina's school finance, we used an intersectional practice theory (*i.e.*, site ontology), and critical race theory lens.

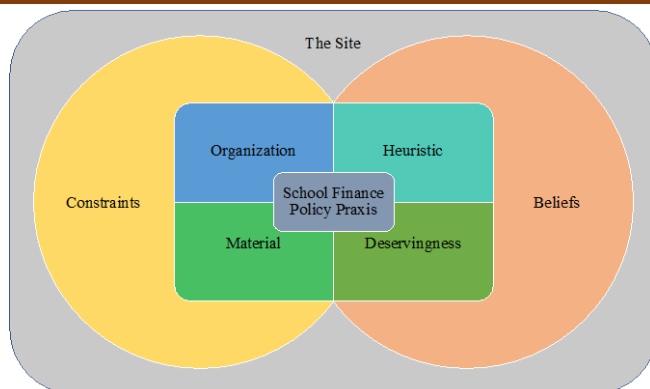
Policy practices are organized into inter-connected spatial-temporal actions. These actions are grounded in heuristics, material objects and place (*i.e.*, site) that inform cultural, economic, social and political ideologies – the site ontology (Green, 2009; Grootenboer, et al., 2014; Schatzki, 2005; Schatzki, et al., 2001).

Furthermore, state legislation has the potential to resolve education funding inequity, but legislative action has maintained disparity as the preferred status quo (Driscoll, et al., 2014; Rodríguez, 2018).

Exhibit 1 displays the interdependent spatial-temporal phenomena grounding policy praxis. In the center, school finance policy praxis is informed by organization and material arrangements, that operate as constraints. Simultaneously, deservingness and heuristics work to create a belief structure about the community.

Finally, the site, and the history of the site, informs the absolute design of the system. The site informs material and organizational arrangements and informs the constraints of school finance policy praxis. The site also informs the ideation of deservingness, the bias employed in heuristics and the beliefs used in school finance policy praxis (Martínez & Spikes, 2020).

Exhibit 1: Theoretical Interdependent Relationship of School Finance Policy Praxis



Finally, if practice is informed by – and informs subsequent – history as South Carolina works to mitigate the effects of

COVID-19 on schooling, it will continue to assert white dominance through seemingly neutral policy that works to exacerbate education inequity in communities of color, and specifically LatinX communities (Dumas, 2015; Gillborn, 2005; Gordon, 2015; Montoya, et al., 2016; Stovall, 2006).

Through our framework, we argue oppression of the LatinX community and communities of advocacy are so enmeshed in South Carolina's site ontology, it is challenging to develop a state-level policy discourse that supports communities of color.

Methods

The research design for this study leveraged a multi-method design including quantitative and qualitative methods. This study employs a horizontal equity panel (*i.e.*, descriptive analysis of relative uniformity) to understand the aggregate funding disparities of South Carolina. The study also used a fixed effects estimation model that examines the relationship of specific revenue and expenditure categories as a function of LatinX proportion.

Both quantitative methods helped to inform the semi-structured interviews with school leaders. Using semi-structured interviews helped us understand what resource disparities existed in districts serving a high proportion of LatinX students before COVID-19 and how the pandemic exacerbated those resource disparities.

Findings

Disproportionality Analysis

The quantitative strand of this study presents some interesting findings about both the disparity that exists between districts in revenue allocation and how this disparity targets high LatinX school districts and districts in poverty.

Contextually, we must understand that South Carolina is predominantly Black (44%) and white (47%). LatinX students make up 5.3% of the total student population, and at most in any school district across the entire sample approximately 37%.

The state exhibits a high degree of poverty with 68% of students supported by the free and reduced-priced lunch program, while the school district poverty index statistic shows the mean of poverty reaching 75% with a max of 99%.

The average district poverty index is 75% with a max of 99%. Many of South Carolina's school districts, and the families they serve, are categorically under some type of fiscal constraint.

South Carolina's median income is \$24,567. This is \$38,888 less than the report 2008 median income of the United States, \$63,455, and \$43,601 less than the 2018 median income of \$68,168.

From our analysis, South Carolina has not funded its base student cost (BSC). In fact, in 2011, the total BSC shortfall was \$790,726,950 and, in every year from 2009 to 2018, South Carolina shows a shortfall of BSC funding between the estimated necessary funding to educate students across the state and what South Carolina provides school districts.

Furthermore, before 2008, the last year the BSC was considered fully funded was 1998.

In 2019-20, the projected state gap in BSC funding was \$606 per student, with a difference between BSC budgeted \$3,095 and BSC actual of \$2,489.

Examining the granular results of this study, we see there is gross variation in the amount of funding and spending between districts. The local revenue per-pupil variation is quite large at 36%, and as is the maintenance and operations expenditure per-pupil variation, 26%. Finally, the instructional expenditure per pupil variation is 16%. Overall, South Carolina exhibits school finance disparity.

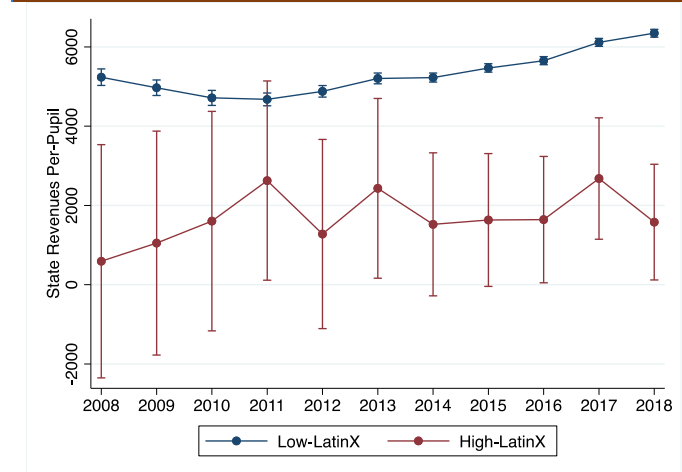
Fixed-Effects Model

Our analysis indicates that, as the share of LatinX students in a district increases, so do the gaps in fiscal capacity, discretely gaps in state revenue per pupil. For instance, in 2018, school districts with 10% LatinX students received \$1,192 more in state revenue than districts with 30% LatinX students.

Concurrently in 2018, school districts with 90% LatinX students received \$4,767.79 less than those districts with 10% LatinX students. In Exhibit 2, we estimate state revenue per pupil weighted by district enrollment size.

We used this method because larger districts contribute more to the estimated relationships. This approach is preferred to simple correlations between poverty and funding because most state school finance systems include provisions that allocate additional funding through state revenue to decrease differences in community and property wealth – major variables in school funding.

Exhibit 2: State Revenue Per Pupil High and Low LatinX Districts



We show the relationship of state revenue per pupil and district LatinX enrollment visually showing the characteristic gap in funding that exists year to year. We isolated state revenue per pupil to understand how districts with higher proportions of LatinX students ultimately intersect with state sources of funding to sufficiently address the learning needs of students.

Stakeholder Leadership Interviews

The quantitative analysis shows that South Carolina's state investment in its districts that serve a greater proportion of LatinX students – and by proxy LatinX students' writ large – may not counteract the education needs present. Respondents provided nuanced information that we used to create three omnibus themes.

The first theme centered on *district-level need* with many of our stakeholders highlighting how the pandemic influenced their school districts' fiscal constraints. Throughout the interviews, district leaders expressed there was a lack of resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. One district leader stated:

“We realized that some of our students come to school for those essentials. That was probably the most consistent part of their day, caring adults, it's a controlled environment. And I mean, not security, controlled environment, I mean, heating and cooling controlled environment. So, it was a comfortable, nice, good 72 to 74 degrees, consistent all day, two meals. You have breakfast, and you'll have a lunch. And you'll have opportunity to socialize.”

The second theme centered on communication with state officials and how state-level stakeholders were maintaining, or in our case not maintaining, a consistent level of asset-based communication. One district leader stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic communication with state officials was a challenge.

“Any discussions that I've had as it relates to policy, education policy, has been initiated by me or my staff. So that's from school safety. That's to academic achievement, curriculum and instruction. That is student well-being and support funding allocations, that the full gamut, you know, that's been initiated by on behalf of myself or members of administration.”

In line with this lack of communication, a separate school district leader felt that state legislators are voting unidirectionally based on their assumptions of educational leaders and mediating their agency, engaging in deficit-based ideology about educators and educational leaders.

“We're not even going to listen to what they have to say, about education, we know better than you. Because you just teach. And so, we know better than you, because you're just a high-ranking teacher, but you're not really a CEO.”

“We [legislators] are not even going to listen to what they [educators] have to say, about education, we know better than you. Because you just teach. And so we know better than you, because you're just a high ranking teacher, but you're not really a CEO.”

The third and final theme centered on how districts combined varying resources to maintain a constant level of service for their students. It should be noted that district leaders made great efforts to ensure students were being served. One school district leader leveraged many types of resources to provide translation services for his LatinX families, stating that it was important to do so because of the following.

“Many of those families [LatinX families], they do not feel like they are a part of the school's community. Because when they go, they see zero representation, and

very few people that are able to communicate with them in their native tongue. And so, they don't feel a part [of]. And when they don't feel a part, you don't get that full level of engagement.”

Holistically, these interviews help us to understand how engrained the sense of community is and how school district leaders view the power of the community as actively able to participate in mediating the structural challenges of the district if they are supported themselves. Our leaders help us situate the educator need, against a population of individuals he views as having the capacity to mediate this need, if provided pipelines of access.

This captures the essence of this study, structurally the LatinX community of South Carolina may be unsupported, despite the many ways they currently support the state and despite the ways they could support the state if provided sufficient opportunities. In our current understanding of state dynamics, however, the LatinX community is not viewed as fundamentally a part of the state or as fundamentally deserving of those opportunities by indifferent state leaders.

Policy Implications

South Carolina has a tumultuous and purposeful history with school finance disparity – a supported theme that emerges in our review of school finance policy in South Carolina and from our analysis of the data.

Inclusive of the fiscal disparity, the S.C. General Assembly has historically proposed legislation aimed at reducing educational liberation, historical truth, and community inclusivity, including HB 3728 passed in the 125th session.

To ameliorate the educational inequity exhibited across the state, we offer the following policy responses.

South Carolina must fully fund its education system, including to serve LatinX students and emergent bilingual students. Underfunding the BSC in the manner that South Carolina has placed all areas of public education in direct harm. Schools and students require resources to thrive. Teachers and leaders require resources to maintain a level of service that envelopes students in a fundamentally safe learning environment. Constraining funding at the top of the funnel, through the BSC, interrupts the resource allocation for districts and schools, and from our analysis, may with greater magnitude harm minoritized students.

South Carolina must try to understand school districts' acute needs and allow for communication from direct district leaders and personnel. South Carolina must understand school districts' acute needs and allow for communication from direct district leaders and personnel directly to the general assembly. The findings of this research suggest there are few opportunities for school district leaders to communicate their needs and few if any instances where the S.C. General Assembly opens itself up for substantial influence from those leaders with front-line knowledge.

South Carolina must provide greater ethnic and cultural support for its LatinX community. In the 125th session of 2023-24 the S.C. General Assembly passed the *South Carolina Transparency and Integrity in Education Act* that seeks to prevent leaders and educators from providing their students with historically-accurate curricula that expound on the legacy of forced labor and enslavement and

the harms of white supremacy. The act prohibits teaching content that delineates how race, sex, ethnicity, color or national origin play a role in the subjugation of individuals. Laws of this nature limit how schools can support their LatinX students to ascend the pipeline of education. It will also likely lead to constraints on how funding is used to target LatinX students through culturally-sustaining teaching.

Conclusion

State-level policy powerbrokers have largely disregarded the LatinX community in South Carolina and education leaders with practical educational insight. This scholarship has three goals: first to highlight the insights and nuance of education leaders; second, to highlight the school finance disparity that exists across the state; and third, to support the LatinX community in South Carolina as one that is consistently targeted for policy violence but practically ignored in the policy process.

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This document is an executive summary to the report, A Disproportionality Analysis of South Carolina School Finance Policy Priorities in High Proportion LatinX Districts During COVID-19, by David Martínez, D., Osworth, D., & Díaz, H.L., (May 2023) IDRA.