



NATIONAL ACCESS NETWORK

June 26, 2006

MEMORANDUM

To: Supporters of Quality Public Education for All Children

From: Michael A. Rebell and Molly A Hunter

Re: The *Fund the Child* Manifesto

We are writing to bring to your attention the serious detrimental impact on the growing national movement to ensure adequate funding to educate all children that is posed by a “manifesto” entitled *Fund the Child: Tackling Inequity and Antiquity in School Finance* that is currently being circulated by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Although the document describes many of the profound inequities that plague public school funding today, its proposal for Weighted Student Funding (WSF) as the sole solution to the problems that schools face is misleading, and would actually be harmful if implemented. In certain circumstances, WSF can be an effective way to distribute education funds within large school districts, but without a host of other reforms, WSF alone cannot create equity for public school students.

Focusing on WSF as a cure-all for school funding inequities is wrong for three major reasons. First, **this proposal for Weighted Student Funding ignores the biggest funding problem facing public schools—adequate funding.** By ignoring the need to ensure adequate funding in their reform agenda, the authors have invalidated the “equity” basis of their position. While schools with more at-risk students should indeed be provided more funding to create programs for success, these changes must come in the context of determining the actual cost of implementing needed programs, rather than merely changing the distribution of an arbitrary and insufficient amount of education funding. By rejecting attempts to assess the actual cost of educating students and providing funding on that level, the authors of this manifesto have rendered their proposal irrelevant. No policy solution will achieve an equitable education for at-risk students, and other students, unless the amount of funding for their schools is sufficient to help them learn.¹

Second, **the authors of the manifesto do not acknowledge the difficulty of calculating the weightings that would become the basis of WSF.** Almost all of the current weightings for at risk students, students with disabilities, and English language Learners have resulted from political compromises hammered out on the basis of the availability of funds in a particular state at a particular time, rather than on any systematic

¹ As the first footnote to the manifesto candidly acknowledges, this approach would also facilitate a large-scale voucher system that would allow public funding to flow to private and parochial schools, a system that could also seriously compromise current efforts to provide adequate education funding to all public school students.

analysis of these students' needs. Developing accurate weightings would be essential before WSF could become an important mechanism for school funding. Methodologies for developing fair and accurate weightings, some of which are briefly discussed in the manifesto, are in a developmental stage and the manifesto's simplistic proposal to base all funding decisions on per-student allocations before accurate weightings have been established is, to say the least, premature and unjustified.

Third, accountability measures cannot ignore inputs, programs, and activities that help schools build the capacity to educate all students. The authors of this manifesto argue that "per-student funding should arrive at the school as real dollars...that can be spent flexibly, with accountability systems focused more on real results and less on inputs, programs, or activities." Simply assuming that in giving funding to school administrators the money will be spent to establish the critical school-level resources necessary for each school's specific mix of students ignores the very complex realities of school improvement. School improvement depends upon a variety of programs, strategic planning, professional development, parental involvement, curriculum development, alignment with state standards, and other educational actions, some of which are more efficiently handled at the district or regional level. Although in many situations, more discretion over funding should be delegated to individual school leaders, such delegation should occur through a well-conceived and properly implemented educational reform planning process. While accountability measures that tabulate results can be useful for informing a school's strategic planning and targeted programs, the focus of efforts to ensure equity must be building school and district capacity to truly educate all students, including those at-risk.

In sum, *Fund the Child* identifies some of the serious challenges that schools face in achieving equitable learning environments for all students, but its proposal to utilize Weighted Student Funding as the single answer for all the funding inequities and inadequacies that our schools face is simplistic and harmful. WSF cannot stand on its own. Although it might prove helpful in specific circumstances within some large districts, without adequate funding, a more accurate understanding of appropriate weightings for at-risk students, and a focus on the many factors necessary to create the capacity of schools to truly address student needs, the proposal cannot be the solution that its proponents claim. On the contrary, it may well undermine many of the efforts that are currently advancing public education in states across the country.