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Foreword

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Foreword¹

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This edition of *Educational Considerations* is devoted to education finance issues of national importance in the twenty-first century. There are many ways to conceptualize a special edition on this theme. Education finance is a relatively young field compared to many disciplines, and one might take a retrospective approach, to begin at the beginning, the early twentieth century, with the grand masters of education finance—Cubberley, Updegraff, Strayer, Haig, Mort, Morrison— and weigh their contributions along with those of others at key historical mileposts. Another approach might be more data-based, examining the advances in our field’s ability to analyze and interpret education finance data in increasingly complex and sophisticated ways in order to deconstruct, for example, the “black box” of educational inputs, processes, and outcomes.

A third approach, the one selected here, presents an analysis of the more recent past, examining trends and issues that hold importance for the present and future, not only of education finance, but also of education more generally. These include long-term trends, such as the thirty year history of school finance litigation, as well as the vibrant but troubled charter school movement of the 1990s. Perennial issues, such as teacher compensation, still perplex policymakers, and after a decade of state standards, assessments, and high-stakes testing, compensation issues are again at the forefront. However, a greater appreciation of the role of professional development funding in enhancing teacher quality also is emerging. While the collection and use of appropriate data are key to gaining insight into what works and what doesn’t, be it school-based resource allocation or a state education funding system, there is growing interest in our field in those issues that are so far ahead of the curve that they have slipped beneath the radar screen of systematic data collection. For these issues, qualitative methods complement traditional quantitative analyses.

While the above issues and trends focus on elementary and secondary education, the future of higher education finance may be instructive with its greater emphasis on distance education and collaborative, entrepreneurial ventures to increase student enrollments and reach time-pressed, place-bound professionals. Finally, it is sometimes more comfortable to focus on our own federal, state, and local funding issues than to look transnationally at the impact of a globalizing economy. Frankly, it is unsettling to contemplate the cost of illiteracy in lost opportunities to the economies of not only developing or unstable countries, but also to our own economy and standard of living. Education of the world’s children is imperative, not only for reasons of social justice, but for global economic survival, and the United States, as a world power, shares responsibility for this enormous task. We, as researchers and practitioners in education finance, have much to contribute to that conversation.

The articles in this special edition are intended to be thought-provoking. For example, Thompson and Crampton challenge the efficacy of school finance litigation to achieve education finance reform in a study that tracks four states over a twenty-seven year period. Theobald analyzes the structure of teacher compensation and student achievement across three waves of education reform via a traditional framework of equity, efficiency, and liberty. Recognizing the constellation of societal and economic factors that have historically affected the teaching profession, Theobald’s analysis is cautious, more descriptive than prescriptive, but ultimately he seems to embrace efficiency-enhancing structures, such as pay-for-performance, more warmly than equity or liberty. After Killeen et al., analyzed levels of professional development expenditures in school districts, they came to what will undoubtedly be a surprising conclusion for many: Urban school districts outspend their suburban and rural counterparts. Embedded in this study, although not directly posed, is the question, how can urban school districts spend more on professional development and still have such dismal student scores? The authors acknowledge the lack of complete data in this newly-researched area and are pursuing case studies to augment these findings. Picus and Robillard echo concerns about data collection in a pragmatic study based on a Los Angeles high school and reach the conclusion that given the difficulty and cost of collecting school-based data, student-based data collection may be a more realistic goal. Versteegen reminds us of the historical importance of federal policy and funding with regard to students with disabilities and details major changes in the fiscal provisions under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Turning to what might be considered the single most important education reform of the 1990s, Muir et al., examine the impact of charter schools on the districts in which they reside, with a focus on funding issues. Their’s is an important contribution as much charter school research has been ideological and anecdotal up to this point. In addition, the federally funded four year study of charter schools did not address these issues in such depth (Nelson et al., 2000). Arsen’s study of Michigan charter schools paints a portrait of one state’s experience and reaches a troubling conclusion: charter schools whose *raison d’être* has been innovative approaches to education spend significantly more on administration and less on instruction than regular public schools in Michigan. Crampton and Bauman address an emerging trend, educational entrepreneurship, and examine the fundraising activities of three Colorado school districts. They conclude that the most affluent, a suburban district, was the most aggressive and successful in generating entrepreneurial revenues, and they find that across the districts and schools studied, entrepreneurial revenues remain largely outside traditional accounting methods. This case study is nested in the larger context of conflicting paradigms that underlie education finance policy decisions, where values such as equity, based in the theory of social goods, clash with notions of markets and competition found in neoclassical economics. LaCost et al., describe a collaborative partnership between two units of their university and a regional accrediting agency that utilizes distance education coursework as a centerpiece to certify school administrators and teacher leaders as School Improvement Specialists. The article reflects a tentative enthusiasm that is perhaps indicative of the concerns public sector institutions bring to balancing the fiscal benefits and risks of such ventures. In the closing essay, McClure chides us for the narrow focus of our field and encourages us to broaden our vision to the effects of the globalizing economy on our collective future. All in all, this is a cautionary tale that warns us that we ignore global economic and education trends at our own risk.

References

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1. The views expressed here do not necessarily represent those of the National Education Association.