

COMMENTARY

The Pitfalls of Site-Based Budgeting

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[A recent article in the San Francisco Chronicle](#) makes it clear just how hard it will be to make the distribution of resources in California's education system more equitable. The article describes a controversy in the [Albany Unified School District](#), where three elementary schools are raising money from parents to supplement the funds that the state provides.

The poorest of the three schools raises the least money, and spends much of what they raise to provide more lunch-time supervision. The other schools raise more and spend it on supplemental instruction in art, music, and other subjects. In an effort to be fair the school board suspended art and music lessons in two schools until they could come up with a way to provide similar enrichment in all three.

Not surprisingly, this decision displeased many parents. The issues raised by the Chronicle article illuminate the promise and pitfalls associated with [Strategic School Funding for Results \(SSFR\)](#), the subject of a [recent PACE seminar](#). See also [Thoughts on Public Education](#) (TOP-Ed.org has been offline since 2018 yet the website is archived via Wayback Machine). School districts implementing SSFR seek to make the distribution of resources across schools more transparent and, in some cases, more equitable, while shifting a greater degree of control over resources to the school level.

The move to increase autonomy and accountability at the school site encourages local educators to respond to the specific needs and circumstances of the children and communities they serve. By the same token, though, it is almost certain to lead to increased differentiation across schools. Some schools will devote their discretionary resources to lunch-time supervision and math tutoring, while others will devote them to music instruction and the chess club.

As the Albany story makes clear, differentiation is easily construed as inequity, even when the funds in question are raised by the schools themselves. As SSFR moves into full implementation in LAUSD, Pasadena, and Twin Rivers, we will learn how much differentiation school boards—and the communities they represent—are prepared to tolerate.

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