



Should private funding be allowed in public schools?

Though contributions from parents help defray costs, they can also increase school inequity

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Private funding in public K-12 schools can be controversial. In wealthier communities, an influx of private donations can potentially have an impact similar to that of funding schools based on local property tax revenue: increased disparity.

Paul Warren, a research associate at the Public Policy Institute of California who focuses on accountability and state budget work, says that several branches of private funding have an impact on K-12 schools.

The primary kind, he says, is funding that comes directly from parents and communities.

“Virtually every school district has put together a foundation in order to receive these funds,” Warren told Education Dive. “It varies wildly across districts. In wealthier parts of California, you hear stories about people writing checks for \$1000, and the amounts of money being sufficient enough to hire an extra teacher or a librarian.”

That’s probably the most common and significant form of private financing, Warren says.

But should it be allowed?

The Cato Institute’s Jason Bedrick, who focuses on education policy and school choice, says he sees no reason why not. “I’ve of the mind that we should do our best to pull up the poor and not pull down the rich. It’s absurd to make the argument that parents shouldn’t be able to give their kids as much as they possibly can.”

To Bedrick, the logic should be similar to that of parents being able to read at home to their kids: Those parents who have that option can choose to utilize it. Still, he notes that an argument exists related to school donations from wealthier parents exacerbating the gap between rich and poor.

“But given our current system, that’s already done through property taxes,” Bedrick told Education Dive.

This spring, a long-term investigation executed by a coalition of 20 NPR member stations found that looming discrepancies existed in schools on a district-to-district level. Property values played a major role in contributing to disparity, since those that are worth more subsequently pay more in taxes, which results in better-funded schools with more resources in wealthier areas and schools in low-income areas remaining locked in poverty.

“As to whether or not it’s a good idea, in California, school districts don’t have a lot of control over their funding levels,” Warren said, noting that school districts by themselves aren’t able to raise or control tax rates.

“Their funding depends on decisions that are made in the state capitol regarding budgets and spending,” he explained. “Private donations are a pretty important source of funding.”

It’s also worth noting that parents can be willing to spend more on schools than what the state might deem appropriate.

“They want their kids and their neighbor’s kids to have a good education, and so this provides an outlet for that,” Warren said. “In a lot of ways, it’s a really good thing.”

Yet a problem arises when it comes to actually quantifying any possible resource gap stemming from private money in K-12. The PPIC, with Warren’s help, has tried to study the issue — yet it’s thorny.

“We don’t have very good sources of information on how big a factor that [parental contribution] is,” he said. “Do a lot of schools get a lot of funding? Or are areas that get a lot of parental contributions few and far between?”

And because donations aren’t permanent, even the more privileged schools who get funding from their communities needs to proceed with caution.

Donation amounts can vary significantly year to year, and schools can be better off using the extra contributions for field trips or new library books instead of long-term expenditures.

Bedrick agrees.

“The public education system should be financed adequately, and when they’re looking for money from parents and prospective donors, that should be more for frills more than anything else,” he said. “Certainly, in the public sector, you would expect schools shouldn’t have to regularly rely on private financing, especially for basic operations. It’s a public system, and it should be funded adequately, as a public function.”