

## *Local Control, Funding and Flexibility*

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In the 1970s, legal challenges to unequal schooling resulted in a shift of power away from local districts to the state government. This was justified, in part, because a lot of inequality had to do with unequal funding. Since housing is segregated and local schools were funded primarily through property taxes, rich districts were able to spend considerably more on their schools than poor districts. Legal minds decided that the remedy was to send everyone's property taxes directly to the state. Then the state government would divide up the total and disperse it equally among the districts.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the state house. State legislators began to tie chunks of spending to specific school policies, and then they began to demand that districts implement policies without giving them any money to do so. In this way, state governments essentially eliminated the policy-making function of locally elected school boards while at the same time creating budget woes for them during the last twenty years. The state takeover of school policy-making has had several fundamental effects. One, it has made school policy uniform throughout the state. Two, it has allowed corporate business to dictate what that uniform policy is. Three, it has not equalized school spending. Four, it has allowed the resegregation of schools. And five, it has increased pushouts while failing to close the achievement gap.

From 1990 to 2000, sixteen state legislatures had passed legislation tying funding to the districts' abilities to raise test scores on state mandated tests. Districts complained that they needed more money and the flexibility to tailor their programs to meet the needs of their diverse student populations. State officials brushed off these complaints and told district officials to better enforce the teaching of a standardized, simplistic scripted-curriculum in "low-performing" schools—or else face penalties.

Since 1965, federal education law had mostly provided extra funding to poor districts with few strings attached. In 2002, however, Congress renamed the federal law No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and tied the extra funding to high stakes testing and scripted reading programs. This made school policy-making even more distant from local control, moving it from the state house to the White House. The farther away policy is made from those whom it affects, the less likely such policy will meet the needs of those it allegedly serves, especially when corporate lobbyists, who outspend unions 12 to 1, have greater access to and influence over state and federal legislators than mom and pop.

In calling for school policy and programs to be responsive to local community input, one can be accused of wanting a return to the bad old days. Some argue that it was federal intervention in the South during the Civil Rights movement that finally ended legal segregation and systematic lynching. And by this analogy, they argue that the federal NCLB, if properly rewritten, will finally end the historic achievement gap and truly fulfill the American promise of social mobility by merit alone. But both the historic analogy and the current defense of a revised NCLB are based in myth and fantasy, not reality. The answer to ending inequality within districts is more democracy, not less. Judicial and legislative remedies are not effective unless the people who are affected by such remedies are part of their creation, implementation, and revision. Parents, students, and school staff will never be in this position until they organize once more into coalitions around the issues of freedom and dignity for all. It is the responsibility of each person to find out what they can do to make this happen.