

School Fundraising: Leveling the Playing Field or Advantaging the Advantaged?

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by

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***Abstract***

In this study, I examine the mechanics of fundraising in three diverse elementary schools. Through semi-structured interviews with principals and a Parent Teacher Organization president, I explore the differences in school fundraising between a school with a high per pupil expenditure, a low per pupil expenditure, and a school with an above average per pupil expenditure but that has a disproportional number of economically disadvantaged students. My findings suggest that schools raise different amounts of money with different degrees of difficulty, but the greatest difference in schools is their financial starting points. I contend that school fundraising highlights the great inequalities in American school.

## *Introduction*

The public generally believes American schools to be a great equalizer, providing a level playing field for all. But as researchers and policymakers point out, funding in American schools is not equal. What are the results of this inequality? While scholars continue to debate whether funding differences really impact children's school outcomes, one aspect of school inequality has largely gone unnoticed—schools serving advantaged children can raise more money on their own, through fundraisers, than schools serving disadvantaged children. This study aims to explore fundraising in schools and how it may differ depending on the wealth and the location of a school. Are wealthy districts receiving even more than we anticipate from informal money sources such as fundraising and corporate donations? If so, how is this informal money being utilized? Is this money yet another advantage that wealthy districts receive that widens the gap of inequality in American schools?

## *Background of Inequality*

School funding is based largely on property taxes, which can differ as much as three hundred percent between wealthy and poor districts (Condrón and Roscigno 2003). There are debates as to whether school funding matters and how putting money into schools actually affects educational outcomes. Some studies have found that there is not a systematic connection between expenditures and student achievement (Hanushek 1989). Other researchers argue that school resources are extremely important and directly affect student achievement (Greenwald et al 1996). We know that funding is different for each school, but how different?

The design of the American school system is important to study within the realm of school fundraising to see why some districts receive less money than other districts and what districts are doing to raise extra revenues. Jonathon Kozol reported that parents in a wealthy school district in New York raised \$400,000 to build a new auditorium for their school (1991). Does a brand new auditorium matter? Does it give some students a distinct advantage over others and is this type of fundraising unfair? The functionalist school of sociology would argue that it is not unfair. Functionalists believe that society evolves naturally and that, as in nature, only the fittest survive. They believe that America's schools are merit-based institutions that reward intelligence and hard work. The controversial authors of "The Bell Curve" (Herrnstein and Murray 1994) take a functionalist position when they argue that innate intelligence affects outcome. Money, socioeconomic status and school differences, according to functionalists, are not large determinants of whether one can be successful or not. Functionalists claim that because some people are smarter than others society has individuals to fulfill all necessary roles, from garbage collectors to CEOs (Collins 1971).

In contrast, the conflict perspective contends that society has not naturally evolved, but has been designed this way by the people in power. While education appears to be meritocratic, students are rewarded based on predetermined conditions that are closely tied to their background. Kozol, who argues against the functionalist view, says it is more accurate to label the design of America's schools not, "the survival of the fittest" but "the survival of the children of the fittest" (1991; 60). Everyone in society is competing for scarce resources, and schools are no different. Conflict theorists believe schools are an important factor to children's academic success and that there are

institutional obstacles for those who are economically disadvantaged. In short, rather than serving as a vehicle for success, our current school system serves the interests of the advantaged.

Social reproduction theorists believe that education is designed to reinforce inequality, but hides its true purpose behind the mask of an equalizing society. Social reproduction theorists believe that society is constructed to reproduce social class systems and schools are one mechanism of promoting this reproduction. Schools are designed to train the wealthy to maintain their wealth along with their position on the top of society and to keep the poor at the bottom of the job market. While middle and upper class schools reward creativity and individualism, lower class schools reinforce memorization and obedience. The exploitation that begins in schools prepares students for workplace exploitation (Bowles and Gintis 1976).

Beyond privileging the upper class and socializing students to future work roles, Meyer claims that schools select and allocate students into positions in society. The institution of education is designed to sort students and legitimizes this allocation of work positions without the student having any choice (Meyer 1977). Conflict theorists believe that schools are working against the disadvantaged, while functionalists think schools can provide an equal playing field for all children in America despite funding differences.

### *Background of School Funding*

School funding in the United States has its basis in America's political and demographic history. In order for territories in the United States to petition for statehood, they had to provide a free system of education to all citizens starting in 1787 (Walters 1993). By the 1900's, local funding of schools began; schools were small in size and

their purpose was to serve the local community. Local funding worked since Americans lived in small, isolated communities (Biddle and Berliner 2003). Funding, at this time, was approximately equal across these communities and any differences between schools were not recognized. As America industrialized and the poor moved into urban areas for work, wealthier Americans moved to suburbs. This change caused the dynamics and impact of local funding to shift. No longer were local taxes approximately equal across the county, nor were the differences between schools ignored.

America started to see huge discrepancies between those living in wealthy suburbs, urban ghettos and rural areas (Biddle and Berliner 2003). “Foundation” programs began to try to equalize the playing field since wealthier districts could raise more money than poor districts. Many states decided that if districts could not reach what they deemed to be the goal for per student spending, they would receive aid. Regardless of the state aid, the poor districts could not compare monetarily with wealthy districts. Foundation programs did not equalize districts and funding inequities grew as schools depended more and more on local property taxes for money (Walters 1993).

### *Current Funding*

What do we currently know about school funding and funding gaps in public education? Public schools in America currently obtain approximately 43 percent of their funds from local taxes. Fifty percent of school funding comes from the state government and the remaining 7 percent comes from the federal government. The large portion of school money that comes from the local level is based heavily on property taxes that vary greatly between districts depending on the worth of homes and businesses in the community.

The results of this funding pattern is that there are immense differences between the per pupil expenditures across the states. For example, if adjusted for the cost of living, New Jersey spends, on average, \$8,801 per pupil and Utah spends \$3,804 per student (Biddle and Berliner 2003). In contrast, some of the wealthiest districts in the country spending as much as \$16,546 per pupil, like in Alaska. The state in this study, on average, spends \$6,251 per pupil, but depending on the district can spend as much as \$8,764 and as little as \$5,345 per pupil. Expenditure discrepancies are consistently related to wealth discrepancies because of the system of funding (Walters and Freeman 1993).

Even within the same school district funding can be unequal. In a study of a large, urban school district, Condron and Roscigno (2003) found that schools within this district spent up to \$790 more per pupil in certain elementary schools. The main difference between the schools receiving more money and the schools receiving less money was the socioeconomic status of the students. The schools with the lowest proportion of poor students spent more per pupil than schools with the highest proportion of poor students. Higher socioeconomic status students, on average, received more money.

Disadvantaged, poor and minority students in America actually receive, on average, less funding than advantaged students. According to research by Carey (2003), districts in 22 states with the highest levels of poverty received less funding from state and local sources than districts with the lowest level of poverty. In the state in this study, the current gap in per student, calculated in 2001, between the highest and lowest poverty districts is \$642. The gap between districts with the highest and lowest numbers of

minorities is \$195. While this may seem a small amount, it cumulates when multiplied by all students the same school.

The total amount of spending on education in the United States exceeds \$200 billion a year and in the past three decades per pupil expenditures have increased over 200 percent (Walters 1993). These are impressive amounts yet there remains an obvious money gap within and between states.

### *Litigation over School Funding*

Many believe that America's current system of funding is unconstitutional. Multiple court cases during the 1970s addressed this issue, including the famous U.S. Supreme Court case, *Rodriquez v. San Antonio*, which was a class action lawsuit representing minorities in Texas that claimed the school funding system in Texas was unfair and unequal (Kozol 1991). However, the plaintiffs could not convince the court system to equalize funding because the Supreme Court ruled that there is not a strong enough correlation between school funding and achievement or opportunity (Dayton 1993). The U.S. constitution only promises access to a free education: it does not include exact equality of per pupil expenditures (Dayton 1993). The decision to keep funding based at the local level was largely based on the idea that education is a state issue and the federal government should not intervene (Walters 1993). Many states have found school funding methods unconstitutional (New Jersey's *Robinson v. Cahill*; *DeRolph vs. State of Ohio*) yet changes in funding have been slow and unsuccessful. Currently; forty-three states have or have had litigation about inequalities in school funding (Education Commission of the States 2004).

Clear inequalities in funding exist, but in order to equalize these differences drastic steps would have to be taken. A Supreme Court decision to change school funding may not be the only solution. Society would have to make the tough decision to level schools up by increasing funding to the poorest districts or level schools down by taking money away from the wealthiest districts. This would be a difficult decision for the government to make. To level schools down, states could reroute the money raised by taxes in wealthier districts and give it to poorer districts. To level schools up, states could try to find additional funds or raise taxes in order to bring the poorer districts up to a median level (Walters 1993). Neither of these solutions is met with much public approval. Wealthy Americans do not want to lose their advantage and have their money spent elsewhere. Poor Americans do not want to spend more of their hard-earned money on taxes. Also, some researchers believe that increasing spending is equivalent to throwing money at a problem without really solving it (Walters 1993).

*Does Money Matter? Does Spending Correlate with Achievement?*

The question the American public and the court systems have been asking is does funding matter? What does money have to do with student achievement? Research has not come to a consensus about this issue. Eric Hanushek (1989; 1996) has repeatedly argued that money does not influence achievement. Hanushek states that even with increases in per pupil expenditures in schools, because of the institutional arrangements in place, students would not achieve more (1989). He proposes that the lack of resources is not the biggest problem facing schools, and society needs to focus on broader educational reforms in order to equalize outcomes and achievement (1996).

Greenwald et al (1996) argue that resources and funding do matter for student achievement. Their studies find that resources are positively related to student outcomes and assert that increased spending may increase student achievement. They support their arguments by showing that students who receive a higher per pupil expenditure have higher levels of achievement. While they do not contend that money is the sole determinant in school success, they believe it is important to examine how money is spent.

There are holes in the debate over the importance of school spending and the effect of per pupil expenditures on achievement. In order to resolve this issue, Ludwig and Bassi (1999) suggest that new methods be used to study this problem, and note that past research has omitted important variables. Further empirical research needs to be performed on this subject to determine whether money affects achievement and there needs to be a consensus on the methods used to perform this research. Recently, other researchers have used different methods to study this problem and have concluded that funding does have a significant effect on student achievement (Biddle and Berliner 2003). Despite the varied arguments about the importance of money in education, general conclusions state that money has some effect on achievement.

Another complicating factor is that most studies look at how money is related to students' test scores. While test scores may reflect one aspect of what schools do, most parents want their schools to do more than teach their children skills that will show up on standardized tests. Parents tend to like it when the school builds a child's confidence through art, sports, and other extra-curricular activities. The kinds of benefits that

additional resources often provide may not be easily observed by studies focusing on children's test scores.

*How Money Matters: Parental Involvement and Added Resources*

If there continue to be questions over the empirical evidence regarding money and achievement, research can look at the ways money can matter in schools. There are many reasons to believe that better-funded schools provide more opportunities and higher achievement for students. Better-funded schools can attract highly qualified teachers with higher salaries and have better working conditions. As spending per pupil increases, the number of teachers with a master's degree increases; these better-trained teachers have a positive effect on students (Condrón and Roscigno 2003). Also, schools with more resources can provide better school facilities. The physical condition of a school, as well as the money spent on instruction and maintenance is important, as studies claim better school facilities cause students to be more engaged in school (Condrón and Roscigno 2003). Other findings suggest that an increase in expenditures can help implement non-academic programs that are beneficial, such as programs for immigrant children or to prevent teenage pregnancy. Some schools report improving safety measures in their schools like adding metal detectors or surveillance cameras (Walters 1993). These benefits would not be available without additional funds. Even in school districts that seem to have high per pupil expenditures, much of this money may go to extra, but necessary programs like special education (Walters 1993).

Often, schools gain from extra resources provided from parents and community members. Community involvement is a large factor that can contribute to the success or failure of a child in school. If a community has strong social capital, which is the

network of trust that are formed in communities that add to a child's well-being, sense of security and success, it can provide important links between parents, as well as between a parent and the school faculty. These connections help reinforce the rules and expectations for children because they receive consistent messages not only at home, but at school and even in the homes of their friends' in the community (Coleman 1988).

Community social capital is dependent on the structure of the community. Some communities are arranged in ways that have extensive parent groups, perhaps from parents being involved in Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO), or other types of social clubs. These close knit groups are committed to their children and their community can be very powerful (Lareau 2003). Close-knit communities have been shown to reduce the drop-out rate of children in both one and two parent homes (Coleman 1991). So while money and school funding are often indicators of the economic and social situations of the community, they are not the only factor affecting students and schools. Both money and parental involvement have significant influence in schools. With the increasing funding gaps becoming more apparent, parents, teachers and community members are working together to provide extra and much needed money for their schools.

#### *Fundraising and Other Alternatives to Bridge the Gap*

Why do some schools receive more additional funding and volunteerism? The answer is clearly resources. Some parents have more money to give, more time to volunteer, are more skilled at communicating with teachers, and have a better understanding of the importance of education. These parents also tend to live in the better-funded school districts. Parents who live in these districts make more money on average. For example, within the same county in one Midwestern state, the median

family income in an urban school district is \$25,774 while the average income of a family in a suburban district is \$49,930 (State Department of Education 2004). This difference in income can account for many things, including the ability to give extra money to a school or buy the supplies a child needs to attend school. Parents who live in the better-funded districts reside in these areas because they are wealthy and can afford more expensive homes, which in turn provides schools with higher property taxes to draw on.

With the current gaps in funding, many schools have to find alternative ways to provide the necessities, while other schools, wanting to provide the best for their students, look for ways to supplement their resources. Schools have long relied on parents to creatively raise funds to help out with extras for their students. The Parent Teacher Organization fundraises to give students extras and benefits that would not be available to them otherwise. In America it is estimated that fundraising provides an additional two billion dollars to schools each year (Kidder 2002). Traditionally, fundraising was used to provide non-essentials such as field trips and playground equipment, but as some school finances decline, fundraising is sometimes used to provide critical items such as office supplies and textbooks (Golanda and Dagley 1994).

There are major gaps in the research on school fundraising. Few researchers have studied fundraising because it is hard to find data on funds raised in schools. Schools do not have to report this money to the government, or any other source. Many principals do not know the exact amount of money a school raises because the PTO designs the fundraisers and decides how the money is spent (Golanda and Dagley 1994). There is little to no regulation for PTOs or schools when it comes to fundraising. Golanda and Dagley (1994) found that low socioeconomic status schools spending

money they raised on postage and telephone bills; these are necessities for the school but they hardly provide many direct educational benefits for the students.

School fundraising is used by most U.S. elementary schools to benefit their students, but does it benefit some schools more than others? Studies have shown that schools with better educated, savvier principals and higher socioeconomic status schools are able to raise significantly more money and tend to have much better resources for students (Kidder 2002). Golanda and Dagley (1994) also found socioeconomic status to be directly related to the amount of revenue a school can raise. Differences between school fundraising is great; one of the first studies on school fundraising found a variance from \$1.57 to \$75.47 raised per pupil across schools (Meno 1984). These differences in school funding and fundraising efforts have left some schools to rely on more creative solutions to raising money, such as corporate fundraising.

Corporate fundraising is an increasingly controversial issue, but schools are increasingly reaching out to businesses to help them with the funds they need, in return, businesses are responding to schools for a variety of reasons: advertising, philanthropy, and recruitment of workers (Glegg 1997). The trend of businesses being involved in school funding began in the 1980s when companies sponsored sports competitions and championships (Cohen 1999). In 1997, there were approximately 200,000 school-business partnerships in the United States. Schools are partnering with businesses to help build school buildings, stadiums and libraries. The stadium or school is then named after the business (Cohen 1999). A common example of a school-business partnership is with soft-drink companies, which have an estimated 500,000 deals with schools across the country. Companies provide vending machines to schools and the school keeps a portion

of the sales profit (Molner 2002). For example, in Madison, Wisconsin, a three-year contract with Coca-Cola will provide the Madison school district with \$1.5 million, a \$100,000 signing bonus, as well as internships for students (Cohen 1999). Other popular options for schools include nationwide initiatives, such as box tops for education, or soup labels for education. By collecting these brands labels through parents, schools receive money (Molner 2002).

The recent phenomenon of schools partnering with businesses is worrying some. Critics of the school-business partnerships admit that schools desperately need the money, but worry about the effect of the constant advertising on students. Soft-drink deals cause concern for children's health, because schools are promoting unhealthy products (Cohen 1999). Critics question whether kids are too susceptible to advertising and worry about the constant branding of everything, including school buildings. Not every parent agrees with the morals of business advertising (Glegg 1997). The corporate sponsorship of schools is undoubtedly lucrative and a creative, easy way for schools to raise funds that they do not have, but parents and education researchers are concerned that it is a slippery-slope to invite businesses into schools.

Through all types of fundraising, principals, parents and policy makers are desperately trying to make up this gap between schools and financial needs. This research hopes to examine the different points at which schools assess their situation and the techniques, methods, successes and failures they experience through the fundraising process.

*Research Question*

Schools serving the advantaged tend to spend more money per pupil than school serving the disadvantaged. But the gaps that we are familiar with may underestimate the true gap, because they ignore variations in fundraising. In this thesis I consider how much more informal money is raised via fundraisers in schools serving advantaged children versus disadvantaged children. I also consider how that money is used.

### ***Methods***

This study was conducted at three different elementary schools within the same county in a large Midwestern metropolitan area of roughly one million people.<sup>1</sup> I chose schools depending on their reported per pupil expenditures (PPE) in relation to other districts in the county. Specifically, I chose one school with high PPE, one with very low PPE, and a third because it was in a large, urban district with an above average PPE. These schools were also chosen, in part, for convenience and their willingness to participate.

This study includes three schools, one from each designated category: high PPE, low PPE and urban. For multiple reasons, many schools that I originally contacted did not provide information for the study. To contact elementary schools, I had to go through a series of reviews of my project with two departments within my university, and the superintendent's office of each school district I wished to interview. Some districts

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<sup>1</sup> The small sample is a limitation of this study. It is hard to say if these results are generalizable to other schools, and in other parts of the country as school funding varies state to state. Due to the time constraints of this study, the difficulty of getting permission personnel, and a good deal of unwillingness to participate on the part of schools, the sample size of this study was cut from nine schools to three schools.

simply did not respond with an answer, and some districts declined participation altogether for varying reasons. Interestingly, one district from the lower set of per pupil expenditures claimed they were much too busy with proficiency testing to participate, and another school from the urban district said they no longer do fundraising but gave no further information and did not want to participate. The sample size became much smaller than desired highlighting some of the practical difficulties involved in studying schools. The unwillingness of many superintendents and principals to participate in this study may point to the sheer busyness of administrators at elementary schools today.

### *Schools*

Roosevelt Elementary School<sup>2</sup> has the second lowest per pupil expenditures in its county at \$7,668. Roosevelt is part of a small district and is one of two elementary schools in the district; the other was a mile down the road. It falls almost \$1,000 behind the state average PPE of \$8,435. Fifty-five percent of fourth grade students at this school are proficient in reading. State indicators note that schools must meet a 75% reading proficiency level to be considered passing. The district in which Roosevelt is located does not meet the state proficiency requirement for math, citizenship, writing or science either. Roosevelt has 415 students and 25 teachers. It is 85% white and 11% African American, and a total of 29% of the students are considered economically disadvantaged according to State reports.

Located the farthest away from the city, in a less metropolitan area, Roosevelt was the most rural school I visited. The building was approximately 50 years old and in fair condition. The building was in no way new or ideal, but it was in reasonable order and physical shape. My initial observations of the school included the fact that the gym

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<sup>2</sup> I use pseudonyms for all elementary schools.

doubled as a cafeteria, the library was small and generally the entire school seemed overcrowded. Also, the office area was messy and phones were often unattended, and occasionally answered by older students.

Kennedy Elementary School is part of the largest district in the county and one of the largest, metropolitan districts in the state. It is one of 90 elementary schools in the district. The PPE for Kennedy was in the upper half for the county and above the state average of \$8,436 at \$10,356. This is above average PPE can possibly be attributed to the school's Title 1 funds that provides extra money from the federal government for schools and districts considered particularly disadvantaged. While the PPE is similar to our wealthy district, Washington, there are clear differences between Washington and Kennedy in proficiency scores and other observations in the schools which will be discussed. Fourth graders at Kennedy had a 57% reading proficient level, and, like Roosevelt, did not pass any of the state's standards in math, writing, citizenship or science. Of the three schools I studied, Kennedy was in a district with the lowest graduation rate at 59% (compared to 84% at Roosevelt and 97% at Washington). Kennedy has 510 students and 22 teachers. It is 78% African American, 4% Hispanic and 16% white. Sixty percent of Kennedy's students are considered economically disadvantaged.

Kennedy Elementary School is housed in an unattractive building that was most likely built in the 1970's and possibly had been converted from an old business or warehouse. Kennedy is located in an urban, residential area, but not the inner-city. From the street, the building did not look like a school, but more like a factory painted odd shades of green, yellow and cream. In one side of the building, a large room had been

divided to hold six classrooms. Six-foot tall bookshelves were all that separated these classrooms, and noise easily traveled between the “rooms.” The principal requested we meet before school hours, as during the day she is too busy and the building is too loud to conduct an interview. The library was housed in a large, open area. There are noticeably few books and many books appeared to be older and out of date. Generally the building was unorganized and overcrowded. All of the furniture and posters were dated, and the environment was not conducive to learning.

Washington Elementary School had the highest per pupil expenditure in the county at \$10,869. While this PPE is similar to that of Kennedy’s, the demographics of the school are quite different. Washington’s fourth grade reading proficiency level is 88.2%, the only school in this study that passes state standards. Washington also passes 80% of students or more in citizenship, math, writing, and science. Washington has 363 students, 25 teachers and is 97% white. Other races within in the school are not listed by the Department of Education. None of the students at Washington are considered economically disadvantaged.

Washington Elementary School is in an upper-class suburb. The school is an old-fashioned looking school house that matches the large, brick houses in the district, but the inside has been completely remodeled and is feels like a brand-new school. Security, which the other schools lacked completely, is enforced at Washington. Guests are required to sign in and wear visitor badges during their visit. Only one door is left unlocked to the public at Washington and is monitored at all times. The school is beautiful, orderly and kept very clean.

Table 1: Overview of Schools

Name	Location	PPE	% Economically Disadvantaged	Racial Composition	4 <sup>th</sup> Graders Passing Reading Proficiency
Washington	High SES City-Suburb	\$10,869	0%	97% white	88%
Roosevelt	Low SES Rural-Suburb	\$7,668	29%	85% white 11% African American	55%
Kennedy	Low SES Inner-City	\$10,356	60%	78% African American, 16% White, 4% Asian	57%

### *Data Collection*

I conducted roughly 30 minute tape-recorded semi-structured interviews at each of the three schools. The interviews occurred in the principal's office at a time convenient to them either during or before the school day. I asked a series of informal questions to each principal (see Appendix A for a full list) and then allowed for more open discussion.<sup>3</sup>

I structured the interviews around my main research questions. Specifically, questions ranged from basic descriptions of schools' fundraising efforts and how much money they raise, and more personal questions about their frustrations and feelings about fundraising in their schools. I also asked a series of questions about parental involvement in their school, as well as financial questions about their needs and wants for their elementary school. I also wanted to know what they typically do with the money they make from fundraisers and what their most pressing financial needs are in general.

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<sup>3</sup> After delving into my study, I realized it might be more beneficial to interview PTO members as I found they conducted most fundraising efforts, but because I did not have time to get permission through my college, I could not realize this goal. I was able to interview one PTO member at Roosevelt.

## ***Results***

### *How Money is Raised*

Fundraising efforts in each of these schools are surprisingly similar. Each school follows the standard format of contracting a company to come into the school and provide brochures full of crafts, cookies, candies and/or other easy-to-sell items for kids to take door-to-door or give to parents to sell at their places of work. The schools receive 50% of the profits and companies offer prizes to top-selling children. While no school used the same company, the brochures were noticeably alike. Washington sold gift wrap. Kennedy and Roosevelt sold candies, candles and craft items. Each school was very pleased with the ease of using these companies and planned on continued use in the future.

Washington Elementary only does one fundraiser a year, stating that they raise enough money from their fall gift wrap sale to sustain their PTO for the entire year. Roosevelt and Kennedy do both fall and spring fundraisers. Kennedy uses the same type of catalog fundraiser in both the fall and the spring. Roosevelt uses the catalog in the fall and has a one-item sale in the spring, such as cookie dough or chocolate bunnies. The PTO's in all of these schools run all fundraising efforts and use money raised to help the school.

### *How Much is Raised*

Contrary to expectations I found that each school raises close to the same amount of money (see Table 2). Roosevelt raised a total of \$17,000 from two fundraisers. Their fall fundraiser brought in \$12,000 and their spring fundraiser garnered an additional \$5,000. Washington raised around \$15,000 from one fundraiser and Kennedy raised

\$10,000 from two fundraisers, \$5,000 in both the fall and the spring. Principals noted that fundraising can change year to year. Washington can make as much as \$20,000 and Kennedy can make closer to \$10,000 from one fundraiser. Numbers reported are their average amount of money raised. Despite raising roughly similar levels of money, the most striking difference between the amounts raised is that Washington is able to raise the total amount of money they need for the year from one fundraiser, while Roosevelt and Kennedy have to do two fundraisers. Kennedy was still \$5,000 behind the other schools after two fundraisers. Each school aimed to raise close to the same amount of money each year for their PTO, yet the frequency of fundraisers and the actual completion of the goal was slightly different for each school.

*Table 2 Fundraising Money*

<i>School</i>	<i>Total Money Raised</i>	<i>Number of Fundraisers</i>
<i>Washington</i>	<i>\$15,000</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Roosevelt</i>	<i>\$17,000</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Kennedy</i>	<i>\$10,000</i>	<i>2</i>

### *Experiences with Fundraising*

The mechanics of fundraising differed at each school. Each school stated that they had a core group of parents that were active in the PTO, and other parents were willing to help but were less dedicated due to work and family schedules. Principals seemed happy that they had any help at their school and were grateful to have a PTO.

The PTO was essential at each school for fundraising. None of the schools complained about fundraisers or were negative about their PTO, yet the schools encountered different problems with fundraising. Cynical and frustrated comments slipped into conversations. Kennedy's principal detailed the long and wearisome process her large district faced with fundraising at the administrators' level because of miles of paperwork and red tape. She was more than happy to pass that burden to the PTO, which did not have to go through as many channels to raise or spend money. Other schools in her district did not do fundraising at all. She believes that "it's a lot of work and it can get sticky with the cash handling procedures. Some people don't like to deal with the paperwork that comes with it." The main concern she had with her district was the amount of paperwork, describing it as "tedious and cumbersome."

The president of the PTO at Roosevelt spoke with me in great detail about her experiences with fundraising. She spoke of the difficulty of getting other parents involved. She gave the impression that she, along with three other parents, was left to do most of the work;

"We have 500 kids so we should have 1,000 parents, but we only have about 8... (the rest of the parents) they won't show up for anything else... fundraising is not fun. It's not fun. It's a lot of work but it's necessary. You don't get tired of it because you know you have to do it."

The principal reflected on this statement and suggested that parents are too busy to be involved in schools, with both parents working and kids at home. Not wanting to sound negative or ungrateful, the principal added to this sentiment that, "dynamite comes in small packages."

Washington seemed to have different experiences getting parents involved and raising money. Principals at Roosevelt and Kennedy were careful not to be pessimistic about their PTO or fundraising, but cynicism about the experience slipped into the conversations. For example, Roosevelt continually said their school and PTO were wonderful and supportive but stated, “Generally school funding in (our state) is not equitable, but we keep hoping for better days down the road.” Washington’s principal had no problems, concerns or negative attitudes. The principal reiterated that the parent group is supportive and extremely active. The PTO has chairpersons for each of the many events they do throughout the year. Washington’s principals summed up her PTO’s involvement, financial backing and support by saying, “Anytime we need something, they will get it for us.”

### *Starting Points*

Roosevelt, Washington and Kennedy Elementary Schools start with very different resources and needs. When talking to each school, these differences became apparent, more so than just walking through the schools and observing buildings or looking at per pupil expenditures, proficiency test results or school demographics. Washington and Kennedy have very similar PPE but in no way are these two schools similar, or equal. When talking about what principals would want to improve their schools, the principal at Kennedy laughed and said she would want a new building but cited how improbable that is for her district. Realistically, she wants more manpower in the school to help with the students. In contrast, Washington Elementary’s building was completely remodeled a few years ago. Washington’s principal stated that she could not really think of anything her school would need that she does not already have.

Roosevelt's principal stated multiple times that their school levy had failed four times and was on the ballot again in a few months. The principal explained that since they could not pass their levy they had cut out half of the busing in their district, putting an additional burden on parents and the school. Also, they were forced to cut all fieldtrips for their school. Roosevelt was struggling to meet the same standards and keep the amenities they were used to before the levies continually failed. Trying to maintain the benefits they want for their children, the principal acknowledged, "Pennies get pinched to the point where you almost pinch them in half sometimes."

Roosevelt, Washington and Kennedy clearly have varying beginning points and PPE does not always tell the entire story. The physical conditions of the school buildings, results on standardized test scores, differences in socioeconomic backgrounds and the diverse wants and needs of these schools hint at their extreme differences. They are very different and their needs are very different as well. The need for more funds varies in important ways.

### *How Money is Spent*

The largest contrast found within these schools is how they spend their extra, informal money. From instructional materials to enrichment activities, these schools use their money from fundraising to support what they believe they need. As we can see from their starting points, these schools have diverse needs. Roosevelt spent the bulk of their money on instructional materials and educational items. Most of the PTO's money is spent on books for the library, art supplies that are located in one closet that must be used by the entire school, storage containers for teachers for organization and recess games to make up for their small amount of old playground equipment. The PTO also gives each

new teacher a gift certificate for \$250 to buy classroom supplies because the school budget does not cover many classroom items. Consumable items, such as workbooks, paper and ink, are in high demand and the PTO often must replace these items at Roosevelt. The PTO will also buy school supplies at the beginning of the year for several kids in each class because they cannot afford them.

While most of Roosevelt's extra funds go to daily needs like instructional supplies, the PTO and principal try to add enrichment activities to the school year. Since field trips were cut at Roosevelt, the school was forced to be creative by bringing fieldtrips to the school. In the fall, the PTO brings in a pumpkin farm so kids can pick jack-o-lanterns. In the spring, the school brings in an author of a children's book to read to students. In gym classes, two students from each grade are sent to a sporting event a few times a year, such as a college basketball game, in honor of good sportsmanship. While most of the PTO's money is spent on school supplies, they still attempt to purchase some extras for their students with the little money leftover.

Kennedy raised less than any other school and spent almost all of their money on daily necessities. The principal claimed almost all of their extra money goes to school needs, such as books or supplies for the classroom. One project they were trying to raise money for was a "Welcome" sign for their school's front yard since the school is hard to recognize from the road (as it looks more like a factory than a traditional school). The purchase has been postponed though, because of concerns that the sign will be vandalized in the area. Fundraising money was also used on fieldtrips, but not often. Most often, fundraising money is used to purchase books and instructional items for Kennedy.

Washington Elementary School does not spend fundraising money on instructional materials, as their school budget covers all instructional and classroom needs. Washington's fundraising money is spent on enrichment activities in the school. Examples of these activities include, annual spring field games for students, a sixth grade graduation party, and a program celebrating art in the school. Field trips are not supported through the PTO, but through their school budget. The PTO does provide grants for teachers, up to \$500, that can support any type of "innovative" program in the classroom. Fundraising money is also used for large projects that are needed from time to time, like redoing the playground, or rewiring a room to provide a computer lab that cost upwards of \$5,000. More so than Kennedy and Roosevelt, Washington used it's fundraising money on discretionary items that will enrich their students learning experiences but are not necessarily needed.

*Alternative Fundraising: Corporate Sponsorship*

Recently there has been much media attention about school's using corporate sponsorship to help supplement their budgets. This recent phenomena applies in two of the schools that I studied. Both Kennedy and Roosevelt described their need for contracting with local and national businesses to bring additional funds into their schools. These contracts also provide a sense of community connectedness in their schools. This new and alternative form of fundraising seems to be benefiting schools that cannot rely completely on traditional fundraising efforts.

Kennedy Elementary uses corporate sponsorship, or partnership as the principal referred to it, extensively. Because of their Title 1 status, Kennedy is provided with two "parent consultants" that work approximately ten hours a week and get paid a small fee to

go into the community and solicit parents, community members and businesses to get involved in their school. This program, in its second year, is helping the school improve parental and community involvement in their school.

Corporate sponsorships at Kennedy include a national bank, two national restaurants, a national school supply company, a local church, and a photography company. These sponsorships usually do not donate money directly to the school but donate supplies or sponsor activities for the students and the community. The principal was not aware of the exact amount of money these sponsorships generated but detailed the benefits these companies bring for the school.

The restaurants and the bank sponsor community nights at the school or bring programs in during the school day. The PTO organizes these events but the companies provide the materials for these activities. At a family fun night, where the school is open for visitors and displays projects students' are working on, a restaurant and the school supply company encourage people to come by, guaranteeing gift certificates and coupons for all attendees and set up booths advertising their products. This generates added interest and parental involvement in the school. The bank had an assembly where it taught students' math skills related to banking and set up faux bank accounts for each child to use for practice. The local church donated one hundred backpacks full of school supplies at the beginning of the school year for any student in need. The photography company provides a small percentage of their sales to the principals' personal building account as a thank you for doing business with them (the exact amount of money received was not known).

Kennedy is happy for the extra help, yet voiced some concerns over distracting students with businesses in the schools. Overall, the experience has been positive and since they are in need of extra ways to provide enrichment and community activities for students' Kennedy hopes their corporate partnerships will grow stronger in the future.

Roosevelt spoke less about corporate sponsorship explicitly. They have contracts with the same school supply company that Kennedy uses. The company donates supplies to the school occasionally. It seems Roosevelt was not forced to use corporate sponsorship in the past, but it is increasingly on their mind as their budget is cut year to year. Roosevelt hinted that they will likely increase their dependence on corporate sponsorship in the future but have not used this type of fund raising as extensively as Kennedy.

Not all schools utilize corporate money; Washington has never used any corporate sponsorship in their school. The principal stated the need for this has not arisen in her school, and does not plan on soliciting money from businesses in the future. Schools that start in a more disadvantaged position have to stretch their imaginations and open their doors to more ways to get money, while highly advantaged schools do not have to spend the time and energy on these endeavors. Corporate sponsorship has become a way for disadvantaged schools to try to provide the extras they desire for their student's that they otherwise would not have.

### ***Conclusion***

Through this study, I have found that advantaged and disadvantaged schools use roughly the same fundraising methods to reach sometimes very different outcomes. It seems advantaged schools fundraise with a greater ease and less pressure than

disadvantaged schools. Advantaged schools do raise more money and do not have to resort to alternative funding sources, like corporate sponsorship.

The bigger story I have discovered is not the few thousand dollar differences between what these three schools raised, but the schools' widely-varying financial starting points and the way in which they distribute the extra money. The advantaged school could spend money on luxuries and enrichment activities in their schools, while more disadvantaged schools were required to use their extra funds on daily necessities and far fewer luxuries. Even if per pupil expenditures and fundraising monies were the same, these schools would still be in very different positions due to where they have started.

The findings of this study suggest that schools not only raise varying amounts of money but spend money on different things which varies due to the school's starting point. The starting points observed at these schools indicate the inequalities in schools. For example, Washington is able to provide kids with a brand new playground or computer lab through fundraising money, when they are starting with less economically advantaged students (zero actually) who probably enjoy more of these educational extras at home as well. Kids in an advantaged district such as Washington have different and arguably better home situations, then come into better schools, while children at Kennedy or Roosevelt come from more economically disadvantaged homes where life is presumably harder and enter a school that is less than equipped. These schools worry about spending money not on parties and fieldtrips, but basic school necessities like ink for printers (Roosevelt) or books for the library (Kennedy). These differences matter for children because schools are supposed to "level the playing field" and give each child a

free and equal education, yet we see through what schools choose to spend discretionary money on, they are not equal. Students at Kennedy and Roosevelt may need more help to be at an equal level as kids at Washington, yet they are left with even fewer resources. Students at Washington enjoy all of the luxuries their school can provide, and are also enjoying the privilege of living in advantaged homes in a high SES area. Inequality is exacerbated in these schools. While it not the districts fault for being located in a wealthy area, or parents and teachers faults for being able to raise so much money, it is more a fault of the structure of the school funding.

The structure of school funding seems to advantage the already advantaged. Conflict theory would agree that those at the bottom are left fighting over the scarce resources available for schools. They are forced into communities to try and raise money to equalize their schools. Functionalist theory would propose that schools are funded fairly and those on the top have earned their positions and therefore deserve to pass along their advantage to their children. Functionalists would say that schools on the bottom need to work harder to bring themselves up to a passing level, and school fundraising provides a vehicle for poorer districts to do this.

We know that formal funding for schools results in disparities in children's experiences, so we can assume that informal funding can have the same effect. From this study we see the differences formal funding makes and how that affects not only what schools can spend informal money on, but the people they can pool their informal money from. Per pupil expenditures underestimate the amount of inequality in schools, especially when looking at schools like Washington and Kennedy, who have roughly similar PPE's but have much different facilities and experiences within the schools.

Informal funding better explains differences between schools, because by looking at what schools spend or would want to spend extra money on, we can gauge what they need and what they are lacking. Looking at informal funds, like school fundraising, helps us better understand the inequalities in America's schools on many levels. First, we see the huge inequalities in schools due to formal funding. Secondly we see the differences that school administrators must deal with on a daily basis, and the added time and emphasize that already poor districts must face which takes time away from educational endeavors. Thirdly we see the difficulty different schools have raising money which alludes to the different positions parents start in, from how much free time and money they can contribute to their children.

#### *Future Research*

Future researchers interested in this topic would have to be able to collect more information from more schools. I believe both qualitative and quantitative studies on the school fundraising could be useful. As I found in my study, PTO members are responsible for most fundraising in schools. A study that looks closely at the organization and inner-workings of PTO's in different districts may show how schools are differently able to use social and human capital to raise money. Looking into this issue can help sociologists discover the different experiences schools have and the difficulties they face due to the lack of resources. Future research may want to ask, should schools have to spend as much time and attention to raising money as they do? Is this hurting children's educational processes? How is the current system of funding schools forcing some schools to look for outside funds? School funding is likely to be a

topic of great interest for years to come, and school fundraising is one small facet of this great problem that needs to be addressed.

School fundraising highlights the inequalities in schools, yet also points to the inequalities that exist outside of the classroom. For schools to be equal in our current system, parents would have to be equal. School funding problems do not have an easy solution. Equalizing funding for all districts or improving buildings will not solve every problem in schools, yet it would definitely help. Redistributing students so each school is integrated, not by race, but by today's major form of disadvantage and discrimination, socioeconomic background, may help schools perform on the same levels and be more equal, but is America likely to do this? Probably not any time soon. Inequalities in schools may be in part to disparities in funding, but mimic the larger social trends of inequality. Schools are just one of many institutions in society designed to keep social order and continuity. Until we shorten the gap of inequality in society, schools will continue to reproduce inequality.

## Appendix A

### Questions for Principals:

- What is the size of your school?
- How many teachers do you have?
- What do you do for fundraising?
- Who organizes fundraising efforts?
- How many types of fundraising do you do?
- Are these types of fundraising typical for other elementary schools in this district?
- How active is your PTO?
- How many fundraising projects do you do a year?
- How successful are fundraising efforts?
- How much do you typically raise in a year?
- Do you know how much your school raised last year?
- Do you consider your fundraising efforts successful?
- What do you consider is the main purpose of doing fundraisers?
- Do you feel frustrated with fundraising efforts?
- Do you ever feel like you are doing too much?
- Why don't you do more fundraisers?
- How much money would you like to raise by fundraising?
- What have you done in the past with the money you have raised?
- What do you plan on doing with the money you raise this year?
- Do you typically have an idea of how much you want to raise each year or what you want to spend it on?
- If you had unlimited funds, what would you purchase for your school?
- How involved are parents in the school?
- Do you feel that parents are comfortable asking questions or approaching the school?
- If not, what are ways you try to get them involved?
- Does parental involvement sometimes get in the way of your goals?
- What do you believe students need, materially, to achieve?
- Besides material things, what do you think students need to achieve?
- How involved is the community in the school?
- How much do you think parents spend on school supplies each year?
- Do you ever set a limit for how much teachers can ask for from parents?
- Do teachers ever spend their own money for classroom supplies or extras?
- How much are "student fees" typically?
- What does this money go to?

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