

Can decentralization improve Seattle schools?

Guest Opinion: School districts in many big cities give schools control over how they use district funds. Seattle should too.

By Marguerite Roza and Jim Simpkins

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Recent local headlines have parents and principals baffled and frustrated by a district policy that allocates teachers in the fall, and then takes teachers away mid-year.

Gatewood Elementary was the first victim when Seattle Public Schools informed the school that it would lose a first grade teacher. The Gatewood community, which valued smaller classes in the early grades, didn't like the decision. Other schools were also hit with mid-year staffing shifts, including Garfield High School, where a popular Latin teacher is on the chopping block. Latin is a big deal at Garfield, so this decision is hitting hard.

In other large cities, school districts have moved beyond these fights by adopting a student-based allocation formula that allows each school to decide for itself how to use district funds. Under a student-based allocation structure, the district gives each school a known amount of money per pupil (adjusted upward for harder-to-educate students), and each school makes its own tradeoffs with the money.

A school that wants Latin, or smaller first grade classes, can spend its money in those areas. If that means larger classes elsewhere in the school, or one fewer administrator, that's the school's choice too.

Districts in Denver, Boston, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Houston, Hartford, Baltimore, Milwaukee, Cleveland and more have all adopted such a system. Each school receives, say, \$5000 for each student, plus additional fixed dollar amounts for disabled students, English-language learners and students in poverty. The school then uses its knowledge of its students, staff and community to decide how to use those funds.

A school with a beloved counselor, or a rockstar Latin teacher, can figure out how to keep those positions — even if tradeoffs have to be made. A school also has the option of customizing its schooling services in ways that better meet the needs of its unique mix of students and teaching talent, and the delicate human touches that make each school unique. Those choices then get communicated by an empowered principal with first-hand knowledge of the tradeoffs.

Instead, in Seattle, the district makes all those decisions for schools. Not surprisingly, communities don't feel heard. Even worse, allocation formulas are opaque, and decisions seem arbitrary and inflexible. The whole mess destroys goodwill and trust in the school system.

Years ago, Seattle had a student-based allocation model under Superintendent John Stanford. Two superintendents later, the model was undone as the district re-centralized control over resource use through a staffing formula.

Most of the district staff has since changed (several times). For those Seattle Public Schools leaders not familiar with the concept, now might be a good time to hop a flight to Denver and see how it

works when a district passes funds directly to schools. Student-based allocation won't solve every problem facing Seattle's schools, but it will take the important step of giving decision-making power to those who know each school community most intimately.

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