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Opinion: Pause HISD's plan to centralize school funding

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For over two decades, Houston Independent School District has doled out dollars in a way that drives more money to schools with more students in poverty and empowers principals with a meaningful say in how their dollars are spent. This equity- and school-focused funding approach is part of the district's DNA and enshrined as a [policy pillar](#). Now, the new superintendent is fast-tracking [plans](#) to reverse course and shift [nearly a billion](#) dollars in spending decisions away from school principals and up to central office, replacing a long-running student-based formula with a more rigid staffing one.

The seismic change is buried in the district's proposed budget, which the school board has been asked to approve by June. But citing work in progress, to date, the proposal has been light on numbers and long on promises. Two months isn't much time to vet a major overhaul. In contrast, Washington D.C. has spent 4 years running numbers, prepping for their educational funding change.

Houston's school board needs to take the time the city deserves to see if consolidating budget power back to the top is the right way to go. As such, we respectfully call for the board to stand up for the community and ensure a full public vetting process. It's what such a monumental decision warrants before a well-established budget

strategy with a lot of wins is ditched in the blink of an eye.

Those wins include the fact that the current model, known as weighted student funding, advances equity. Under the highly transparent model, the district gives schools more dollars for students with higher needs. peer-reviewed research proves it: in fiscal year 2019, HISD spent [\\$384 per student more](#) on schools attended by the average low-income student than schools attended by other students. The weighted student funding strategy brought student achievement gains that won HISD the coveted [Broad Prize for Urban Education](#). (The link between implementation and positive student test scores is documented in our [research](#) .) And while the district today clearly has ample room to improve, in a district like HISD with very limited dollars, there's no wiggle room to get it wrong. It is these successes that led the school board to make weighted student funding a cornerstone of district strategy.

The Houston superintendent's move goes against the tide of [dozens of mega-districts](#) that have adopted WSF in recent years — [from](#) Atlanta and Denver to Chicago and New York, Memphis-Shelby County and Metro Nashville — [each posting equity gains as a result](#). Most recently, [District of Columbia Public Schools](#) approved weighted student funding, swayed by the [evidence](#) backing it. And in 2015, the bipartisan federal [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) included a pilot program enabling districts to expand their weighted student formulas to include federal funds as well.

We understand that the natural state of many districts is to centralize power over finances. But HISD's board has long resisted that pressure, choosing instead to run a system that gives principals latitude in how best to staff their schools to meet differing student needs.

And the truth is, abandoning weighted student funding will not solve the problems the superintendent has flagged, like the structural

deficit and uneven offerings across schools. Some may believe that the centralized funding model will unlock more money. It won't. The models being debated in Houston are different ways to distribute dollars; they have zero impact on how much money the district has on hand. Deficits happen when a district spends more money than it has; HISD's deficit this school year has been as big as \$70 million.

The district need not jettison weighted student funding to mandate that all schools apply an effective reading curriculum or offer fine arts — things that leadership has called for. The district can absolutely require all schools to offer certain programs or services under weighted student funding; principals simply keep the leeway to decide how best to deliver those offerings at their school. It's the district's responsibility to then hold principals accountable for outcomes.

So, a centralized funding model does not win more money for schools. It does, however, incur losses. Principals — who know their students and the strengths of their unique mix of staff — lose their flexibility to decide how to tailor their resources to meet the needs of their diverse students. And a proven track record of equity hangs in the balance.

In working with scores of districts through our national school finance research center, we can confidently say that Houston's rush to change is unprecedented. We have never seen a big-city district so dramatically overhaul its finance model without at least two years of planning. And while the threat of a state takeover continues to hang over HISD, there is no evidence that the Texas Education Agency is demanding this rapid-fire shift.

It is now up to the school board to slow down and give this finance flip the full public airing and deliberation it demands. Houstonians deserve to know what this change means for every school and its

students.

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