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# Money talks, but what is it saying to our children?

By Mary Clemons,

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Fifth-grader Drew Buckner, 10, holds his hand up to answer a question from teacher Casey McBride on Wednesday, Dec. 19, 2018, at the Patrick Henry Downtown Academy Elementary School. Photo by J.B. Forbes, [jforbes@post-dispatch.com](mailto:jforbes@post-dispatch.com)

**Money talks. But sometimes it's hard to determine what it says.**

Take, for example, the money that funds public schools in America.

EdBuild, a nonprofit organization that works to raise national awareness related to current problems with the way states fund public schools, recently released a report that was excerpted in The New York Times. Among the findings in that report:

- Schools in the United States that serve students of color receive \$23 billion less than schools that serve predominantly white children.
- Schools in white neighborhoods receive approximately \$2,000 more per pupil per year than schools in black neighborhoods.
- Predominantly black school districts are three times larger than mostly white districts.

How do these numbers translate to schools in the St. Louis metro area? For that information, it's helpful to consult "Children of Metro St. Louis: A Data Book for the Community," published by Vision for Children at Risk (10th edition, 2017-18). Here we find that, statewide, Missouri invests relatively little in education (\$10,631 per pupil per year), while St. Louis spends somewhat generously at \$15,369. This is more per pupil than the "wealthy white" districts of Ladue and Kirkwood, and just \$2,651 less than Clayton, which is the biggest spender at \$18,020 per student.

So, while a little more than \$2,000 separates the spending per pupil between Clayton and St. Louis, this doesn't tell the whole story. Consider these facts, also from the Vision for Children at

## Risk report:

- The student/teacher ratio in Clayton is 12-to-1; in St. Louis it's 17-to-1.
- In Clayton, 13.8 percent of the students are eligible for free lunch; in St. Louis, 100 percent of the students are eligible.
- In Clayton, 0.3 percent of the students are homeless. In St. Louis, 23 percent of the students are homeless.

Money is vital to all of our school districts, but it's not fair to compare student outcomes between one district that is small (fewer than 2,500 students), predominantly white, healthy and wealthy, and another district that is large (more than 25,000 students), and made up of mostly low-income and black families (African-Americans are over-represented in poor families due to institutional racism), where classes are large, almost a quarter of the students are homeless and many are hungry. Could an additional \$2,000 per pupil each year level this playing field?

Probably not completely, but it would help. Many students in St. Louis public schools lack basic supplies (not to mention computer notebooks, white boards and other items that are standard in county districts). There are not enough nurses, counselors or social workers. Teachers are paid less (an average of \$26,000 per year less than their Clayton counterparts). The infrastructure is crumbling and maintenance is too often deferred. Students need gym equipment, outdoor playing fields, art supplies and musical instruments.

It's been said that the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result. While money helps, money alone will not produce successful students. Just spending more money on St. Louis schools will not produce Clayton outcomes.

We're engaging in an exercise in futility if we don't start thinking and doing something different in our large city school districts, where most of the children come from concentrated poverty. Increased support services should be at the top of the list, along with competent, caring principals and teachers.

Comparing the Clayton and St. Louis school districts is a good opportunity to discern the difference between equal funding and equitable funding. If we are looking at equal funding, then every district should get the same per-pupil expenditure. But if we're looking for equitable funding, then the district with more disadvantaged children who face greater challenges from the beginning needs greater resources.

Our current system will continue unless we take responsibility to make changes. All of us can help by coming up with compassionate, creative ideas and solutions to help our most at-risk children. Some solutions are already at work: mentoring programs, businesses that "adopt" schools, the teacher home visit program and others.

Yes, money talks. But it doesn't need to have the last word.

*Mary Clemons, who lives in Kirkwood, and Ruth Ehresman, who lives in St. Louis, are co-presidents of Women's Voices Raised for Social Justice. Barbara Finch, who lives in Clayton, is a founder of Women's Voices.*