THE FINANCIAL PATH FORWARD: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF HOW LEADERS EXPERIENCE DISPARITIES OF PER PUPIL EXPENDITURES WITHIN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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Abstract

Despite an abundance of material, natural, and economic resources available within the United States, our K-12 public education system remains a vexing conundrum of inequality. Numerous legal, economic, and political attempts to intercede have met with mixed results. Per Pupil funding disparities remain across states and districts. Rhode Island, my home state and location of my professional career, is the smallest state in America as measured by physical space, yet has thirty-six different school districts, each with a different per pupil funding expenditure. The rationale for this phenomenon remains elusive, thus the intellectual impetus for this study. In order to elucidate possibilities for change, a thorough consideration of the state of affairs, both past and present with regard to education funding, was probed with leaders within the education sphere in Rhode Island. From this inquiry, the lived experiences of these leaders provided a rich context from which to consider the change process. Questions of equality and fundamental fairness arose. The findings demonstrate the multiple layers of need. School funding issues are not confined to an educational program, instructional materials, and teacher salaries. Instead, a granular approach to this phenomenon revealed the tattered state of school infrastructure, the unclear equity of charter schools, a lack of oversight regarding building maintenance, and the question of differing legal protections for students between neighboring states.
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To my children, Isabella and George: I hope this shows you what is possible with hard work, a support network, and determination. There are endless possibilities of what you can accomplish in life. Know that your mother and I love you unconditionally and will always be there to support you. I’m hopeful the countless nights and weekends spent at the dining room table has shown you that you can accomplish anything your heart desires.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of Problem

Embedded, systemic poverty continues to persist in America today. Despite numerous fiscal and educational reforms, the financial gulf between affluent and poor families remains large. Michael Harrington wrote of this phenomenon over fifty years ago, speaking of two Americas; one seen, the other hidden away. The millions of poor have become increasingly invisible and it requires our intellect and kindness to ensure that these Americans are seen (Harrington, 1962.) There are those willing to change these inequitable conditions but the majority of citizens, particularly those untouched by this malady, continue to render those living in impoverished conditions as invisible (Harrington, 1962). Harrington’s compelling narrative about poverty remains resonant today, as nearly fifty million Americans, many of them school aged children, live in conditions originally articulated by Harrington fifty-seven years ago. Poor Americans remain frequently isolated, often feeling hopeless. Living conditions are squalid. Decrepit infrastructure abounds; buildings rotting and decayed. The real victims here are children; those with no ability to impact their living conditions. This was the life they were born into. Whereas the students just a few miles down the road might go to a brand new, state of the art school, students living in poverty are frequently educated in worn buildings of shoddy repair, replete with structural defects. I have always wondered how these students feel coming into school each day. Is there a sense of hope, that perhaps things will get better? Or, as I have seen first-hand, have the systemic inequities already turned elementary aged students into jaded pessimists? Escape will be challenging, even terrifying for some; social service programs are
sparse, the struggle for a better life, as promised by the “American Dream”, fleeting and ephemeral.

With regard to the intersection of education and poverty, the history of the United States has shown that most K-12 education spending initiatives are state funded. Recently, however, there has been an increase in the federal contribution to education spending allocations (Darby & Levy, 2011). Despite increased federal involvement in school funding, the historical trend towards local autonomy has served to exacerbate racial and economic disparities (Darby & Levy, 2011). Potential, court ordered, wide spread fiscal reform has often been thwarted by the fact that local control of school districts is driven by highly localized entities (Darby & Levy, 2011). This has resulted in continually high degrees of racial and socioeconomic segregation. Whereas Brown v. Board of Education was designed to eliminate the separate but equal educational doctrine, segregation in American schools, as defined by the number of African-American students in White majority schools, is at the lowest level since 1968 (Kozol, 2015).

Students in affluent and middle class communities have higher per pupil expenditures than students in poor or economically depressed communities. This has created a systemic inequity that serves to perpetuate generational poverty and raises a fundamental question of equity and fairness. One need not look far to see such disparity. Even within a state as small as Rhode Island, there are thirty-seven school districts. Within these districts, students just a few miles apart may be educated in diametrically different school buildings. Driving down the street, one can find a state of the art middle school, constructed just ten years ago, complete with all the amenities of modern technology, such as dedicated space for Science laboratories, a vast library media center, and Maker Spaces. These students can gather in common areas to work collaboratively in space with natural sunlight. In marked contrast, the middle school a mere three
miles from my home is almost eighty years old. Built for the Industrial Age, an antiquated, insufficient paradigm, this school has been abated multiple times for asbestos, has a pervasively leaky roof, and rotting ceiling tiles. It begs a simple, but enormously powerful question: Why do some students experience the state of the art middle school experience and others not?

As the number of students living in poverty exceeds 16 million as of 2012, this issue has widespread implications (Conradi, 2016). This is of particular import because poor students often begin Kindergarten with substandard reading, writing, and mathematical knowledge than their more affluent peers (Conradi, 2016). Thus, there is a gap even before school begins, and that fact, coupled with inequitable funding mechanisms, creates the moral imperative to decisively ameliorate this gross injustice before future generations are put at heightened risk for societal marginalization.

The underlying narrative surrounding the embedded ethos within the political culture of the United States suggests that education is the “great equalizer”, allowing those who grew up in poor homes to rise above the conditions of their birth. Countless examples of those that have flourished despite meagre upbringings permeate our collective cultural discourse. Yet, these stories occlude a harsh truth: access to a quality education, one that truly allows all citizens equal access to positive adult outcomes, remains elusive. Our culture, one that supports the fallacious narrative of “rugged individualism”, instead serves as political justification for political and education entities to continue fiscal policies that exacerbate access to quality educational resources between rich and poor students. These choices have dire consequences. The educational attainment of the family breadwinner(s) largely determines the families economic well-being, and this effect is multi-generational (Hanusheck & Lindseth, 2009).
The issue of education funding within the United States is not one of quantity, as the United States remains the richest nation on earth. Instead, the issue is one of allocation. Between the years 1960 and 2005, education performance, when adjusted for inflation, has remained flat despite a quadrupling of spending (Hanusheck & Lindseth, 2009). While educational attainment is not wholly determinant of socioeconomic status, there is indeed a strong correlation between these two phenomena: twenty-one percent of students with less than a high school diploma lives in poverty as adults. In contrast, only four percent of students with a college diploma live in poverty (Hanusheck & Lindseth, 2009). There can be no argument against the essential requirement that one have an education. Failure to do so indelibly diminishes the ability for one to provide for her/himself and others. In summation, the United States does not suffer from a lack of fiscal sources to remedy access to educational resources. Our societal injustice entails how these resources are distributed and has persisted over time. Numerous legislative and legal changes have yet to see a change in long term educational outcomes for students that live in districts with marginalized funding mechanisms.

**Significance of Research Problem**

While some people living in poverty can afford to buy or rent a home, many living in dire poverty are homeless. In the 2009-2010 school year, there were approximately one million homeless students identified in U.S. schools, an increase of 41% compared with two years’ prior (Miller, 2011). Market-rate housing is often too expensive and affordable housing is too scarce for poor families (Mohan & Shields, 2013). Homelessness is associated with a myriad of deleterious effects, many of which impact school performance. One such example is chronic stress, as children who experience a consistently high level of stress have a compromised ability in executive functions such as decision making, planning, and working memory, all of which are
critical skills (Teicher, Anderson, & Polcari, 2012). Chronic stress is particularly impactful on younger students, as these children have not yet learned coping skills, making it more difficult to adapt and cope with stress (Cedeno, Martinez, & Bueno 2016). Stress is a public health hazard for children. Imagine living in a state of perpetual worry, having to consider where your next meal may come from, or having to wonder if your family will have enough money to pay the rent or buy groceries. This is a question of survival that is difficult for even the most well-adjusted adults to process productively. For many children, this sense of worry and dread forever orients one’s worldview. Trust is excruciatingly difficult. School, which should be a source of knowledge building, social connectedness, and community engagement, only serves to meet basic needs: a safe, dry space where essential items, such as food and shelter are predictably provided. One cannot attend to the business of learning when one’s stomach is empty. A student will not be able to access the curriculum if pervasively preoccupied. Exponentially multiplying this effect, dilapidated schools perpetuate feelings of inadequacy, playing on the insecurity of being born poor, causing students to wonder what they did to deserve this.

While homelessness is a form of extreme poverty, there are many students living in depressed economic conditions that do have a home but are also forced to move frequently. These students are considered residentially mobile. While moving in and of itself is not necessarily a harmful action, students forced to move based upon economic constraints are at greater risk for academic underachievement (Voight, Shinn, & Nation 2012). This is related to a number of factors, such as the need for parents and caregivers to work extremely vigorous hours at low paying jobs simply to provide the basics for their families. This is turn makes it more difficult for caregivers to engage with their children and to provide the necessary guidance and support to succeed in school. Consequently, these external factors have the effect of diminishing
Impoverished students often lack basic necessities, such as adequate food, clothing, school materials, and medical care. This contributes to childhood stress, producing a disproportionate level of anxiety and worry that may increase the need for psychotherapy (McLaughlin, Breslau, Green, Lakoma, Sampson, Zaslavsky, & Kessler 2011). In addition, financial difficulties encountered as a child provides an additional layer of risk for the onset of mental health disorders as an adult (McLaughlin et al., 2011). While many think of poverty only in the form of a current state for a student, the ramifications from pervasive poverty over time are not simply limited to the present moment rather, long term exposure to impoverished living conditions can become a life-long struggle for an individual, lasting well beyond time spent in school.

Poverty is also a de facto form of segregation. When considering segregation on the basis of race, segregation was only slightly lower in the year 2000 than it was at its recorded apex in 1960, and segregation based on financial status peaked in the year 2007 (Quillian, 2014). This has served to disproportionally impact African-American students in a negative fashion because African-American students live in disproportionally poor areas when compared to White students. As most school districts are funded by local property taxes and the tax bases of schools with African-American students tend to be far less affluent, the resources afforded to African-American students are far less when compared to their White counterparts. This residential segregation creates residual inequality across multiple layers and contexts (Quillian, 2014).
While the previous sections highlighted the external ramifications of living in poverty, poor students also are at greater risk for depressed school performance in comparison to their financially advantaged peers (Gutman, Sameroff, & Cole, 2003). This could be attributable to achievement gaps that begin before a child enters school, persist through the schooling years, and are never recouped. Depressed reading skills have a significant impact on all academic tasks, including math, as many math achievement metrics involve verbal skills and reading word problems (Herbers, Cutuli, Supkoff, Heistad, Chan, Hinz, & Masten 2012). The single greatest predictor of scores on standardized reading assessments is tied directly to socioeconomic status (Ransdell, 2012).

Perhaps the most unexpected and alarming finding in this review of the existing literature is the potential relationship between life expectancy and educational differences. While technological and medical advances have contributed to increased life expectancy in the United States as a whole, there are some deeply troubling gaps that persist between economic class groups within our nation. One such study found that in 2008 adults within the United States with fewer than twelve years of education had life expectancies not much better than adults from the same group in the 1950s and 1960s. Further, when race was added as a variable to this data set, the results are even more vexing. In 2008, Caucasian men and women with sixteen or more years of schooling had life expectancies far greater than African-American with fewer than twelve years of education- 14.2 years more for Caucasian men than African-American men, and 10.3 years more for Caucasian women than African-American women (Olshansky, Antonucci, Berkman, Binstock, Supan, Cacioppo, Carnes, Cartensen, Fried, Goldman, Jackson, Kohli, Rother, Zheng, & Rowe, 2012).
Olshansky et al. (2012) also found that African-Americans and Hispanic Americans with sixteen or more years of schooling, lived 7.5 and 13.6 years longer, respectively, than Caucasians with less than twelve years of education. This leads me to believe that there is indeed a connection between educational attainment and life expectancy, as these two data sets demonstrate that those with a higher level of educational attainment live longer, irrespective of racial group.

Educational access and attainment is more than just a “here and now” question. Long term outcomes extending beyond the procurement of diplomas and degrees are at stake when discussing the need to remedy contemporary funding formulas. Decisions that policy makers and judges make in the present day have long term implications. Poverty is embedded, systemic, and historically woven within the fabric of the American experience. We can only hope to remedy some of these negative outputs if we recognize the inequity of the educational funding inputs and make changes based upon need.

**Positionality**

My passion for this subject was discernibly ignited when I began teaching in a specialized day school for students with emotional disabilities twenty-three years ago. Seeing the deprivation of familial resources: students entering school with tattered clothing, sparse lunches, and an aggregate sense of hopelessness stood in marked contrast to my own upbringing: one where I never lacked for basic resources. I had new clothes. I never had to worry where my next meal was coming from. Lunches were bountiful- never was I sent to school with mayonnaise packets as my only source of sustenance, unlike a student I remember teaching. Optimism was an embedded emotion, a sense that anything was possible and that the future was bright.
students as the ages of eleven and twelve who felt defeated and hopeless was a gut punch. The feelings of sadness often filled my evenings, wondering why things were so unfair.

As I progressed through my educational career as a Special Education teacher in a different school system, I continued to see inequities, but of a different kind. Students with disabilities were not often understood by other educators and administrators. Decision making regarding programming was based upon economic feasibility instead of student need. This led me to, on a more in-depth basis, consider the role finances play in the school decision making process.

Upon moving into an administrative role and beginning this phase of my professional career, I began to see inequity in a wider context. There was the availability of data that showed one school district would have thousands more dollars spent on a per-pupil basis annually. When I moved from a school district with limited fiscal resources to one that had sufficient financial allocations, I began to question the larger, systemic process of how education funding dollars are distributed.

As I have served in a number of roles as a career educator for nearly twenty-five years, I firmly believe in the concept of equity. The unifying thread surrounding my educational experiences has been one of resources. More specifically, the distribution of resources. Why are some students afforded access to greater opportunities and others not? How can we, as the richest nation in the history of civilization, continue to allow for such disparity between the allocation of fiscal resources between wealthy and poor school districts? I personally believe that the manner by which schools are funded needs a fundamental overhaul, one that prioritizes students in districts with diminished levels of fiscal capacity. Thus, this research endeavor is undertaken
with the explicit acknowledgement that the contemporary model of funding in place is systemically and historically unfair, in need of a comprehensive overhaul.

**Research Questions and Goals**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the contemporary mechanisms by which public schools are financed and to examine possibilities to improve the current systems in place. In addition, the purpose was to examine how the allocation of resources impacts both short and long term outcomes on students that live in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities and to explore possibilities for improving these outcomes. Further, both of the above questions were considered within the state of Rhode Island, where I currently serve as a school administrator and parent of two, currently enrolled students. The following research questions directed the inquiry to help understand the perspective of policy makers and influencers.

1. How do public policy influencers understand the current funding mechanisms in K-12 public education with the United States, and more specifically, the State of Rhode Island?
2. How do these influencers describe their experiences with regard to the effect of poverty on students within the United States, and more specifically, the State of Rhode Island?
3. How do these influencers describe their perspectives with regard to the need to change current state funding mechanisms in order to provide equity for all students?
The theoretical framework that guided this research project was Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. This paradigm was a pivotal lens from which to orient and understand the needs of school-aged children across the United States and within the state of Rhode Island.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow developed his Hierarchy of Needs Theory in 1943. Maslow posits that an individual cannot move up this hierarchy unless progress is made one step at a time in sequential order. The five levels are; (1) physiological needs (food, water, air, sleep), (2) safety (security of environment, employment, and resources), (3) belongingness (love, friendship, intimacy, safety), (4) esteem (confidence, self-esteem, respect) and (5) self-actualization (morality, creativity, problem solving) (Cianci & Gambrel, 2003).

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is one of the most well- known tenets of psychology. This theory, first espoused in 1943, is significant because it provides a leveled understanding of human development and human needs. Maslow’s theory has been incorporated into other disciplines such as economics, sociology, medicine, and education. This paradigm has been cited thousands of times in scholarly work that cuts across numerous disciplines, including sociology, economics, education, and nursing. John Bowlby used this paradigm in expanding common understanding of child and human development (Otway & Carnelley, 2013). There is also extensive use of the HON in the marketing of consumer goods, with the underlying assumption that humans need to produce goods, advance technologies, and provide more material items for consumption as part of the mission to raise the quality of human existence (Habib, 1993). As this study demonstrates a linkage between educational attainment and later economic outcomes, the HON paradigm serves as an invaluable, orienting lens for both phenomena.
Maslow’s HON is a remarkably broad concept, with application in a variety of disciplines, including economics, education, psychology, sociology and medicine. One conclusion drawn as a means of simplifying the HON paradigm was that individuals seek information based upon their level of development. Individuals at beginning levels of the hierarchy seek coping information to meet basic needs, while individuals at the highest level seek edifying information (Norwood, 1999). The HON framework has also been applied to economics. This has been applied with regard to why consumers seek to purchase certain products, how to make workers more productive. Further, textbooks have been published for decades using the HON as a framework (Jerome, 2013). Academic literature has been constructed using the HON model (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyscznski, 2004).

Criticisms of the Hierarchy of Needs Theory

Pushback on HON has centered upon three primary concerns: (a.) There is a lack of empirical data to support Maslow’s claims. Maslow focused his study on top achievers at a university level and did not focus his work with other societal groups, making it impossible to generalize the conclusions of his work to society at large (Mittleman, 1991). (b.) Maslow’s assumption that all humans are the same and that theory universally applies to all people. As an example, the HON theory is overly simplistic, not accounting for needs during troubling times like recession and war (Cianci & Gambrell, 2003). (c.) Maslow’s construct comes from a westernized framework of human behavior that promotes competition and individualism. Other societies have more collectively based values which place the good of all over the needs of any one particular individual. Hofstede asserts that HON is ethnocentric and steeped in Westernized values (Hofstede, 1984).
Hierarchy of Needs: Why it fits.

While criticism of HON certainly has merit, I believe this framework remains a valid lens from which to consider the issue of poverty as it intersects with current funding mechanisms within the United States. As a lifelong educator, I have seen how the manifestation of poverty impacts student performance. During my time in the classroom, students that came from poor families usually had the greatest difficulty learning. Through no fault of their own, students that were preoccupied with where their next meal was coming from or whether or not their family would have a roof over their head, struggled to complete assignments in school. Homework was seldom completed. Parental attendance at conferences was rare. Incidence of referral to remedial and/or Special Education programming was high.

While incorporating data into a phenomenological study can offer compelling evidence to change a current practice or remedy an existing inequity, the use of a personal, narrative inquiry reveals the human manifestation of policy choices. Offering statistics on the number of poor students in the United States, while framing the issue within a grand perspective, perhaps is inadequate. In order to create resonance within the scholarly community, there is a need to critically examine school funding formulas. Maslow’s HON, as it is widely accepted and known within both the scholarly community and the population at large, provides a useful access point from which to view the issue of inequity. The framework is linear and direct and, despite some disagreement over the veracity of certain claims, still holds a privileged position across a multitude of disciplines. Thus, the theory is known, understood, and, at least in general terms, accepted as a meaningful frame from which to codify the lived human experience.
Summary of Paper and Organization

This research study focused upon understanding the perspectives and attitudes of policy makers and influencers with regard to the intersection of poverty and current school funding practices, seeking to examine possibilities for changing a contemporary system that many deride as unfair. Further, participant understanding of the larger phenomenon of childhood poverty and adult, deleterious outcomes was probed. The second chapter of this project will present a review of the literature, demonstrating a nexus between this problem of practice and the existing, published body of scholarly knowledge. In the third chapter of this study, the research questions are reviewed, the methodology of the study is elucidated, the process for the collection of data is summarized, the research participants and sites are identified, and the data analysis metrics are reviewed. In the fourth chapter, the narratives of each participant and the summary of the interviews are presented. The fifth, and final, chapter, depicts the results of the discussion and consideration of the major, emergent themes that arose from the interview process. In addition, the fifth chapter highlights connections between these results and the existing literature on this topic.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

In the collective endeavor to provide equitable access to educational resources, both legislative and judicial pathways have been traveled. The United States is different from nearly any other industrialized nation in that the majority of public school funding comes from local funding sources and bond issues (Payne & Biddle, 2016). This discussion is not new. Thomas Jefferson recognized that education was essential to the health and vitality of a democratic, free society (Dayton & Dupree, 2004). An educated citizenry creates economic and social mobility. Unlike the old world, in America, one could be born into meager circumstances, but through education and hard work, organic progress could be made. While in the abstract robust funding for all students is a socially desirous goal, commonly agreed upon, the political reality is, and had always been, predominantly about how to achieve this end for all students, both rich and poor. There remains little doubt; poverty has a pernicious impact on people (Lende, 2012). Poverty impacts not only economic considerations, but also affective and psychological. Those living in poverty have significantly elevated risk profiles for physical and mental health maladies, psychological disorders, and even early death. As the legislative process has proved vexing over time, many of those aggrieved by the systemic inequities have sought the court system for redress. State legislatures, particularly during times of economic hardship, are likely to cut education funding (Leachman, Albares, Masterson, & Wallace, 2015). The political system, with its inherent capacity for change through purposeful election cycles, is less likely than the precedent oriented world of the judiciary to ensure fiscal equanimity. Thus, over time, courts seem to have produced more positive outcomes for those seeking mandated fiscal reform (Dayton & Dupre, 2004).
Following, this literature review outlines the seminal legal and legislative outcomes surrounding the equitable distribution of education funds. Second, this review examines how schools are currently funded within the United States. This will include both traditional and non-traditional revenue streams. Third, the impact of poverty is explored. Fourth, the state of Rhode Island’s funding mechanisms, along with the strong foregrounding of equity issues, is elucidated.

Seminal Legal & Legislative Outcomes

Perhaps no legal case is as significant as *Brown v. Board of Education* in the compendium of educational equity case law. The decision in *Brown* marks a seminal moment in American educational history: upending the doctrine of “separate but equal” previously established in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This ruling brought dramatic changes across the country (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2001). Those endorsing the status quo, clinging to racially hostile canards, protested furiously across the country. In numerous regions of America, protests ensued and violence erupted as the caldron of racial animus bubbled over. While the decision rendered in *Brown* fundamentally asserted that separate could not be equal, this case had more widespread implications with regard to educational quality and enrollment patterns (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2001). This began a trend of greater economic and racial integration between previously separated student groups. Brought in 1954, on behalf of Linda Brown, a grade three student in Topeka, Kansas, this case challenged the legality of de jure racial segregation in American public schools (Karst, 1972). The resultant outcome prohibited legally enforced segregation, moving towards socioeconomic integration and an attempted equalization of funding for poor, Black school districts and more wealthy, White school districts (McUsic, 2004). Despite the major victory for proponents of mandated legal remedies to address issues of financial and racial
equities, Brown did not eliminate inequities surrounding the quality of education (Darcy & Levy, 2011).

While the Constitution makes no specific mention of a right to education; scholars, legislators, researchers, and educators have sought to construct meaning with regard to whether or not a fundamental right to education exists (Darby & Levy, 2011). As the Constitution of the United States does not directly reference education, the funding for education is predominately left to the states, resulting in disparities in per-pupil expenditures not found in other nations (Payne & Biddle, 2016). Lyndon Johnson attempted to address this issue in “The War on Poverty”. More specifically, in his accompanying Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Johnson sought to emphasize equal access to education and high educational standards. The ESEA was considered by many to be the most expansive foray into educational issues ever undertaken by our federal government, allocating over 1 billion dollars towards education spending (Bishop & Jackson, 2015). The ESEA also formally launched Title I, a federally funded revenue stream specifically allocated for students living in depressed socioeconomic conditions (Bishop & Jackson, 2015). At the time, many presumed educational inequities would be ameliorated, that all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, would be provided roughly equivalent teachers, facilities, textbooks, and enrichment programs (Darby & Levy, 2011). Sadly, this outcome has not been realized and the financing of public schools is a national disgrace (Karst, 1972).

Soon thereafter, in 1966, The Equality of Educational Opportunity, more commonly known as the Coleman Report, was published. This report struck a nerve in the American populace, generating much controversy (Kiviat, 2001). The Coleman report shaped social science research, empowering this line of inquiry to be used as an impetus to influence the
debate surrounding public policy towards educational equity and opportunity (Wong & Nicotera, 2004). Using data collected from nearly three-quarters of a million families, the Coleman report concluded that the strongest predictor of educational attainment was the family background and economic position of a given student’s parents. This raised serious questions about the efficacy of public education, in particular because the government has invested billions of dollars into this complex endeavor (Hanushek, 1972). Some have argued that the Coleman Report would have been more effective if the focus remained fixed on the fact that educational inequality exists rather than attempt to extrapolate the reasons for these gaps (Hanusheck, 1972).

Questions of fundamental fairness were again raised in Serrano v. Priest, as the legality of the California created, school finance system was challenged. Districts had been allowed to, via the state government, set a rate of taxation for local residents (Goldstein, 1971). These rates were different, as was the capacity of each district to provide a similar revenue stream due to differences in property values. Thus, the plaintiffs charged that the state was violating the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment due to disparities in spending across districts. The state of California had provided a basic, minimum financial commitment to fund schools. Above and beyond that minimum threshold, states could tax to raise additional funds. In wealthy communities, a small tax hike could produce significant revenue streams, as property values were high. In contrast, poor communities would have to raise taxes significantly, impacting residents with the least ability to pay, to raise additional revenue for schools. This grotesque spending model was overturned in 1971 (Karst, 1972). Public response to this decision was predominately positive, as the concept of fiscal equity in education is seen as nearly universally good (Goldstein, 1971). The ramifications from Serrano have had some kind of effect on public school system funding in multiple states over the following decades. Since Serrano, the highest
court in thirty-six states have issued rulings supportive of greater fiscal equity, with seventeen states calling the current state funding system in place a violation of the state’s constitution (Dayton & Dupre, 2004).

Following *Serrano* in 1973, the *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* decision brought forth another landmark decision surrounding school finance equity. In this case, the plaintiffs claimed that a fundamental right to education exists, and as such, this right needed to be applied to the states via the 14th Amendment of the Constitution (Macchiarola & Diaz, 1996). The Supreme Court of the United States rejected this claim, holding that no fundamental right to education exists. As the Supreme Court took the federal question off the table, states sought legal remedies to the finance question through challenging the question of adequacy, rather than equity (Macchiarola & Diaz, 1996). While *Brown v. Board of Education* found that education was an important right, *Rodriguez* found that education was not a fundamental right and protected by the constitution (Darby & Levy, 2011). Nonetheless, this decision left open the possibility that unequal funding may violate state constitutional provisions (Darby & Levy, 2011). While potential redress was available at the state level, the door for plaintiffs to use the federal bench as a means to address the funding equity issue was effectively scuttled in *Rodriguez* (Dayton & Dupre, 2004).

In *Abbott v. Burke* (1985), the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that the state constitution required the educational system provide all students with equal educational opportunity. This standard moved beyond mere “thorough and efficient” educational access. Instead, the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled students had a right to procure an educational that would provide competitive access to society (Lichtenstein, 1991). The fundamental premise adjudicated in *Abbott* was the quality of education in urban, poor districts was inferior to the quality of
education in more wealthy, suburban districts. As evidence, the court cited access to quality instructional materials, teacher/class size ratios, and the state of repair of educational school buildings (Lichtenstein, 1991). Based on these factors, the court concluded that there was no doubt the quality of education provided to students in poor, urban districts was significantly deficient when measured against that of more wealthy districts. This issue would be addressed via a revised school funding procedure that required the new threshold to be above and beyond “thorough and efficient”, opting to use the term “substantially equal” when specifying the required fiscal commitments educational entities in New Jersey must undertake (Lichtenstein, 1991).

In the United States, the federal government has historically played a minor role in funding education, leaving that responsibility to the states when local schools were created more than two hundred years ago. Local property taxes serve as the primary source of revenue. As the value of homes varies significantly, there are significant differences between the revenue bases of cities and towns (Adamson & Darling-Hammond 2012). Until the 1970s, local governments carried in excess of 50% of the total educational costs for the schools. Legal mandates from successful court challenges during the 1970s pertaining to funding mechanisms based upon equanimity precipitated a shift in fiscal responsibility. Today, the state and local government each contribute approximately 44% of total revenue to the school system (Husted & Kenny, 2014).

Within this paradigm of split funding within state and local entities, there is much variance across our fifty states. A full thirty-eight states fund schools via the use of a Foundation Program. Foundation Programs fund schools via a mandated guarantee related to either a per pupil or per teacher unit that is historically intended to pay for a basic education program. Local
entities fund this model through a uniform tax rate that is typically dependent on the local property tax valuation. In cities and towns that have lower property tax revenues, the state government often makes a contribution to offset the fiscal inequity that exists between more affluent and more relatively poor communities (Husted & Kenny, 2014). The level of contribution made by the state varies within our nation. It aims to keep local control of educational initiatives, but as income disparity has widened, significant disparities in per pupil expenditures exist between high-property-value school districts and low-property-value school districts. (Arche 2014).

One state, South Carolina, has attempted to remove the property tax altogether as a means of funding the public school system. In 2006, the South Carolina General Assembly passed Act 388, which served to replace the property tax with a one-cent sales tax on specific retail items. This served to drop the total dollar pool for education funding in South Carolina by one-third while also providing an unnecessary tax break to the wealthiest South Carolinians: retirees, owners of valuable waterfront property, realtors, and real-estate developers. Further, Act 388 saw the tax burden shift to consumers and paralyzed local districts from raising additional revenue (Knoeppel, Pitts, & Lindle, 2013). Thus, Act 388 served the unintended consequence of exacerbating income inequality across all societal areas, while also causing local educational entities to layoff personnel, cut educational programming, and diminish overall capacity to provide school services for children (Knoeppel, Pitts, & Lindle, 2013).

Another fiscal vehicle to fund schools, the District Power Equalizing System (DPES) is used in three states: Connecticut, Vermont, and Wisconsin (Verstegen, 2011). The DPES are designed to support the financial equity of the taxpayers, not the students, seeking to ensure that similar tax rates are present across the state as a whole. As a consequence of this system, taxation
and spending decisions are shifted from the state to the education locality. The state then matches
the disparity between what is raised locally and what is guaranteed (Verstegen, 2011). This
system serves to only exacerbate the already significant disparity in funding between wealthy
underscores this point. In writing his opinion, Justice Moukawsher specifically rebuked the state
for not providing adequate fiscal measures for the poorest communities, while wealthy
communities flourished via a vast array of resources.

There is currently one state that utilize full funding or flat grants: North Carolina.
Although local funds are not part of the finance plan in the full state funding model, flat grants
do allow for local governments to augment or supplement finances, but these supplemental
monies are not matched by the states (Wang & Zhao, 2011). North Carolina has also provided
its’ state legislative body the ability to authorize four local option sales taxes (LOST) since the
1970s. The funds from these taxes, in two cases, were restricted to use for school capital needs,
and the other two were levied to supplement the general revenue pool that could also impact
school capital funding (Wang & Zhao, 2011). In seeking to determine the effectiveness of these
measures in terms of relieving disparities between wealthy and poor communities, Wang and
Zhao analyzed data from one hundred, North Carolina counties between 2004 and 2006, finding
that significant disparities exist between wealthy and poor school districts in terms of the
capacity to raise money to support capital projects. Thus, even with supplemental funding
mechanisms available for schools, a significant gap between rich and poor districts remains.

There are seven states that use a combination model to fund schools (Verstegen, 2011).
These states may use a tiered model that is based upon changes in costs from year to year, with
variances that depend upon the preferences within the state. These states are Georgia, Illinois,
Kentucky, Maryland, Montana, Oklahoma, and Texas. Hawaii is the only state to provide all of its’ educational funding from the state government (Verstegen, 2011).

Another commonly used means of securing funding for schools is the use of a state lottery. Forty-three of America’s fifty states have a state sanctioned lottery system. New Hampshire, in 1964, was the first state to offer a lottery to citizens. The hope of a lottery system was to create an additional vehicle for states to raise money for socially desirous projects, such as funding schools, without creating an additional tax burden on citizens. Annual income of lotteries totals more than 40 billion dollars, an average of $212 per person living in a lottery state and $372 per household (Henricks, 2016).

In the state of Illinois, approximately 2.1 billion dollars was generated from the lottery during the 2009 fiscal year, an all-time high. Thirty percent of this revenue is designated for the Common School Fund, designed to fund primary and secondary education within the state. For 2009, the share of lottery funds allocated to public schools was six hundred and twenty-five million dollars, approximately ten percent of the state’s education budget (Hendricks, 2016). On its’ face, one might posit that this is a positive outcome. Lotteries generate millions of dollars nationwide, keep rates of taxation lower for citizens, and provide desperately needed funds for schools, particularly schools in socioeconomically depressed areas. Upon further examination however, lotteries offer a false hope, as lotteries shift the burden of payment for schools on economically at-risk groups, particularly African-Americans, as African-Americans are more likely to play the lottery than both Caucasians and Hispanics (Hendricks, 2016). Thus, as states rely more heavily on lottery revenue to fund schools, more traditional and equitable means to fund schools, such as property tax rates are shifted. This creates an exploitive relationship as those who play the lottery (and nearly always lose) play the de facto role of subsidizing the
public schools. The end result is that the lottery, originally designed to help support school funding, hurts those in the lowest socioeconomic class the most, shifting an already disproportionate fiscal burden on the most at-risk citizens.

**Charter Schools**

The increase of Charter Schools across the United States has been documented during the early part of the twenty-first century. Over the past two decades, the growth of charters has drained money from traditional public schools (Lafer, 2018). Charter schools are basically private businesses using public money (Levine, M. & Levine, A. G., 2014). Proponents of Charter Schools believe that these schools offer poor students a chance to leave low performing districts, while critics argue that Charter Schools serve to reduce the fiscal capacity for public schools to educate students in a fair and equitable manner. As Charter Schools do take money from the same pool as public schools, some argue that this serves as a functional budgetary cut to the public school system, and that these cuts disproportionately affect working-class and minority students (Kumashiro, 2012). Charter schools are more likely than traditional schools to deny admittance to students with a handicapping condition (Lake, 2014). Charter schools often lack the capacity and resources to provide specialized instruction, fully implement IEPs, and address behavioral issues (Garda, 2012). Thus, if the promise of charter schools lies in innovation to benefit all students but these same charter schools deny access and/or provide minimal support to certain student groups, it is fair to conclude that opportunity is better for only some groups of students.

One potential example lies in Louisiana. Prior to Hurricane Katrina in 2004, the Orleans Parish School System (OPSS) that primarily educates African-American students, was ranked last in Louisiana as defined by performance on multiple standardized assessments (Parsons &
Turner, 2014). Louisiana, in turn, ranks forty ninth out of fifty states in education within the United States (Parsons & Turner, 2014). After the devastation caused by the hurricane, many families still did not have a home. Despite these horrific conditions, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings authorized forty-seven million dollars for the construction of charter schools in hurricane affected areas, but provided no such fiscal relief for the crumbling and decrepit public school buildings (Saltman, 2007). Further, then Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco implemented Act 35 that greatly expanded the state’s power to take over schools falling below the cut score on the School Performance Score. These changes enabled New Orleans to utilize a primarily charter based model. Students educated in the public school model received $5,120 for instruction, while students in the charter style cohort received $8,652 - a difference of $3,522 per student (Parsons et al, 2014).

California provides another example of the high cost of charter schools. The number of charter schools has grown by about 40% in the last half-dozen years (Levine & Levine, 2014). When a student leaves a neighborhood school for a charter school, the funds follow the student (Lafer, 2018). Local schools and districts, however, remain responsible for many costs those funds provided. Despite this fact, there remains no established mechanism for measuring these costs or accounting for them in policy decisions (Lafer, 2018). The city of Oakland has lost $57 per year to charter schools. The costs of charter schools in San Diego have forced increased class sizes, a shortage of nurses for asthmatic students, the defunding of library, music, and art programs (Lafer, 2018). These costs are far from incidental, affecting programming and educational opportunity for students of all grade levels. Students, when not provided a full slate of academic programs, are placed at a massive disadvantage compared to peers. Exposure to literacy has a direct correlation with the future ability to read and speak well, essential skills in
the competitive world of employment. Providing these opportunities for some, but not all students, undermines the premise of equality of educational opportunity.

State and local governments played a hegemonic role in funding schools within the United States for over two hundred years. In the last forty years however, the Federal Government has taken on a greater fiscal role based upon legal challenges. Nonetheless, the locally collected property tax remains the primary funding source, with varying degrees of state and federal aid supplementing the education budget. As property tax rates are much higher in affluent areas than in poor areas, the net result produces a gross inequity in funding, leaving poor school children in a significantly disadvantaged position. Most states still utilize a foundation program to fund schools, while others use a hybrid approach that incorporates bond and grant initiatives. Many states employ a state lottery to help support school funding, but state lotteries act as a regressive tax, negatively impacting those in the most disadvantaged fiscal position while also giving elected officials political cover on the issue of raising taxes. Charter schools have gained popularity, but questions of funding equity remain. As the case of the New Orleans Public Schools illustrates, Charter School funding has the ability to create a significant discrepancy in per pupil funding measures, leaving public school children less well funded than their charter school attending peers. The case of *CCJEF v. Rell* (2016) plays a decisive role in this entire discussion, as the mandate from the decision explicitly states that the state of Connecticut has not provided a fair and equitable education for all students, in large measure due to a paucity of economic resources for economically disadvantaged students. This leads us to consideration of alternative methods of funding schools and if these measures provide more equitable fiscal resources to meet the needs of all students, including those living in a marginalized economic class or condition.
Non-Traditional School Funding Mechanisms

Given that funding for schools in the United States varies widely, as this decision is made primarily at the state and local level, without significant involvement from the federal government, there are some non-traditional funding mechanisms currently in place. There are specific reasons why non-traditional mechanisms are in place in certain states and not in place in others. The first section of this strand will depict some of the underlying reasons that have given rise to non-traditional funding mechanisms, while the second facet of this strand will describe some of these non-traditional funding sources.

Attitudes That Impact Non-Traditional Funding Mechanisms

Public opinion is a consequential determinant of education funding policy. Seldom, when asking the question whether or not an individual supports public school funding will the answer be “no”. Abstract questions like this, lacking tethered financial costs, provide the illusory notion that all citizens support public education. Instead, the real question, the authentic measure of support regarding funding public schools is how much are we willing to pay to provide all students with an equitably funded education. Attitudes towards funding public schools affect the likelihood that additional education funding will be resonant with the general public and elected local legislatures. Despite living in the “information age,” where news is available on a continuous informational loop, the average American is not well informed on current levels of educational spending (Schueler & West 2016).

One such study revealed some interesting data, finding that respondents to a survey estimated that their district spent only fifty-four percent of the actual amount spent in that fiscal
year as well as finding that respondents underestimated the average teacher salary by over thirty percent (Schueler & West, 2016).

Intuitively, as the public consciousness has consistently placed a high priority on education, and that education is the great “equalizer”, allowing poor individuals to rise about their economic and social class, one would think that the public would consistently support alternative funding to schools. As the proverbial story goes, if an individual works hard in school, a college degree and a high paying job are within reach. Yet, when examining this ingrained attitude against fiscal attitudes, there is some information that leads us to believe that this narrative is fallacious, at least when compared to responsiveness to alternative, increased funding for public schools.

In examining the data from a survey (Schueler & West, 2016), the results stood in marked contrast to the above narrative. As respondents were provided with more information about the actual costs of running a school and salaries of school employees, respondents were less likely to support increased funding to the public school system. For example, those respondents in the “informed category”, meaning that their perceptions about the costs of running the schools were indeed close to the actual costs, only supported increased funding at a rate of thirty-six percent. Those in the “uninformed category”, defined as holding widely disparate perceptions of the actual costs when compared to their own perception, supported an increase in funding at a rate of sixty-three percent (Schueler & West 2016).

Income and accompanying social status also play a role in understanding which groups are more open to non-traditional school funding. People of higher social status and economic privilege are more likely to support the status quo (Klugman, Walters, Stuber, & Rosenbaum, 2011). While this may serve as an impediment to implementing non-traditional (and increased)
school funding mechanisms, there are other variables at work. The concept of trust by citizens in their local and state governments also plays a role in determining the openness to new, non-traditional funding options. The concept of trust is positioned as the preference of an individual’s preference of which government, the state or local, should play the hegemonic role in funding schools. When citizens trust local governments in terms of fund allocation, citizens are more likely to desire that the local government play the primary role in funding the schools. Conversely, when trust at the local level is weak, citizens tend to prefer that the state government be primarily responsible for funding schools (Alm 2011).

The state of Ohio is one where citizen trust factors enormously into the educational funding equation (Ingle, 2012). Ohio funds schools through a combination of local property taxes and state aid, similar to most other states. What makes Ohio different is the frequency of votes pertaining to the tax levies on public schools, as Ohio has more such votes on school funding than any other state in our nation (Ingle 2012). As a result of this trend, districts have the ability to privately finance campaigns in support of increased school funding. District staff, including teachers and administrators can also participate in these campaigns, so long as staff energies towards these efforts occur either before or after school hours. Successful campaigns galvanized all stakeholders, placing particular emphasis on grass roots organizations, including students, which created a sense of urgency (Ingle 2012).

Over time, certain states, as a means of attempting to reduce discrepancies between the funding of individual school districts, have taken more fiscal control of the educational allocation process (Cann & Wilhelm 2011). California is one such state. In California, a full two-thirds of the education budget is allocated at the state level (Timar & Roza 2010). Additionally, once these state directed funds filter down to local districts, nearly all of these funds, approximately
ninety-five percent of the total funding package, are already allocated towards the salaries and benefits of school employees, making it difficult for schools to distribute new monies on a localized level.

Seventy-two percent of states continue to utilize a Foundation Program model as a means to fund schools as of 2011 (Verstegen & Knoeppel, 2012). A Foundation Program model entails a set of minimally appropriate funding levels localities must provide. More specifically, this paradigm prescribes set financial costs, mandating that a town sustain these benchmarks over time. Districts may exceed these minimum standards if they so choose to via tax levy, but may never reduce below a minimum threshold. This is commonly referred to as “maintenance of effort”. This remains the dominant formula by which states disperse funds to schools, however there have been some localized changes that have shifted some of these funds. One such example is inclusive STEM secondary schools that focus on Science, Mathematics, and technology as core educational foci. Both Texas and Ohio, beginning in 2005 enacted such changes (Rogers-Chapman 2014). These schools offer the potential of equanimity for students in low socio-economic groups, as these programs have increased access to resources, resources that are unlikely available in more economically depressed school districts. As these schools have open admission practices not simply confined to geography, students in depressed school districts have the opportunity to attend the same school as their more economically advantaged peers.

While these schools offer a chance at equal access for students of all economic strata, the prevalence of inclusive STEM high schools is higher in cities than in non-city areas. Students living in large cities thus have greater access to inclusive STEM high schools than students not living in or around a city (Rogers-Chapman, 2014).
While not present within the United States, the use of Child Savings Accounts (CSA) is prevalent in some countries around the world. These policies, found in selected Asian, Latin American and European nations, allow poor children to accumulate fiscal assets (including governmental matching funds) for important life endeavors, such as purchasing a home or paying for college (Cheung & Delavega 2011). Mexico, for example, starts funding students in Grade Nine as a motivation to complete high school. Students can earn points for every grade passed. These points are used to provide students with additional monies. In 2009, each point earned was worth $1.15 pesos. This money can be earned through Grade Twelve and serves as a fiscal incentive to finish high school, leaving graduating students with a small sum of money to begin “adult” life with (Cheng & Delavega, 2011).

States continue to primarily utilize traditional methods as a means of funding public schools, with few emergent changes over time (Vertegen & Knoeppel 2012). Non-traditional means of allocating financial resources to schools have emerged in pockets within the United States and more prevalently on an international level. Within the United States, attitudes and levels of information held by citizens are impactful. In the United States, my review of the literature has found that the more accurately citizens understand the actual cost of school expenses, the less likely citizens will support increases in education funding. In the abstract however, with the underlying narrative that education is “the great equalizer, allowing people to rise above meager beginnings”, not accompanied by accurate perceptions about true educational costs, citizens will support increasing funding to schools. Income level also impacts desire to increase educational spending. Those is higher strata tend to maintain the status quo, while those in disadvantaged positions tend to support an increase of financial resources to schools.
Despite these troubling findings, there are some reasons for optimism. Local campaigns supporting increased funding have met with some success in Ohio, particularly if a grass roots coalition can be galvanized, create a sense of urgency, and involve all stakeholder groups. California has at least attempted to address inter-district disparities by having the majority of education funds dispersed by the state government. Rhode Island has adopted an enhanced formula, enabling funds to follow the child, creating consistency in accounting practices, and ensuring that students in poverty and low socio-economic groups receive a greater proportion of the resource pool. Certain larger cities have embraced open enrollment STEM programs, creating access to instructional materials and resources not previously available to poor students. The CSA model employed in Mexico serves as a potential template for policy makers within the United States to directly address the issue of poverty within our schools.

The Impact of Poverty

The gap between the rich and poor has steadily increased since the 1970s and the United States has the highest income inequality in the developed world (Condron, 2009). Schools tend to exacerbate the achievement gap between students of different racial and socioeconomic groups. Compounding this conundrum is the high proportion of homeless people that are children. Of the expected 3.5 million people expected to experience homelessness in the year 2012, more than half are women and children (Hinton & Cassel, 2012). In comparison to peers with a steady home and little to no residential mobility, younger students experiencing homelessness are twice as likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability and three times more likely to be identified as having an emotional disturbance (Shaw & Goode, 2008). Individuals experiencing homelessness are also at a significantly elevated risk of chemical dependency, thus making care for children even more vexing (Swick & Williams, 2006). Children of parents that
experience homelessness and/or extreme poverty are also at a heightened risk of experiencing or witnessing violence (Swick, 2008). These elevated risk factors cannot be extricated from consideration when examining educational outcomes. Students that do not have basic feelings of safety and security met cannot be asked to perform at the same academic level as students that do not contend with these tragic life dynamics.

Poverty is more than an economic malady. Poverty is a pervasive, all-encompassing condition that has myriad adverse effects. Socioeconomic status affects cognitive skills, academic achievement, mental health, and physical health (Lende, 2012). The effects of poverty experienced in childhood can manifest in individuals as adults (Lende, 2012). Lower childhood socioeconomic status is linked to lower self-assessed health ratings, increased incidence of cardiovascular disease, and increased mortality in adults (Adler & Stewart, 2010). Further, the perception of economic deprivation in children leads to a greater likelihood of a diagnosed mental health disorder as an adult (Hackman, Farah, & Meaney, 2010). There is at least a loose association between poverty experienced as a child and a lifetime of diminished earning capacity (Adler & Stewart, 2010).

**Poverty and Educational Attainment**

By nearly any metric, students that live in generational poverty tend to score lower on educational assessments than those more fiscally advantaged peers (Evans & Anderson, 2013). These score differences first manifest in the primary grades, persist into the middle grades, and are seldom overcome by the conclusion of high school.
Historically, Rhode Island’s educational funding mechanisms have relied upon the “minimum guarantee”, a specific, minimum threshold that the state must allocate to local, educational entities (Wong, 2013). This system has roots in the 1960s, beginning with a twenty-five percent commitment in 1960 before moving to a thirty percent commitment in 1964. In 1967, the Thibeault Commission changed the funding metric to median family income from local property value assessment as the determining factor in the level of funding (Wong, 2013). In 1983, the state legislature returned the mandated portion of the state contribution back to twenty-five percent (Wong, 2013). The Omnibus Property Tax Relief Act was passed in 1985, seeking to increase the state share of education spending to fifty percent (Wong, 2013).

The state of Rhode Island then went without revisions to its’ education funding formula for nearly twenty years. Given the pace of change across the country via both legal and legislative means, this was an unusual circumstance. Rhode Island typically spends more than most states on education funding- ranking 8th in the 1990-1991 school year, and 6th in 2007-2008, spending $14,459 per pupil, nearly one-third more than the national average, which was $10,532 during the same time frame. (Wong, 2013). Local revenue made up 54.4% of school expenditures in 1990-1991 and 52.3% of school expenditures in 2007-2008. (Wong, 2013). State contributions remained commensurate during this time; 40.8% in 1991 and 39.9% in 2008 (Wong, 2013). These expenditures were impacted by other events within the Rhode Island economy. In the early nineties, Rhode Island underwent a fiscal crisis when a number of the state’s credit unions went bankrupt, costing citizens millions of dollars in permanently lost dollars. As a result, the state deferred eighty-four million dollars in teacher retirement in 1991, reduced the minimum guarantee of state spending for education to twenty-five million dollars in

During this same time frame, there were challenges to the legality of Rhode Island’s education funding formula. In 1994, the city of Pawtucket, along with other communities with limited educational resources, filed suit alleging the current funding formula was not an equitable distribution of resources, depriving students in low income communities. Superior Judge Needham sided with the plaintiffs, citing the current situation as a violation of Article XII of the state constitution (Abbott & Robinson, 2010). The Rhode Island Supreme Court reversed this decision, holding that the current funding system did not violate either the Equal Protection clause or the Education clause embedded within Article XII (Abbott & Robinson, 2010).

This decision did not go without criticism. The majority of Rhode Island’s children that live in depressed socioeconomic conditions live in urban areas. These urban areas have truncated instructional budgets, poorly functioning infrastructure, antiquated instructional materials, and a paucity of available material resources. In contrast, the comparatively wealthy subset of Rhode Island’s pupils is concentrated in more suburban districts. The ability for districts such as Barrington and East Greenwich to locally raise revenue stands in marked contrast to their urban counterparts in Providence and Pawtucket. The Providence School Department, the largest in the state, has required massive amounts of state aid through the past few decades. There is also a comingling of other factors. The racial and ethnic makeup of those students living in depressed socioeconomic conditions are of African-American or Hispanic descent. This creates the additional consideration, as state law requires those minority groups provided with protected class status not be disproportionally affected by educational funding decisions (Abbott & Robinson, 2010).
The concept of local control, as previously espoused virtue of education funding, also raises concerns in Rhode Island. Given the structure of the Rhode Island legislature, “local control” is an illusory ideal, as the state legislature controls nearly all taxing and spending mechanisms. Local communities have no fundamental right to levy and collect taxes (Abbott & Robinson, 2010). In contrast to the vast majority of other states, Rhode Island does not have a true local property tax mechanism. The collection of state revenue is determined by the state legislature (Abbott & Robinson, 2010).

Governor Lincoln Almond attempted to broach these concerns in 1999 with the creation of the Governor’s Task Force on Elementary and Secondary Education (Wong, 2013). During the 2006 legislative session, the Rhode Island General Assembly, hiring the firm R.C. Wood & Associates, sought to develop a new, needs based formula (Wong, 2013). This formula was constructed and implemented to ensure Rhode Island could apply for Race to the Top (RTTT) funds. These competitive grants, created by the Obama administration as a means to jump start educational innovation and reform, became a highly sought revenue stream. Failure to have an equitable funding formula disqualified applicants from receiving these federal monies, thus Rhode Island wanted to ensure an ability to compete.

Wood and associates developed a needs-based model based upon four core concepts: (1.) Spending would be increased by between 56.7 million and 128.3 million dollars to meet the criteria to be considered a successful school. A successful school is defined by the costs required by other, successful schools to have students meet the required proficiency standards. (2). Increase aid by an additional 42.4 to 46.4 million dollars to support schools that have high numbers of Limited English Proficient (LEP) or disabled students. (3). Purposefully solicit feedback from educational leaders, families, and others that have high interest in the success of
potential reforms. (4). Increase spending between 53.35 and 58.35 million dollars on pedagogical improvements that would positively impact student academic achievement and performance (Wood, 2007).

These core ideals served as the intellectual core of numerous iterations of subsequent legislative bills. After political setbacks in the years 2008 and 2009, the final version of this education funding formula was passed in June of 2010. The governor then signed the legislation, which became binding and effective in the year 2012 (Wong, 2013).

Despite these revisions, the cities of Pawtucket and Woonsocket, two of the poorest communities in the state, filed suit challenging the adequacy of this new formula, contending that the new formula did not provide the needed funding to sufficiently educate the high number of special needs students living in these districts. Living with a handicapping condition is, in and of itself, a potentially life altering trajectory. These students face tremendous struggles without the additional burden of not having properly funded educational programming. Currently, as the state of Rhode Island only funds a portion of what is considered “High Cost” Special Education, those students not in the “High Cost” category, defined as a per pupil expenditure five times higher than the average Special Education cost, receive no additional support via the funding formula. This practice was implemented as a safeguard against school districts over-identifying students as being disabled for the purpose of receiving additional financial support from the state. While this makes sense financially, the unintended consequence is that students with an authentic handicapping condition requiring additional services and money, are not provided with an equitable educational revenue stream as their non-disabled peers.
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

Research Paradigms

There are three dominant vantage points from which to conduct a scholarly inquiry: postpositivism, interpretivism, and critical theory. Arising from discontent from a strict positivist perspective, postpositivism is primarily used in quantitative research studies. Underlying this approach, postpositivism’s advocates claim that human intellect is flawed and that life’s experiences cannot produce a single, universal “truth in reality.” (Ponterotto, 2005). Similar to positivism, postpositivism seeks to explore a nexus between a particular cause and effect scenario grounded in traditional “hard science” methodologies. The researcher should follow many tenets of the Scientific Method: form a hypothesis, create a controlled experiment to verify or refute the hypothesis, and rely on the data exclusively to draw conclusions. Postpositivism also demands that the researcher not engage the issue on an emotional or personal level. Postpositivism operates from a nomothetic perspective, looking to explore commonalities in response patterns among large groups of people rather than individuals. The goal is to predict and codify a phenomenon rather than probe for an in depth understanding of the individual (Ponterotto, 2005). Further, when looking to distinguish postpositivism between the etic and emic language categories, a distinction traditionally practiced within the field of counseling, postpositivism falls into the etic strata. Classification in the etic category, for purposes of research, means that the field of inquiry falls into a universal set of conditions that apply to all of humanity, irrespective of any language, culture, or societal differences. (Ponterotto, 2005).

Interpretivism constructs reality from the perspective of individuals and groups and acknowledges that there are multiple realities, each with equal legitimacy, within the academic world. This reality can only be truly gleaned through deep introspection and planned, purposeful
reflection and is reflected in a qualitative research study. A central tenet of interpretivism emphasizes the connection between the researcher and the person/people being studied. It is this series of back and forth conversations that facilitate a shared understanding of a topic. The researcher and her or his participants jointly create (co-construct) findings from their interactive dialogue and interpretation (Ponterotto, 2005).

While postpositivists have philosophical underpinnings in the idea that there is a single, universal truth and that the research process should seek to find the best remedy to societal problems, interpretivists believe that one truth does not singularly exist, rather that the truth comes in multiple forms as those involved in the research process construct meaning together. Truth is not simply something that scholars “discover”, but a continuous flow of information to be assimilated by people or groups of people (Butin, 2010). Simply put, the reality of any given social or educational problem is built through the experiences of those embedded in the process.

Interpretivism, in contrast to postpositivism, examines issues from an idiographic and emic perspective. Idiographic academic writing is highly personalized, as it focuses on either individuals or select groups, rather than society at large, and is marked by characteristics of copious attention to detail and elevated levels of description (Ponterotto, 2005). Postpositivism has a fundamentally different style of writing, seeking to actively exclude a sense of a narrative structure, instead focusing upon drawing generalized conclusions, devoid of a sense of emotion.

Arising from research and practice in the field of counseling, emic style writing is found within interpretivism. An emic “lens” pertains to the characteristics and descriptors of individuals, whereas an etic vantage point pertains to universal tenets that apply to all of
humanity (Ponterotto, 2005). Scholars writing using an emic lens seek to glean a deep understanding of the individual, a hallmark of the interpretivist perspective.

While postpositivism and interpretivism suggest remedies to current social problems, critical theory seeks to upend the current social order. Arising from Germany nearly a century ago, critical theory seeks to liberate marginalized and oppressed groups from the norms imposed by a group of powerful elites. Central to this paradigm is the idea that the assumed truth is foisted upon all members of society by those in positions of power and authority. While postpositivist and interpretivist perspectives implicitly suggest that societal actors have good intentions, critical theorists stand in marked contrast- believing that those in power have purposefully perpetuated the status quo of marginalizing certain voices (Butin 2010).

Critical theorists view their work as a form of critiquing social norms (Ponterotto 2005). The supposed “facts” of any given situation are jaundiced by the perspective of the person or group in a position of power, thus distorting reality for anyone not in this privileged societal position. Language and words are the tool for developing and maintaining societal power. Oppression manifests in multiple forms and the current norms in contemporary academic research subtly perpetuate a cycle that fosters marginalization of disadvantaged groups.

While postpositivist and interpretivist perspectives attempt to maintain, to varying degrees, a measure of objectivity, critical theorists have an embedded advocacy within their writings. There is no mystery surrounding how the critical theorist author feels as the topic unfolds. In addition, critical theorists are clear that creating new knowledge should never stand alone. A requisite requirement of the critical theorist paradigm is to use this new information to
enact social change. This requires action that seeks to purposefully elicit social change for the betterment of those in oppressed social groups (Merriam, 1991).

The purpose of this study is to understand the perspectives of those in the policy making domain of the educational arena. This research focuses upon a reality co-constructed by the researcher and participants. No claim of factual certainty will be offered. The veracity of the claims shared can neither be proven nor disproven. Instead, the driving force behind this research was to construct meaning from the responses to ascertain the positions of the participants as a vehicle to perhaps elicit policy adjustments. The key component of this study is how the perspectives coalesce around a central premise or theme (Saldana, 2016).

Research Questions

The research questions of this study are:

1. How do policy influencers understand the current allocation of educational resources within the United States, and more specifically, Rhode Island?
2. Do the policy influencers, based upon the current distribution of educational resources within the United States, with specific emphasis on the state of Rhode Island, feel the current system is fair to all students?
3. If the policy influencers feel the current distribution of educational resources is unfair, how do these stakeholders believe would be the best ways to change the current distribution model?

Each qualitative research study is unique: taking on a different form as the data is revealed (Saldana, 2016). While I fully recognize that my positionality cannot be completely extricated from both the questioning and interpretation processes, this data was generated via
a semi-structured interview process, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to construct meaning and draw conclusions from the data set.

**Philosophical Underpinnings of IPA**

Challenging the concept of empirical truth, Phenomenology became a construct from which to view an issue of importance before the first world war (Dowling, 2005). This concept seeks understanding through the interpretation of lived experiences, placing personal meaning within a social context (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). The results of IPA inquiries must be melded within the larger cultural and historical conditions in place. The researcher exists in an interrelated fashion with the participants of a study and meaning is generated through the engagement of a phenomenon (Palmer, Larkin, de Visser & McFadden, 2010). Researchers using IPA seek to discern the nature of relationships between the actor(s) and the larger world, where meaning regarding the “world” is distilled through the participant’s interactions with it (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). IPA disciples seek to understand how participants make sense of the world and capture that data through interviews and other forms of direct communication. Truth is co-constructed through creating meaning as the result of live experiences.

**Seminal Scholars of IPA**

Edmund Husserl is a pioneer in the field of phenomenological research. Husserl sought to understand phenomena free of any previous bias or assumptions, seeking to understand the topic in a natural context (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). Truth is sought through understanding the human interpretations of events. The results of these studies lie within a social and environmental context. Husserl also centers intentionality within the study of a phenomenon.
This is a purposeful relationship between the researcher and phenomenon under investigative study.

Martin Heidegger, similar to Husserl, places importance on how humans interpret life experiences. Heidegger was primarily concerned with how humans construct the meaning of being (Cohen & Omery, 1994). The process of creating meaning is a reciprocal process, jointly entered into by the researcher and participant. “Being-in-the-world” was the term Heidegger used to describe the intersection of human interactions with the larger environment (Dowling, 2005).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty added additional layers to the works of Husserl and Heidegger. Merleau-Ponty focused on four components that comprised the framework for the world: lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived human relation (relationality or communality) (van Manen, 1990). Merleau-Ponty extended his work and writings into the worlds of music, art, and politics. Contrary to other phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty believed that the body was the means through which humans experienced events and that our perceptions could not be extracted from our experiences.

**Scholarly Debate and IPA**

Although methods of research that place empiricist methodologies have a privileged position in scholarly endeavors, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) offers an excellent opportunity to embed meaningful personal experiences within the global research process (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). IPA offers a myriad of options in the fields of health care and social psychology, as both areas are situated within a larger environmental context. IPA relies on the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participant and has the
potential of elucidating shared themes that can perhaps find cohesion amongst similar groups (Lancer & Eatough, 2018). IPA has been criticized for being ambiguous and lacking standardization. Further, others have criticized IPA for being overly descriptive and lacking in interpretive structures (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). IPA has also been criticized because, while it does capture the interpretations of an experience, it lacks insight as to why an experience occurred. Nonetheless, IPA is a flexible and versatile approach to capturing the perspective of individuals living a particular set of experiences (TuFour, 2017).

Alignment to My Study

Qualitative research is designed to procure meaning from participants (Creswell, 2007). As the researcher, I sought to understand the lived experiences of participants from their perspective (Ponterotto, 2005). Through this inquiry, both myself as the researcher and the participants themselves will learn (Clandanin, 2007). IPA aligned with my study as I sought to find shared experiences across a cohort of individuals with similar backgrounds as a means of giving voice to their collective experiences. This collaborative experience aligns with IPA as the focus is to make sense of a particular experience in a focused context (Lancer & Eatough, 2018).

Data Collection Within IPA

First, a small number of interview participants were identified. IPA is designed to have small participant cohort groups. The goal of these interviews was to explore meanings, not collect facts (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Transcripts capture the exact words of the participant. Depth is considered more important than breadth in an IPA study (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Participants were asked to partake in either one or two interviews, depending upon the time
availability of the participant and the length of the conversation given any potential time restriction. Prior to the commencement of interviews, permission to participate in the research was obtained in writing and a consent to participate form was signed. One significant theme to explore was the historical context of educational funding, asking participants to expound upon their knowledge base. Participants were asked about their knowledge and perspectives regarding seminal legal and legislative policy decisions. Questions of this nature were important to determine context and personal philosophical orientations. These attitudes helped me understand the rationale and openness to change current practices. As my positionality was oriented towards systemic change, the attitudes of leaders in this field helped further refine and inform potential future outcomes. Throughout the interview process, I to ensure that the participant’s responses were correctly represented. I continually desired more information and/or clarification regarding identified responses and subsequent themes. This additional layer of information drove the second key component of the interview process; the “next steps” required on a macro scale required to equalize fiscal allocations to traditionally marginalized student populations. Questions were designed to be open ended in nature.

A central, unifying theme of the interview process was to have participants tell their story. By having open ended questions, the real possibility exists that new issues and solutions could be created (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Telling a story has myriad positive consequences, such as identifying central themes, distilling lessons learned, examining effective solutions to problems, and building a construct for future experiences (Webster & Mertova, 2007). By having participants tell their stories as change agents within the educational sphere, new pathways and possibilities for ameliorating an unjust system were unearthed. New legal and legislative outcomes were provided voice and pragmatic options are foregrounded. By looking at the
progression of these issues within the personal framework and actions of these participants, future change scenarios were explored.

Data Management

All interviews were conducted in either a private or semi-private location selected by the participant. No interview was conducted at the workplace or home of the researcher. This was designed to ensure maximum comfort of the participants. Interviews were recorded after permission to do so was obtained. The recording device used was an iPhone. Interview transcripts were stored on my personal computer. Access to both my iPhone and computer are password protected. Computer stored data was backed up on a USB drive that only I have access to. The computer, iPhone, and USB will only be in my hands. Any subsequent, paper based data was stored in a locked filing cabinet. This data will be destroyed three years after conclusion of the research.

Participants

Research participants were chosen based upon the ability to access levers of power related to the distribution of educational resources. These adult individuals influence policy decisions within the legal, economic, or larger political context. The intent in selecting participants was to find those with the greatest capacity to deliver change. Elected leaders within the state or federal legislative systems were desired due to the ability to affect the greatest amount of change on the largest number of students. Given that elected leaders have myriad competing priorities, the selection process then moved to those elected leaders within a more
localized context. In addition, those with legal expertise and a desire to reform the system were sought. While the legal history of reforming public education within a fiscal context has met with uneven success, legal challenges to resource allocation have proven to be more reliable in the interest of change. Potential participants were notified of the opportunity to participate in the research study via a letter. This communication was followed by a phone call. No offer of compensation was offered to any potential participant. Participants were notified full confidentiality would be maintained via data storage on a password protected computer. Pseudonyms with an accompanying numbers systems were an additional layer of protection to ensure the privacy of participants. Each of the participants is actively engaged in policy making in a public capacity, thus minimal risk is apparent due to fact that most responses to this inquiry mirror previously stated public positions.

Analytic Methods Within IPA

After completing the interviews, I went through each interview transcript, one line at a time, using In Vivo Coding, a style that captures the responses in a verbatim fashion (Saldana, 2016). In Vivo Coding helps to give clarity and to condense meaning (Charmaz, 2014). Codes from the data set were generated based upon the responses of the participants, not the researcher. Each participant interview was coded separately. After reviewing each line of data, I sometimes added notes and created analytic memos, designed to think critically about what is being shared and why it is being shared (Mason, 2002). After the first cycle of coding, I employed a comparison analysis, taking information from the data and then comparing this data to burgeoning categories (Creswell, 2017). This was a critical step to ensure that the voice of participants was being projected clearly and articulately. After two readings, categories for
analysis were created. The emergent themes were then developed based upon the commonality of thematic responses offered by the participant group. Keywords and associated contexts contributed to development of emergent themes.

**Presentation of Findings**

I presented a small number of (no more than four) master themes. This was presented as a table with accompanying superordinate themes. Direct quotations are used, followed by my analysis of the meaning behind these quotes. Emphasis was placed upon finding commonality amongst topics of discussion that connected the themes to related literature (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). This allows a reader to assess the accuracy of the interpretations and ensures the voice of the participant is maintained (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

**Validity and Credibility**

A valid research study manifests when the methodologies of the inquiry are sound and buttressed by the data collected (Webster & Mertova, 2007). While qualitative research differs from quantitative methodology in that the outcomes presented cannot necessarily be consistently reproduced, the data collected nonetheless was vetted properly. The transcripts have undergone this process as the interview results have been transcribed by an outside third party. Research participants were asked to verify the veracity of the transcripts during the research process. Using the above member checking protocol provides an additional layer of protection for research participants.
Triangulation is a critical tool to ensure the validity and credibility of a research study (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation entails examining multiple data sources to provide perspective on an issue of import. Although this research study obtained the perspective of stakeholders rather than “prove” an empirical truth, the data presented, to be viewed as credible, must be seen by the reader as authentic. In other words, the data must capture the story the participant wishes to tell (Saldana, 2016). Triangulation in this inquiry was obtained via the diverse cohort group of participants. This eclectic set of participants did not comprise a monolithic stakeholder group. Instead, research participants had a diverse set of professional experiences and vocations. Even though the issue examined in this study was specific to education, the larger, overarching issues brought lawyers, elected leaders, and passionate community members into the fold. Using direct quotations created a rich, thick description of the phenomenon being explored (Creswell, 2013). As this study used an In Vivo Coding methodology, a rich, thick description was “baked into” the results, foregrounding the lived experiences of the participant cohort group.

**Protection of Human Subjects and Informed Consent**

The use of semi-structured, in-person interviews was the primary means by which data was collected. Participants were informed in advance regarding the nature of the research inquiry. Prior to the formal onset of the interview process, participants gave written consent and were informed that withdrawal during any portion of the study was allowable. Participants were informed that no material rewards would be offered for participation. Throughout the research process, participants were afforded the opportunity to examine the accuracy and veracity of responses provided to the researcher.
Obtaining IRB Approval

IRB approval was sought and obtained directly through Northeastern University. Formalized research activities did not commence until the IRB process was completed. Research participants were never coerced into participation and no power imbalances existed between the researcher and the participants. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the inquiry. Participants were informed of their explicit right to withdraw from the project at any time. Interview participants were offered the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and elaborate on any segment of conversational data collected. At no point during the data collection process did any participant express reservations or reluctance regarding any component of this endeavor.
Chapter 4: Findings

Purpose of Research & Cohort Group Characteristics

The purpose of this study was to obtain the perspectives of leaders within the field of education with regard to how these leaders experienced and interpreted the disparities of per pupil expenditures within school districts. An additional goal of this research was to determine what systemic improvements were justified with regard to how to ameliorate the distribution of economic resources as a means of equalizing educational opportunity for all students. This chapter presents the narratives derived from personal interviews with six leaders within the policy making realm of public education. Of these six leaders, four were elected officials. Three of these elected leaders served as representatives within the Rhode Island State Legislature; two participants in the Rhode Island House of Representatives, the other in the Rhode Island State Senate. The fourth elected leader interviewed currently serves as a representative of Rhode Island on a national level, serving in the United States Congress. Of the non-elected leaders interviewed, one participant is an attorney currently bringing forth a lawsuit against the state of Rhode Island, claiming that the failure to provide an adequate, public education is depriving students from fiscally challenged school districts from receiving the skills necessary to become functional citizens. The sixth interview participant served as a policy director for an organization committed to fixing the public school infrastructure in Rhode Island and currently works in the Rhode Island legislature as a policy analyst.

Each participant in this chapter was assigned a pseudonym to protect confidentiality. Thus, the name of each participant was changed to ensure that, consistent with the Informed Consent document, the participants maintained anonymity. To address the essential questions and purpose of this study, this chapter is divided into two main sections: (1) a summary of each
participant’s interview and (2) a synthesis of the major common themes gleaned from the insights of the participants as these themes relate to the research questions.

Peter Ryan

“We can pretend to do all this other stuff, and I shouldn’t use the word pretend, but we can do all this other stuff that’s really good and this is the right work we should be doing, but if we stop there and don’t look at the money, we’re not going to get the success we should have.”

Background: Peter is in his late twenties and has been interested in educational funding issues since he was in high school. The genesis of this interest occurred when, as a high school student, Peter’s local, public high school was in danger of losing accreditation. Peter expressed his disdain and embarrassment over this fact. “One of the things that happened over that time, was that just when the town didn’t invest in anything related to facilities or anything like that. When the town didn’t do that, we as a student group decided to organize and start demanding better conditions for our schools. The end result became a $30-million-dollar bond passed to renovate our school and that motivated me to make sure this never happened again.” Peter aspired for a more formalized say in educational policy decisions, serving on his local school committee as a 19-year-old student, obtaining a seat on the school committee at the age of 20. Currently, Peter serves in the Rhode Island House of Representatives. More specific to our Committee. All education budgets, beginning for students in Kindergarten programs, moving into elementary, middle, and secondary schools, and concluding with higher education budgetary questions, pass through Peter’s subcommittee. Peter is an author of numerous bills pertaining to the distribution of educational monies within Rhode Island public schools.
Discussion: Peter’s experiences made him particularly sensitive to issues of school infrastructure and construction. He lamented the fact that his local high school was put on warning status and how this categorization drove him to become an advocate for robust school funding. “I think the biggest thing has been around school construction. One of the things that, as a Freshman Senator, I did was go to the senate president and ask to work on school construction issues.” Prior to that time period, in the vicinity of the years 2012 and 2013, Rhode Island had placed a moratorium on school construction. There had been a protracted economic recession and numerous capital projects were severely curtailed. Peter, to jump start the school construction process, led a senate task force to publish a report regarding the need to upgrade the infrastructure of Rhode Island’s public school buildings. Through the research of other New England states, Peter found some noteworthy revenue streams utilized by other states to fund public school buildings. “Massachusetts has done a lot of work around this and offers some good perspective for us. Their problem was actually deeper when they started then when we did. We had put a moratorium on and we had frozen that cash for a long period of time.” Our immediate neighbor to the north, Massachusetts, dedicated 1% of aggregate sales tax revenue for the exclusive purpose of funding school infrastructure projects. Peter offered this as a remedy to help offset some of Rhode Island’s infrastructure needs. “We can inch our way over time to make this money available. If we can collect taxes on internet sellers, then we’d actually reduce the sales tax down. This could be a pay as you go model. You have more up front revenue and can more appropriately lay out that capital as it is needed rather than borrow it through bonding.”

There has been a “one size fits all” approach to school funding. Local capital budgets typically have been sparse and there are virtually no state enforced compliance standards. In Peter’s perspective, this was an ineffective means of addressing school infrastructure needs.
“That was, wait until it gets to be a big enough project and then put it to bond and we’ll reimburse the bond. That incentivized a series of bad behavior by districts. If I have a problem today that costs $300,000 to fix, I might as well just wait until the building falls down or become so inhabitable it becomes a $3,000,000 problem and we go to bond to get a new building. It really did not make sense. Even in a project that might only have a useful life of ten years, you were bonding it out over thirty years.” Past financial practices have been largely prescriptive, born of a lack of resources. The economic recession retarded the school construction process. Buildings that had outlived their live expectancy continued to languish, problems unaddressed. Bond issuances also increased a district’s financial commitment to interest payments. If there was an ability to pay more of these costs upfront with a dedicated revenue stream, these interest payments could be significantly scaled back.

This committee’s research and work drew the attention of one candidate for governor: Gina Raimondo. Then candidate Raimondo used this committee’s work as a cornerstone for her educational policy recommendations during the election season. Upon being elected governor, Gina Raimondo lifted the moratorium on school construction funding and included many of this committee’s key recommendations as part of her first state budget. Peter, while happy that much of the committee’s work had been utilized, expressed regret that the 1% revenue stream, either derived from the existing sales tax structure, or from a new, internet based sales tax, was never recommended in her budget. The newly elected governor, in Peter’s estimation, did not want to raise taxes. Peter opined that this dedicated revenue stream, irrespective of the particular fiscal pathway, needs to be created and maintained.

Even with an improved economic climate, a governor with more progressive educational fiscal policies, and an emphasis on school building health, vexing questions of school equity
remain. Rhode Island went an extended period of time without having a funding formula at all. The new formula, first implemented nearly a decade ago, has helped draw attention to equity considerations. “It’s better than it used to be when they said “We’ll give you $10,000 per student this year because that’s what you got last year.” There was no assessment of the number of students, what those students’ needs were and anything as to how it was done, and it was completely arbitrary.” Nonetheless, the current system has opportunities for growth. This is due, in part, to the relative newness of a formula, where the general public is still assessing issues of equity. Peter expressed that much work lies ahead. “I think we have a lot of work to do to make sure that people do understand what it is. I could count, probably on one hand, the number of people that I think truly understand the inner workings of that formula and how it works.”

As a state senator, Peter has a significant, direct influence over the state budget as it relates to educational expenditures. He has far less influence over local expenditures regarding how local cities and towns allocate funds for public schools. Public school funding in Rhode Island public schools predominately depends upon the combined, total contributions of state and local dollars. Peter expressed his reiterated his displeasure with what he sees as local entities underperformance in contributing to educational costs. “Our current formula has an implied local share and it is market based, based upon research we did throughout New England with regard to what it costs to educate kids in New England. We, the state, have done our part, but there’s never been any obligation, implied directive in any shape or form, that the locals have to do the same. As a result of the formula, we’ve seen towns pull back, which is the opposite of what we wanted.” Peter emphasized that, by not having the legislature mandate more local funding, student equity is compromised. “I think that the local share is a massive component that we’ve
missed, and it’s making it so that there is no equity for students. For example, Cumberland is incredibly low funded compared to Lincoln, which is right next door.”

An additional consideration of the new funding formula relates to state contributions to districts that have high number of students requiring English Language (EL) interventions. Typically, students with EL needs are concentrated in urban districts, such as Providence and Central Falls. Prior to the revised funding formula, EL needs were not explicitly accounted for within the funding mechanisms. Previous iterations of Rhode Island’s funding were born primarily of political influence within the legislative bodies. Peter wanted to ensure that this new consideration was captured within our conversation. “I would say that the funding formula did anticipate that there was going to be an increased cost for students with EL needs. It also determined that there was such a high correlation between those students with poverty that they could use poverty as an index that would predict need for EL funding.”

Although Peter believes that the revised funding formula has made a difference and is more equitable for students living in districts with limited fiscal means, more work lies ahead. As our conversation turned to the current landscape, there was rich discussion regarding how to actualize the ideal of equal educational opportunity. In particular, there was an emphasis on dissemination of information. As the funding formula, at least in comparison to neighboring states with long established funding formulas, is a relatively new concept, Peter expressed that the populace would need more time to demonstrate understanding. The previous system was fairly well known and understood. In general terms, Peter offered that most individuals knew the distribution was a political phenomenon, and that the totals for any given year were likely similar to the previous year. In the new formula, there was a series of more complex mathematical permutations. Further, there were terms used that lay individuals might not understand. Peter was
not reluctant to offer criticism of the outgoing Commissioner of Education in Rhode Island, Ken Wagner, as it relates to understanding the formula and resulting fiscal implications. “I think the last commissioner had no desire to understand the funding formula and no concept of it. When you have the chief education officer in the state that is running the department that administers the formula, and says that it’s good or bad, coming in year after year, and not saying it is a priority for them to review, then that’s a problem. We’re spending $1 billion a year on education. We know you will never close the achievement gaps we’ve talked about unless you look at this.”

Our dialogue soon shifted focus to the instructional program, moving into the classroom domain. The need for instructional coaches, professionals with the expertise to ensure the curriculum is implemented with equal parts imagination and fidelity, are in scarce supply. Districts often see these professionals as ancillary, as they do not have a supervisory function and do not have to manage a classroom. In moderately well fiscally positioned districts, these professionals are often the first casualty of a budget issue. In poor districts, these funds for these instructional leaders are seldom requested, as the administrative teams know in advance that financial capacity for these educators simply does not exist. A highly effective school system assures that students receive a guaranteed and viable curriculum, something an instructional coach helps manage and align. These professionals also examine assessment data, offering an expertise designed to continue the cycle of teaching, assessment, reflection, and re-teaching content. “You have to have people looking at your data all the time. Otherwise, how do you know if your instruction is effective and that the curriculum is being implemented in schools?”

This kind of work, examining student data as a means of assessing the effectiveness of instruction, was a central spoke in the promise of charter schools. Peter expressed how that promise, despite political grandstanding to the contrary, has never been actualized. “An a-ha
moment for me was when the mayor of our town said that he wanted to bring this small petri dish, you know 40-50 students, together into a charter school. We can look at how these kids learn and take these findings and bring them back to the public schools. As a look back, this was a terrible idea. Nobody ever did that work. As we deal with a finite number of dollars, and we have the adage that the money follows the child, but as we see here, that didn’t work. I’ve also realized that these economies of scale don’t work. Just because you add one student to the classroom doesn’t really change the cost all that much. In most cases, the teacher, curriculum, and building have already been paid for. Sometimes you add that one kid, that’s the magic that makes you open a new classroom, but that’s not often the case and that’s a big issue.”

Charter schools are not necessarily a negative model, but there needs to be a strategy behind them. If there are multiple charters operating with little or no oversight and strategic planning, there is the strong possibility that districts simply create an alternative school location that differs only in geography and not in instruction, curriculum, and data analysis. The original purpose of charter schools in general was to have these schools serve as laboratories, experimenting with cutting edge curriculum and instructional strategies. Instead, Peter expressed dismay of how charters currently run in Rhode Island. “We have not had any strategy as it related to charter growth. It’s not tied to district performance. It’s not tied to student need. It’s not tied to any strategic measure as to where we grow charters and why. How we fund charters is not very specific. More opportunity and choice is great for everyone but if we don’t know what works and what does not, we are wasting tons of money. If a charter school takes $5 million from a district, the district doesn’t actually save $5 million. If, let’s say 150 kids attend the charter school, the district simply doesn’t know if those kids are being successful. There’s no
criteria. Currently, if scores don’t get better, the only thing that happens is that another charter school is opened. So, we are in this endless circle and we end up in the same spot.”

As the conversation turned back to Cumberland, RI, the district that Peter is originally from, more pointed criticism over the logic behind Rhode Island’s approach to charter schools was offered. Within the past five years, a new charter school was opened in Cumberland. This school was in direct competition with Cumberland High School for students. Peter strongly questioned the logic of such a decision. “You look at Cumberland today. They are outperforming BVP (the name of the charter opened in Cumberland), Cumberland High School has the national school principal of the year as it’s leader. But, in all the places in the state where you could make that investment, you chose there? What I’m saying is we have zero strategy as to where it makes sense, strategically and financially, to have charters. There’s a playbook there. We just don’t have it.”

An additional challenge with charter school funding in Rhode Island is the enrollment data of students with disabilities and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Students with disabilities typically cost more money to educate than their non-disabled peers, sometimes by a substantial amount. While public schools must educate all students, regardless of cost, Peter opined with regard to the disparity in rules between public and charter schools when educating students with disabilities. “Constituents have contacted me about kids coming back into public schools from charter schools. More often than not, it is because the student has an IEP. The school usually says something like this to a parent “You know what, we really can’t fully support Johnny here. We don’t have the right resources and supports. He’s better off back in the district school.” But, the real kicker and irony is, when they (the charter school) have a kid who does have a Special Ed need and that wouldn’t have the resources even back in Cumberland, but
would still need to go to an out of district placement of some sort, they’ll send the kid back to Cumberland first and force the public school in Cumberland to an out of district placement. That forces Cumberland Public Schools to pay for it.” These out of district programs run in the tens of thousands of dollars. Some even approach a cost of $100,000 per student to the district.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Peter expressed a desire to lessen our reliance on local property tax funds as a means of generating school revenue. “We rely a lot on property tax income more than many other states. That’s not atypical for New England states. We need to change this over time. We need to determine the right state share and the right local share and hold people accountable for this, which we have not done. Regardless of what the funding formula is, if we do not hold all stakeholders accountable for their fair share of the revenue, then we can’t maintain fidelity.”

There was also the point of examining the inputs. More specifically, if the funding formula, when first created ten years ago, examined EL and poverty factors, were these the right metrics to include. And, if they were the right metrics to include, were these variables accounted for in a just, proportionate fashion? “We need to ensure that we are doing things the right way, or if the groups need to be broken out differently.” Finally, we revisited the question of a 1% revenue stream exclusively for education, be it from existing tax dollars or from an increase in the local tax levy. “We need to phase in over a five to ten-year period a gradual increase, taking up to 1% of sales tax revenue. Slowly, we would dictate that these funds go to school construction projects. This would reduce the reliance on borrowing. Over time, we could wean ourselves off bonding for everything and be able to pay for more infrastructure needs up front.”
Nancy Lewis

“We just did this massive study of school buildings in Rhode Island and it said everybody’s in trouble. Everybody.”

**Background:** Nancy, an attorney by education and trade, never really took to the day to day affairs of practicing law. “I litigated for six or seven years and realized I really liked the Policy end of things.” Having a mother who spent a lifetime in education also influenced Nancy’s interest in education. “I’ve seen the education angle in everything my mother has done up until the past two years, when she retired.” Nancy also felt that she could make a real difference for students. “I liked to advocate for new laws rather than simply follow the laws on the books already.” While Nancy’s early work was focused on property related cases, such as roof collapses and construction projects, Nancy was more interested in helping people. “I would learn about the effects of compounding injuries or illnesses and what the root causes of injury were based on these interplaying issues, but I really wanted to help people who had been wronged. I think my legal background, my upbringing in an educational family, and my move to Rhode Island led me to where I am now” Nancy, after relocating to Rhode Island two years ago is the Outreach Coordinator at the Occupational and Environmental Health Center of Rhode Island. This work charges Nancy with determining the factors that influence the health and wellbeing of people in their place of employment. Nancy herself described her current position as ideal, a melding of her legal background, interest in public policy, and for helping people. “Because a school building is both an occupational location and an environment for the students and staff that are there- that is a perfect fit, a marriage of policy and people. The work became bigger than we expected- as this office became a central hub for information, resources, ideas, and meetings related to school infrastructure.”
Discussion

As someone who is not native to Rhode Island, Nancy was surprised regarding the lack of oversight regarding the state’s school buildings. “There were no maintenance requirements for school buildings in Rhode Island. There were basic checklists, but they had no depth and had far too many allowable deferments, which basically means it just pushes dealing with a problem back a year.” Nancy, while disappointed by this fact, appeared more concerned about an inability of the state to enforce compliance. “Really, the only punishment was taking away money. But, if you took money away, you just exacerbated the issue. This basically meant we kept kicking the can down the road, and the buildings kept crumbling.” As schools have to make so many difficult choices, often on a shoestring budget, certain projects get neglected. “It wasn’t the local district’s fault necessarily. They didn’t have the money. What it has become is an equity issue.” I asked Nancy to clarify this point, as I was uncertain of the direction that she was going in. “Well, there’s an obvious answer and a not so obvious answer. The obvious answer is a lot of school buildings in a more affluent location, may not appear to have missing ceiling tiles and broken windows- but they do. For example, the Barrington Middle School needs to be rebuilt. It’s not in great shape. Their roof has leaked and they have had to close school a few times. Here’s the difference- Barrington voted. The town’s men and women voted to increase their property tax cap in order to fund this large school building project. They can do that, but many other towns can’t. The biggest difference is the ability to remedy a problem.”

Whenever a structural problem, such as a broken window or frozen pipe manifests, there are negative consequences for students. Temperature regulation is a commonly cited issue, students being either too hot or too cold. Nancy broke down some specific challenges faced in schools with poor temperature control mechanisms. “Look at when standardized tests are given.
If they are given in the beginning or the end of the year and it is in a three story building with no air conditioning, the students on the third floor are far less comfortable on the first floor. This is made worse when you have bathrooms that don’t function, they start to smell. Say nothing of the brown water, sinks covered in trash bags, and leaky pipes.” These issues, while significant and impactful, were often addressed with bare minimum interventions. “I have two examples of this, one in Tiverton and one in Providence. I have a photo of a Tiverton ceiling where the ceiling tiles have a gray spot on them, and then a brown water mark on the outside of the gray spot, and I learned that people in that building painted over the previous water mark. They did not fix the leak whatsoever. In a Providence school, the ceiling tiles just fell one day during lunch. They just fell. Whether it was from a leak or not, it’s unclear, but the ceiling tiles fell in the middle of the cafeteria.”

While buildings tend to require more repair when not updated regularly, another contributing factor to building decay is age. As school buildings in Rhode Island, are, on average over fifty years old, this brings about structural issues, especially when modern educational needs require increased capacity for technology, such as computers. Computers and other electronic devices require updated, high capacity electrical systems. These systems are unevenly functioning within Rhode Island schools, as Nancy opined. “If students in a town all have individual Chromebooks, but there is only one functioning outlet in the room, how much can we say this technology is really helping them?” While upgrades seem like a plausible remedy, the actual conditions are more complicated. “Most of our buildings are over fifty years old. Once you open the walls, whatever grandfathering happened that allowed you to keep the building in its’ current state, once you open the walls and touch the building, you have to keep up to code, and depending how long ago the last major renovation was, that may be a decade or two.”
As our conversation had brought about some substantive, quantitative examples of the deleterious impact of crumbling school buildings, the next segment of our discussion focused on how Fix Our Schools could influence the change process. One component of this work, as Nancy explained lies in educating the public about how schools are funded. “Many people in the public aren’t straight on how schools are funded. I had to be set straight on this as well. School money and building money are different sets. Once you can separate those, you understand that in order to discuss them with regard to equity changes because of where these monies come from.” Nancy continued to elaborate. “With an education to curriculum based type instruction, you are talking a lot about money from the state, when you are talking about buildings, that money is from the city or town, which comes from property taxes. Property taxes are very different across the state.” With regard to more specific, fiscal mechanisms for building repairs, the ability to pay plays a prominent role. “When cities or towns fix buildings, they don’t pay 100% of the construction costs. They never do. The range a community must pay changes every year, but it ranges between 35% and 98%. When Rhode Island passed the $250-million-dollar bond last November, this will allow for some fiscal incentives that will fix these base rates.” Increasing these base rates offer a financial incentive for districts to begin infrastructure projects soon. Cities that begin this process early will have ready access to these funds. Early action in the procurement of these funds is essential. “If you wait, the $250 million will be gone. That’s one of the built in motivators. Another part is allowing districts to receive the state’s share up front.”

Even with the additional $250 million allocated for school construction available, other challenges remain. If the share ratio, the percentage at which the state reimburses the local city or town decreases this change impacts many district’s abilities to pay for building upgrades. Some
districts may be able to support a variance in year to year reimbursement, but others, as a shift in the state ratio could alter the district’s fiscal commitment by tens of thousands of dollars on an outstanding bond, could simply not afford this upcharge. As a result, certain cities might not apply at all- out of fear that unforeseen, decreased state share ratios would constrict the ability to pay. Cities and towns, dependent on credit and bond ratings for future investment might just forgo a foray into this process out of fear of default. Nancy acknowledged this consideration could impact how districts approach applying. “It creates a bit of unpredictability when you don’t know if your percentage points will change from year to year. It doesn’t help with budgets.” Nancy also offered another, compelling reason for districts to apply for these available funds anyway. “This money increases the chance we have a fair system. The state is offering $250 million to anyone who will apply. I know this can be hard, I do, but I’m seeing how people are reacting to schools and that, generationally, people now seem less positive about future outcomes for our schools.”

In attempting to unpack this, in Nancy’s mind, less optimistic worldview, she spoke passionately about how school safety fits within this issue of funding and equity. “People I’ve spoken with have frequently said to me “Back in my day, we didn’t have to worry about people coming in to shoot up schools”. While protecting students, most would agree, is the single most important function a school has, the cost of effective safety measures is not frequently a prominent part of public discourse. “How we go about protecting kids is a challenge. We talk about vestibules, security cameras, and school resource officers. If you go to different places you get different answers. In my discussions in Providence, many people are skeptical of school resource officers in schools because the relationships have not been good. It doesn’t make people feel safe. So, if school resource officers won’t work in Providence, what else should be done for
school safety and for what cost? This is a major disconnect that has been exacerbated by recent events.”

There is also the more global issue of student academic performance when compared to temperature regulation within the public school building. If a school building is not properly regulated with regard to air flow, ventilation, and temperature, the ability of students to focus on an academic assignment or exam is impacted. “Let’s say it’s 72 degrees outside and you are on the first floor of a poorly ventilated building. If the school has an antiquated HVAC system, it could feel like 90 degrees on the third floor. I’ve seen research that shows students on the third floor, based solely on the elevated temperature, are more likely to fail an exam.” This is particularly important in the era of high stakes testing, as the results of these exams follow students, and, in some cases, impact graduation.

While many within, or directly connected to, the educational universe recognizes how so many financial factors contribute to the success of students, there are those outside this realm, still unaware of the nexus between student performance and proper funding. Nancy, when asked to consider how we bridge this gap offered some initial steps. “We need to start first by changing hearts and minds. There’s a disconnect between where people think the positive benefits of their students will come from. It’s a combination of several things, it always is. Buildings often look clean, so what could possibly be wrong? Why do we possibly need this much money?” This work is grass roots based; starting with local conversations between neighbors. One conversation leads to a second conversation, and so on. People within a local community converse and the positive value of school infrastructure is foregrounded. Constituents voice concerns to elected leaders and elected leaders translate these voices into legislative action. Nancy offered that anecdotes from local families can move this conversation forward. “When buildings aren’t fixed,
students get sick. If a building has black mold or if cases of bronchitis spike because of poor ventilation, this impacts the district, too. Now, you have to pay a substitute teacher for the day; yet another cost. People will start to see the burden of a city based on a building problem.”

Part of ensuring buildings do not get to the point where black mold becomes an issue is ensuring proactive maintenance requirements are legally mandated. Nancy’s work required making specific recommendations to the governor regarding specific requirements for local towns. “We need requirements. Think of it like a 401(k). Districts should have to put up an amount of money every year for building upkeep. It might be painful at first, but over time, districts won’t even think about it, like a direct deposit for your paycheck.” This kind of forward thinking also is necessary for the state. Deploying human capital to purposefully explore these issues is also a high priority. “The School Building Authority at RIDE has also expanded. There are four, full time people there now and they are very good at what they do. These people know HVAC systems, how much they cost, how they impact the environment and are a huge asset to local communities.”

The need for a more permanent revenue stream was a primary concern. Currently, in spite of the recently passed $250-million-dollar bond, there is no embedded mechanism to ensure that school buildings receive consistent upgrades. One potential remedy entails following Massachusetts, which years ago attempted to provide additional aid for school building costs. “Massachusetts has a system where they take one percent of their sales tax. It is automatically deducted, they’ve been doing it for 15-20 years, and they put it into school building only.” While this opens up a litany of fiscal pathways, who gets this money, and how this money is spent, is also of central concern. “It is need based, but an important part to know about that, because this goes back to equity, you can be determined to be a needy project, but if your affluent cities and
towns are applying for it more often, then by comparison, they are going to get more money.”

When asked to elaborate further, Nancy had additional, salient information. “Despite this in Massachusetts, and I learned this from talking with many people, there is still a disparity in who is getting the money. You would think Boston is getting much of this money, but they are not. It takes time and money, another full position, to apply for this money- but Boston Public Schools don’t have the resources to apply for it. They don’t have the time.”

As there was lots of information to assimilate and lessons to be learned from Massachusetts, Nancy was particularly interested in pursuing and anti-silo mentality as a means of moving Rhode Island’s school building investment plan forward. “We are really looking at outcomes. Good schools allow students to have good jobs. Students won’t achieve if their health is poor. Buildings contribute to future costs. If students are having high incidents of asthma in urban core buildings due to black mold, that’s both a current and future cost to Medicaid. There is a connection between asthma and chronic absenteeism. If students aren’t in school, they aren’t learning. If they aren’t learning, there is a greater risk of dropping out.” This kind of information, not obviously connective, is seldom discussed with regard to education. More frequently, the texture of the discussion is focused upon issues of academic performance. While academic performance is a central mission of public schooling, the failure to contextualize larger issues of health, attendance, graduation, and health care claims as an ancillary performance consideration of public schools remains a phenomenon worthy of further exploration. Nancy lamented this as our conversation concluded. “We are starting to see some data that shows hotspots for chronic absenteeism and asthma, specifically. Now I know the home environment can contribute, too. A lot of this is projective, but it has been my experience, talking with the Department of Health and researchers from Harvard, the public health scientists there, that we need to study this more.”
Concluding Thoughts

Nancy’s participation yielded both expected and unexpected results. Due to her extensive work focused on school building improvement and the resulting approval of the November bond in Rhode Island to allocate $250 million dollars to school infrastructure projects, her advocacy for a dedicated revenue stream was expected. Further, providing public information as a central component of the work was also expected. There had been much community outreach from multiple public agencies. This work was designed to increase public awareness around the condition of public school buildings in Rhode Island, highlighting the urgent need for infrastructure upgrades. Nancy’s explanation of the larger public health considerations around dilapidated school buildings yielded some unexpected, but pivotal information. Some burgeoning research findings surrounding the poor condition of urban ring buildings and higher incidents of chronic absenteeism, perhaps connected to black mold and/or asthma, was alarming. Students that are not in school do not learn. Students that do not learn are at increased drop-out risk. Students that drop-out have significantly depressed economic trajectories that exacerbate fundamental issues of equity and fairness, an issue that cannot be ignored in a democratic republic.

James Bradley

“I think once we found a system in which the majority of the members of the general assembly benefitted, then it became the system, whether it was right or wrong or actually completely fair.”

Background: James Bradley has been a member of the Rhode Island General Assembly since 1992. James has represented a district in Cranston, RI during his legislative tenure.
Cranston has the third largest population in the state, only behind Providence and Warwick.

Previous to his legislative experience, James was a police officer for 22 years. During his time on the police force, James returned to law school and is now a licensed attorney. James has always had an interest in public education and refers to the General Assembly as the “School Committee for the State.”

**Discussion**

Rhode Island was the last state in the country not to have a funding formula for education. Given that forty-nine other states had developed and implemented a formula and James has spent over twenty-five years in the legislature, this phenomenon is a proper starting point for our conversation. “Any discussion of state aid to education has to be discussed in the context of politics. We are talking about property tax rates, school construction, and health care costs.” With these known costs in mind and the fact that many other states have very similar factors to contend with regard to funding, we discussed why it took so long to adopt a formula. “People have always backed education but Rhode Island, at least compared to neighboring states, have very high property taxes.” Some individuals have viewed this system regressive in nature.

“If this is how we fund education, and people’s taxes continually go up, you end up devaluing people’s property. Nobody wants to move into a neighborhood where they see their taxes will go up every year.” James continued to elaborate. “We can use other regressive taxes, like gambling revenue, but also need to make sure that gambling venues don’t expand too quickly because we create an additional problem there.” There is an interest in funding public schools- very few oppose this in an abstract sense. The difficulty lies when those numbers are specifically codified, meaning that in order to pay for books, infrastructure, health care costs, and teacher salaries,
there is an actual understood cost to the public. “People simply do not want their taxes increased.”

As other states utilized funding formulas and Rhode Island continued to operate in the absence of such a system, James discussed some of the intermediate steps taken to move towards adoption and implementation of a formula. “The House has really invested in the budget. When I first came, there was one budget analyst. There are now six or seven in the House and six or seven in the Senate.” There has also been increased coordination with the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE). “We needed to be given certain information from RIDE. Once they increased staffing and resources directed at informing the legislature, we were better able to understand the issues and what made the most sense.” This increased coordination, in James’s mind certainly helped the working relationship between the two entities, leading us to continue the discussion regarding this arrangement as it leads to equity for students. “During this time we used a foundation system, but it evolved over time. Funds were pooled together and depending on the impact each of those funds had on a community, that dictated how much money that community got in school aid.” This, at least conceptually, makes sense with regard to equity. Systemically, the funds were distributed based upon need. The issue, according to James was how other elected officials reacted to this concept. “Providence has always been the elephant in the room. Let’s say, for example, they were getting half of the state’s share. If you increased by 30 million in any given year, Providence was locked into 15 million of those funds. Over time, many legislators felt this was unsustainable. These legislators were under pressure from their constituents, they had to reflect that in their votes. On the other hand, many of these same legislators felt the goal was to develop a system where the money followed the student. Because of this, the issue became political, not educational.” James contextualized this issue bluntly. “No
member of the General Assembly was going to support a state aid system that did not benefit their municipality, it just was not going to happen. They would face certain defeat in the next election cycle.”

In light of these competing priorities, there was enough of a recognition that some type of change was needed. (Many have opined, but James did not touch upon, Rhode Island’s application for Race to the Top (RTTP) monies as a driving force in the adoption of a formula. Application for these funds mandated a state have a funding formula in place.) James saw this agreement through a political context as well. “I think that once we found a system in which the majority of the members of the General Assembly benefited, then it became the system, whether it was fair or not.” An additional consideration in the adoption of a formula mandated that the formula be phased in over time. This was done to ensure “that cities and towns go up and down, sometimes by hundreds of thousands of dollars, on a year to year basis.” The plan was to implement the formula over a ten-year period “between the years 2008 and fiscal year 2018”. Once this ten-year cycle was complete, there would be a re-evaluation. In James’s estimation, there seems to be very little difference between the ultimate outcomes. “I don’t see all that much difference, to be honest with you, other than the fact that in Providence, the increases would be a little more under control or a little more understandable and they wouldn’t be taking such a big piece of the pie every year.”

Having explored some of the political and economic questions, I wanted to draw these considerations back to the question of equity. If James’s understanding of the funding formula did not lead him to the conclusion that a particular funding plan was more fair than another, I wanted to consider any issue that he may see as being unfair. As a member of the General Assembly, many of James’ colleagues had strong feelings about charter schools. “Well, in my
time, I’ve had some peers talk about charter schools. If a charter school comes into an area and they draw 400 students and the state is giving $10,000 per student, it means all that money got diverted away from the public school budget. You just lost all that money and that doesn’t necessarily mean you are all of a sudden going to have fewer building and teacher needs.”

When asked to elaborate further, James offered this conundrum for local districts- “Your costs remain very much the same but you’ve lost a lot of income. Another big side of this issue is that the local district is hurt because many of these best students go to the charter schools.” This does impact the culture and climate of a school and can hurt morale. Adding further to the financial impact of charter schools is how these schools operate with regard to students with disabilities. “Local schools are generally left with most of the students with Special Education needs. Students with profound needs are very expensive to educate. How do you do this the right way if a significant part of your operating budget goes out the door to a charter school?”

Despite these important financial considerations, the issue of charter schools in Rhode Island continues to be highly polarizing. James helped to unpack this debate with some historical perspective, as he has served in excess of twenty-five years. “I would say it has been quite contentious. When we first adopted charter schools it was a very close vote. The majority leader, George Carullo, believed that we should give charters a shot and it narrowly won support.” This narrow victory did not end debate, however, and there remains some resistance. “There are still many who believe that charters have expanded too quickly, and that the financial impact on the local community has not been taken into consideration.” James doesn’t expect this issue to be resolved in the near future. He didn’t express a clear opinion with regard to being in favor of, or opposed to, charters. James offered that this is best left for true education professionals to solve and that, as an issue of equity, there are bigger issues to confront.
James expressed a particular concern about teachers. “If we look at the past twenty-five years, teacher salaries remain largely unchanged. We’ve gone through a lot in Rhode Island, and I think there has been a war against teachers. If you also look at the pension system, health care, and benefits—teachers have to work longer for less. The end result is good people won’t go into the profession, and that hurts the kids. If we want to talk about equity for kids, we have to talk about attracting smart, dedicated people into the profession.” He was hopeful that public perception may be changing. “Families are increasingly concerned about public education and what to do with it.” One additional measure to address public concern would be in accountability steps mandated by the legislature with regard to bond issues and infrastructure. “Some places were really allowed to let their buildings decay. Other communities invested in the buildings. But, the bottom line is I think there should have been more accountability and there was not.” When asked specifically what accountability mechanism needs to be employed, James offered- “We have a new provision in this law, it was in Article 9 of last year’s budget, which I copied, dealing with maintenance. Schools must have 3% of their budget go to the maintenance of these schools eventually.” If this proposal lacked the political capital to get passed, James offered an alternative option; “I’m sponsoring a bill this year to allow cities and towns to have the municipal side of their budget take over the expense for school maintenance and construction.” James offered that this option offers greater flexibility and moves us away from the “shell game” that manifests within the school budget process. “If you tell a school department that they have to allocate 3% of their budget for repairs, maybe they will, or maybe they won’t. They may try to hide it. It is usually the last thing they look at, after sports, band, and materials.” Small districts, in particular, may struggle to meet any maintenance spending requirement, according to James because “when you look at buildings in small communities, the
town ones are usually nicer than the school ones. Schools aren’t really built for that function. Let the town and public works department take care of that.”

James does have a point. The purpose of a school district is to educate children. As an exercise in logical thinking, the municipal resources of a city or state organically are charged with infrastructure projects and capital projects. The skill set of employees on the municipal side of town operations are grounded in buildings, maintenance, roads, and facilities. While all of these factors do impact public schools, most employees within the public system are not trained for this work. Instead, public school personnel are almost universally educators by trade. School superintendents, the highest position within a public system, typically come from an educational leadership background. When we draw these considerations back into the larger issue of equity of school funding, we need to consider whether or not true equity can be achieved unless the right entities control the allocation of resources. James echoed these sentiments when talking about additional steps. “We need to look at what Massachusetts has done. They had a plan in place. The leadership in Rhode Island just has not been very good. We need a steady hand, someone who will put the right people in the right position for the benefit of students.”

**Concluding Thoughts**

James provided a reminder that all educational outcomes cannot be extricated from the political process. Change comes as a function of having the votes. Having the votes means being able to “make sure the public understands that a good educational system and high property values go hand in hand.” Rhode Island has a unique educational history, one that failed to produce a funding formula for multiple decades. James also drilled into how essential teacher quality is to student performance. In any discussion surrounding equity of opportunity for all students, failure to consider the role of the teacher would leave a key component of this debate
unattended to. Perhaps most importantly, the role of the state legislature was deeply considered. In James’s view, the state needs to mandate certain educational and fiscal provisions, particularly surrounding compliance. This quite likely will be met with significant resistance in many communities, as advocates of local control would, without question, push back regarding the, in their view, usurpation of local educational priorities.

**Ron Smith**

“What we found when we did our research is that poor districts tax themselves harder to give their kids less. That was unconscionable when it’s a state system of education that is carried out in a local district.”

**Background:** Ron Smith is a private attorney who represents individuals and school districts concerning employment issues. Ron on two previous occasions has filed suit against the state of Rhode Island on behalf of multiple poor school districts, claiming that the state has failed to provide all students with an adequate public education. Other work Ron has done pertains to contract negotiations and compliance with state and federal educational requirements. Ron has practiced law for the past 35 years. Previous to his legal tenure, Ron was a public school teacher. Ron stated to me that “the cases that are of greatest interest to me, the two past cases we have handled regarding constitutionality issues and those kind of around the rights of poor children to an equal and adequate education in Rhode Island- trying to establish that as a constitutional right.”

**Discussion:** The issue of equal opportunity was immediately positioned by Ron as a key component to his work and passion in the larger context of a free, democratic society. “The opportunities provided to wealthy children in wealthy districts, and it is kind of shocking in a
democracy, compared to those students in poor districts, is staggering. This is especially so with children of color and students learning English. I remember seeing towns like Woonsocket and West Warwick, Pawtucket, Providence, and Central Falls; they certainly did not have the same opportunity as students in wealthier districts.” To Ron, this phenomenon was supported by both anecdotal and scholarly research. “I know you’ve seen the studies. We did a lot of these. I had a series of experts who testified back in our first case in the 90’s and there was no dispute among educational professionals that children from poverty and limited English proficiency required about 50% more resources to have the same educational opportunities as children who didn’t have those kinds of challenges.” Ron’s point is generally understood by most people within the field of education. There is an unstated understanding that the playing field is not level, that certain, inherent disadvantages, such as property tax base, are manifest. We looked to discuss and ascertain the history of education funding in Rhode Island and perhaps determine how the current fiscal picture came into being, the current situation being inequitable. “The Rhode Island formula is a foundation aid formula which actually was very equitable formula when it began in the 60s or 70s. There were four or five different categoricals, things like limited English proficient, public housing, and such- the other specifics escape me. What we found was that this was fairly equitable because it would provide for Providence and Pawtucket 70% from the state, because no matter hard Pawtucket taxed itself it did not have the fiscal ability to provide the opportunities of a rich district.”

In Ron’s estimation, the Foundation Aid Formula seemed to, at least in a general sense, provide some fiscal relief to poorer communities so that educational opportunity was commensurate with more affluent districts. The next portion of our conversation focused on how and why that system was jettisoned. “We had the basic formula and most people thought it
wasn’t much of a problem. Some people called it “The Patchwork Quilt of Financing.” Ron then proceeded to offer that the political component of this concept began to change how schools were financed. “Whoever had the drag in the legislature could change things. Newport had a lot of conventional public housing. If you can jam money into that categorical, Newport ends up with more money than it probably should. Because you’re sucking it out of the foundation formula, right? What would happen is whoever had the drag in the legislature would ensure that funds would go to their local community.”

Ron continued in recounting the history, moving into the late 80s and early 90s, when Bruce Sundlun was governor. “Remember that when Bruce Sundlun was governor there was the banking crisis.” In the early 1990s, Rhode Island had a massive financial crisis. A number of savings and loans institutions were victimized by an embezzlement scheme, costing many people huge amounts of money. There was pressure on the state to intercede and offer relief to victims. Ron continued; “At that time, the foundation aid formula provided, let’s say, to a Providence, a 70%-80% reimbursement because of poverty factors. East Greenwich probably got 10% reimbursement, right?” East Greenwich, in contrast to Providence, has a wealthy tax base. Governor Sundlun, faced with mounting political pressure to find public monies to provide relief for those swindled, needed to take action. Ron posited: “The late Governor Sundlun said “How am I going to deal with this banking crisis? Oh, look at all of this money in the education formula. We’re going to cut 10% from every district.” A cut of 10% to education funding is impactful for all school districts, but the impact on poor communities is disproportionally large on poorer communities. Ron continued: “10% for East Greenwich is a dollar and a half, for Providence it was a gazillion dollars.” Hyperbole aside, this impact had real consequences.
As a school committee member in Pawtucket at the time, Ron was faced with some serious challenges: “At the time, we were getting 70% reimbursement. It was a tremendous hit on us. There were already disparities but this hit really highlighted them. They said to me “You need to sue those bastards.”

Ron wasted little time in preparing legal action against the state. The issue was framed within the context of education being a fundamental right. There were some shocking disparities presented to the court. “First, the physical plant. In Woonsocket, there was a 100-year-old building with sewage coming through the floor. In Pawtucket, I don’t remember the school, but the biology teacher had these experiments going on, but the heating system was so bad there was a break and all the animals died.” Despite these clear disparities, Ron won his case in lower courts, only to have the decision overturned by the Rhode Island Supreme Court. Ron lamented this result. “We tried this case for two weeks in the 90s in front of Judge Needham. He ruled in our favor until the Supreme Court flipped the thing. They (Supreme Court) did not say it was not a constitutional right, they just said they were not going to get involved.”

In light of such clear evidence regarding the disparity of resources between rich and poor communities, I asked Ron to offer his opinion as to why the court was reluctant to take action: “The courts have no gumption. Going back to *San Antonio v. Rodriguez*, they basically said this was a can of worms that we are not going to open. They said that even though there was a problem they were not going to stick their nose into that. They have done the same thing here.” This is an especially tragic time for inaction. Disparities in educational opportunities have only increased over time. Ron reflected further on his visits to schools, with particular emphasis on the poor conditions of many facilities. “Holes in the wall. Broken windows. All the stuff Kozol wrote about. It reminded me of what he said- “If you put people in a dump, that’s what they will
come to think of themselves- that they are only worthy of the worst.” This is part of the problem. Education is central to a democratic ideal. But the hard facts are, if you say to somebody that you should pay more in taxes to educate students, many people will tell you to pound sand. We had great experts testify in our case, talking about the shortcomings. Money is directly connected to achievement. The defendants said money doesn’t matter. It’s where kids come from, money is really irrelevant. My response was: “Why don’t you give us the money and we’ll see if it matters.”

Ron continued to offer tangible examples of the ramifications of underfunding certain Rhode Island school districts. “I remember going into Woonsocket High School back in 1992 or 1993. The books were 20 years out of date. The history textbooks they were using concluded by saying “Someday, men will walk on the moon.” In light of the evidence provided and Ron’s lived experiences with regard to the disparities in infrastructure and instructional materials between wealthy and poor districts, we began to focus on the reasons for this inequity. “This has become a political log rolling exercise. Rhode Island knows what both the problem and the answer is to educational inequity- they just don’t like the answer. You have to remember that when I brought my first case, back in the early nineties, Rhode Island and Massachusetts were in about the same place educationally.”

In the current educational climate within Rhode Island, the successes of Massachusetts are often cited. In the minds of many, Rhode Island should mimic many of the policies implemented by our neighbor to the north, as Massachusetts consistently ranks highly on studies related to educational efficacy. Ron referenced this: “At the same time as my case, Massachusetts had a similar case, which they won. It forced the legislature in Massachusetts to do the right thing. They keep talking about all the great stuff Massachusetts has done, and it’s all
true, but the motivating factor was the litigation. The litigation that they won, and the court said, it is a constitutional right, and children are not receiving it.” Turning back to the legislative influence on educational policy, Ron was pointed in his criticism: “This thing about the court’s involvement in education (from the view of the legislature) is just bunk. They (the legislature) just want to feather the nest and take care of their union friends, take care of the entrenched parties.”

The next phase of our conversation moved into the state of Rhode Island’s position within the field of education in the first part of the 21st Century. After education commissioner Deborah Gist was appointed in 2009, the drive to apply for Race to the Top (RTTT) dollars was intensified. In order to apply for the RTTT monies, individual states were mandated to have a documented funding formula. RTTT allocated in excess of $4 billion dollars and Rhode Island’s leaders were anxious to obtain a share of federal government financing. Ron was critical of the newly developed formula from the very beginning. “The formula did many things that made it totally inequitable. There’s no money for maintenance. There’s no money for busing. The formula was bullshit. It was made to get it through politically.” I then asked Ron to elaborate on what a fair funding formula would look like. “Any formula has to figure in local income, taxable property, poverty issues. As a result of this communities would receive aid sufficient to provide an equitable and adequate education for all children. Remember, we were supposed to go to 60% state funding for education. We have one of the lowest percentages of state funding in the country. The goal is to make sure the kid in Pawtucket has the same opportunities as the kid in South Kingston or Barrington. Another thing- when we compared the course offerings at East Greenwich and Barrington High School to West Warwick and Woonsocket, it was just so obvious how different the opportunities were.”
Our conversation clearly established some significant, tangible discrepancies in educational opportunities based upon geography alone. Ron has visited scores of school buildings and classroom over decades, noting the immediate physical differences in the infrastructure, but also drilling deeper into the course offerings. Ron, while jaded in certain respects, fundamentally believes that education is a constitutional right, worthy of legal protection. “I remain an advocate for adequate funding, appropriate constitutional funding, that sort of stuff.” He was also sharply critical of the current, national leadership: “Betsy DeVos just wants to privatize education. She’s pretty clueless. Her next book she reads on education will be her first.”

**Conclusion**

Ron documented a comprehensive account of the history of education funding within Rhode Island. In his view, the original Foundation Aid Formula served as the most equitable method of ensuring all students received a similar educational opportunity. He was especially critical of the courts for failing to uphold this ideal, opining that multiple, historical openings have presented themselves, but that the courts have simply chosen not to get involved. During his multiple legal cases against the state, Ron outlined specific, tangible evidences of inequality between school districts. These inequalities manifest across multiple facets of education, including transportation, infrastructure, curricular materials, and course offerings. As an attorney, Ron offered a perspective as seen through the eyes of the law. Prior to becoming an attorney, Ron was first an educator and sees his work grounded by his early career choice. Ron was particularly critical of politicians, whom he sees as lacking the will to challenge the status quo, more interested in preserving their place in the legislature than in helping all children.
Chris Davis

“I think the problem has only gotten worse. Generationally, we integrated our school system, but now I think we, you know, have created sort of separate school districts. I think the quality of education you receive is largely dependent on the community in which you live.”

Background: Chris proudly declares that he is a product of public education. After graduation from law school, Chris served in the Rhode Island House of Representatives for eight years, beginning in 1994 before becoming the mayor of Providence, Rhode Island in 2002. Chris served as mayor from 2002-2010. Chris was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2010 and, as of this writing continues to serve the people of Rhode Island as a representative from the 1st Congressional District. Chris noted early in our interview that: “as Mayor of Providence I had direct responsibility for the public school system in Providence. In my eight years in Congress, the role is a little less direct, kind of federal funding for certain parts of public education.” Chris still plays a role in setting education policy but does not currently serve on any subcommittee with direct influence on public education policy. Chris, as someone who has extensive background dealing directly with education in Providence, Rhode Island’s largest, most populous and diverse city, can offer a perspective seldom matched within my home state.

Discussion: We first discussed the background of events that led Rhode Island to our current position within the context of public education funding. As Rhode Island had the peculiar designation of being the last state in America with a funding formula, I was interested, as Chris is a central political figure, in how he interprets this phenomenon. Chris wasn’t particularly critical of the former Foundation Aid formula: “It wasn’t a terrible system. The general assembly tried, while I was there actually, tried to, did develop a school funding formula. It was trying to create a rational distribution system.” The central challenge here, with regard to how the funds
were allocated were, in Chris’s mind: “whether or not local communities are shouldering an unfair burden and also does it adequately reflect what the cost of educating children in that particular community is.” Determining the answer to these questions within the general assembly was very challenging, as the issue was political in nature. Chris offered: “It was difficult to find a formula that benefitted the majority. There were people that gained, people that lost. People that lost wouldn’t vote for it, even if they thought it was good for the state.” As we discussed what a fair and equitable funding formula might look like, Chris referenced the current reimbursement program for school infrastructure as a meaningful exemplar. This formula, it should be noted, is different from the funding of the instructional program, employee salaries, and benefits, which are subsidized via a different revenue stream. Following up, Chris offered: “When I was mayor, the reimbursement rate for infrastructure was 90%. This is appropriate because it makes and allows for investments that are necessary but it shares the burden between the state and the municipality in a way that’s fair.”

Sharing the burden between the state and town should also manifest in the instructional program. If new curricular materials that are research based and effective are only available to wealthy districts, but not poor ones, this creates an equity gulf. Buildings and infrastructure, while vitally important, do not compose the entirety of the school budget as Chris explained: “You have to take into account a range of considerations so that all young people have access to the same high quality education. So, unless the state government helps to equalize things and the federal government to grant resources, you’re going to have incredible inequality in terms of educational opportunity.” Governmental intervention in educational issues could also move into the realm of the judiciary. When Chris was Mayor of Providence, he wanted to potentially pursue a legal remedy to equity of education, as he explained to me: “When I represented
Providence, I offered an amendment to our state constitution to guarantee every child have an equal educational opportunity.” He went on to offer the rationale for this amendment. “If there was to be litigation or you went to make a claim that some children were being denied, you’d have a basis to point to a constitutional provision.” He continued to explain that this would create disagreement within the public at large and also with state legislators. “One of my colleagues said “Oh, if we pass this constitutional amendment and people are not getting an equal educational opportunity and they could sue the state.” To this comment, Chris retorted to his former colleague- “Exactly.” In reflecting upon this exchange, Chris offered to me: “Who has the right to decide who is worthy of an equal educational opportunity?” This comment resonated with me because it underscores the notion of fairness, the idea that a commensurate public education is an inherent right within a democratic society. Legislators and judges should be committed to this ideal, less concerned with the particular details and more invested in simply living up to the promise of equal access to a better life in a society.

Chris spoke at length about his work in Providence as Mayor. He was cognizant of building bridges, attempting to underscore the point that the success of all students was especially important in Rhode Island, as we are the smallest state in the union. “You have a stake in the success of children in Providence. If kids in Providence are not successful and a good educational opportunity and aren’t successful, you know, they can’t get a good job, contribute to the tax base in their community. This is too small a community- it is your interest as a resident of Cranston or Warwick that students from Providence have an equal opportunity because it relates to the success of all of us.” The sense of an interconnectedness, seldom mentioned in partisan politics, but pivotal to the success of the republic, was also touched upon in our conversation. “It all relates to the success of all of us and the state of our state, but there was a lot of parochial
thinking and I think even today there is not enough focus on the importance of an equal educational experience for all children.” As Mayor of Providence, Chris sought to build these connections, not just during school hours, but also in the after school programming options for students. “There’s so much research about summer learning loss, about, you know, families that cannot afford to go to museums, take trips, and kids from poor families often don’t have that opportunity.” As Mayor, Chris created the Providence After School Alliance these opportunities for students. There was a connection between the school and the outside world. These programs fostered learning and healthy development. To Chris, this nexus of during and after school programs as a function of equity was straightforward. “I think when you look at school funding you have to be thinking about funding for a full day of activity because it includes not just school time, but out of school time as well.”

These after school programs also brought positive outcomes for students in school. Chris shared some of the specific outcomes: “The results and data are just overwhelming. The kids perform better academically, attendance is up, and discipline problems are down.” This leveraging of multiple resources across the totality of time students are awake recognizes that learning, academic growth, and pro-social outcomes are realized both inside and outside of the school environment. The reality remains, however, that these opportunities are frequently tied into the money adults invest in students. While most in the field of public education support an umbrella of programming for students, public funding of charter schools remains a more divisive issue. As a statewide, elected official that hears from a wide group of constituents, I was curious to hear Chris’s thoughts on this matter.

Chris was nuanced with his initial feedback, taking a measured, if not logical approach: “I think there are good charter schools and bad charter schools. That’s just reality.” He then
provided some historical context into the intent of charter schools, offering: “The original idea of charter schools was to offer new innovations, to allow for new practices that would improve student outcomes and scale these practices up.” Charter schools, if purposeful in their actions could be powerful educational placements. “There’s been some great examples of (scaling up). I know Central Falls has done some good stuff, they have ideas and there’s a close collaboration between them and the broader public systems. They (charter schools) can be powerful forces for improvement.” As there is only a finite number of education dollars available, choosing to fund charter schools comes with a cost: public school funds. This conundrum was squarely in Chris’s thoughts: “It’s always a challenge because of adequate funding everywhere. Every dollar that goes into a charter schools comes from the public system broadly. The challenge is in creating a good culture where they’re sharing ideas.” While funding and culture certainly are factors in the current charter school debate, accountability is another facet of the conversation. This is especially true when charter schools, in Chris’s mind; “They (charters) also have to be accountable. Charters that do not meet the standards should not get the money.”

While Chris does not currently serve on any educational committees in the House of Representatives, he was not optimistic that the federal government would provide more funds for local educational issues. He spoke of the current policy disconnect between the Democratic and Republican parties specifically, offering: “There are lots of people in the Republican party who don’t think the federal government should have any role in education, and in fact, now a number of my colleagues have advocated for abolishment of the Department of Education, so I think there is a keen interest in maintaining local control, but I also think the federal government has a critical role in providing resources so that communities can do the work they need.”
In looking to explore the specific nature of these resources, I asked Chris to be more specific, which he was: “It’s money, money, money. But, we need to think specifically about IDEA, low income students, and English as a second language. This is what we have been fighting for. These are areas where we (the federal government) could do more.”

**Conclusion**

Chris, as he has served on the local, state, and federal level over a twenty-five-year period, brings expansive knowledge and experience regarding education to our discussion. He is experienced enough to have personally participated the legislative debate over the foundation aid plan that preceded the current funding formula. As mayor of Providence, Chris led specific, targeted initiatives to bring about increased student performance, working directly with personnel from across the spectrum of educators. These programs moved beyond the school day and brought numerous positive affects to the students enrolled. In addition, as mayor, Chris recognized the web of interdependency that exists between students across the state. As Rhode Island is the smallest state geographically but nonetheless contains 35 school districts, the success of students from any city or town has a meaningful impact on surrounding communities. Thus, there is a need to move beyond provincial thinking. As a U. S. Congressman Chris has experienced the seismic differences in opinion regarding the federal government’s role in public education. A major gulf exists between the two entrenched political parties, with the Republican party set on dismantling a federal role in the funding and governance of education.
Oliver Johnson

“But if you are only giving better education to some kids at the expense of education that’s being provided to others, then you are cynically...so you could also say, we’re doing this...you’re not only doing this because you want to provide education for kids, but you’re doing it knowing you’re hurting the education of the majority.”

Background: Oliver has served in the public domain for many years. His nascent political years were spent on the school committee in Lincoln, Rhode Island. After a term on the school committee, Oliver served on the town budget board in Lincoln, followed by a stint on the Lincoln Town Council. In Rhode Island, while school committees have direct oversight over the operations of the school districts, town councils play an important role in determining town budgets. So, while the school committee sets specific policy for the district that they lead, town councils have the fiscal authority to approve or reject municipal budgets. These budgets include school appropriations, typically the largest single component of a town budget, thus giving local town councils tremendous power over school department monies. Oliver’s first foray into school finances came as a result of his time working in town finance. His experiences led him to desire an ability to make a greater impact on school financing policy. In 2008, Oliver successfully ran for a seat in the Rhode Island House of Representatives. It was during this first campaign when Oliver knocked on my door to have a discussion about school policy. At the time I was a classroom teacher on the cusp of beginning an educational leadership program. We spoke for about half an hour that first meeting and have kept up a friendly working relationship over the past several years. Oliver was my state representative and I was his constituent, so we periodically had discussions about the state of education in Rhode Island. Oliver served District Forty-six until 2018, when he opted not to seek re-election to concentrate on other pursuits.
Nonetheless, Oliver, given the depth and breadth of his experience with education and fiscal policy, was a natural participant for this research study.

**Discussion:** In our initial discussion, Oliver mentioned that his first interest in public education came as a result of his wife, who was, and still is, an elementary school teacher. More specifically, his interest in education was piqued as a result of the disparate experiences his wife had as a teacher: first in Brookline, Massachusetts, a very wealthy community filled with families of university professors and administrators, and Washington, D. C., a tragically poor community. Oliver made some interesting observations about the contrast between these two environments: “Brookline was diverse, just not economically. There were students from all over the world, parents from India and Europe, highly educated. The school she taught at in D. C. was 100% African-American, with the exception of her and two other teachers.” Adding some information, Oliver said: “Brookline was second to none in the state of Massachusetts, which is practically second to none in the United States, as far as outcomes and attention to education. Whatever they (teachers and students) wanted in Brookline, they got in Brookline.” Oliver quickly contrasted the conditions manifest in Washington, D. C.- “The school she taught in was cockroach infested. We were afraid to take food from school because we thought our apartment might become cockroach infested. She had no in class help, no leadership help.” We then spoke of some specific manifestations about being a classroom teacher and having no support. “She was teaching second grade. Kids were ten years old. Within the first two weeks of school, she was going through the stairwell and found two forth graders having sex, stuff like that.”

I then asked Oliver what she did when encountering that situation, recognizing that, as a twenty-five-year-old teacher I would have been unsure of what to do next. How Oliver replied to this question was heartbreaking: “The other teachers told her to bring the kids into the closet and
hit them, where no one could see. She called a parent once, and the father came down and broke a yardstick into pieces over his son. At this point she decided she’s never call a parent again, because she wanted her classroom to be a safe environment.” Hearing a heartbreaking response like this elicits a desire to learn more about the school and dive deeper into what has become of the students and the school. Oliver talked about the tragic outcomes for this school. “The economics of this neighborhood were abysmal. It was 100% public housing. And so it is so heartbreaking. There are many, many stories like this. There was a plan put forward, they were going to do a Hope Six project, which is a HUD deal where they go into distressed public housing, bulldoze it, and rebuild. They never did it though. The neighborhood is now where the new Washington Nationals park is. We’ve been down there not all that long ago, it’s all like half-million-dollar condos. And the school building is still there. But it’s closed because there’s no kids.”

Oliver offered that the experiences of his wife and the resultant outcome of this school caused him to question the concept of how public schools are funded and why there are such different experiences for different student groups. So, when the concept of charter schools was first introduced to Oliver, he was excited over the possibilities. “I remember talking to my wife about this when we lived in D. C. and kept thinking why wouldn’t someone do this. It seemed like a no-brainer.”

Although Oliver and his wife enjoyed living in Washington, D. C., family considerations brought them back to Rhode Island. In considering locations to settle down and start a family, Lincoln seemed like an easy fit. Oliver’s wife is from Lincoln and the public school system has a strong reputation. It was at this time, despite expressing some theoretical support for charter schools, that Oliver first had some moments of skepticism. “I think we paid more for our house
as a result of the schools having a good reputation. I don’t remember exactly when, but at some point, this thing called Blackstone Valley Prep (BVP) was proposed and started as part of the mayoral academy system.” Oliver was disconcerted because he felt they had paid a premium to live in Lincoln and, despite a strong educational reputation, there was a burgeoning charter school movement in town. Oliver was not reflexively opposed to charters, as he clarified: “There had always been a few what I call boutique charters out there, like the International Charter, which does bilingual education. Those seemed reasonable to offer, because the curriculum was differentiated.” Still, the growing movement an increased cost to local taxpayers were of concern. “But then you have Blackstone Valley Prep show up and all these people start opting into it. I couldn’t understand why we would do that because from what I could tell, there was no difference in curriculum.” While this was irritating to Oliver, he took particular exception that BVP was offering programming options not available to public school students. “They (BVP) offered a full day Kindergarten and that was a big selling point for year one. At the same time, the town of Lincoln was struggling to fund its own full day Kindergarten, because we had half-day Kindergarten at that point.” Oliver was particularly critical of town leaderships, as he felt the town administrator was duplicitous in his explanation. “I remember having a conversation with the Town Administrator who was both opposed to full day K in Lincoln and a founder of BVP. He was opposed to Lincoln going to full day K and he was poo-pooing it as glorified daycare. And, I called him out on it- if it is unacceptable for the town to have full day K but BVP is using it as a selling point; what am I missing here?” Oliver became frustrated because this incongruous approach was never addressed. His first significant aversion to charters arose most out of this personal, rather than professional, experience.
Soon thereafter, Oliver served the town as a member of the budget board. Shaped by his earlier experiences, he became disconcerted over an ever increasing town line item for charter programming. “The line item, I noticed, started around one-hundred thousand my first year but was projected to be around one million in year six or something crazy like that.” At this point, Oliver begins digging through the voluminous reference material he had prepared in anticipation of our discussion. Upon finding the information sought, he offered: “This escalation was crazy. So, here we go, we went from tuition payments of eighty-six thousand in 2008 to $1.8 million in 2015.” This rapid escalation was of serious concern to Oliver. The vast majority of these funds came from the locally sourced budget, with scant fiscal relief from the state.

The subject of relief from the state was broached as we moved into the next phase of our discussion. Oliver, as this experience with local funding and programming was unsatisfying, was elected as a state representative in 2008. I was anxious to gain his perspective with regard to how Rhode Island arrived at our current funding formula. Oliver was quick to opine: “The old formula was really just based on how much money had been given the previous year. Some schools were given a boost to encourage consolidation, like Bristol-Warren. These schools that went the consolidation route had kind of a baked in advantage. The problem here was that the old formula was blind to population shifts.” Oliver, while expressing that he could not offer a definitive proclamation with regard to the equity component of the old formula, explained that the current formula was arrived at to “allow Rhode Island to compete for Race to the Top (RTTT) dollars.”

As an elected official, Oliver was fully aware of the economic factors that went into the creation of the formula, too. “Part of it was based on the wealth of the community, as it should be. The assessed value of property, the ability to pay- based upon the Basic Education Plan
(BEP). You could go above that if you wanted to, but in theory you are not supposed to go below it. There were adjustments made for free and reduced lunch- that was the proxy factor for poverty. So, if you had X percentage of students that were eligible for free and reduced lunch, then you got a boost of Y dollars per student. By 2015, districts got a 40% boost for students that had free and reduced lunch.” As he generally understood the global wealth of cities and towns, Oliver felt the revised formula was an improvement over the previous Foundation Aid iteration. Looking over his chart showing the $8,966 per pupil allocation coupled with the bump provided for free and reduced lunch, Oliver commented: “Here’s your total number. So you can see Barrington and East Greenwich get the least, Central Falls gets the most. Barrington can spend what they want, Lincoln the same thing. That makes sense.”

There is, however, some significant concern regarding other components of the revised funding formula that, in Oliver’s estimation, are diametrically opposed to the nation of equal funding opportunity for all students. “Now, there are certain things that do not factor into the BEP, so the state will only pay for instruction. The number we’ve talked about is about instruction only. The state will not cover busing, electricity, capital improvements, pension contributions.” Elaborating further, Oliver commented on the pension system, a source of protracted debate in Rhode Island: “The state has said they will not fund anything that’s voluntary. Pension obligations, cynically, they consider voluntary, although the state pension system, as we know is statutory. So, I don’t know how, on one hand, they claim we are only going to pay for stuff’s that in state control, but say something mandated by the state is not state control, but they do.”

While not directly involved in the instructional budget of a district, a thorough consideration of the impact funding formulas has on students must be tied to pension obligations.
The pool of state and local funds in Rhode Island is finite. Although expressing concern over this calculus, Oliver appeared more concerned with the parallel tracks of schooling that are inevitably created when charter funding subsumes a large portion of the public school budget. Beginning to display some emotion, Oliver commented: “So, the way charters are funded under this new formula, everything is done on a per pupil basis. This basis is adjusted for poverty. Now, they’ve also added an English Language component (EL), but, they’ve completed ignored Special Education which is a huge cost to some district but not to others. They won’t add Special Ed because they think it will incentivize districts to game the system, to over identify students with disabilities to obtain an increased dollar amount. Charters don’t take Special Education kids.”

The intellectual premise surrounding the creation of the Rhode Island formula was that the funds would follow the student. Based upon the ability to pay, a district would receive reimbursement from the state. As an example, Barrington is an affluent town. Barrington pays for 79% of student educational costs from the local budget, receiving 21% from the state. Conversely, Central Falls, a very poor community, receives 95% of education funding from the state, paying only 5% locally. Oliver explained how this, coupled with the prevalence of charter schools in some communities, but not others, contributes to fiscal inequity: “So, if we look at these examples, these monies from the town, whatever they may be, also follows the student to the charter school. But while the funding follows the child, what does not follow the child are the expenses. So, what happens is education becomes more expensive on a per pupil basis for the school that’s left. And, in fact, I think you could argue that even the educational cost is not covered, because if you take one kid out of your son’s fourth grade classroom, it doesn’t get any less expensive to operate that classroom. The teacher gets the same salary, the electricity, heat, and water still cost the same. The only thing that’s changed is the school gets less money.”
As a member of the Rhode Island House of Representatives, Oliver worked with other legislators from similarly impacted communities in an attempt to quantify the cost to towns required to disburse per pupil student funds to charter schools. In Rhode Island, the communities of Lincoln and Cumberland were significantly impacted by this phenomenon, thus Oliver partnered with representatives from Cumberland to explore the specific fiscal ramifications of funding charter schools. This work yielded some interesting outcomes. “The assumption is made that when a child goes to a charter placement versus a public school placement, the money should follow as well. And, if that were the case, then the school should be, whatever the number is, $10,000, let’s say, less expensive to operate on the public side. And it isn’t. It also assumes that the charter school itself costs $10,000 for that kid to attend and that is not the case, either.”

While this made sense on a global, theoretical level, I was looking for some specific information that could crystalize my understanding. Upon seeking this clarification, Oliver obliged: “In Rhode Island, students that go to parochial schools have their transportation and textbook cost provided by the district. That is an educational expense. It factors into the educational expenditure and inflates the per pupil expense. A kid goes to a charter school, they get that per pupil number and the charter never has to supply textbooks. Whatever that extra number is, they get to keep.” This was just the first of many examples Oliver provided to me with regard to how the prevalence of charter schools impacts financing structures, and thus, equal opportunities for all students. “Early Intervention (EI) services is an obligation of the town, it lives in their education budget. That’s not an inexpensive thing and it increases the per pupil expenditure number, but you know what- charter schools are never required to pay for early intervention services.” Adding additional examples, Oliver added: “Out of district Special Education placements for severely disabled kids, those are extraordinarily expensive things, that
again, live in the education line, education budget, inflate a per pupil education number. None of these students go to charter schools. Charter schools never have to deal with this. The same is true of career and technical programs.”

Oliver’s work, along with that of other legislators, to codify how these insidious costs to local districts manifest in relation to the proliferation of charter schools in many Rhode Island communities, was completed in 2015. Oliver was cognizant that these recommendations would be met with significant headwinds, as powerful charter school advocates occupied numerous privileged positions within the larger political and legislative domains. The specific desire of this work was to, in Oliver’s words: “to take a deeper dive into at that point had been asserted, but never proved, which is that charter schools were benefitting from an inflated per pupil number, that was inflated by expenditures, that were exclusively or disproportionately borne by the local districts. The charters were contesting this, saying they had their own expenses, too.”

As I have little background knowledge regarding how charter schools pay expenses, I was looking for more clarification. Oliver responded: “We were looking for RIDE to test our theory, using the Universal Charting of Accounts (UCOA), to see who was truly bearing the cost for certain expenditures.” (UCOA was put into place statewide in 2008 so that all Rhode Island school districts would track accounts using a uniform nomenclature. This was done to ensure transparency and forthrightness of accounting practices as a mechanism to discourage clandestine fiscal practices that could obscure actual costs.) Oliver was eager to share that the findings of this commission confirmed his belief that funding charter schools served to undercut the opportunities of students within the public system. “High cost Special Education is one area. Typically, Special Education funding is not considered in the formula, but high cost Special Education is. So, if you spend five times more than your average expenditure on a student for
Special Education, you get that student included in the high cost category. The state does provide some funds for this, not a lot, but some. They distribute this on a pro rata basis. But, you see here (points to the report), there are no students at any charter school that qualify for this. All of those costs, and we are talking about six-figure tuitions in some cases, are being born by the local town, those funds shifted away from public school students.” This was followed by an explanation of numerous other areas that had a deleterious effect on public, but not charter, budgets. “If we go further; pre-school costs, post-graduation responsibilities, early intervention-charter schools are not asked to bear any of these expenses.”

These fiscal considerations, without question, have an impact. Part of the commission’s work was to determine a specific fiscal cost. Oliver quantified this effect size as follows: “When you capture these costs, it’s about 7%. You can go as deeply as you want with the math, but the costs, born either exclusively or disproportionally by local districts in relation to charters is about 7%.”

Subsequent legislative cycles have seen charter school funding decrease. Nonetheless, charter schools still are widely available for students in Rhode Island. As we attempted to consolidate our conversation, Oliver wanted me to remember that he believes that all students should be afforded a just educational opportunity and that he is not universally opposed to charter schools. Instead, he is mindful that the public needs to know that charter funding does come from public monies and that powerful entities, in his estimation, may have underhanded motivations for supporting charter schools. To wit, “You have to look and see who is on the board of these schools. If you look at Blackstone Valley Prep (BVP) or Achievement First, which is part of this national group that came out of Harlem, I forget the name of the school, but whatever, there are big name, corporate hedge fund Manhattan Institute people that are on all of
those boards— all of whom are big political contributors. If you look at Governor Raimondo, and remember, if Hillary Clinton won, she was gone, or Corey Booker. When Booker was the mayor of Newark, he privatized a lot of the schools. I can’t say that their support of charters was done to get inroads into the mega donor corporate world, but it certainly didn’t hurt.”

As education is a public endeavor that requires money allocated from local legislative bodies, the process inherently political. As much as any of us would like to extricate politics from education, these two phenomena are likely coupled forever. Oliver admitted to having some frustration over this and also offered that his experiences have jaundiced his perceptions over time, adding: “We say we want to provide a better education for all of our kids. But, if you are only giving a better education to some kids at the expense of others, you are cynically: you also could say we are doing this knowing you are hurting the education of the majority of kids.”

When I offered that this educational grouping could be considered creating parallel systems, Oliver nodded his head in agreement and added: “one of which is being funded disproportionately and excluding kids with special needs. Also, you hurt kids with emotional needs. Charters can just expel whomever they want, they just kick out the kids with behavioral issues. Charters can also just fire teachers. There’s almost no due process.” As we had spent well over an hour together and extensively spoken on myriad educational issues, I asked Oliver to close out our conversation with what he would like the public to know. He offered: “I could go on all day, but you have to remember this is all political. In Rhode Island, the leaders who make these decisions target specific groups and know what they need to say to whom to get elected. This is about politics.”
Conclusion

During our expansive, wide-ranging educational funding conversation, Oliver’s expertise and insights, particularly around charter school funding mechanisms, were particularly edifying. In particular, examining the fiscal data on a granular basis and truly distilling the costs of charter schools is a worthy endeavor. Using a UCOA analysis, charter schools cost local school districts approximately 7% of their annual budget—no trivial amount during this era of shifting state aid. In the interest of funding communities equitably, based upon hard data such as mean household income and median property value, a district’s state share of education funding can shift by millions of dollars from one year to the next. In the realm of this shifting landscape, even if the new formula has more equitable data inputs, there needs to be strong consideration regarding the stability of a viable instructional program over time. More specifically, even if the new formula benefits students from traditionally underserved communities based upon the added metrics of free and reduced lunch, and EL costs—are these factors marginalized or cancelled out by the proliferation of charter schools and their demonstrable costs to public school children? These, and multiple other insights from the subsequent interviews, will be distilled in the upcoming discussion chapter.
Chapter 5: Discussion

This qualitative study sought to discover, understand, and describe the lived experiences of leaders within the realm of public policy decision making within the state of Rhode Island to understand the current system of public funding for K-12 education. In addition, the purpose was to develop possibilities for creating a more equitable model of fiscal distribution for students. This study addressed the following research questions: 1) How do these public policy influencers understand the current funding mechanisms in K-12 public education within the United States, and more specifically, within Rhode Island? 2) How do these influencers describe their experiences with regard to the effect of poverty within the United States, and more specifically, within Rhode Island? 3) How do these influencers describe their perspectives with regard to the need to change current state funding mechanisms in order to provide equity for all students? In this chapter, the major emergent themes will be presented with connections to the literature that supports this study.

Research Design Review

Twelve potential participants were invited to participate in this research study. Six participants agreed to be interviewed for this project. Data was collected via one semi-structured interview at a location of the participant’s choosing. Prior to completion of any interview, the participant signed the Informed Consent document. Each interview was audio taped. The participants were informed that pseudonyms would be used and that partaking was completely voluntary. Questions posed could be bypassed at the behest of the interviewee. Each participant was offered the opportunity to review the transcript upon completion of the interview. All data was stored on a password protected computer that only I have access to.


**Participation**

Upon hearing that each participant was interested in being interviewed, a follow up phone call was made to determine the time and location of our interview. Peter Ryan requested that we meet in his office at the Rhode Island State House, which served as our location. Oliver Johnson, as we live in close proximity to one another, asked that we meet at his home. James Bradley, as he is an attorney when not serving in the legislature, requested a meeting in his office. Ron Smith also wanted to meet in his office, located in Providence. Nancy Lewis and I met in an office complex as well. Finally, Chris Davis was able to meet with me one late afternoon prior to returning to Washington, D. C. in his local House office building.

**Emergent Interview Themes Connected with Extant Literature**

The six participants offered expansive perspective regarding issues of access and equity of education for all students within Rhode Island. As each participant entered our conversation with a different lived experience, professional perspective, and particular thread of importance, the responses were reflective of these differences. All participants had leadership roles within the educational context; some formalized as they are elected leaders, others less formal as they served in a legal capacity or within the hierarchy of an organization affiliated with issues of educational equality. While there are multiple granular differences within our conversations, the feedback received fell into four major categories: 1) Infrastructure Maladies, 2) Charter School Considerations, 3) Revenue Stream Discrepancies, and 4) Legal Issues of Equity. Following, the impact of these four main themes will be explored, with each discussion component leveraged within the realm of the extant literature presented in Chapter Two.
Infrastructure Maladies

Each participant recognized that the cost of education was not simply a matter of funding an instructional program. While textbooks, curricular materials, and teacher training are vital to a functioning, robust, and healthy school system, these items are marginalized if the infrastructure/buildings that students and teachers occupy are decrepit. A component of the current state of infrastructure maladies in Rhode Island can be traced to a lack of public knowledge. Both Nancy and Peter specifically commented on how the public may have some misperceptions regarding infrastructure funding, with Nancy, Peter, and Oliver specifically offering that the general public does not recognize that the educational program and school infrastructure funding stream are from two different sources. Instead, many in the public presume that the totality of the education budget in a given locality is one chunk of funding. This coalesces with the findings of Schueler & West (2016) who found that the average American is not well informed on the actual costs of educational spending.

The ramifications of this relative lack of knowledge has led to deleterious effects on the state of infrastructure within the public school buildings in Rhode Island. Nancy specifically commented that the buildings in Rhode Island are typically over the age of fifty. Peter commented that Massachusetts has a required 1% taxation mandate as a means to ensure buildings remain in good working order, and James recently introduced legislation within the Rhode Island House of Representatives requiring districts to allocate a minimum of 3% of the total education budget for the express purpose of keeping up with the regularly need maintenance requirements, of which there are sparse codified regulations. Increased knowledge with regard to infrastructure could be correlated to citizen trust, as espoused by Ingle (2012). As the infrastructure question is also political, especially with regard to whether or not the school
district or municipal side of town operations is best positioned to monitor this facet of educational, trust is also a factor, as postulated by Alm (2011). The public requires more timely, specific information with regard to how schools are funded. Nancy eluded to this concept as changing “hearts and minds.” Sharing information builds trust. Building trust leads to more equitable outcomes.

As school infrastructure maintenance is a significant cost and there are constant pressures to address other concerns, school systems frequently put already limited monies in other places. The result, as noted by Ron and Nancy, is alarming. There were numerous examples noted of covered sinks, sewage pipes exposed in the floors, broken windows, stained ceiling tiles, and broken bathroom facilities. Ron was quite direct in discussing this phenomenon and how the impact was disproportionate for people of lower SES and membership in Non-White cohort groups: “When you go to Woonsocket, where most of the students are poor and many are children of color, and you see this 100 year old building with raw sewage coming through the floor or hear from the biology teacher at the high school tell you that all the animals in the experiment died because the heating system doesn’t work, it’s just what Kozol said: If you people in a dump that’s what they will think of themselves.” Oliver offered a similar sentiment when he and his wife lived in Washington, D. C., a locality that is overwhelmingly poor and composed of African-American citizens, explaining that the buildings were cockroach infested. Yet, as Klugman, et. al (2011) note, despite these known inequalities, people in powerful, privileged economic status groups are more likely to support the economic status quo, disinclined to provide an equitable funding share to schools that serve traditionally underserved constituency groups.
Lende (2012) notes that poverty has a negative impact on people. This problem is exacerbated when the infrastructure problems of a school contribute to other related health concerns. As Oliver noted, the Rhode Island Best Educational Practices (BEP) documents speak of instruction only. There is no mention of infrastructure. Thus, the state threshold for minimum infrastructure maintenance is virtually non-existent. As Ryan posited, these skeletal building requirements incentivize neglectful practices: “The problem is people now just wait. Instead of fixing the little problem, let’s just wait until the problem gets big enough and then we can go to bond.” When there is no external controlling mechanism to keep building repairs up to date, the conditions for current students deteriorate. This leads to negative health outcomes for children, both in the short and longer term. Nancy explained specifically that there are increased pockets of asthma in Rhode Island schools. These pockets are clustered in urban and urban ring areas. Coupled with this phenomenon is at least a loose association with higher rates of chronic absenteeism in these same areas. As Shaw & Goode (2008) note, these students are at elevated risk of being diagnosed with a learning disability or emotional disturbance. Adler & Stewart (2010) add that these conditions contribute to lower self-assessed health ratings, increased incidence of cardiovascular disease, and increased adult mortality. Nancy captured the connection between ill-functioning infrastructure and poor health: “When buildings aren’t fixed, students get sick. If a building has black mold or cases of bronchitis spike due to poor ventilation, people get sick.” While illness due to infrastructure problems is an issue for everyone to confront, the problem is more easily confronted in districts with available revenue streams. Thus, students in communities with fewer fiscal resources are more likely to be educated in buildings with infrastructure issues that negatively impact their short and long term health. This
compromises educational equity as students residing in poor districts bear are more likely to be exposed to hazardous health considerations than their more affluent peers.

Infrastructure problems can also impact educational performance. In my discussion with Nancy, as she was charged with much of this work for her previous position, had a wealth of knowledge that coalesced well with the extant literature. More specifically, Nancy was able to articulate that infrastructure deficiencies have a tangible effect on student academic performance. She spoke of data that showed a linkage between the ability of a school building to regulate temperature and the scores of students on a high stakes test. More specifically, if the temperature outside was seventy degrees but the windows in a building could not open and/or the temperature regulation system in a building was not functional, that the “feels like” temperature on the third floor of that same building was ninety degrees. This temperature difference had a negative impact on student scores. While this does not have the obvious impact of exposure to black mold or asbestos to an individual’s health, this is worthy of consideration. With graduation rates being tied to scores on standardized tests and future earning potential being tied to rates of educational attainment, full consideration of a level playing field is pivotal. If students from affluent districts have temperature controlled buildings and others from disadvantaged districts do not and, if there is an effect on test scores due to this difference, there needs to be a mechanism to rectify this situation. As noted by Hackman, Farah, & Meaney (2010) and Adler & Stewart (2010), there is an association between poverty and future, diminished earning capacity. Thus, if we are interested in providing all students with an equal educational opportunity, we cannot allow some students to have the proper environment for taking high stakes tests and force others to take these same impactful exams in conditions known to depress scores. While not an immediately assumed
variable in educational attainment, properly functioning infrastructure does impact equal access to educational opportunities, both in a present and future context.

**Charter Schools**

In theory, each interview participant was open to the concept of a charter school. Advocates of charter school creation and expansion argue that these schools create competition, foster educational innovation, reduce interference from public sector unions, and allow students from economically depressed school districts to escape schools that fail to make educational progress (Hoxby, Muraka, & Kang 2009). The charter conundrum, at least in the context of my research, was in the context of public financing, as both charters and traditional public schools are largely financed via the same revenue stream. Charter schools, per Levine & Levine (2014) are basically private businesses using public monies. My conversations with James, Oliver, Peter, Ron, and Chris highlighted facets of this dilemma. Chris offered that some charters work and others do not, elaborating further that those charters that do not produce results should close, while those that flourish should remain open. Ron also offered that charters must “be accountable and produce results. Charters that do not meet the standard should not get the money.” Charters were founded, in part, to function as experimental classrooms, where innovate pedagogical practices are tested. If these approaches lead to increased student achievement, those practices should be applied in public schools. Peter was critical, offering that Rhode Island has no “playbook” here. Charters have been allowed to expand in Rhode Island with little oversight. As traditional public school districts lose money when charters open according to Buerger & Bifulco (2019), it is absolutely essential that positive educational results can be empirically claimed. Absence such proof, this loss of money decreases educational equity for students within the public school system. James felt strongly that when charters open, they must produce an
effect that justifies the expenditure put forward by the citizens, explaining: “If a charter comes
into an area and they draw four hundred students, and each student has a $10,000 per pupil
expenditure dollar amount, that is four million dollars diverted away from the public school
budget.” This phenomenon is vexing as Lafer (2018) offers that the expansion of charter schools
has drained money from the public school system. There is no supplemental pool of money to
draw from. In the context of educational equity, a public school system that does not provide
equal opportunity for all is inherently unfair. Oliver captured this on multiple levels. He provided
an example within the local educational context of Lincoln, Rhode Island: “They (BVP- a charter
school) offered full day Kindergarten and that was a big selling point. At the same time, the town
of Lincoln was struggling to fund its own full day Kindergarten, because we had half-day
Kindergarten at that point.” Moving onto the larger effects in Lincoln, Rhode Island, Oliver
explained: “The escalation (of public funds into charter schools) went from $86,000 in 2008 to
$1.8 million in 2015.” This has a direct impact on students from lower income families,
according to Buerger & Bifulco (2019) because students from lower socioeconomic groups cost
more to educate. Thus, if the aggregate pool of funds in the public sector is diminished, the
capacity to provide an equitable education for all students is diminished.

Another key variable in understanding charter school funding is the actual costs, and how
these costs impact the ability of each public school district to provide educational services for all
students. Interview participants, in theory, were supportive that the revised funding formula had
the money “follow the child”. More specifically, if the established cost of the per pupil
expenditure was ten-thousand dollars in Woonsocket, Rhode Island and a student from
Woonsocket wanted to attend a charter school in Cumberland, Rhode Island, Woonsocket would
be required to transfer ten-thousand dollars per student that attended the charter school in
Cumberland. Conceptually, this made sense. In fact, Oliver, who during the course of the interviews emerged as a vociferous proponent of de-funding charters, was, in his own words, initially highly supportive of charters, offering: “Why wouldn’t you do this (offer charter schools)?” The idea was, if Woonsocket has a struggling public school system based upon low scores on standardized metrics and a high rate of poverty as defined by the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch, that students attending the charter in Cumberland would be provided with a better education, thus affording these students with a greater opportunity to succeed. In theory, this was a true opportunity to provide equal access to students to a high quality of education, regardless of the zip code a student was from. If competition was created in the public sector, a town like Woonsocket would be required to elevate their educational practices and, as Hoxby, Muraka, & Kang (2009) offer, charter schools can be “the tide that lifts all boats”.

An emergent reality from the phenomenological experience of the interview participants was that the seemingly straightforward proposition that the money “follows the child” presented a more divergent set of fiscal outcomes. In fact, a different data set was presented during the interview process. There is evidence that, according to Ladd & Singleton (2018), the loss in revenues due to charter schools are greater than expenditure reductions made possible by transfer of students to charter schools.

Oliver, James, and Peter all commented on the lack of students receiving Special Education services attending charter schools. James specifically commented that students with profound special needs are “very expensive to educate.” Peter spoke about constituents approaching him regarding students returning to the public system “because, more often, than not, the student has an IEP. The charter is telling the parent that the school cannot support their
child’s needs, that he is better back in the district, because we (the charter school) do not have the resources here.” This anecdotal narrative supports Lake’s assertion (2014) that charter schools are more likely than public schools to deny enrollment to students with disabilities. Oliver was particularly pointed in his remarks, commenting, “Out of district Special Education placements for severely disabled kids, those are extraordinarily expensive things, that again, live in the education budget, inflate a per pupil education number. None of those kids go to charter schools. Charter schools never have to deal with this…high cost Special Education is part of the formula, the state does give some funds for this, not a lot, but some.” As captured by Buerger & Bifulco (2019), Oliver’s assertion is correct: the presence of charter schools increases the cost to the local district for students receiving Special Education services.

There are additional costs created by the presence of charter schools that are incurred by a local school district. These costs pertain to English Language (EL) learners and Early Intervention (EI) services. Garda (2012) opines that charter schools lack the capacity and resources to provide these educational imperatives. As Oliver explained: “They have added an EL component for the funding of charter schools…Early Intervention (EI) services are another obligation of the town, it lives in their education budget. That’s not an inexpensive thing and it increases the per pupil expenditure number, but you know what- charter schools are never required to pay for early EI services.” As Levine & Levine (2014) note, charters lay claim to reimbursement as public schools and shift certain burdens back to the public school budget. This phenomenon skews the reality of cost: the charter school receives the benefit of services but is not required to put forth any monies for this purpose. As a result, the per pupil expenditure is not an accurate reflection of real costs. Oliver elaborated on the results of his research: “While the funding follows the child, what does not follow the child are the expenses. So, what happens is
education becomes more expensive on a per pupil basis for the school that’s left...when you capture these costs, it’s about 7%. You can go as deeply if you want with the math, but the costs, born either exclusively or disproportionally by local districts in relation to charters is about 7%.” As Lafer (2018) comments, these costs have real aversive affects that often result in cuts to core services for students in the public schools, frequently including counseling services, library programming, and increased class size. Oliver’s cost add assertion to local public schools as a result of charter school emergence is buttressed by Buerger & Bifulco (2019), who found that charter school creation increases the cost to local school districts by 7.5% in the short-term and by 7.1% in the long term. In addition, the concept that charter schools take on a greater number of poor students compared to regular public schools, thus creating a more equitable model is a phenomenon with unclear results (Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009).

Revenue Stream Discrepancies

Rhode Island, all participants agreed, has a unique history in funding public education. Regardless of the particular funding mechanism, each interviewee agreed that significant revenue bases exist between affluent and poor towns, dovetailing with the findings of Adamson & Darling-Hammond (2012). As Ron noted: “Poor towns tax themselves harder to give their kids less.” Like most of the United States, Rhode Island relies on a combination of local and state taxes to fund the education budget, with the state’s share designed to offset clear differences in town revenue (Husted & Kenny, 2014). Rhode Island uses what is called the Share Ratio; each city or town pays a percentage of the education budget. The state, using a formula based in an ability of each locality to pay, reimburses each town (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2019). Central Falls receives 97% of the education budget from the state, the highest
percentage in Rhode Island. The lowest percentage of state contribution to education spending is at 35%, with nineteen school districts receiving that amount.

While the reimbursement rates described above ascribe to a level of theoretical fairness, the results of this research bring to bear some important considerations that impact the ability for all students, regardless of economic status, to receive equal educational opportunities. Peter, Nancy, James, Ron, Chris, and Oliver all commented on property tax rates. Peter lamented low local funding in some areas but not others, pointing to differences of thousands of dollars in towns separated by less than a mile, also opining that Rhode Island, in general, is over reliant on property tax rates. Karst (1972) found a similar result, elucidating that poor communities, even with aggressive taxation rates, cannot match the spending of neighboring, more affluent towns. James pointed to comparisons between Rhode Island and other New England states, commenting that other states have lower property tax rates. Ron was highly critical of a system that he felt punished poor districts, asking these municipalities to take on costs that are fundamentally unfair. He noted that these funds do not include money for busing and electricity, among other items. Chris, as a federal legislator, felt that the federal government could do more, opining: “Unless the state government helps equalize things and the federal government grants resources, you are going to have incredible inequality in terms of educational opportunity.” This aligns with the findings of Arche (2014): significant disparities exist between high property value school districts and low property value school districts.

Peter highlighted the case of his home town, Cumberland, Rhode Island in contrast to the adjoining town of Lincoln; “I think the local share is a massive component that we’ve missed, and it is making it so there is no equity for students. For example, Cumberland is incredibly low funded compared to Lincoln, which is right next door.” The data underscores Peter’s example. In
2017, the most recent year on record, the per pupil expenditure for a Cumberland student was $14,570 dollars, while a student right next door in Lincoln had, on average, a per pupil expenditure of $18,602. This is a difference of $4,032 dollars (RIDE, FY 17 UCOA Data). From a financial perspective, Lincoln and Cumberland are fairly commensurate towns and the figures above include the state share, yet there is a significant difference in the per pupil investment between these two seemingly similar towns. Despite Goldstein’s findings (1971) that the concept of fiscal equity is good, in practice, this ideal may not be actualized. This operates differently than Verstegen’s aspirations (2011) in that a state government could fill the gap between what is raised locally and what should be guaranteed. Even with the matching component from the state, there remain per pupil disparities between adjoining school districts.

With rates of property tax being different from town to town and with a clear difference in the ability to raise funds across the state of Rhode Island, James touched upon the use of gambling revenue as a means to offset education costs. More specifically, James commented that raising money from gambling can keep local property taxes down and keep home values high. He further elaborated, saying that persistent tax increases keep potential citizens from moving into that town. There is available revenue from gambling. As Hendricks notes (2016) lottery income exceeds $40 billion dollars nationwide in any given year, an average of $212 per person and $372 per household. There is danger here, however. Kumashiro (2012) cautions that the promise of additional lottery funds provides political cover for politicians to cut local taxes. This serves as a de facto incentive to play the lottery, which operates as a regressive tax; impacting poor communities disproportionally. Individuals from lower socioeconomic strata play more frequently and have far less disposable income to use for this purpose.
The interview cohort group universally agreed that the previously used Foundation Aid formula was overtly political. James, Chris, Ron, Peter, Nancy, and Oliver felt the new formula was more equitable as it was tied to explicit economic criteria and was less inclined, in Ron’s words: “to be a political log rolling exercise.” As Oliver offered, in defense of the new formula: “So, you can see Barrington and East Greenwich get the least. Central Falls gets the most. That makes sense.” Chris, when reflecting upon the transition to the new formula, felt it was an improvement because “(In the old formula)- there were people that gained, people that lost. People that lost wouldn’t vote for it, even if they thought it was good for the state.” Thus, when there is a shift towards fairness moving away from overtly political considerations, more equity for all students can be created. Using the cautionary tale of South Carolina’s political move to eliminate the property tax and replace it with a 1% sales tax, as expounded upon by Knoeppel, Pitts, & Lindle (2013), there is a need, as identified by the research participants to ensure the funding of Rhode Island’s public schools is tethered to discernable economic indicators that ensure those with the ability to pay the most indeed do so. While there remain issues of equity with the new formula, the research participants felt the new formula was a step in the right direction.

Each interview participant was also asked about potential changes to the current system that could be more equitable to all students. Universally, in the abstract, all interview participants felt more money should be spent on public education endeavors. Peter and Nancy, in particular discussed the need to create a permanent revenue stream, one that acted as an investment, proactively funding education initiatives as a means of getting ahead of future costs, thus saving money in the long run, while also providing equal educational access for all students. Peter and Nancy both cited Massachusetts as an example, citing the 1% dedicated revenue stream for
educational costs. Peter commented on this directly: “Massachusetts dedicates 1% of their aggregate sales tax revenue for funding school infrastructure projects.” Nancy, reflecting the same idea: “Massachusetts has a system where they take 1% of their sales tax. It is automatically deducted. Think of it like a 401 K. It’s like a direct deposit to your paycheck.” This kind of dedicated revenue stream offers great possibilities. As James explained- “Some places have let their buildings decay. We need to look at what Massachusetts has done.” Peter, diving a bit deeper, talked about using sales taxes from internet purchases to create this monetary flow: “We can phase this in over a five or ten- year period. This would reduce the reliance on borrowing. We would wean ourselves off borrowing every time an infrastructure project was needed.” As Payne & Biddle (2016) offer, much of our school funding comes from bond issuances. Over time, localities pay robust amount of interest on these bonds. Creating a revenue stream ahead of time can also offset the reality of decreased educational funding when the economy experiences downturn, a proclivity captured in the work of Leachman, Albares, Masterson, & Wallace (2015). By banking money in advance, schools would have less need to ask for bond issuances and continuously seek tax increases.

**Legal Issues of Equity**

Participants in this study are aware of the interplay between legislative and legal factors that have had demonstrative influence on the funding methodologies within Rhode Island. There was, during the course of our conversations, specific discussion with regard to how legal remedies can play a significant role in leveling the playing field, ensuring that all students, regardless of zip code location, can receive access to an equitable public education. Nancy, Ron, Chris, and Peter all had feedback on the question of using the legal system as a means of redress for those denied an equitable public educational opportunity.
While the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* debunked the “separate but equal” myth, Darby & Levy (2011) note that inequities in educational opportunity and quality remain. Ron captured this phenomenon, adroitly offering: “it is shocking to me, in terms of opportunity within a democracy, the opportunity difference between students in wealthy communities and those in poor communities. This is especially so for children of color and children learning English.” When I asked for further elaboration, Ron discussed the disparity in course offerings between wealthy and lower socioeconomically positioned high schools, noting a dearth in advanced placement Science and Mathematics opportunities. Ron positioned this disparity within a larger, legal context, stating these are issues of constitutionality for all children, specifically commenting: “an equal and adequate education in Rhode Island- trying to establish that as a constitutional right.” This tactic, as described by Goldstein (1971), mirrors the approach seen in *Serrano v. Priest*, attempting to use language within the state constitution as a means to equalize funding mechanisms. Chris also was supportive of this approach, pointing out that he, as mayor of Providence: “offered an amendment to our state constitution to guarantee every child have an equal educational opportunity.”

As no explicit mention of a right to an education exists within the Constitution of the United States, Payne and Biddle (2016) note this question is left for individual states to decide. Chris elaborated on the impetus for his position to provide an amendment to the state constitution, commenting that “if there was to be litigation or you went to make a claim some children were being denied, you’d have a basis to point to a constitutional provision.” This tactic as noted by Hanusheck, Kain, & Rivkin (2001), speaks directly to educational quality patterns as an indicator for a constitutional challenge. Further, as Lichtenstein notes (1991), educational equanimity, as a constitutionally protected right, allows all students an access point to a
competitive society. When the political system fails to equalize opportunities for all, and, as noted by Leachman, et. al. (2015), that state legislatures cut education funding in times of economic duress, the use of a provision within a state constitution protects the rights of all students. These arguments were supported by Nancy, who sees equity of educational opportunity as correlated to future results, opining: “Good schools allow students to have good jobs.” There is, as noted by multiple participants, a clear nexus between equal educational opportunity in the present and future earning potential in the future. Chris specifically noted; “If kids in Providence are not successful in being provided an equal educational opportunity, you know, they can’t get a good job or contribute to the tax base of their community.” This goes to the heart of the decision in *Abbott v. Burke (1985)* in that all students need an equal educational opportunity, moving beyond what Lichtenstein (1991) notes is simply a “thorough and efficient” access point. More specifically, children in Rhode Island deserve the same constitutional protection as students in New Jersey, the genesis of the decision in *Abbott*. Ron commented on the efficacy of the remedies in *Abbott*, noting: “The Abbott decision, which was what, 30 years ago, has made a difference for those kids. It forces the state to do how to do more for those with less. We’re trying to do that here.” This assertion is also supported by Peter and drives much of the work he has done as a state legislator. Peter expressed an acute desire for fidelity in offering commensurate educational opportunities for all students, saying: “People need to be held accountable. Regardless of the funding formula, if all stakeholders are not held accountable for their fair share of the revenue, we cannot maintain fidelity.”

In further discussion of the impact the court system could have in Rhode Island, Ron drew a parallel to Massachusetts, frequently cited as the exemplar for Rhode Island to follow, stating: “They keep talking about all the great stuff Massachusetts has done, and they are right,
but the motivating factor was the litigation.” Going further, as Ron’s first legal challenge to establish education for Rhode Island students as a constitutional right was successful, only to be overturned in the Rhode Island Supreme Court, he proffered: “The court knows the answer, educational opportunities are unfair. They just don’t want to get involved. We proved our case. Going back to *San Antonio v. Rodriguez*, they basically said this is a can of worms they do not want to open.” The challenge for Rhode Island is, per the logic espoused by Macchiarola & Diaz (1996), as *Rodriguez* effectively removed the federal government as a mandated enforcer of equal access to public education, is to convince a state court that education access is one of adequacy. *Rodriguez* did not establish education as a fundamental right. Instead, as Darby & Levy (2011) position, education is an important right. This has left the decision to state courts. Ron posited that all intellectually honest people know that there is a huge issue with regard to educational equity. Chris agreed, offering that unless the courts get involved: “you will continue to have incredible inequity in terms of opportunity. We need a basis to point to a constitutional provision.”

With the Rhode Island State Supreme Court seemingly unlikely to intercede on what has been viewed primarily as a political and economic issue, one which, in the court’s opinion, should be left for elected leaders to resolve, the issue of next steps is important. As Dayton & Dupree concluded (2004); with the federal bench effectively saying that equal access to education is not a fundamental right, individual states are left to wrestle with fair and equitable funding of schools. Chris feels, as a U. S. Congressman, that the federal government needs to play a more active role in funding education, offering: “There is a keen interest in maintaining local control of education, but I also think the federal government has a critical role in providing resources so that communities can do they work they need.”
Implications for Next Steps

Funding education in an equitable manner, one that truly affords all students equal access to a quality educational experience so that future potential for economic and social engagement in society is actualized, is a vexing conundrum. This challenge is multi-faceted and requires change within multiple contexts: political, legal, social, and intellectual. While the recommendations that follow will not completely eliminate inequity, they are grounded in the lived experiences of the interview participants and offer possibilities to accelerate the change process.

Infrastructure Investment

There are currently three hundred and six school campuses located within the Rhode Island public school system. The average building age is fifty-seven years old. According to the Jacobs Report (2017), Rhode Island’s public school infrastructure requires $2.2 billion dollars in renovation and repair. (School Building Authority at the Rhode Island Department of Education, 2017). By any reasonable standard, educational equity cannot exist when school buildings have poor temperature regulation, rotting ceiling tiles, plumbing deficiencies, leaky roofs, and pockets of mold. These costs not only make it difficult for students to learn, but also contribute to negative health outcomes later in life. Multiple interview participants cited the use of a dedicated revenue stream for the express purpose of infrastructure needs as an essential next step. Although Rhode Island voters recently passed a $250-million-dollar bond to rebuild school infrastructure, this total allocation is small in comparison to the aggregate need. As Rhode Island generated in excess of $385 million dollars in gambling revenue during fiscal year 2015, this revenue stream offers possibilities for infrastructure improvements (Dadayan, 2016). Currently, gambling revenues are placed in the General Fund, thus providing the governor and state
legislature discretion in how these monies are allocated. In order to provide for this immediate infrastructure need, an increased share of this $385 million dollars should be devoted exclusively to building repairs and construction throughout the state. As a means of providing for the infrastructure crisis, there needs to be a ten percent increase to the existing pool of money allocated towards public education. More specifically, on a total revenue pool of $385 million dollars, and additional $38.5 million dollars per year needs to be earmarked solely for the purpose of school construction. Dadayan (2016) observes gambling revenue has remained stable in Rhode Island from the years 2008-2015, ranging between $374 and $399 million dollars. This ten percent dedicated revenue stream, irrespective of other monies already allocated for schools and based on past gambling revenues, would raise in the vicinity of $37 million dollars annually for school infrastructure projects. Over a ten-year period approximately $370 million additional dollars would be made available. While this pool of funds would not completely remedy the infrastructure challenges, there would be over $1 billion dollars made available over a thirty-year cycle to prioritize capital projects. There is simply no way around not taking drastic fiscal action. The academic, future economic, and future health costs are simply too high. Failure to purposefully allocate these funds will result in exacerbating an already clear equity gap. In addition, this pool of revenue does not require the state to expand gambling. Instead, this proposal reallocates projected revenue already in place. This guards against Hendricks’s assertion (2016) that increasing gambling outlets serves to impact those in lower socioeconomic groups disproportionately.
Charter School Regulation

Multiple interview participants expressed dismay with the state of charter schools within Rhode Island. The issue was not one of reflexive or ideological resistance. In fact, multiple participants expressed an openness to having a charter school presence. Much of the skepticism was grounded in cost and oversight: charter schools are adding significant costs to towns, escalating quickly, yet there appears to be little oversight. As an intent of charter schools was purposeful exploration of innovative teaching pedagogy, with the expectation that the charter would collaborate with the local public school as a means of enhancing teacher practice, interview participants expressed frustration that this was not happening regularly. Further, participants were critical regarding the lack of oversight and rate of expansion. Thus, Rhode Island needs to avoid the path New Orleans took after Hurricane Katrina: a massive increase in charter school construction at the expense of public schools. Due to this rapid expansion, Parsons reports (2014) that the per pupil expenditure in New Orleans between charter and public school students was in excess of $3,500 per student. This discrepancy leads to creating parallel educational systems, leaving those within the public school system inequitably funded. In addition, Saltzman (2007) points out that forty-seven million dollars was allocated solely for charter school construction after Hurricane Katrina, yet no monies were earmarked for public school facilities. While Rhode Island has not experienced a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans fiscal allocation model serves as a cautionary tale for Rhode Island. Thus, as Rhode Island is experiencing an infrastructure crisis, there needs to be a moratorium on additional charter school buildings until the public sector buildings can be adequately repaired.

Charter schools should also be subject to performance standard benchmarks. These benchmarks should be based upon student achievement on high value assessments, such as the
RICAS or NAEP test. Failure to produce improvement over time should lead to the return of students in charter schools to the public school system. As Chris commented during his interview: “Some charters work. Some don’t. The ones that work should stay open. The ones that do not should close.” Currently, charters function with minimal accountability or oversight. As multiple interview participants offered, there is a dearth of accountability charter schools currently have to their local education agencies. There is a need to assemble a team of educational stakeholders, including those already working within a charter school environment, to research and implement clear thresholds of accountability for charter schools operating within Rhode Island. This team should also develop, in conjunction with local educational leaders, dedicated time and space for charter and public school educators to share practices that are effective. Equity for all students means determining what instructional strategies work. Failure to share this information across systems will result in diminished outcomes for students, particularly those in higher risk categories. Peter had referenced during the interview process that Rhode Island lacks a charter school “playbook”. The above suggestions will create a clearly defined path forward.

Charter schools must also be mandated to design, implement, and monitor IEP documents for students with disabilities, providing the same set of services as the public school system. Currently, as charter schools have some ability to regulate entrance criteria, a resultant outcome has been, as noted by Lake (2014), an underrepresentation of students with disabilities within the realm of charter schools. Equity means access for all students. Exclusion, if either explicit or implicit, based upon the fallacious narrative that charter schools lack either the funding or skills to educate students with disabilities, is simply unacceptable and discriminatory, especially so if the entity receives public funds. Denial of admittance to students with disabilities also is a cost
shift burden to public schools. As there is an unfortunate linkage between lower socioeconomic status and identification of a disability, there is an added deleterious effect when charter schools can exclude students with handicapping conditions. This results, as Sass (2006) offers, in fewer students with disabilities and English Language (EL) needs placed within a charter school. As Oliver noted, these differences in placement ratios inflate the per pupil expenditure number. Charter schools receive this money from the public pool of funds but are not required to implement services. This diversion of resources adversely affects students in public schools. Therefore, charter schools must provide a full range of IEP services in order to receive public funding.

**Revenue Stream Changes**

Rhode Island should follow the Massachusetts requirement that one penny of the state’s 6.25% sales tax revenue be dedicated to public school funding. Since 2004, the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) has raised $13.4 billion dollars to maintain and improve the school buildings. While the Massachusetts model mandates this revenue goes directly into infrastructure projects, a previous recommendation in this report of a 10% shift in gambling revenues will, in part, address the infrastructure needs. The funds collected from this revenue stream will have a portion allotted to infrastructure, but also a portion dedicated towards the instructional program. These funds will be disbursed on an as needed basis, with students in economically disadvantaged districts receiving the majority of these dollars.

In 2015, Rhode Island raised $3.26 billion dollars in aggregate revenue. Approximately 50% of that revenue, or $1.63 billion dollars came directly from the sales tax. Adding just 1% of that total sales tax revenue towards public school projects, based upon the 2015 collection patterns, would raise $16.3 million dollars annually for the public schools. This money should be
provided directly to the public schools and should be based specifically on need. These funds should be directly tied to the instructional and curricular program. As an example, these funds should be used for curricular materials and professional development for staff members. There should not be one district that has a research based, viable set of curricular materials on one side of Rhode Island and another district that possesses antiquated materials. These funds will also be used to provide a full range of commensurate class offerings at high schools across the state.

Students in Woonsocket are afforded the same right as students in Barrington to take advanced placement courses in high school, as these courses are prerequisite requirements for admission into competitive colleges. Students that are not afforded the opportunity to take advanced coursework are thus unfairly impacted in the college admissions process. This lack of a similar access point has aversive effects on future economic opportunities, limiting future earning potential. An equitably oriented society does not preordain limits on future earning opportunity by providing the needed coursework to some students at the expense of others. In particular, this is a fundamental issue of equity, as those currently marginalized as a result of scarce course offerings are more likely educated in communities with limited financial resources. Providing an enhanced, needs based revenue stream to level the playing field has potential to create a more systemic concept of fairness. Zip code matters less, grit and persistence matters more.

**Legal Remedies**

Shifting economic resources towards schools offers much opportunity, but the reality remains political winds shift regularly. Changes in the governor’s office and state legislatures often result in reevaluation of fiscal priorities. While the above recommendations regarding a more equitable distribution of school funds would have demonstrable effects on student equity, a more lasting remedy would come through legal changes. As Ron pointed out in
our discussion: Massachusetts has done a great deal to improve student access and performance, but it must be remembered that the thrust of this improvement was driven by the court system, not the political process. Ron and Chris both explicitly advocated for the State Supreme Court to declare that a constitutionally protected right to an education that allows for full participation in a democratic society exists. This thinking, as positioned by Wong & Nicotera (2009), shifts public discourse towards educational equity and quality. As Dayton & Dupree (2004) note: some thirty-six, high level state courts have issued rulings in support of fiscal equity. Rhode Island’s Supreme Court, without qualification, should affirm the positive right of all students in Rhode Island to receive a commensurate education. This declaration should explicitly require a combination of state and local funds be used so that the educational program, curricular materials, and course offerings are substantially similar in all school districts. By taking this action and affirming this right, students have a means of redress should the district and state fail to provide a quality education. Failure to provide access to a legally protected, quality educational experience, complete with modern, research based curricular materials, healthy, functional school buildings, and a robust set of course offerings causes permanent damage to students, significantly impairing access to higher education opportunities, likely forever limiting earning potential. This drains both the individual and state, creating outcomes that likely strain social service programs, increase rates of incarceration, accelerate health maladies, and fail to address documented systemic inequities. The genesis for protecting the fundamental right to an education can only come from a judicial mandate. Fiscal remedies are inherently fleeting, subject to perpetual political changes, offering only the illusory ideal of fiscal equanimity without court sanctioned protections. Rhode Island has this opportunity squarely in focus and should not hesitate further in taking action.
Limitations

This research project consisted of six interview participants. It is reasonable that a larger cohort group would yield insights in contrast to the lived experiences presented by the participants. Readers of this research may draw different conclusions from the data set outlined. Different questions may also manifest. The data collected here cannot be considered exhaustive. As a matter of positionality, as a school administrator with an educational background of working with traditionally underserved students, my personal bias towards increased financial support for high need student groups may, despite explicitly declaring my intellectual proclivities, manifest.

Implications for Future Research

This study provided extensive insight into the thinking of six educational leaders across the political, policy, and legal spectrum of public education within Rhode Island. These leaders impact public policy at both the state and federal level. Additional studies that include student voices are imperative to building the collective body of knowledge regarding issues of equity in education. Policy makers must carefully consider the lived experiences of students as a means of developing a truly comprehensive, effective set of legal and political remedies. As this study developed potential changes along four, universal themes mutually agreed upon by research participants, further study is merited for each strand elucidated in the findings: 1) Infrastructure Maladies, 2) Charter Schools, 3) Revenue Stream Changes, and 4) Legal Issues. Each of the aforementioned themes are complex, nuanced, and layered. Researchers with advanced fiscal acumen could extrapolate fiscal possibilities yet uncovered to help close the equity gap. Those with formalized legal training could view this phenomenon through a judicially oriented lens, fully versed in the legal machinations over time that have brought us to
this point in Rhode Island’s history. In addition, this problem considered through the lens of a declared advocate of charter schools could provide perspective not readily offered through the cohort group selected for this research study. Finally, as Rhode Island did pass a $250-million-dollar bond in November of 2018 to specifically address the physical condition of Rhode Island’s public schools, research documenting the outcomes of this issuance could help drive additional interventions. Copious documentation of how these funds were distributed, coupled with resultant educational outcomes of students educated in these buildings, focusing on educational achievement, should help orient future action steps.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to conduct a phenomenological analysis of how public policy leaders in education understand issues of equity and finance, seeking to discern if current distribution systems are fair, providing all students with a quality, commensurate public education. More specifically, three research questions were considered: 1) How do public policy influencers understand the current funding mechanisms in K-12 public education with the United States, and more specifically, the State of Rhode Island? 2) How do public policy influencers describe their experiences with regard to the effect of poverty on students within the United States, and more specifically, the State of Rhode Island? 3) How do public policy influencers describe their perspectives with regard to the need to change current state funding mechanisms in order to provide equity for all students? Participants offered much knowledge regarding how public schools are funded. This was expected, as most participants have some influence over how educational dollars are spent. Four of the six participants, as active legislative actors, have direct fiduciary responsibilities. The two non-elected leaders, as part of their chosen profession, need to understand, at least in general terms, how public schools within Rhode Island are
financed. Participants articulated specific, timely, detailed knowledge regarding the impact of poverty. Further, I was able to specifically recount visiting schools and deposing experts with detailed knowledge regarding the effects of poverty on students in Rhode Island. Nancy, an expert of the condition of school buildings within Rhode Island, was able to articulate the ancillary consequences of impoverished school conditions on student academic performance and health. Interview participants also provided a full, robust set of policy suggestions for increasing school equity in Rhode Island. These recommendations cut across the economic, political, and legal sectors, requiring immediate, drastic action to provide educational equity for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status.
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