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## Massachusetts Chapter 70 Education Equity Funding in Policy and Practice

Julia E. Kostro  
*Colby College*

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# **Massachusetts Chapter 70 Education Equity Funding in Policy and Practice**

EDUCATIONAL STUDIES HONORS THESIS

Julia E. Kostro

Advisor: Professor Lauren Yoshizawa

May, 2020



## **Abstract**

School funding policies aim to equalize school quality between districts of varying income levels, however, vast inequalities persist in our education system. This thesis examines how and why education funding policy, despite its high potential to create meaningful reform, continues to be a weak lever to promote equitable change in the education system in Massachusetts. After considering the rationales from previous scholars used to explain this phenomenon, interviews were conducted with three key stakeholder groups (policymakers, state advocates, and local leaders such as principals and superintendents), in order to produce a cross-sectional analysis of why education funding policy tends to fall short of its equity expectations.

Two important findings emerged when determining how equity policy is indeed a weak lever for implementing equitable change, and two were uncovered as to why exactly this is. The two findings when determining how policy struggles to create meaningful change are 1) differing theories of change throughout stakeholder groups and 2) other deep-rooted and fundamental systemic issues throughout the education sector and other policies and structures as a whole. The two findings when determining why exactly this is are 1) Cognitive dissonance and internal conflicts of beliefs within people in different levels of the education system, both personally and in groups, and 2) the conflict between stakeholder groups on centralization versus local control.

There are key implications in this work for all stakeholder groups involved as to the ways in which they may be unintentionally susceptible to hindering the objectives of equity policy initiatives in their own lines of work. This work provides the theoretical backdrop for those working in the education system to be more conscientious about the implications of how their

own feelings translated into actions affect the broader scope of education in the state of Massachusetts and beyond.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Introduction**

Education inequality is prevalent throughout the country, and the state of Massachusetts is no exception. State policymakers in Massachusetts in 1993 enacted into state law Chapter 70, which aimed to combat the vast inequalities growing in the system at the time and still in place to this day. In an attempt to regulate and fairly distribute funding, the first policy determines the total cost of providing adequate education for all students in the state, known as a per-pupil foundation budget. Next, the policy first determines the amount a city or town is able to contribute to the operation of its own schools. From this estimate, a required minimum local contribution is calculated, and the gap between a district's required local contribution and its foundation budget is filled with Chapter 70 state aid. Chapter 70 was considered a progressive piece of legislation in 1993, but it has since become outdated and in need of changes. Even though the law raised the minimum state and local contribution substantially and distributed that state funding in a way that attempted to be more equitable, it did not prevent localities from spending significantly more on the education of their own students. Because of factors such as this along with many other contributing factors, the disparities between low and high-income education since 1993 have only grown.

The Student Opportunity Act (SOA), passed in October 2019 and significantly updating the 1993 Chapter 70 law, has yet again attempted to compensate for the inequalities between Massachusetts school districts by pumping nearly \$1.3 billion into the state's education system within the course of the next 7 years. The vast majority of the money in this bill is going to a small percentage of school districts in the state that are in the most need of added funding. This will give necessary capital to the communities in the most desperate need throughout the



commonwealth. There is notable praise and excitement around the SOA for promoting higher educational equity in the state, but some are critical that this policy may yet again fall short of its intended outcome.

Policy is a powerful tool to implement considerable widespread change throughout large populations such as Massachusetts. Policy provides the framework to guide decisions and influence outcomes throughout communities. However, education policy historically has been a weak lever when attempting to promote equitable change, and there are proponents of two counter reasons as to why this is the case. Some researchers believe that policy is largely ineffective over time due to the internal conflicts of multiple stakeholder groups throughout all levels of the system. Proponents of this theory believe that these groups hinder their own abilities to promote equitable change through policy by failing to find an equilibrium of the internal tensions between their ideological and self-serving thoughts. This creates cognitive dissonance, where the state of having inconsistent views produces anxiety and results in behavior and/or attitude changes.

Others believe that policy alone continues to be an inadequate vehicle for meaningful change due to the conflicts of power between different stakeholder groups across the education system. Policymakers are influenced by outside organizations such as advocacy groups and other coalitions, resulting in a hierarchy of persuasive powers. This results in stakeholders with significant social capital prioritizing their own agendas over the priorities of the policy in place. Additionally, once policy is made, these people with conflicting powers can use their social capital to work against the equity policy that is in place.

People continue to struggle with why exactly equity policy continues to fall short for the students who need it the most, and although many theories have been put in place, the reasoning for the outcome is still not entirely known. We know that policy is a product of a coalescence of ideas by major stakeholder groups, and we also know that policy can have unintended consequences and backlash once it is put into place. However, we are unable to predict exactly how a policy itself will play out in the real world, even if on paper it seems like a theoretically perfect piece of legislation. We still have not learned enough about what exactly goes on between multiple levels of the education system that results in poor outcomes of policy. Even though people continue to be hopeful that the SOA may finally begin to promote change, there is no way to know if the policy will in fact have its intended impact. The only way to know is to wait and see how it plays out.

In this paper, first I will summarize what we as a community currently know about the state of funding and policy making from the outlook of three key stakeholder groups: state-wide policymakers, state advocates working in nonprofit organizations across the commonwealth, and local leaders such as school principals and superintendents who work to better their local communities. Then, I will share my findings which combine the previously opposing theories of policy making and impact; examining the strengths and shortcomings of both the theory of internal conflicts and the theory of social capital. Lastly, I will conclude with implications for the future of policy and suggestions for the future, which will hopefully help everyone from local leaders and community groups to larger state advocates and policymakers create and implement more equitable education funding policy in upcoming years.

## Literature Review

### **Introduction: Money Matters...But How?**

Due to policies allowing for increased autonomy of towns and their local spending, it is widely accepted that school funding is inequitably distributed throughout the country. Moreover, the income disparities between socio-economic classes are only growing, with students in higher income brackets attending schools with significantly higher funding, and the differences in education between the highest income bracket and lowest are widening, Reuter's reports (2012). Massachusetts schools, although they continue to place first in national charts for public education in the country, also receive greatly inequitable funding between schools.

Local contributions constitute 44% of total school funding (Springer, Houck, & Guthrie, 2015), but different districts have varying capacities to contribute. Some cities and towns have the ability to put up more towards their education if they have significant amounts of commerce or a high residential taxes. However, many localities do not have this luxury, resulting in significant inequity between towns of varying wealth and ability to contribute to their district's education system. One example of this is when comparing the lower-income town of Gardner to the higher-income town of Weston, Reuter's writes that Gardner High has no parent-teacher organization whereas the parents in Weston raised \$300,000 in 2011 for their schools (Rohde, Cooke, & Ojha). Additionally, Mintrom (1993) states that school districts with low property have had to either tax their poor constituents at higher rates or devote fewer resources to education than rich districts (p. 847).

There is also a general agreement that the amount of funding a school receives matters when it comes to the quality of student education at certain schools. Higher school spending has

been associated with everything from increased graduation rates and consequent reduced incidence of school dropouts to the addition of auxiliary services such as meals, transportation, and guidance (Springer, Houck, & Guthrie, 2015, p. 4). In yet another example of why funding matters, Jackson, Johnson, and Persico write that “the estimated effect of a 22 percent increase in per-pupil spending throughout all 12 school-age years for low-income children is large enough to eliminate the education gap between children from low-income and nonpoor families” (2015, p. 72).

However, even though prior research states that per-capita spending is undoubtedly important, it has also been shown that simply increasing spending per student in a given school district does not automatically solve the issue of education inequality. Jackson, Johnson, and Persico state that a minimum amount of baseline funding is essential, writing, “Money alone may not lift educational outcomes to desired levels, but our findings confirm that the provision of adequate funding may be critical” (p. 75). Erik Hanushek argues the same, stating that after studying the observed outcomes over the past fifty years does not suggest that simply giving money to schools “is likely to be a policy that solves the significant U.S. schooling problems seen in the levels and distributions of outcomes” (2015). Hanushek continues that *how* money is spent matters significantly more than the sheer monetary amount, and that overall funding has not been shown to create significant change in schools over time. So, perhaps money matters less than scholarship previously thought.

Nevertheless, policies that supplement or equalize funding can also have a profound impact on education institutions when these policies are created with intention. Jackson, Johnson, and Persico (2015), write that in certain ways money may still matter after all. They

state that although money alone may not raise education standards, the supply of adequate funding is critical. When focusing on the categories of educational attainment, high school completion, adult wages, adult family income, and the incidence of adult poverty, increased strategic funding was shown to impact students on all of these levels for the better. They write, “For children from low-income families, increasing per-pupil spending by 10 percent in all 12 school-age years increases educational attainment by 0.5 years” (p. 72). This highlights the importance of adjusted policies in order to ensure the money provided in policy is not wasted, but even perfectly planned policy may still fail in its actual execution.

So, how do policies address the need for a fundamental level of funding for all students while also addressing the growing educational inequality in our country? Prior scholarship generally offers two different ways of understanding why policy-making and the implementation of policy itself is a weak lever for promoting equitable change: internal conflicts of beliefs within people in different levels of the education system (both personal and in groups) and the ability of stakeholder groups to influence policy due to social capital.

### **Theory 1: Cognitive Dissonance & Internal Tensions**

The first theory as to why creating meaningful change through policy is so difficult is the internal conflicts and beliefs of multiple stakeholder groups throughout all levels of the system. Three central stakeholder groups responsible for making these decisions are policymakers, local leaders, and state advocates. Even though all of these groups have the ability to promote equitable change and policy, perhaps internal tensions and conflicts create cognitive dissonance

in the minds of key decision makers, forcing them to confront different ideologies and possibly hinder the implementation of the policy.

### ***Policymaker's Perspective***

In order for policy to be enacted, it must first be written. Policymakers are the principal stakeholder group which creates the policy that all other stakeholder groups work with after it is created. Springer, Houck, and Guthrie (2015) state that the long legacy of funding is often very political. Their study suggests that policymakers are constantly balancing between equity, efficiency, and liberty. These three values create tension for policymakers throughout many education finance policies. They write, “the tensions between these values act as checks on their growth, providing for policy equilibrium with a center point that shifts as national political mores and powers shift” (p. 10).

Mintrom (1993) found that policymakers have significant desire and power to make equitable changes, but due to a general unease about political survival many policymakers fail to support initiatives that are not beneficial for their political careers. From a policymaker's perspective, changing school policy inevitably adds funding to some schools and decreases funding for others, causing the possibility of extreme upset to constituents such as taxpayers and parents. While this negative implications might justify the benefits for some, it is a decision that many policymakers struggle to make.

Mintrom states that taxpayers tend to vote relatively simply; generally voting to minimize taxes, and people who raise taxes are often made unpopular and therefore voted against in later elections. The voting behavior of parents of school children, on the other hand, is somewhat

trickier due to their status as parents as well as taxpayers. Parents generally want what is best for their own children, but they also would like to minimize their costs otherwise. Parents often want their taxes spent on their own children's education but not on the education of children outside of their own school district, so many parents would also be against any increase in taxes that does not directly impact their own children. Policymakers know this, and this tension between their own principles and potential future electability could cause policymakers to vote against a bill that they might be ideologically in-line with if they think it is something their constituents would disagree with.

These combined objectives, along with many other tensions, is why Mintrom says, "policymakers seek to alter the distribution of resources we can expect to see strong opposition to reform. The result could be that expensive policy initiatives end up doing little to achieve their original aims" (p. 859). In order to create and maintain equality, the governments would have to take away the resources and positions to those with the advantage and give them to the disadvantaged. This exchange of resources and ranks interferes with the freedom of the advantaged, but possibly frees those who were historically disadvantaged, putting some policymakers especially in wealthy districts in an incredibly difficult internal debate.

### ***Local Leader's Perspective***

Local leaders in education such as principals and superintendents also have the necessity to balance between stakeholder groups and decide how they want to handle tensions between liberty and equity in their own communities. Local leaders naturally desire to make decisions based on what is best for their own communities, creating the best possible education for the

students within their own towns or districts. Local leaders may agree with the idea of educational equity as a whole, but they want to ensure their own students receive the best education that the district can provide as well. This produces a form of cognitive dissonance. However, policymakers have the added desire to make similar decisions to balance race and socioeconomic student populations throughout schools to create a more equitable environment for their students, resulting in a significant clash of values between these two stakeholder groups.

Bryk and Schneider write, “Principals' actions play a key role in developing and sustaining relational trust. Principals establish both respect and personal regard when they acknowledge the vulnerabilities of others, actively listen to their concerns, and eschew arbitrary actions. Effective principals couple these behaviors with a compelling school vision and behavior that clearly seeks to advance the vision” (2003). It is clear that local leaders such as principals are central to school and district communities, producing significant tension between their own beliefs of what is best for their own students and what is best for the state and country as a whole. This cognitive dissonance could result in a change of beliefs towards a less equitable system, and thus local leaders may advocate for something that might not be completely in line with their ideological beliefs. This tension could result in a faltering at this level of the educational process.

### ***State Advocate's Perspective***

Since the United States education system remains largely decentralized with significant decision making power and funding distribution decisions going to local and state leaders, this also allows for outside stakeholders such as advocacy groups to have input in the funding



process as well. Instead of policymakers who are required to constantly balance power, advocates act as catalysts in order to build momentum and pressure to create change on the legislative side. Advocates use many tactics to create change. Some of these include advising legislatures and upholding them to certain values. These advocacy groups must decide what their own institutional beliefs are, and at times they could do more harm than good regardless of their intentions.

Lubienski (2015) writes that philanthropists fund organizations that align with their own political beliefs, making the possible tensions for organizations palpable. For example, Lubienski describes an organization that aims to influence the political process and policy making receiving a donation from someone whose goal is to provide alternative forms of education such as charter schools. Organizations that may not have had a specific stance on issues such as alternative schooling must then balance the tensions of advocating for what they've determined as the most equitable or the policy that may not be aligned with the organization's values but results in a significant addition of resources to that organization. It is possibly due to conflicts like these that Stone (2005) notes that in a complex democracy, policy oftentimes addresses competing conceptions of abstract goals. Sometimes, policies that are intended to implement certain goals result in opposite outcomes. There are many steps involved in policy making and people with real psychological tensions at every step, so it is no wonder why a leading theory is that these tensions can result in the hindrance of the creation and implementation of policies such as school funding.

## **Theory 2: Power & Social Capital**

Some researchers suggest that the lack of efficacy in education policy is more due to the balancing of powers than it does with internal conflicts. The second theory as to why creating meaningful change through policy is so difficult is multiple stakeholder groups balancing power and social capital of other groups in different levels of the education system. Bryk (2003) found that relationships between distinct roles within schools characterize the social exchanges of schooling. Bryk uses the examples of teachers with students, teachers with other teachers, teachers with parents, and all groups with the school principal to demonstrate how power and social capital can play a significant role in the implementation of policy. Each group member conceptualizes what his or her role's expectations are as well as the expectations of other groups. This concept of trust and social capital is exhibited within the three aforementioned stakeholder groups as well: policymakers, local leaders, and state advocates, each dealing with their own unique challenges to balance the power and social capital of other groups.

### ***Policymaker's Perspective***

Policymakers are the prime stakeholder groups with the most direct power, with the ability to create policy that affects the entire Massachusetts education system. Policymakers are responsible for creating new legislation that either helps or hinders the goal of education equity, so the powers that they respond to are also quite necessary to understand. Policymakers have to balance the pressures of many stakeholder groups, including but not limited to local leaders, state advocates, federal policymakers, and even local parents. Mintrom writes, "Any move to redistribute existing state-level funds will reduce resources in some districts and increase them in

others. State legislators will avoid such a divisive policy option, unless a large number of their constituents are to benefit and only a few to lose, or unless losses could be spread thinly across a large group” (1993, p. 849). Policymakers must balance the powers of each stakeholder group in order to promote their own political agenda, and this may get in the way of the creation and implementation of new equitable policy.

### *Local Leader’s Perspective*

Another important stakeholder group is local leaders such as school administrators and school district superintendents, because they have the ability to intentionally or unintentionally help or hinder the goals of equitable education policy. Local leaders are a stakeholder group with significant power to create change within their own school systems, especially those with high social capital, which means that they may have the capacity to override equitable funding initiatives that were previously put in place even if they are simply trying to do what is best for their own school communities.

Additionally, the way local leaders respond to school problems often differs between higher and lower socioeconomic classes due to different stakeholder groups providing significant pressure, such as parents. For example, when students in middle-class families as opposed to students in working-class families have bad experiences with a teacher and tell their parents, the responses are oftentimes quite different. When the middle-class students told their parents, Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2003) write, “By then members of the school board were getting calls. The parental network facilitated a quick and collective response. The teacher and the principal called the Tallingers that weekend. There was a meeting with the parents the following

Tuesday. The teacher was suspended for a week. In stark contrast, working-class and poor families handled these same types of incidents in a more individual fashion” (p. 336). In this case, the parents’ cultural capital resulted in a significantly different outcome than of parents with less social capital. Parents with significant social capital have the power to pressure local leaders into making decisions that they may not have made otherwise, therefore changing the efficacy of state-wide initiatives that aim to produce more equitably funded schools in the country.

### *State Advocate’s Perspective*

State advocates have significant power over which agendas they choose to support and which agendas they choose to fight against. However, advocates such as philanthropies and other nonprofit organizations are still supported by other powers, so in order to increase their own power and influence, they must rely on the objectives of other stakeholder groups. Lubienski (2015) writes about this, stating that this recent shift in the climate of United States educational policy places increasing importance in private sectors such as donors from organizations and other advocacy groups. Because of this, advocacy groups now have more power than ever. Lubienski writes about the potential harm in this, writing, “This reality is exceedingly problematic as it (1) challenges traditional understandings of democratic participation and oversight of schooling; and (2) can force school officials to cater the delivery of curriculum or alter the culture of the school to accommodate the corporate interests of those who gain influence by donating money and swaying research away from the neutral and more toward the ideological” (2015).

Educational inequality is only continuing to increase, which has a profound impact on school systems across the country that are attempting to provide the highest quality education for all of their students. Many states have put in place funding in order to address that problem, but it oftentimes does not produce the intended outcomes. It is evident that different stakeholder groups play a role in shaping the success of policy initiatives, but how and why exactly this happens is still not fully known.

### **Number One for Some: the Example of Massachusetts**

Some states have formed policies aimed to combat this growing injustice; one of these states is Massachusetts. The state is a prime example of a growing income disparity and education gap. Although Massachusetts continues to rank as the #1 public school education in the country, the wealth gap in the state is staggering. Reuter's states, "In the bottom fifth of Massachusetts households, the average income dropped 9 percent in the past 20 years to \$12,000...But the top fifth saw their average income leap 17 percent, to \$217,000, as their education levels soared far higher. Three-quarters had a bachelor's, up from half. Fully 50 percent had a post-graduate degree, up from a quarter" (Rohde, 2012).

The Chapter 70 law, the state's first school funding bill aimed to form adequate and equitable funding in Massachusetts, was passed by the state congress in 1993, affecting all K-12 schools in the state. Chapter 70 attempts to ensure that every school in Massachusetts has adequate resources to provide a quality education for all students, while taking into account the varied abilities of each local government to help contribute to that amount. It does this by calculating the required local contributions and additional Chapter 70 aid needed to reach a

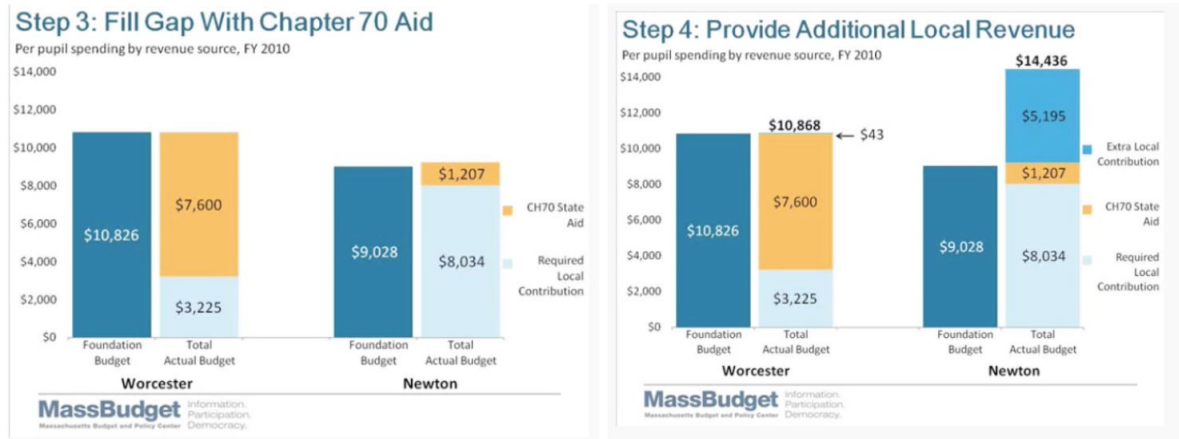
minimum per-pupil spending budget in schools (Massachusetts Chapter 70 program, section 3).

However, Massachusetts is still facing vast education inequality even after the implementation of Chapter 70 in 1993. For example, Massachusetts went from the 23rd most unequal state in 1989 to the 7th most unequal state in just 22 years; experiencing the second-biggest increase in income inequality (Reuters Special Report, 2012).

Because local towns and cities have the ability to provide additional local contributions and the fact that the calculation system has become outdated, the educational inequality around the state has continued. In fact, the graph below by MassBudget gives the example of two towns in Massachusetts, Worcester and Newton, and shows that after their Chapter 70 aid their funding looks about the same per student, however after the local revenue has been added by the optional local contributions, the students in Newton receive about 40% more funding than students in Worcester (2010). The state's effort to adjust its contributions in ways that balance out local contributions is both limited and undermined by the excess local contributions provided by the highest income districts in the state. The new Student Opportunity Act was adopted in October 2019 with the purpose of correcting that exact problem.

**Figure 1**

*Chapter 70 Funding Formula Before and After Additional Local Contributions*



Note. MassBudget (2010).

**Looking Forward: The Student Opportunity Act**

Massachusetts has recently worked to aid the Chapter 70 funding formula created in 1993 by the Massachusetts Education Reform Act. This policy, called the Student Opportunity Act, is the most significant update to the Massachusetts Education Reform Act and is attempting to create more equitable education within Massachusetts, even though many of the aforementioned hurdles still exist. The Student Opportunity Act was signed into law on November 26, 2019 and is projected to provide an additional \$1.4 billion in funding towards Massachusetts public schools by the year 2027. In addition to a significant increase in funding, the Student Opportunity Act funding is also reliant on increased accountability. The SOA requires school committees and superintendents to create three-year improvement plans to outline how the additional funding will be spent in their schools. Section 1S of the SOA states, “Each district’s

plan shall be developed by the superintendent, with the approval of the school committee, and shall consider input and recommendations from parents, including, but not limited to, special education and English learner parent advisory councils, school improvement councils, educators in the school district and other relevant community stakeholders” (2019, p. 4).

With increased spending and increased accountability as two measures in the bill, the SOA was passed with bipartisan support. These accountability measures will undoubtedly give the state more power (Guthrie & Wong), but it is unknown how exactly this increased accountability will be enforced and if it will help or hinder efforts towards the intended bipartisan outcome. Additionally, this increased spending has been shown to be largely ineffective in some cases. As Stone suggests, many well-meaning policies result in unintended outcomes, and the only true test of the SOA is time. Will the Student Opportunity Act show that policy can be used as a productive tool to fix current and future equity issues, or will policy continue to fall short of its intentions? This research attempts to better understand how and why education funding policy continues to be a weak lever to promote educational equity in the state of Massachusetts, building from previous scholarship while producing new insights from interviews with stakeholder groups throughout all levels of the education system in the state.



## Methods

### Interview Selection

Using the case of Massachusetts to understand the functionality of funding as a tool for education equity, I conducted interviews from December 2019-April 2020 with people in the aforementioned three stakeholder groups: the State Board of Education and the legislature, equity-oriented advocacy groups, and local leaders such as principals and superintendents. I conducted three interviews in each of the stakeholder groups (with the exception of local leaders which were two principals and two superintendents) which became the data from which these findings were based.

I sorted all school districts in the state into high, medium, and low levels of local contributions per pupil based on the 2019 state data. Local contributions were used as the parameter to judge school inequalities because they highlight the vast funding differences based on the local dimension of educational funding. Because of the availability of local contribution data as well as the apparent power of local contributions to vastly impact the amount of school funding in the state, I determined that this dimension of variation is the best term of reference to answer my research question. I used random selection to identify school districts within each strata to recruit for participation. I contacted local leaders first, prioritizing principals of high schools and district superintendents of high and low levels of local contributions. As seen in Table 1, the final sample included ten interviews, three from each stakeholder group with the exception of four interviews in the local leaders category, which was two principals and two superintendents.

I determined which Advocacy group members would be the best fit based on the alignment of the organizations to the aforementioned thesis goal of creating a cross-sectional view of the current state of funding policy in Massachusetts. This was determined by researching the most well-known Massachusetts nonprofit organizations working in the realm of education and determining how well the organization fit with the intended goal of the research, and then by the interest and willingness of the organization to participate. In order to determine the fit of the organization of the project, I looked for Massachusetts-based educational organizations whose missions were to advance education equity in the state. These organizations are well-known and well-respected in the community, and they also have significant connections to schools as well as policymakers in the state.

Members of the State Board of Education and legislative members working in educational policy in Massachusetts were selected from their respective websites and chosen for best fit with and knowledge of the subject matter.

**Table 1**

*Stakeholder Group Information and Pseudonyms*

<b>Stakeholder group</b>	<b>Number of interviews</b>	<b>Distribution of titles</b>	<b>Names*</b>
Local leaders – low local contribution	2	1 principal & 1 superintendent	Lily (principal) & Lisa (superintendent)
Local leaders – high local contribution	2	1 principal, 1 superintendent	Lucy (principal) & Laura (superintendent)
Policymakers	3		Penny, Paula, & Phoebe
State advocates	3		Sophia, Sarah, & Susan

*\* to protect the anonymity of study participants all parties have been given female pseudonyms*

## **Interviews**

Interviews were 30-45 minutes in length, consisting of eight questions each asking about interviewees' individual experiences and feelings while working within the education sector. These interviews covered topics regarding perceptions of current and new policy, general feelings of empowerment in their roles, and potential room for improvement in the policy and in their roles (see Appendix A for interview protocol). I conducted all interviews via phone and all interviews were recorded for subsequent transcription. All interview recordings were then stored on a secure Colby College server to ensure maximum security and confidentiality of the interviewees.

## **Transcription**

Interviews were transcribed using the transcription tool Trint and then checked and edited by the researcher for correctness. Interview transcriptions were then also stored on the secure Colby server to ensure security.

## **Coding**

Interviews were coded using the methods of Kathy Charmaz (2006), categorizing segments of the data that summarizes each piece of data. Coding was short and stuck closely to the data, prioritizing words of action and personal emotion in this specific case to understand and synthesize the meanings of these actions and sentiments. After this, interviews were compared

within groups as well as across levels to describe patterns and contrasts between the different stakeholder groups.

## Findings

In this section, I will highlight the four major findings that my research has brought to light regarding why education funding is a weak lever for promoting equity in the state of Massachusetts. The Student Opportunity Act is generating a lot of attention from people of all different levels of the education system, especially those who stand to gain the most. However, there is no information yet on how the SOA will actually create a more equitable funding system in practice, and if this money will indeed promote educational change for the better. As previously stated, past well-intentioned equity policies often resulted in little to no change, and some can even hinder the process as much or more than they help it. So, understanding how policy works and its potential pitfalls is essential when trying to maximize the effectiveness of school funding policies such as the SOA.

I found that there are two incredibly important factors when understanding in what ways equity policy is indeed a weak lever for implementing equitable change: 1) differing theories of change throughout stakeholder groups and 2) other deep-rooted and fundamental systemic issues throughout the education sector and other policies and structures as a whole. Previously, I stated that there are two main theories as to *why* this is: 1) cognitive dissonance and internal conflicts of beliefs within people in different levels of the system, both personal and in groups, and 2) the conflict between stakeholder groups on power and social capital. However, through my research it became clear that although the ability of stakeholder groups to influence policy due to social capital although a key point when understanding why policy continues to fall short of expectations, cognitive dissonance and internal feelings are much more of a root cause of the problem even though both are essential to understand the shortcomings of educational policy

creation and implementation. However, instead of power and social capital playing as much of a role as previously thought, a new finding emerged that tensions between centralization and local control resulted in more of a hindrance to policy than social capital and power.

First, I will discuss how the inequality in the state is not solely an educational problem, and that there are external inequalities within other realms of education as well as other larger systemic problems throughout all social programs that continue to hinder the overall goal of equality. Second, I will discuss the differing theories of change held by each stakeholder group (policymakers, local leaders, and state advocates), a key reason that is producing tensions between different levels of the education system. Third, I will discuss that cognitive dissonance and internal conflicts between stakeholder groups are another form of friction between groups. Last, I will discuss the still important topic of power and social capital and how it plays its own role, but explain that the findings did not show as much power and social capital playing a role as the three aforementioned points. I will then explain the tension that arose in place of power and social capital, which was the difficulties of stakeholder groups to balance the ideologies of centralization versus local control.

### **The Whole System is “Rigged”**

All interviewees discussed that educational funding is just one small part of a much larger puzzle of systematic inequality. Not only are there significant challenges behind designing and implementing equitable funding policy in an education system that is already fundamentally skewed towards those with the most money, but there are also larger equality issues throughout our society that simply looking at educational inequality would miss the larger picture of our

society. All interviewees commented on the fact that the current Chapter 70 policy is outdated, and even though it was once considered progressive in 1993, it has failed to keep up with the way our society has progressed. Interviewees noted that the policy is inherently difficult to understand, and that even if it was perfectly written it would not touch other larger inequalities in our education system as well as other institutions such as healthcare. Looking to the future, the SOA attempts to create educational equity within the state of Massachusetts, but the policy itself will only address a fraction of the issue if it is the sole action taken by policymakers.

All ten interviewees noted that the Chapter 70 funding program was outdated, although there were varying levels of urgency and feelings on the amount by which the policy needed to change. The language of criticism varied significantly from simply stating that the formula “definitely needed tweaks” to extreme language such as “wholly inadequate,” but people referred to diverse reasons as to why this was the case. First, policymakers noted two important cases: 1) that formulas require constant upkeep and 2) that many other stakeholder groups to this day simply do not understand how the formula itself works.

Sophia noted that for the first 10 years after 1993 Chapter 70 was actually quite progressive, perhaps the most progressive funding formula in the entire country at the time. However, the stagnant policy was unable to keep up with the ever-changing world. Aspects including but not limited to inflation, healthcare costs, and increased special education students and English language learners increased the cost of education without affecting the funding that schools were receiving, resulting in an under-funded school system over the years. Additionally, Sarah states that our society as a whole has changed. She says, “The goal posts of education have moved. In 1993 the Education Reform Act was passed to make sure kids graduated from high

school. Well, we now know that at least some postsecondary participation in credentialing is really necessary to be an active participant in the economy.” Due to all of these factors and more, the formula that was once considered progressive has since become outdated. Many interviewees of all stakeholder groups noted that this is not the fault of Chapter 70 in particular, mainly just that policies address a point in time without the knowledge of how it will impact the future. Formulas need consistent upkeep, and although Chapter 70 seemed to be adequate in 1993 many said that in current times it is simply not sufficient.

Many policymakers also noted that other stakeholder groups, especially local leaders, have not ever understood how the policy worked. Many people working in education in the past did not have to know exactly how the policy worked because they were receiving adequate funding. But, because the policy is no longer keeping up with the reality of many people, many people have recently begun to question it. Penny says that she spends a significant amount of her time conversing with local leaders about why they receive the funding that they do, because even though they operate in positions of power in their districts they do not understand the way the funding system functions. Additionally, the formula itself is purposefully set up to be complicated in order to address as many factors as possible, however this results in an unclear and confusing formula. Phoebe says, “The formula is so difficult to comprehend and so opaque, and if people don't understand it, then how can you possibly offer a fix?” Because of problems like this, tensions arise between stakeholder groups simply because people in positions of power do not understand why they receive the amount of money that they do.

Interviewees stated that the formula fails to address equity problems within individual schools, which further perpetuates societal injustices within our culture. Lucy states in her school



that some demographic populations are doing significantly worse than others. She says, “We aren't outside of any of our subgroup ranges yet, but our group that we are worried about because it is getting very, very close is our Latino male. So those students are being over-identified for special education services. Those students are being disciplined at a higher rate, so on and so forth.” Even though Lucy’s school is considered a high-income school district, historically disadvantaged populations continue to face inequity within their own school district. State advocates such as Susan state that they have to do briefings at different times because otherwise parents who work full-time are unable to participate in the dialogue of the school. Even though the formula is able to address the inequity of funding, it continues to be unable to address other more subtle inequities that may initially be unrecognized such as susceptible demographics like parents who work full-time or with less flexible hours. These groups of people oftentimes tend to be historically disadvantaged populations, so measures that fail to address these other inequalities are further perpetuating the fundamentally flawed system that we have in place, even if new policy attempts to create more equitable changes.

Additionally, simply addressing the Chapter 70 formula as the sole problem fails to address the other fundamental problems within our education system. Susan states that “this is a universal flaw in American education in general, that the fact that education is funded by local property taxes, it’s built-in inequity in the system at its foundation.” She believes that it is a widespread flaw that education is funded by local property taxes, because this essentially bakes-in the injustice in the system into the policy itself. This means that even if the formula is adjusted to further promote equity, it is still based on fundamentally unequal variables.

Other stakeholder groups such as policymakers felt that there were additional forms of the education system to blame. One policymaker noted that they could produce a theoretically perfect piece of legislation but if all stakeholder groups are not working to implement it, the policy has no impact. Stakeholder groups are definitely not on the same team in all cases, and one policymaker even stated that some groups actively made it their goal to work around the legislature. When stakeholder groups fail to work with each other, and at times even actively work against each other, it is no secret why our education system seems to be failing in places. Chapter 70 fails in its goal to compensate for the inequities of local-based funding, but there continue to be overall limitations of funding formulas to improve equity.

Many interviewees also mention that it is important to look not just at our education system, but at our social systems as a whole. Lucy says, “If we're going to talk about equity then we need to also include things around health care, nutrition, opportunities for our kids to work so they can make money, but not necessarily have to make money, if you will. So if I were in charge I would change the system. And I don't know how, but I would definitely change it. The system is rigged in every which way.” Many of these inequities are simply not addressed in educational policy, but Lucy believes highlights in her interview that this is a mistake. She believes that educational policies are able to make a difference, but without changing our system as a whole and addressing fundamental inequalities our society will never be truly equal. Eight out of the ten interviewees also expressed similar sentiment in their interviews. Laura also says, “There is a larger social context to equity that we're often missing and it just isn't addressed by schools. What are we doing for housing? What are we doing for employment? What are we doing on tax laws which have gone in the opposite directions? There are systems in place that

perpetuate inequality and part of our issue is that schools can't address it alone and are at the same time very subject to the inequities that are present in our society.” There are simply too many factions in our society today to believe that one piece of policy will create even a dent in the inequalities that have been baked into our system.

Lastly, there are also additional inequities occurring on a student-to-student basis, and even if school funding was exactly the same across the state parents would be able to find a way for their kids to receive additional resources. For example, Sarah says that even if a funding magically became equal across district lines, “a family could then say well that's wonderful but I want my child to go to a summer camp or do math tutoring or have enrichment programs where they learn arts and music. And if they're going to do that in addition to the school and the funding formula can't make up for that.” Even if this school funding is equalized, richer and historically advantaged families will still be able to spend their money and use their resources and connections to give their kids an advantage. There is no particular way that policy is able to ultimately redress the fundamental inequalities that are prevalent and growing in our society.

Because of state-wide problems such as these as well as federal and even global factors, policies can actually hinder more than help. Lisa talks significantly about other socioeconomic factors that contribute to policy failing to be a powerful catalyst for equality in the state of Massachusetts. Lisa says, “So it's kind of like a furious coalescence of a whole lot of different things coming together at the same time to really have a hugely negative impact...and there is a systemic bias that negatively impacted a handful of urban districts.” Later, she points to pre-college opportunities, access to internships, and standardized test study-prep as main points of inequity within the system. Even though all ten interviewees agreed that policymakers are

truly trying to do what is best for the state, this “furious coalescence” of ill-timed events can result in well-intended and even possibly well-written policy hurting more than it is helping. While state-level policymakers perceive themselves as having made significant efforts to create meaningful changes to educational policy within the recent years with the Student Opportunity Act, local leaders and state advocates believe that this effort has not gone far enough. However, one thing that remains a common thread across all participants is that even if school funding is equalized, without changing our culture and rules as a whole one piece of educational legislature does not change the fabric of our society.

### **Theories of Change**

Different stakeholder groups often expressed extremely different theories of how to create meaningful educational change in the state of Massachusetts. Policymakers tended to believe in a more gradual theory of change, which is full of group work and focusing on what can actually pass. State advocates, on the other hand, saw their positions as catalysts of change, pressuring policymakers to create change when they deemed necessary. Lastly, local leaders such as principals and superintendents had a much more district-first perspective, seeing the most positive change in what would most benefit their own districts and school systems. Due to these different understandings of policy and different ultimate goals for creating change, it is evident that it is much more difficult to create and implement meaningful educational equity policy initiatives.

All three policymakers tended to believe that change is an incremental and iterative process, full of committees and concessions. Paula states, “A legislative body is not the work of

one person. So a lot of work goes into the bills that are filed by surveying different people and they are advocated for by others.” This shows that by this incremental theory of change, policy is very much a team effort. It is not just the work of one person or many like-minded people, it is all people advocating for what they believe is best for their own constituents. Phoebe called this process “a mosaic,” because it requires a mixing of different people and ideas to result in the final outcome.

State advocates, on the other hand, had a very different theory of change. Susan talks about her organization’s role as making it clear what the issues and inadequacies of the Massachusetts funding formula are to ensure that policymakers continue to take new policy seriously. Additionally, even though the Student Opportunity Act is quite new, there are still parts by which members of stakeholder groups have mentioned could be aspects to think about for the future. Penny states that even though the bill did seem to make funding much more equitable from the state side, the local side of the funding was relatively untouched. She says, “There's a lot of room for growth about how we think about and how we determine local ability to pay towards education. And whether or not the state funding system really takes advantage of the breadth of resources that some districts have that aren't fully accounted for in the funding formula.” This is perhaps a way to minimize large funding gaps between the highest and lowest income school districts.

However, others chose different means to advocate for and catalyze change. Sarah writes that her organization does not advocate and aims to take structured approaches to issues to build trust with policymakers. She says, “I get asked a lot how do we actually get people to listen to us and you know I often say that it's not one strategy. It's a cultivated relationship over time where

people trust you and therefore they want to talk to you. And that sort of is underlying all this. The bottom line is we target decision makers.” State advocates’ goals are to target decision makers, cultivate meaningful relationships with them (regardless of the means of building pressure versus creating solid foundations of trust), and use those relationships to create meaningful change by policy.

Local leaders have the needs of their own communities on the forefront of their minds. For example, Lily’s district, a low income school district, had a lot to stand to gain by the Student Opportunity Act. Because of this, Lily said, “We were very much in the know of what was going on. I can't speak for every other urban city, but I know a lot of other urban principals that we spoke to really seemed to be in the know because we knew at the end of the day our kids were going to benefit from this. So we really kind of rallied around it.” She noted that her school is constantly understaffed and feels that this policy will be a huge help to her school district and others like it, while members of higher income school districts seem to be paying significantly less attention to the matter.

### **Cognitive Dissonance & Internal Tensions**

It is clear that cognitive dissonance and internal conflicts are forms of tension for people working in the education system. Policymakers balance their own personal beliefs with what they believe will get enough votes to pass and be implemented. This creates high levels of internal tensions because they are forced to juggle between their own ideology around educational funding with what they believe is actually possible given the current atmosphere that they are given. Additionally, local leaders such as principals and superintendents, especially in wealthier districts, must weigh greater educational equity with what is best for their own

districts. Local leaders who have dedicated their lives towards education are forced to deal with what is best for the state and what is best for their district. These two values are oftentimes opposing, producing high levels of cognitive dissonance.

Policymakers in this study were asked a series of questions to address their own internal tensions, and it is clear that those are quite present when working on educational policy regarding balancing what policymakers would like to do versus what they believe is likely to pass. Paula, a policymaker from a wealthier district in Massachusetts, says, “every piece of legislation is a result of building consensus around what will get the votes.” This results in tensions between what policymakers would like to do and what they believe is actually possible to pass. Paula notes that if the piece of legislation was up to her, she would make a few changes to make it more equitable. She remarks that she wishes the implementation phase was shorter in order to create a meaningful difference sooner as well as increase accountability measures. However, she was happy with the piece of legislation as it was because even though it did not comprise everything she wanted, it was good enough to hopefully create change. Sophia, a state advocate, notices just this when talking about policymakers, saying, “I think that they are some really wonderful people trying to do some really wonderful work there, but I don't think it always translates. And I think that as a bureaucracy, it gets in the way of itself some time. So I think that's problematic.” She talks about noticing that policymakers oftentimes are not able to get everything that they wish to get done in policy, and that the system itself tends to “get in the way of itself.” She believes that policymakers truly are attempting to create meaningful change, but due to the tensions between pragmatism and true equity policy oftentimes falls short of its potential. Policymakers are tasked with the difficult job of balancing what they want and what

they believe is equitable and what they believe will get the votes and make their constituents happy.

This tension and active balancing between personal pragmatism and ideological beliefs is felt by local leaders, such as superintendents and principals, as well. Local leaders also have to balance between trying to make their school district as well-performing as possible while also acknowledging and advocating for educational equity and the greater good. Penny, a policymaker, comments on her experience with local leaders, stating that there is disappointment for school districts that don't stand to gain as much. Some districts are even being asked to contribute more via local contributions to their school district, putting a possible strain on the families in their communities. Although they understand the reasoning and justification of the policy making, it does not make the disappointment less difficult to handle. Lucy, a principal at a high local contribution school, says simultaneously that she believes that every student in Massachusetts deserves to have a first-class education but also that she is disappointed with the results of the Student Opportunity Act for her district. She says, "We are going to actually be hurt by this. When they talked about the new funding mechanisms, we had hoped to garner between a million to two million dollars in support. Instead, from the new funding we will see an increase of one hundred thousand dollars... We weren't expecting that. I think we were expecting that we were going to gain some traction with some of the things that we wanted to do." This exemplifies the reality of the aforementioned tensions that local leaders must deal with. Even though Lucy believes in educational equity throughout the state, she also is deeply disappointed by the lack of additional funding to her own district. This lower funding produces internal tensions, resulting in significant cognitive dissonance in local leaders required to make decisions.



This sentiment is shared not just at the principal's level but at the superintendent's level as well. Laura, the superintendent of another high-income school district, says, "There's a lot of concerns that in essence the state has and should have funded the urban districts, but they didn't do much for the rest of us. So our cities or towns still have to contribute a much more significant portion. And there was not much relief." This strong sense of disappointment is palpable because even though these schools are considered higher-income, these local leaders know that they could have done more with the money for their own kids. This cognitive dissonance is very severe for some local leaders, however it seems that the most severe internal tensions are from high-income school districts. This could be due to the fact that their ideologies more directly oppose their own local priorities. Sarah, a state advocate at a Massachusetts nonprofit, says that since the vast majority of the money is going to just a small number of selected communities, that many local leaders have reached out to them for support. She says, "They simply say we're really stretched as well. We're really struggling to go on with our amount of funding and we're not getting anything like this. And they didn't really realize that until the bill was final." These leaders who believed that they would have gotten more money found out that they might even be receiving less money than previously, and some are realizing that they have been much more negatively affected by the policy than they thought.

### **Centralization versus Local Control**

Most interviewees did not talk about explicit power and social capital playing a significant role in their decision making processes and therefore were not shown to be as strong reasons why policy continues to be a weak lever to promote equitable change. Instead, all interviewees expressed much more tension about ideologically balancing between centralization

and local control. Oftentimes these levels of the system fail to communicate, resulting in conflicting powers. For example, policymakers and state-level advocates strongly believed in stronger accountability measures, while local leaders felt that this would be difficult to implement on the ground.

Four out of the six policymakers and state advocates remarked that they believed that stronger accountability measures should be put in place, and they believed that what they do now is relatively hands-off. Phoebe says, “We have a very local control system. We have school committees and superintendents at the local level. Everyone's doing what they need to do. To that extent, I think you just need to let it happen and let the department kind of take care of that department and provide the necessary leadership. And then we provide more to these schools and school districts that are underperforming. I think our role should be to help them perform better, whether that's providing leadership skills or, you know, obviously we're a system with money. But part of that's just tools so that they can help their kids succeed.” Her sentiment is shared by many other state-level leaders, who believe that they are being hands-off and allowing themselves to give school leaders more power. They see themselves as a support tool and as people to step in when things go wrong.

This is how many state advocates feel as well. Sarah comments on the dichotomy of the necessity of resources with the need of structure, saying, “On the one hand, the need for these new resources and some of these communities are being chronically underfunded. And so we're sort of making up for lost time. At the same time, you want to make sure that it is well spent and it doesn't really just become dollars that are being used to do the same thing again, that we know didn't work.” Surely, some level of accountability measures were agreed by interviewees to be

necessary to ensure the money is not being wasted. Sophia says, “Everybody who's getting the money is supposed to actually have a pretty detailed plan on how they're spending the money.” This alone does not seem problematic, because the SOA is adding nearly \$1.3 billion into the system and state leaders and advocates want to make sure the money is well spent. However, even well-performing school districts see these ever-growing accountability measures and centralization imposed by the state government as a somewhat looming presence that is forcing requirements on them that they do not believe they need.

Local leaders feel constrained by the accountability measures that are already in place. Lily says, “It’s a hard job. There are a lot of demands from many different angles. And everybody wants their demands met first. You have to find a way to balance and triage and it's not easy.” This level of balancing can be exhausting for local leaders. Districts with historically disadvantaged students that need the most effort by administrators may be the most vulnerable even though they’re the exact schools that educational equity policy is aiming to help. Particularly in urban districts, many local leaders expressed concern that people can often be completely focused on the accountability system to avoid state takeovers, which may not be what is best for the students in that district. Lisa said in her district that even though they don’t have quite as much oversight as some other urban counterparts, “We still have to know annual audits and having to track certain data and MCAS and evaluation systems, so that all of those pieces that we're required to meet state guidelines in order to receive favorable ratings from the state.” This is undoubtedly a large responsibility for the already busy school principals and superintendents to have, and policymakers have talked about the recent pushback by local leaders.

Many school principals and superintendents were frustrated by the increased accountability measures presented by the Student Opportunity Act, especially in regards to the unequal funding increases. Lucy commented that even though her school has nearly no additional funding due to the SOA, her school district is still required to implement new school and district improvement plans, resulting in significantly more work even though her school is currently doing well and is not receiving substantial funding. Although Lucy has never complained to her superiors, Sophia says that she has heard many people who have voiced their concern of these new measures to her. She says, “We ended up with a lot of pushback from districts when the state telling them how to spend and what to do. But my biggest concern is to plow all of this money into the system and we'll find that it ends up going to a variety of things that don't actually ever manage to move the needle, especially those that are most in need of getting support.” Paula worries that school districts will spend money without telling policymakers exactly how they are spending it, possibly resulting in less returns on the monetary equity investments that policymakers like Paula worked hard to get passed. This tension between the centralization and local control in two counteracting stakeholder groups that impact the implementation of equitable school funding policy.

Even though wealthier communities are not receiving as much additional state funding as they would have liked, they still have the ability due to their acquired social and economic capital to add more to their required minimum contributions. This highlights the systemic inequality dynamics and reiterates that there are significant challenges with a system that is fundamentally rigged for and against certain population demographics. Paula writes, “The foundation budget formula establishes a minimum [local contribution] that needs to be spent per

student. But when that minimum didn't cover everything that higher income school districts needed, these districts had the capacity to augment that. The poorer communities didn't." One way that the districts are able to do this is by raising taxes. Laura states that poorer communities have little discretion to tax people more while wealthier communities have the ability to tax households at a higher rate. She says, "So there are many ways that wealthier communities could in essence create a higher funded system locally as a result. There is nothing to discourage that. And in fact, I think that was still some of the local control embedded in our funding design. But it did put the poorer districts at significant compromise compared to the wealthier districts." Laura is correct that there is nothing to discourage local communities to put more funding into their own school district, however, this results in an unjust education system. Even though power and social capital are undoubtedly playing a role in this tension, it is a dichotomy mainly between two opposing ideologies: local control and centralization.

Additionally, Lucy remarks that this augmentation of the budget is happening throughout students' entire school career, resulting in an even larger funding gap than one may think. She says, "If you look at it over their entire high school or their entire school career, it's thousands and probably tens of thousands of dollars for each child that wasn't spent on their education." Lucy also says that all schools want what is best for their kids, and if lower-income school districts could spend more money on their kids that they would. However, even if the desire is the same, the school districts have different abilities to do so based on the significantly varied resources. Wealthier school districts also have other advantages in order to continue to have the upper-hand. Lucy states that teachers in her school district make significantly more per year than they would even just the next town over from them. This means that newer and less qualified

teachers may go to the under-funded schools and more highly-qualified teachers would be drawn to and accepted to teach at the higher-income school district. In Lucy's case, her school would not personally benefit from a centralized system because she might lose her higher quality teachers to neighboring schools. The increased centralization measures imposed by the state such as the Student Opportunity Act, even though he agrees with them, will ultimately not end up helping her school nearly as much as she was hoping.

High income school districts are still able to use their social capital in a variety of ways, though, even if it is not the most recurring example of why educational policy is a weak lever for change. Higher income school districts tend to often be smaller and more suburban, making local control much easier than in larger and more urban communities. Laura says, "In a district of our size with 6,000 students and 10 schools it's pretty easy to have relationships with the community and teachers and union and with your parent organizations." This shows another advantage of the wealthier suburban town. It is much easier to be in constant contact with other leaders in the district when the district is smaller, putting urban schools at yet another disadvantage. Even though this does touch on power and social capital, the vast majority of the conflict still comes from local leaders believing in more local power and policymakers and state advocates believing in a more centralized system. These four findings combined result in a clearer cross-sectional view of the ways in which policy continues to fall short of its intentions to produce a more equitable education system in the state of Massachusetts.

## Discussion & Conclusion

### Summary of Key Findings

In summary, this research found four key points regarding how and why education policy funding continues to be a weak lever to promote educational equity in the state of Massachusetts; two focusing on *how* this is the case and two focusing on *why*. The first point is that with a system that is rigged in every which way and in dire need of change, it is not simply enough to adjust educational funding policy and expect a more equitable system as a whole. There are inequalities baked into the fabric of our current society, including healthcare, job opportunities, and nutrition. In the education system there are large differences between the resources of different school districts, and even within one school certain demographics have more advantages than others. Even though equity policies such as Chapter 70 and the Student Opportunity Act are a tool to make schools more equitable, it alone is too small of a change in to create noticeable change throughout time in reality, creating yet another challenge for current funding policy.

The second, that differing theories of change throughout stakeholder groups produce difficulties promoting change in practice. Policymakers believe in an incremental and iterative approach, focusing on what can get the votes over what may cause the most change. State advocates see themselves as catalysts which promote the most widespread change as possible and provide pressure to policymakers. Local leaders seek to promote change in their own neighborhoods, even if their ideologies on educational equity might be different. Combined, these differing theories of change create challenges for funding policy. Those writing the policy are not the same people as those implementing the policy on the ground, and these different

theories of change between people in different levels of the education system can produce tensions between the stakeholder groups that can hinder the intentions of the policy in practice.

The third, pivoting towards *why* education funding policy continues to act as a weak lever to promote change, is that internal conflicts and cognitive dissonance occur between people in different levels of the education system and that these conflicts result in policy being a poor mechanism for equitable change in the state of Massachusetts. Policymakers must balance what they believe is best for the state with what their constituents want, and these desires are oftentimes opposing. This conflict results in a breach of ideology or risking re-election. Other stakeholder groups such as local leaders of wealthier districts balance desiring educational equity as a whole and wanting the most funding for the students in their own districts. Their job is to do right by their students even if their beliefs on education may combat this notion.

Lastly, that power and social capital are still important to consider, but they may not be as important as we previously thought when considering why policy is in fact such a weak lever for change. Instead, it is much more about ideologically balancing between centralization and local control. Policymakers and state advocates believe strongly in more centralization measures such as strong accountability of school districts to ensure they are spending their money in the best ways possible. However, local leaders in general throughout socioeconomic levels already feel constrained by the current amount of accountability measures and do not want more measures to be put in place.



## **Connecting to Past Research**

Prior research offered two ways of thinking in order to further understand why policy making and implementation is indeed a weak lever for promoting equitable change. One of these theories is that policy fails to properly account for the balancing of power and social capital of multiple stakeholder groups. Scholars such as Mintrom write that state legislators tend to avoid divisive policy options unless they believe that a large number of their own constituents are to benefit or that the losses are minimal throughout the group (1993), and the balancing of stakeholder power as well as trying to promote their own political agenda may get in the way of the formation of equitable educational funding policy. However, this research did not find this theory to be nearly as much the case. Even though there were instances of power and social capital playing a role in decision making, there were other theories that proved to be more validated in this research.

There could be many reasons as to why social capital was not uncovered as a key way that policy is hindered from promoting equity. It could be that social capital indeed does not play as much of a role as we had previously thought; there could be checks in the policy process that may prevent people from using their social capital to their significant advantage. Or, social capital could indeed play an important role, however the effects did not come through in this particular study. Perhaps other stakeholder groups who were not interviewed in this study, such as parents, hold the key to how social capital acts in hindering equitable change through policy. Or, perhaps the questions that were asked of interviewees failed to uncover exactly how social capital plays a role. I suggest future researchers look into these questions regarding social capital to address whether indeed is not as important as we previously thought when understanding the

implementation of policy or if the results were due to the specific parameters of this particular study.

Another previously stated theory was that cognitive dissonance and internal tensions of stakeholder groups is a key reason that policy is a weak lever when it comes to creating and implementing equitable change in education. Springer, Houck, and Guthrie (2015) write about a long legacy of political motivations for funding in regards to policymakers, suggesting that they are constantly balancing between the conflicting ideologies of equity, efficiency, and liberty. This research found that cognitive dissonance does in fact affect the ideologies of stakeholder groups, especially policymakers and local leaders. These changed ideologies of policymakers changing their viewpoints to get votes and local leaders to do what is best for their own districts and schools affects decision-making and is one reason that policy can be a weak lever for promoting equitable change.

Two other findings also emerged that were not as explicitly stated in this context in past research. These two findings are 1) the differing theories of change and 2) the tensions between centralization and local control that make for policy consistently coming up short when attempting to promote equity. The challenges and tensions of local control are a key issue in education policy generally, and it is the issue at the root of the unequal local contributions in the Chapter 70 policy. Wells & Oakes write, “decentralization and greater local control may have to be partly sacrificed to the need for district, state, or federal intervention on behalf of students who are denied access to high-status curricula and opportunities to learn in their schools” (1996, p. 142). Although this was previously known that school districts must balance between local control and centralization, previous studies have shown much of the tensions occur due to the

social capital of parents. These two findings shine more light on how funding policy is failing to promote equity. However, this research found that these tensions emerge even without talking to parents at all levels of the education system, not just locally. In the future, it would be helpful for researchers to dig deeper into these issues to find out why exactly these differing theories of change are producing inadequate funding policy and implementation.

### **Implications & Conclusions**

Even though I believe that this theoretical framework succeeds at developing a thorough cross-sectional analysis of the pitfalls of equitable funding policy, there are of course always weaknesses and ways to improve in the future. This framework does not address many incredibly important stakeholder groups when considering the implementation of equity policy, such as teachers and parents. Additionally, interviews were only conducted with local leaders in high and low local contribution school districts, with no representation from middle-income school districts. With more time, I would carry out interviews with parents and teachers, as well as more stakeholder groups in a variety of income levels in order to more deeply understand the complex web of connections that is our education system.

Based on these findings, I would suggest to these three stakeholder groups of policymakers, state advocates, and local leaders that they recognize the key positions that they are in, as well as acknowledge when they feel that they are experiencing cognitive dissonance. Although it is hard to do, looking inward and realizing when one's own personal or local interests are not aligned with what is good for the greater good is when a change of beliefs may happen. Recognizing that these feelings exist and realizing that the cognitive dissonance between

beliefs could change one's ideology is the first step to preventing one's ideology change in the first place. It is also very helpful for all stakeholder groups to be aware of and understand the tensions that other stakeholder groups are experiencing and thinking about. Perhaps after understanding this research, members of the education system will be more aware of the ways in which they may be contributing to the pressure on other stakeholder groups and perhaps hindering the process towards equity in that way as well.

Now is more important than ever to investigate how we are implementing our educational equity funding. This research also points to many non-policy solutions such as heightening public awareness of the importance of education equity as well as the education funding system as a whole. Even though this study has determined that policy is a weak lever for promoting equitable change in Massachusetts, that does not mean that this goal is not possible for policy in the future. Additionally, that does not mean that policy should quit attempting to achieve equity whatsoever; it is quite the contrary. Altogether, the future is hopeful for educational policy, especially policy that is mindful of the strengths and shortcomings of policy as a lever to create change. Funding policy is still an important mechanism to promote widespread change, but the knowledge of how policy can come up short in a variety of ways must be taken into account to produce well-informed policy that will produce the best possible results. Additionally, supplemental efforts could go a long way when supporting these policy efforts, such as informing the public more about how these policies were put into place and why educational equity benefits the entire population, even those that are already economically advantaged.

The Student Opportunity Act has provided to us a rare opportunity to begin the process of equitable change in the state of Massachusetts for the first time in almost thirty years, but it is up

to the individuals throughout all levels of the education sector to make sure that these dreams become realized. All interviewees stated that they were proud of the SOA for making the issue known and attempting to tackle it head-on, but that there will be more to do in the future. As previously stated, funding formulas can quickly become outdated, they need constant upkeep, and they are stagnant solutions to an ever-changing world. They do not address other educational issues outside of the scope of the policy nor do they address our society as a whole. However, we need to start somewhere and build a foundation for policies to come. The Student Opportunity Act targets high-need populations in order to improve everyone, because everyone benefits in a world where everyone succeeds in their education.

### Appendix A: Interview Protocol Chart

	<b>Local Leaders</b>	<b>Policymakers</b>	<b>State Advocates</b>
<b>Beliefs: liberty/equality</b>			
<b>Equity-Equity ideal world</b>	If you could decide how much all schools should be funded, would you give them all the same amount of funding or different amounts? Could you explain why you chose what you did?	If you could decide how much all schools should be funded, would you give them all the same amount of funding or different amounts? Could you explain why you chose what you did?	If you could decide how much all schools should be funded, would you give them all the same amount of funding or different amounts? Could you explain why you chose what you did?
<b>Equity vs Liberty (autonomy) ideal world</b>	Imagine if your school were to be given a grant for a significant amount of money. Just off the top of your head, how would you spend it? What would be your top priorities? Do you think that parents would have the same priorities as you?		
<b>Influence/Power</b>			
<b>Who they talk to or listen to</b>	What other people, especially within different levels of the system, are you in the most regular contact with?  How regularly do you talk to larger policymakers on the state level? Have you ever, or is it more regular contact?	What other people, especially within different levels of the system, are you in the most regular contact with?	What other people, especially within different levels of the system, are you in the most regular contact with?

<b>Times they've influenced a decision or had a decision influenced</b>	Can you think of a time where you were able to lobby with other school administrators or even larger policymakers to create a change in your school?	Is there a time that you are most proud of or that stands out to you where you were able to lobby for positive change whether that be with other policymakers, with schools, or someone else?	Can you talk to me a little bit in the ways in which you and your organization has been able to lobby with policymakers or others to create a positive change in Massachusetts schools?
<b>Perception of communication /agreement with others</b>	How would you describe your relationship with your school's parents? Superintendent? State policymakers? How would you describe the groups' reliability, expertise, and follow-through?	How would you describe your relationship with parents of your schools? School principals? Superintendents? How would you describe the groups' involvement, reliability, expertise, and follow-through?	How would you describe your relationship with parents of schools? School principals? Superintendents? How would you describe the groups' involvement, reliability, expertise, and follow-through?
<b>Perception of own influence/power</b>	How much autonomy do you have as an administrator? Do you feel pressure from state-level enforcement or in general do they let you do your own thing?	How do you see your role in managing school districts in the state, and what are your priorities when managing local leadership?	How do you see the role of your organization in influencing the education of Massachusetts school children? Have you felt like your organization has regularly created meaningful change, have there been setbacks you've had to deal with, or both?
<b>Chapter 70, current &amp; future funding</b>			
<b>Perception of current funding allocation</b>	Do you agree with the allocation of funds, both state-wide and within your school? Are there ways in which you'd like it to change or do you feel that the funding is sufficient?	How do you see the state of Chapter 70 funding in Mass, specifically the ways in which the current funding is allocated? Do you think that the current system is adequate or are there ways in which you'd like to see it change? If yes, what ways?	How do you see the state of Chapter 70 funding in Mass, specifically the ways in which the current funding is allocated? Do you think that the current system is adequate or are there ways in which you'd like to see it change? If yes, what ways?

<p><b>New funding &amp; possible changes</b></p>	<p>The Massachusetts Senate passed the Student Opportunity Act in September of 2019. This is supposed to drastically increase school funding state-wide, but required local contributions are also expected to grow. Can you talk to me in the ways in which you're expecting it to affect your school, if any?</p>	<p>The Massachusetts Senate passed the Student Opportunity Act in September of 2019. This is supposed to drastically increase school funding state-wide, but required local contributions are also expected to grow. Can you talk to me a little about the ways the new Student Opportunity Act may have an impact on the current Chapter 70 funding policy that we have today?</p>	<p>The Massachusetts Senate passed the Student Opportunity Act in September of 2019. This is supposed to drastically increase school funding state-wide, but required local contributions are also expected to grow. Can you talk to me a little about the ways the new Student Opportunity Act may have an impact on the current Chapter 70 funding policy that we have today?</p>
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