4-2017

The Trump Effect on Federal Education Policy: How Federal Actions on the Every Student Succeeds Act Affect Schools Nationally, in Texas, and in the El Paso Region

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Policy Brief

APRIL 2017

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Policy Brief #3
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. federal government plays a critical role in promoting equal educational opportunity. In 2015, then President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (the previous version was No Child Left Behind). ESSA moves some accountability provisions down to the state level and provides flexibility for demonstrating compliance with federal spending regulations.

The Education Department (ED) is responsible for establishing guidelines and regulations for implementing ESSA through a procedure called the Rulemaking Process. ED published an initial draft of the rules in May 2016 and released its Final Regulations in November 2016, after holding multiple expert review panels and responding to over 20,000 public comments on the initial draft. The Final Regulations required districts with large achievement gaps to equalize per-student funding and address disparities in access to experienced teachers across schools.

KEY FINDINGS

- The Department of Education (ED) developed rules for implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. However, under the new administration, ED removed regulations requiring school districts with large achievement gaps to equalize funding across high- and low-poverty schools.
- Currently, one in five districts nationally allocates at least 10% more funding to their lowest-poverty schools than to their highest-poverty schools.
- A combination of district funding models based on teacher staffing ratios and the sorting of experienced teachers into lower-poverty schools creates spending gaps within districts.
- Districts with greater overall funding levels or with less student segregation are more likely to allocate their resources equitably across schools.
- The cost to equalize per-student teacher salary spending across Title I and non-Title I schools in the same district is $3.3 billion (a 2.2% increase).

However, in March 2017, congress blocked all of the rules previously established under the Obama administration. One week later, ED issued new regulations under the Trump Administration that removed rules pertaining to within-district resource allocation equity. Meanwhile, House Representative Steve King introduced a bill that would effectively repeal ESSA and create a federal voucher system. House Bill 610 received substantial opposition from educators and policymakers through social and print media. Although the bill has no real chance of passing, its content highlights the differences in priorities among federal education policy stakeholders.

This policy brief provides background on federal education policy and reports the findings of new research conducted at the Center for Education Research and Policy Studies (CERPS). The CERPS research documents for the first time the extent to which school districts allocate funding and teacher resources equitably across schools nationally, in Texas, and in the El Paso region. The study demonstrates that removal of federal regulation of school district resource allocation will have serious consequences for students, both in the state of Texas and across school districts nationwide.

The CERPS study defines three types of school-level teacher resources: (a) the amount of state and local funding for teacher salaries per student; (b) the number of teachers per student; and (c) the average percent of teachers with more than two years of experience. These data are available nationally for the first time because of a recent expansion of the Civil Rights Data Collection Project. The study explores how teacher resources are distributed across schools, and whether districts have "teacher resource gaps," or differences in average teacher resources between high- and low-poverty schools or between schools with high and low concentrations of students of color.

On average, higher-poverty schools in the U.S. receive approximately $650 per student less funding for teacher salaries, about 0.5 fewer full-time equivalent teachers for each 100 students, and have 40% more novice teachers than lower-poverty schools. In contrast, within school districts, the highest-poverty schools have more teachers per student and, as a result, receive more funding for teacher salaries per student than lower-poverty schools in the same district. However, the "teacher experience gap" persists both across and within districts. Moreover, while school districts allocate more funding to their high-poverty schools on average, one in five school districts has a large teacher salary funding gaps (i.e., allocates at least 10% more funding to their lowest-poverty schools than to their highest-poverty schools). In Texas, 16% of school districts have large teacher funding gaps and 72% of districts have teacher experience gaps across schools.

While the new administration has authority to change the regulations for implementing ESSA, the Education Department is not able to alter provisions written directly into the law. Specific statutes in the law now require states to track average teacher resources across schools and report on "teacher resource gaps," or differences between average funding for teacher salaries, teacher-student ratios, and teacher experience between high- and low-poverty schools in the same district. Data from the CERPS study come from the recently expanded Office of Civil Rights data collection project, which collected, for the first time, school-level teacher resource data nationally.

In the absence of federal regulation, states face incentives through their own accountability frameworks to improve educational environments of underserved students. The CERPS study analyzes districts that have successfully closed teacher resource gaps. The study points to three policy levers associated with more equitable within-district resource allocation. First, districts that are more adequately funded compared to otherwise similar districts in the same state or county have more equitable resource allocation and have smaller teacher experience gaps. This finding comports with the theoretical framework advanced in the study. When high-poverty urban districts receive more state and local funding, they can target resources to their highest-poverty schools without harming more advantaged schools in their district. In contrast, underfunded urban districts face little incentives to allocate resources progressively across schools since doing so would harm their more advantaged schools and make it more difficult to retain teachers in those schools.

A second policy option relates to student segregation. More segregated districts – whether by race/ethnicity or household income – have larger teacher resource gaps. Another way district leaders and state policymakers can close resource gaps within school districts is by desegregating schools. More integrated districts are less likely to have large resource gaps simply because students of various backgrounds are more evenly distributed across schools within the district. A third approach to closing teacher resource gaps would be to simply increase federal funding for Title I schools. For example, the CERPS study finds that the cost to equalize per-student teacher

salary spending across Title I schools and non-Title I schools in the same district nationally is $3.3 billion, representing a 2.2% increase in teacher salary spending in the U.S. Texas could close the within-district funding gap by allocating an additional $340 million dollars, an increase of 3.4%.

With the removal of federal regulations requiring districts to equalize resources across schools, state and district leaders will need to take action in order for students to receive equitable opportunities to learn. The responsibility for addressing resource disparities across schools thus lies with state and local education policymakers across the country including in Texas.

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Rhetorical claims of public education as the great societal equalizer stand in contrast to research documenting unequal funding and inequitable access to experienced, high-quality educators across student race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status.[i] Because teachers are typically paid according to a district-level salary schedule, unequal funding within school districts is directly linked to the inequitable distribution of teacher experience across schools. The U.S. Education Department (ED) has used two approaches to place more experienced educators in high-poverty, Title I schools, thereby narrowing the "teacher experience gap." As part of the implementation process for the recently enacted Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), ED established new regulations that would require lower-performing districts to allocate equal teacher salary funding in high- and low-poverty schools. Additionally, a federal program, State Plans to Ensure Equitable Access to Excellent Educators, requires state education agencies to measure students' access to high-quality and experienced teachers and develop plans for closing within-district teacher quality gaps. In March 2017, congress blocked the proposed ESSA regulations and one week later ED released a new set of regulations that excludes requirements of equitable funding.

The purpose of this policy brief is first to provide background on recent changes to federal education policy under the Trump Administration. The brief then reports the findings of new research from the Center for Education Research and Policy Studies (CERPS) that explores the potential impact of federal education regulations on district resource allocation and students' learning environments. The analyses compare three types of school-level teacher resources – average per-student spending on teacher salaries, number of teachers per student, and the percent

of teachers in their first or second year ("novice teachers") – in high-poverty or high-minority schools other low-poverty and low-minority schools in the same district or state. The study shows that districts across the country, including in Texas, have large teacher resource gaps across schools. However, there is substantial variation in the extent to which districts allocate resources equitably. School districts that receive more funding relative to otherwise similar districts in the same state or county, and districts that are less segregated have more equitable resource allocation across schools. Federal or state policymakers aiming to narrow within-district teacher resource gaps should therefore increase funding for under resourced school districts, or look for ways to desegregate schools.

The section that follows describes recent federal actions on ESSA and other federal education policies. The subsequent section summarizes the findings of the CERPS study that demonstrate how recent federal education policy changes may affect students. The brief concludes with recommendations for federal and state education policymakers.

Federal Education Policy Under the Trump Administration

Although most education policies are governed at the state and local level, the federal government plays an important role in providing students with equitable learning opportunities. The central focus of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and its most recent reauthorization, ESSA, is to provide protections for high-need students and target federal funding to high-poverty schools and districts.[ii] In January 2017, House Representative Steve King introduced a bill that would effectively repeal ESSA and replace the law with a federal school voucher system. Although House Bill 610 has no possibility of passing, its introduction garnered substantial public attention, despite far more consequential recent federal actions on ESSA.[iii] In March 2017, congress employed the rarely used Congressional Review Act to block all

regulations for implementing ESSA previously established under the Obama Administration. One week later, ED released a new set of regulations the excludes the requirements that lower-performing districts address teacher experience gaps and equitably distribute funding across schools. The new regulations also do not explicitly require states to collect community input about the design of their accountability systems.[iv]

Over the past year following the enactment of ESSA, ED developed state and school district regulations that will govern the law's implementation through a procedure known as the Rulemaking Process. ED released an initial draft of the regulations, held multiple expert review panels, and responded to over 20,000 public comments on the initial draft regulations. A long-standing program called Title I allows districts to identify and target additional federal funding to high-poverty schools (i.e., "Title I schools"). One of the key provisions in the initial draft regulations required all school districts receiving federal funding to close teacher experience gaps and distribute teacher salary funding equitably across Title I and non-Title I schools. The purpose of this provision was to close the "comparability loophole," wherein districts have comparable staffing ratios in high- and low-poverty schools, but allocate less funding per student to high-poverty schools because teachers in those schools have less teaching experience and therefore earn lower salaries. Researchers and local district administrators argued that requiring districts to equalize funding and average teacher experience across Title I and non-Title I schools was not feasible. Stakeholders contended that districts may use forced teacher placements, which prior research suggests are ineffective, or arbitrarily districts may reassign which schools are considered Title I.[v] In response, ED reframed the policy in the final regulations so that lower-performing districts, as defined at the state level, are required to measure and take actions to close teacher experience gaps and equalize funding across schools over time.

The final regulations benefited from substantial input from local practitioners and national experts and, as the former secretary of ED John King argued, offered "a concrete step forward to help level the playing field and ensure compliance with [ESSA]".[vi] Congress's blocking of the final regulations, and the replacement regulations later released by ED under Secretary DeVos, move responsibility for ensuring that schools are equitably funded to the local level, but do not require that states seek input from teachers, parents, and other members of the local community in designing their accountability systems.[vii]

Fortunately, ED has taken steps over the past eight years to collect school-level data on a range of variables as part of its overall strategy for enforcing federal civil rights statutes. Beginning in the 2013-14 school year, the Office of Civil Rights Data Collection project expanded to include, for the first time, expenditures for teacher salaries and average teacher experience at the school level. These data allow for the first ever national analysis of within-district teacher resource gaps. A report from the Brookings Institution drawing on these data found that although funding is inequitably distributed across schools, high- and low-poverty schools in the same district actually receive approximately equal funding, on average.[viii] However, the Brookings report did not explore variation in the extent to which districts allocate resources equitably or district factors associated with more equitable resource allocation patterns.

Exploring Teacher Resource Gaps within and across School Districts

The CERPS working paper uses the Office of Civil Rights data to determine what affect removal of ESSA regulations pertaining to district resource allocation might have on schools. The first part of the analysis compares teacher resources at high- and low-poverty schools, in high- and low-minority schools, and in Title I and non-Title I schools. The analysis then identifies district-level factors associated with more equitable resource allocation across schools.

Teacher Resource Gaps

Table 1 shows selected results for the first part of the analysis. The first four rows provide information for all elementary schools nationally. Column 1 shows the percent of students at the school eligible for free or reduced price lunch (FRL, indicating that the student's household income is at or below 185% of the federal poverty income threshold). The lowest-poverty schools in the U.S., those in the top 25% of income distribution, have 17% of students eligible for FRL, whereas the highest-poverty schools have, on average, 90% FRL students.

TABLE 1

Distribution of teacher resources for the highest and lowest-poverty schools across and within school districts nationally, in Texas, and in the El Paso Region

	Percent of students eligible for FRL	Teacher salary spending per student	Students per teacher	Percent of novice teachers
	All elementary schools (47,005)			
Lowest-poverty schools nationally	17.2%	$3,688	17.7	16.3%
Highest-poverty schools nationally	89.8%	$3,030	18.8	22.6%
Lowest-poverty schools within districts	34.9%	$3,149	19.2	17.8%
Highest-poverty schools within districts	63.1%	$3,357	17.0	20.5%
	Texas elementary schools (4,122)			
Lowest-poverty schools statewide	26.8%	$3,068	16.7	15.5%
Highest-poverty schools statewide	94.2%	$2,645	19.1	20.2%
Lowest-poverty schools within districts	42.8%	$2,862	18.1	15.5%
Highest-poverty schools within districts	74.9%	$2,895	16.9	19.7%
	El Paso Region elementary schools (139)			
Lowest-poverty schools countywide	54.7%	$2,782	18.3	12.1%
Highest-poverty schools countywide	95.2%	$2,666	19.2	10.5%
Lowest-poverty schools within districts	56.2%	$2,630	19.7	10.6%
Highest-poverty schools within districts	94.2%	$2,707	18.9	10.7%

Note. Lowest- and highest-poverty schools are those in the bottom and top quartile of the percent of students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch (FRL).

The second column of Table 1 shows that the highest-poverty schools receive about $650

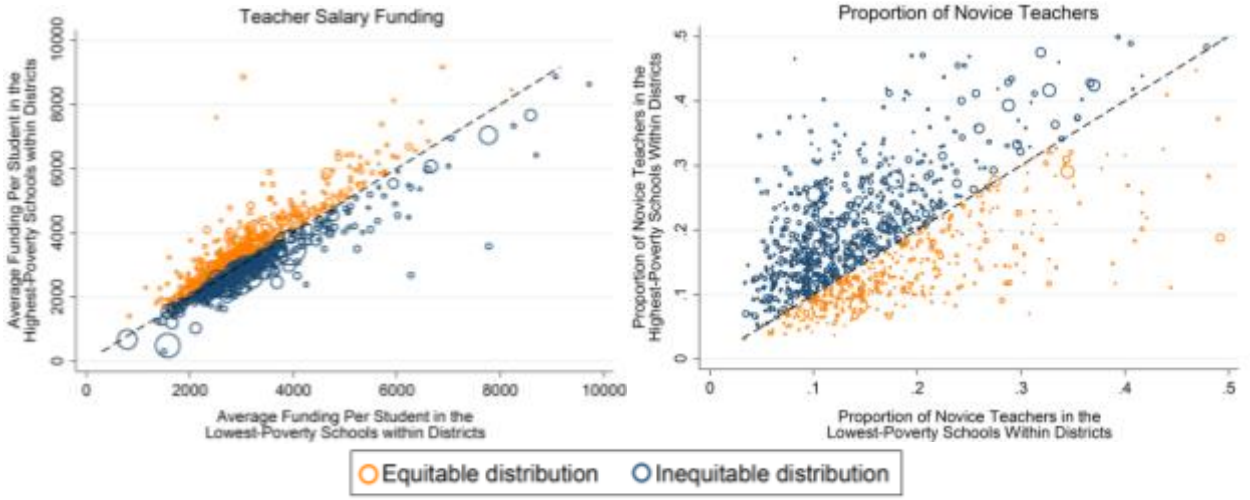
fewer dollars per student for teacher salaries, compared to the lowest-poverty schools nationally. High-poverty schools also have one additional student per teacher, on average, and 6.3 percentage points more novice teachers (implying that the proportion of novice teachers is 39% greater), compared to low-poverty schools nationally. The next two rows show the same information, but examine the lowest and highest-poverty schools within each district. The gap in the average percent of students eligible for FRL is smaller within districts than across all schools nationally because of student segregation across districts. The next three columns show that school districts actually allocate more funding and more teachers per student to their highest-poverty schools, but still have a higher percentage of novice teachers in those schools.

The next four rows show that school districts in Texas exhibit a similar pattern of resource allocation. Looking across all schools in the state, those falling in the highest quartiles of student poverty rate receive less funding, have fewer teachers, and employ more novice teachers, compared to low-poverty schools. However, within school districts, the highest-poverty schools receive more funding and have more teachers per student, on average, while teacher experience gaps persist both across and within districts. Finally, the bottom portion of Table 1 shows results for elementary schools in one region in Texas, El Paso (Region 19). On average, the six districts in El Paso that have at least four elementary schools are segregated by household income, but allocate resources equitably across schools. Like El Paso, school districts in Lubbock and Waco (Regions 17 and 12, respectively) have small teacher experience gaps, on average, but staff their high-poverty schools with more teachers per student and as a result, send more funding per pupil to those schools. Conversely, districts in Huntsville and Richardson (Regions 6 and 10) have significant spending gaps across schools, on average, because staffing ratios in high-poverty schools are not high enough to make up for teacher experience gaps.

The averages presented in Table 1 omit substantial variation across school districts. Figure 1 shows how average teacher salary funding and teacher experience are distributed across elementary schools in all districts nationally (for districts with at least four elementary schools). The y-axis shows the amount of funding (graph on the left) and the percent of novice teachers (graph on the right) allocated to elementary schools that fall in a district's top quartile of percent of students eligible for FRL, i.e., a district's highest-poverty schools. Funding and the percent of novice teachers for a district's lowest-poverty schools is measured on the x-axis. Each circle represents a school district with size proportionate to enrollment. The graphs look similar when limited to Texas. In each case, there is substantial variation in the extent to which districts allocate resources equitably. The study identified the same pattern of resource gaps between Title I and non-Title I elementary schools and between high- and low-minority elementary schools. Teacher resource gaps were slightly larger for middle schools and similar for high schools.

FIGURE 1

Average funding per student for teacher salaries and average percent of novice teachers in the highest and lower poverty elementary schools within districts (largest 1,000 districts nationally)



Note. Each circle represents a school district, with size proportionate to district enrollment. Orange circles indicate districts in which the highest-poverty elementary schools receive less funding per student for teacher salaries (left side) or have less experienced teachers (right side) than the lowest-poverty elementary schools in the same district.

Potential Causes of Teacher Resource Gaps

In the second part of the analysis, the CERPS study explores district characteristics associated with equitable resource allocation. The study advances a theoretical framework, developed in prior work by Baker and Weber, that suggests districts receiving sufficient funding are better able to target resources to their highest-poverty schools without harming more advantaged schools in their district. In contrast, underfunded districts face incentives not to allocate resources progressively across schools since doing so would harm their more advantaged schools and make it more difficult to retain teachers in those schools.

To test this theory, the CERPS study estimates regression models that predict teacher resource gaps, based on district funding levels. The models control for district characteristics that affect the cost of education (enrollment level, population density, urbanicity, and the average cost of salaries in the local labor market) as well as district student demographics and the level of student segregation. Control variables allow for comparisons between districts that have similar observable characteristics, but receive different funding levels. Additional models include state and then county fixed effects to allow for comparisons between otherwise similar districts located in the same state or county. The results of these models are shown in Table 2.

The first row of Table 2 shows the relationship between district-level funding and the within-district teacher salary spending gap. The first coefficient suggests that a $1,000 increase in district-level funding (about 19% of a standard deviation) is associated with a $17 decrease in the teacher salary spending gap between high- and low-poverty schools (4.3% of a standard deviation). The second and third columns show results for models that include state and county fixed effects, allowing for comparisons between otherwise similar districts in the same state or county, respectively. Models with county fixed effects (column 3) suggest the same increase in funding would lower teacher salary gaps within districts by $21 (3.1% of a standard deviation).

Log models show that a 10% in funding relative to other districts in the same county reduces the teacher salary gap by 0.5%. The second and third rows show that across models, the level of income-based segregation at the district is not associated with teacher salary spending gaps, whereas districts with higher student poverty rates have greater teacher salary gaps.

Panel B of Table 2 shows the same three models, this time predicting gaps in the average proportion of teachers with three or more years of experience. As before, districts receiving more state and local funding per student relative to otherwise similar districts in the same state or county have more equitable distributions of experienced teachers across schools. Results shown in Panel B suggest that a $1,000 increase in state and local funding is associated with a 0.4 percentage point reduction in the teacher experience gap when comparing districts in the same state (model 2) and a 0.6 percentage point reduction when comparing districts in the same county (model 3). Given the standard deviation of the income-based teacher experience gap of 9.2 percentage points (shown in Table 3), these coefficients equate to a reduction of 4.4% and 6.5% of a standard deviation, respectively. Log models show that a 10% increase in funding relative to other districts in the same county reduces the teacher experience gap by 1.3%. The second row of Panel B shows that more segregated districts have larger teacher experience gaps.

Finally, Panel C shows the results of models predicting gaps in the number of teachers per student. The models suggest that, when comparing districts in the same state or county, greater funding levels allow districts to staff their higher poverty schools with more teachers per student. The same $1,000 increase in state and local funding per student lowers the gap in teacher-student ratios by 0.03 teachers per 100 students (about 0.33 students per teacher) when comparing districts in the same county (column 3). Conversely, more segregated districts actually target more teachers per student to their highest-poverty schools. The third row of Panel

C shows that higher-poverty districts have larger gaps in teacher-student ratios.

TABLE 2

Regression coefficients predicting district-level teacher resource gaps across elementary schools

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Panel A: Gap in teacher salary funding per student			
State and local funding per pupil	-17.29**	-29.04***	-21.25*
	(5.78)	(6.96)	(10.07)
Segregation index	-14.87	5.47	-9.69
	(74.43)	(74.36)	(105.12)
Poverty rate	927.28***	881.37***	830.16***
	(142.49)	(144.32)	(210.44)
R-squared	0.050	0.137	0.560
Panel B: Gap in % of teachers with >2 years of experience			
State and local funding per pupil	-0.005***	-0.004*	-0.006*
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.003)
Segregation index	0.054**	0.043*	0.057*
	(0.017)	(0.018)	(0.024)
Poverty rate	-0.033	-0.023	-0.04
	(0.033)	(0.035)	(0.051)
R-squared	0.086	0.175	0.706
Panel C: Gap in number of teachers per 100 students			
State and local funding per pupil	-0.011	-0.025*	-0.030*
	(0.008)	(0.010)	(0.013)
Segregation index	-0.698***	-0.626***	-0.397**
	(0.103)	(0.105)	(0.141)
Poverty rate	1.640***	1.635***	1.076***
	(0.197)	(0.204)	(0.279)
R-squared	0.106	0.149	0.287
Districts covariates	X	X	X
State covariates	X		
State fixed effects		X	
County fixed effects			X

Note. The outcome for models in Panel A is the difference in the average per-pupil state and local spending for teacher salaries between elementary schools in the top quartile of percent of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch (FRL) within the district and elementary schools in the bottom quartile of percent FRL. Gaps are positive when high-poverty schools receive less resources per student. The outcome for Panel B is the gap in the number of teachers per 100 students between high- and low-poverty elementary schools within districts. The outcome for Panel C is the teacher experience gap between high- and low-poverty elementary schools within districts. The sample is restricted to districts with at least four elementary schools. Results are similar when based on the proportion of students of color at the school and when using alternate specification. See Knight (2016a), available at http://www.utep.edu/education/cerps/working-papers/Working%20Papers.html, for additional results.

Together the results suggest that providing districts with more overall funding allows

them to target additional resources to their highest-poverty schools. This may happen because adequately resourced districts are better equipped to retain teachers in their high-poverty schools. For example, the results show that districts receiving more funding are able to staff their high-poverty schools with relatively more teachers per student, which may create more attractive working conditions for early career teachers. As suggested above, underfunded districts may struggle to allocate resources progressively if doing so would harm working conditions in their more advantaged schools. At the same time, more economically segregated districts have larger teacher experience gaps and (perhaps in response) staff high-poverty schools with relatively more teachers per student. Results based on racial/ethnic segregation show similar patterns with respect to teacher resource gaps between high- and low-minority districts (see Knight, 2016a).[ix]

Policy Recommendations

A substantial proportion of school districts allocate resources inequitably across schools and staff their most disadvantaged schools with their least experienced educators. The findings from this study highlight three potential policy levers for addressing these disparities. First, states should consider providing categorical funding to districts for improving teacher resource gaps. Under the Obama Administration, the Education Department required all states to measure teacher resource gaps within districts and identify strategies for equitably distributing high-quality teachers across students (a federal program called, State Plans to Ensure Equitable Access to Excellent Educators). The Education Department suggested that improving school working conditions and aligning teacher incentives might help districts close teacher resource and teacher quality gaps. Many state plans, including Texas, involve targeting teacher professional development and leadership training to the most disadvantaged schools within districts. However, notably absent from this policy discussion is the underlying necessity of

adequate district funding. Prior CERPS research shows that, on average, state school finance systems allocate funding inequitably, particularly since the Great Recession.[x] State legislators must therefore do their part to provide districts with the resources necessary to implement programs that would address teacher resource and teacher quality gaps.

Efforts to increase equity in district resource allocation could also focus on desegregation. The results shown here suggest that more segregated districts – whether by race/ethnicity or household income – have larger teacher resource gaps. Thus, another way district leaders and state policymakers can close resource gaps within school districts is by desegregating schools. More integrated school districts are less likely to have large resource gaps simply because students of various backgrounds are more evenly distributed across schools.

A third policy lever for addressing teacher resource gaps is through direct federal funding to high-poverty schools. The data show that approximately 939 districts have greater teacher salary expenditures per student in non-Title I elementary schools, compared to their Title I elementary schools (46% of the 2,030 districts with at least one Title I elementary school and at least one non-Title I elementary school). A total of 7.0 million students in the U.S. attend Title I elementary, middle, or high schools in districts where non-Title I schools receive more per-pupil teacher salary funding, on average, than Title I schools at the same grade level. The total expenditure required to equalize average funding in Title I schools to that of non-Title I schools across all districts nationally is $3.3 billion (a 2.2% increase in total state and local teacher salary spending nationally). State governments could also provide direct funding to high-poverty schools. Texas could close the within-district funding gap between Title I and non-Title I schools by targeting an additional $340 million dollars, an increase of 3.4%.

Conclusion

Despite the many actions taken by Members of Congress and the Education Department under the Trump Administration, some are likely to be more impactful than others. Bills such as HB 610 often gain substantial public attention, but have very little chance of passing. In contrast, the Senate's move to block all federal regulations of the new ESSA law directly impacts schools and students. The Education Department's new regulations exclude any requirements for lower-performing districts to address funding disparities across schools. Despite years of federal efforts to resolve this policy issue, responsibility for improving equity in district resource allocation now falls on states and districts. The CERPS study highlights both the large number of districts that allocate resources inequitably and potential policy levers for addressing these disparities.

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This policy brief is the third in a quarterly series published through the Center for Education Research and Policy Studies (CERPS) at the University of Texas El Paso College of Education. For questions or comments please contact the corresponding author, David Knight at dsknight@utep.com, or visit http://www.utep.edu/education/cerps/.