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Who's Accountable? New Homeowners' (mis) Understanding of
School Funding

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Abstract

Stark school funding inequities, state budget deficits and a housing boom create a high-stakes funding environment for schools in Illinois, especially for schools “on the fringe,” where agricultural land is quickly being transformed into fields of houses. New homeowners who factor schools into their moving decision typically face neighborhood school overcrowding and increasing property taxes to build schools. The purpose of this study was to examine new homeowners’ experiences and conceptions of school funding issues due to growth. Using a grounded theory approach we used interviews, documents, and participant observation in three new subdivisions in high growth areas in Illinois. Using a grounded theory analysis drawn from interviews, relevant documents and participant observation we generated an explanation for how and why parents’ don’t know and/or understand growth issues or school funding. We attempt to explain the process by which these misconceptions arise. Further we consider one implication of parents’ misunderstanding: less trust and personal involvement in school district decision-making.

Research Goals

We moved from an established diverse small city to a new subdivision in a high growth suburb of Chicago and were quickly faced with overcrowding in our neighborhood school. We asked how we could have not seen this coming? We hope to use what we find to develop materials more comprehensive or comprehensible than school report cards to help parents understand the school and community into which they are moving. Our research goal in this study focuses on

understanding the experiences of parents in new subdivisions when a mismatch occurs between what they thought they knew about schools and the reality of school funding and how their misconceptions might affect their involvement in the school district decision-making process.¹

Research Questions

The work was guided by three basic questions about persons who build houses in new developments and their understanding of how the school system that they were moving into may be affected.

1. When parents move, where do they get their information about schools?
2. In new subdivisions in high growth areas what are parents' experiences and conceptions of problems relating to growth?
3. How do parents and stakeholders frame school funding issues and high growth impact on schools?

Conceptual Context

Epstein's influential work on parental involvement proposes a model that is student centered. (Epstein 2001) While valuable, we wanted to capture parents' experiences in their own words. Parental participation in school decision-making is typically studied in urban areas (Stone 2001) (Mediratha & Fruchter 2003) (Epstein and Dauber 1991), not high-performing suburban districts. Other educational sociologists have done ethnographic work on family's experiences with a variety of school issues but our brief literature review has not uncovered qualitative work on the house-buying decision. (Lareau 2003, Crozier 1999)

Methods

Wanting to capture parents' experiences, we decided to use interviewing and participant observations supplemented by newspaper accounts, board minutes and other documents available to parents such as marketing materials from subdivision developers. We taped

¹ We should also note that although we are both graduate students at Northern Illinois University this work was done independently of that institution. Human subjects review and approval was granted by the IRB of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, where Christopher works, but the work was not done on behalf of or using the resources of IMSA.

interviews when possible, and took notes if taping was not possible. Detailed field notes of meetings and informal conversations were kept. Materials were coded. Using grounded theory approach we generated themes, and in this paper attempt to interrelate the themes and generate some explanations of the data collected. Data collection occurred over ten months at one site and five months at the other sites.²

Sample

We gathered information about six different areas in which high growth was impacting schools. We discarded one that already gone through its decision-making process years before, though it is still building out. A second we determined was too small for the sample to be considered homogeneous, but the differences present might be considered in future research. In another case convenient geographically we had multiple access problems, a high percentage of parents had children too small for school and some willing to be interviewed were those who had moved from within the same town. In the three new subdivisions in which we did more extensive and repeated interviews one was a small town adjacent to a larger city, and the others were the most outlying suburbs of a major metropolitan city, on the fringe of agricultural land. The three school districts that remained constituted a homogenous sample in that all three were experiencing high-growth and those interviewed all came from elsewhere and had no strong ties in the town itself. (Glesne 1999).

Of approximately eighty new homeowners contacted, twenty-five were interviewed briefly, seventeen were interviewed at length once, and of these, twelve were interviewed a second time. Our data collection included the participation of a number of individuals identified as stakeholders. School officials were identified and contacted, two were interviewed. In addition

² In order to preserve participant trust we guaranteed them confidentiality in reports that would be generated from

a local mayor and a county planner and naturalist, both locally known for their expertise on impacts of new housing on schools, were interviewed. Finally newspaper accounts, board minutes, and background from reporters, board members and neighbors helped us broaden and deepen our understanding of the school funding problem in areas of high growth in Kane County, Illinois.

Limitations

Because local conditions vary widely and because this sample is not representative our findings are limited. However school funding problems are rampant and high growth areas are quite common in certain regions. More engaged interviews arose at a single site where issues concerning overcrowding had been discussed for about a year when we began interviewing. Research bias might include that we live in Kane County and we have been politically active in the past. Our personal experience prompted us to further investigate this issue, but we feel awareness of our possible bias and honesty with those we speak with is adequate to account for bias. The rich data we have collected and hope to refine in the future will compensate for these issues.

Results

In working with our participants we found them candid about both what they did and did not know and understand as they described their decision making process and subsequent engagement with school issues in their new communities. In the end we found that our three research questions were interrelated in how respondents experienced their effects over time.

this work. We will use pseudonyms when referring to all participants, communities, and schools in this paper.

When parents move, where do they get their information about schools?

Schools are important when people move

Everyone that we spoke with identified education as the most important factor or one of the most important factors that they considered when moving. “The schools were everything,” one father whose child was entering kindergarten when he moved reported. Most had children. In an initial door to door canvass we found that 90% of 80 households we visited included children at the time that they moved into the neighborhood. Some who did not have children in school investigated schools when moving because they believed that the school quality would influence property values.

School information in marketing materials varied

Our sample of marketing materials from subdivisions gave school information, some was comprehensive and some was very scanty. We expected developer’s information to be the primary information provider. We went to developers’ representatives and were not surprised to get scanty information about schools or formulaic sayings like “you’ll be happy with the Westland schools!” However variation emerged. The Craigery featured a sign “on site school” and a large picture of the school in their materials. Westland subdivision’s materials in contrast had a journalistic-like account of their school. For developers “time is money” the mayor of Westland told us. In our small sample of developers’ materials we didn’t find overriding themes. The sample size doesn’t allow us to generalize about developers’ quality of information about schools. A comprehensive survey of marketing materials would yield some dominant themes.

Parents relied most on Illinois School Report Card data when they made their decision to move

Most often parents relied on school report card data primarily or in addition to other information.

Jennifer: “We knew we went to the website and printed out the school report card for the school district, it was like 2nd or 3rd in the state, and we were very impressed by the student to teacher ratio.”

To get the information one parent contacted the school district, but the rest went online to view the Illinois School Report Cards which is available at the State of Illinois site, multiple commercial sites and that legally every school and districted is required to publish annually and make available via the web.

Analysis

In addition some parents interviewed local people, parents, principals, teachers, and some visited schools. One parent investigated the voting patterns with respect to referendums and another used an FOIA request to check into builder contributions to school funding. Another parent relied on her mother’s advice to visit the school and talk to the PTO too based on her own prior experience in a suburban town during a high-growth period two decades earlier.

Although parents overwhelmingly relied on the Illinois School report card they did not really indicate and understanding of it and relied almost exclusively on the state’s standardized ISAT scores. The Illinois School Report card is a curious document, close to what one would call “institutional research” in a higher education setting. They report student performance on state mandates tests as well as demographics and national test scores. The reporting is disaggregated by race and gender, and also reported by-school. Many respondents reported that these report cards played an important role in their judging of the schools, but when asked to elaborate they were not able to provide specifics about how the data was used. In general, the reports cards were used to demonstrate a high percentage of students operating at a high level, but the documents were never described as being used as a way of gaining insight into any possible

contextual issues that might be at play. They do not report much in the way of fiscal health, apart from the per-pupil expenditure rate, and they only offer comparative data from the previous year, so there is no way of being able to detect trends.

After more analysis we hope to refine some other themes that emerged. These include “educational migrants.” Five of the seventeen parents we interviewed described that they were moving to get out of a school district. Their reasons for moving included negative social situations, funding problems leading to larger class sizes and other budget cuts.

The migrants’ prior experience correlates with their looking for more information. Four of the five migrants used the school report card but also tried to get information other places.

In new subdivisions in high growth areas what are parents’ experiences and conceptions of problems relating to growth?

Parents were not able to answer many questions concerning school funding. In Illinois, school funding is largely provided by local property taxes. We asked parents if they could explain how school funding worked. Of seventeen two said they understood to some extent but could not provide an example. The others simply answered they did not understand it. One father expressed that he had just been thinking about how many of his tax dollars actually went to the school, so he obviously curious. Three of those parents we talked to complained that when administrators and board members talked about school funding they often used acronyms and were incomprehensible. One parent did understand it and we didn’t ask her the question because from previous answers we knew she did. She had removed her children from the public schools and was in the process of moving due to a transfer. Of the three moms who understood a little bit, only this mother was confident in her understanding and could be envisioned playing an active role by the researchers. This mom had been previously employed in national politics. The

other two, both women, dismissed their understanding when complimented and one of them compared herself negatively to school board members. “With all I don’t know I couldn’t think about running for school board right now.” When asked if she thought current school board members knew more than her about school funding she said “Definitely, yes, I think the board minutes indicate that”. The three moms also did not feel that their views would find an interested audience. They all felt they were atypical in their doubts about how well the school decision-making process was going.

Prior to my talking with Sue the most reflective of the three a school board member had been quoted in the paper as saying that parents couldn’t understand school funding so certain information had been withheld regarding the school funding referendum. Sue was pretty mad about this. But again she expressed her concern that if she told people no one would really care except a couple good friends. All three women who did understand more about school funding explained they were atypical and two who were involved with the schools expressed peer pressure to be quiet. Sue speculated that other parents did not want any decision questioned because they falsely attributed high test scores to the administrators themselves. “You are cutting off your nose to spite your face,” she said. “But I don’t really believe that they’re responsible for test scores,” Sue kept going. She said that she wanted to look into that issue. I asked her what she thought affected test scores and she responded parents having time to teach students themselves. She told me how she had stayed home when her children were in preschool and had done a lot of teaching of basic literacy skills. She also said she thought money played a role. “Some people can’t send their kids to preschool” she told me and said that was a major factor in school success. Perhaps more than any other parent Sue was quite inspiring because despite other parents’ unwillingness to listen which she said was “strange,” even though she

accounted for it, she said that she had to persist in following what was going on with the schools. “I don’t care if people point at me” she said and she was extremely sincere. Sue articulates well the emotional and mental investment parents make in their children’s education. While many did not understand school funding their reluctance to engage another parent is probably, like Sue suspects, based on a theory about their own child’s education. Because parents want their child to get a good education these same parents don’t want the school district questioned.

With respect to how growth impacts schools, parents did not know the specifics of how much a student cost to educate per year or the impact fee laws or process. At most they understood builders sometimes gave money to schools but they could not elaborate on how that dollar figure was determined, how much it was or what it covered.

Analysis

While parents make great efforts to learn about their future school system prior to their decision to build a new home, their understanding of the impact of new growth on school resources is simplified and usually incorrect. When schools are faced with funding issues and new residents find themselves facing a bond referendum shortly after they have moved in, they are typically confused and often hostile, knowing that they have paid a large (but not specific) sum for their impact fees. Those who have been in the community long enough to start payment of taxes also feel as if they have paid their share, typically \$4-5000 per year for a typical house in the communities that we worked with.

Other stakeholders such as school administrators, politicians, and even builders had a much more complex understanding of the school funding issue.

How do parents and stakeholders frame school funding issues and high growth impact on schools?

Both the new parents as well as the stakeholders express an awareness of diverse and competing interest groups, including those who are anti-growth (Donna), those who have kids out of school (Brenda, Administrator M), developers (newspaper editorial, Mayor), parents of kids in school (Brenda, Administrator M, Sharon, Jennifer), and those without kids (Mayor). The stakeholders, in contrast to the parents, described relationships between diverse groups and resources (natural and built) as determining course of growth and school funding decisions. Some factors that cropped up in these models were county planning documents, community character and history, philosophy such as “smart growth,” policy-making that helps or hinders growth, state funding and taxing policy, different legal jurisdictions, and competition between municipalities. Stakeholders know more. Two area mayors, one of whom we interviewed, are discussing growth philosophies over public web sites. The Mayor provided us with a book he liked, an ethnographic study of small towns that are overwhelmed with newcomers. The book has proved extremely helpful. Miss O. the chair of the Regional Planning Commission in a county that contained two of our three study sites explained

“Growth does not pay for itself. Study after study shows that. The problem further west, not in Geneva, is that cities want commercial development, but they believe that commercial development won’t come until there is a certain number of rooftops and their schools are dying. It’s a very complex difficult problem, the way we’re taxed needs to changed.”

When asked how the interests of different groups interacted, like builders, homebuyers and schools, Superintendent M. replied:

“It’s like the bill of rights, they all eventually compete with one another. Um, some interesting dynamics, it would be an interesting mathematical algorithm to try to calculate how that all works out.”

Superintendent M, like the Mayor also was aware of how arcane school funding issues could be and conveyed that he knew he was not getting his point across in one particular meeting, telling us,

“And I’ve had to do this, I’ve been standing up in front of groups and they say what are my taxes going to do and I’m like well under the property tax extension limitation law you start right there with that whole mumbo jumbo when you say the tax cap can only go up by CPI or 5% whichever is less, well except my taxes went down last year, well that’s because of all the growth going on, well then how come you need a tax, you get into this Christopher, it becomes almost like a ping-pong game but ping pong in three dimensions. It gets to be a very very difficult thing to explain to somebody.”

Superintendent M, like all three stakeholders we interviewed, understood that taxing policy was an underlying issue. He explained how he used that to attempt to get municipalities to impose higher fees on builders in the following passage.

“I have approached when I’ve spoken at the various trustees’ meetings, my approach to fees is that it’s a tax policy question. And simple argument that I make is this if a new student moving into this school district in a new home costs the district 12000 and you aren’t willing to offset that with a fee, that’s just a transition portion, we haven’t even talked about building new grounds with that 12000 number. Ok. And you are only willing to pay, or are only willing to impose let’s say a 6000 transition fee you are in essence in saying the other 6000 has to be absorbed by the district’s taxpayers. Either in,

well three forms, erosion to fund balance, reduction of programs and services, or service standards, or higher taxes. It's a tax policy question and then I've said to them under that circumstance then you all should be passing resolutions supporting our referendums and explaining to the taxpayers why you've made the tax policy decision that they ought to pay that bill. All I hear after I make that little speech is silence. (laughter) Ok. Just silence. Because they don't want to deal with that."

Analysis

That parents and stakeholders frame the issues of growth and school funding so differently creates communication problems frustrating both groups. The stakeholders were from two areas in Kane County where the planning process has won numerous awards. A conversation about planning, growth and preservation of farm land started more than twenty years ago and though hidden to newcomers probably contributed to the understanding of other stakeholders.

Implications and Conclusions

Parents are extremely motivated to find out about schools when they move. They use the school report cards to judge and understand schools. Because school report cards don't explain school funding parents don't understand school funding later when it becomes an issue in their own school district. Policymakers' understanding of school funding is rich and complex. This mismatch creates problems when parents need to participate in decisions related to funding. When parents are motivated and attempt to learn about schools their over reliance on only one or two dimensions reported on the school report card, most commonly the performance on standardized tests, informs their understanding of future school-related issues, specifically school decision-making in policy and funding matters. To answer the foundational issue underlying our

concerns, “Who’s accountable for parents’ (mis) understanding of school funding issues?” we must look to NCLB and the national call for accountability.

NCLB demands that school report cards be compiled and made public. Unfortunately this information is being used as a marketing tool by realtors and even schools who need any type of increased funding to survive in Illinois’ terrible school funding environment. What parents find out and schools are learning the hard way is that because of other aspects of Illinois school finance, growth not only doesn’t pay for itself it erodes schools’ ability to serve its students. Parents have a difficult time integrating these details into their report card model of schooling. As a result parents feel stressed and distrustful, and the lack of understanding of the context is probably one of the reasons parents vote “no” to school funding measures.

Implications for action might include educating parents more fully by providing easily accessible material that can supplement the school report card. Also researchers and policy-makers with parents and taxpayers need to question accountability language and law that gives parents’ a false sense of security and a false sense of the cost of schooling.

Future Research

We would like to follow-up over time with initial participants to look for changes in learning and participation related to school decision-making. We would also like to make contact with school officials to understand emerging issues that may affect participants. We would also like to identify new communities in which to validate themes and to conduct studies of the emergence of social capital and networks.

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