



Families' Perspectives on School Funding

The stress from the multiple crises of the 2020-21 school year has made it challenging to meaningfully engage families and to finance the relief and recovery needed for students' learning and wellbeing. Families' voices are critical to ensure that school budgets reflect a community's needs and priorities for our students.

This year, National PTA collaborated with council PTAs, as part of an initiative to authentically listen – and respond – to the questions and concerns of families regarding school funding. What do families know about school funding? What areas do they feel are adequately or inadequately funded? And how do families think about the differences in per-pupil funding in the community?

Methods



National PTA partnered with Austin Council of PTAs (Texas), Vancouver Council PTA (Washington), Duval County Council PTA (Florida), Hillsborough County Council PTA (Florida) and Pinellas County Council PTA (Florida). These council PTAs helped conduct virtual listening sessions and distribute surveys to families (October-December 2020) to reveal local community priorities and contribute to a nationwide study around education finance. A total of 164 families attended the 22 virtual listening sessions facilitated by National PTA staff. Five of the sessions were

conducted in Spanish and 26% of families were Spanish speakers. The sample was racially and economically diverse, but primarily included women between ages 35 and 54. See appendix for a more detailed demographic breakdown of participants.

Key Learnings

- 1. Families do not feel confident in their understanding of school budgets and they are not sure where to go to find information.** Only about one third of families agreed that they have a general understanding of how their child's school district uses its funding (32%) or knew where to find information on school funding in their community (29%). Some parents admitted they were clueless when it came to the topic, while others shared that they have attempted to educate themselves but were unable to access the information they needed.

"I went through a frenzy of trying to figure out how to influence budgets, back when it became obvious that the kids were not going to have enough teachers to be safe when they went back to school, and it was really hard."
– Parent, Austin, TX

Recommendations: Help families understand how they can be more engaged in the budgeting process. Establish and publicize a point of contact who families should reach out to if they have questions about how money is being spent.



2. **Families were unsure if money was being spent effectively and felt skeptical about the district's role.** Families critiqued the lack of transparency around how money is used. They also expressed frustration around poor implementation and questionable distribution of resources.

Recommendations: Provide more transparency about how funds are spent and why.

"I've got my sixth grader, who goes to PE every day, and my elementary school kids, once a week. [It] doesn't make any sense."

– Parent, Duval County, FL

"I think our library is adequately funded, but I don't think it's being utilized."

- Parent, Pinellas County, FL

3. **Families value educational equity and prefer for schools to receive funding based on need.** During the listening sessions, facilitators presented families with real life examples of per pupil expenditures in their districts. Many families were surprised that some schools were getting as much as \$9,000 more per pupil, and they wanted more information about why the money was distributed this way and how it was being

"It seems it makes the most sense, schools that need more help get more funding. That makes sense to me."

– Parent, Vancouver, WA

"I would be ok with it if the discrepancy is what we're describing. I would want to see the data, though."

– Parent, Austin, TX

"I like that Title 1 or Renaissance schools get extra resources. I think that's needed, because they don't have the families with income that's able to contribute to a PTA, so I think that's a good thing that's working."

– Parent, Hillsborough County, FL

spent. They predicted that the differences had to do with the school's neighborhood, the families' income levels, the school's Title I status. Overall, families approved of funding models that prioritized equity, with 81% of families agreeing that schools should receive funding based on need rather than equal amounts for each school.

Recommendations: Provide more information about why certain schools receive more money than others. Ensure the information is easy for families to access and understand.

4. **Expenses related to core school operations are supplemented by the PTA and/or other fundraising efforts.** Families noted that their PTAs and other parent

groups provided funding to fulfill a variety of needs including everything from salaries for specific positions to books, copy paper and athletics equipment. Families also shared teachers often pay out of pocket for school supplies, as well. When parents and teachers supplement funding in these ways, it can make it more challenging to identify gaps in the district budget.

Recommendations: Consider further analysis of what expenses PTAs most often supplement and how the district can contribute in these areas.

"It's hard to know what the PTA has provided and what the school has provided."

– Parent, Vancouver, WA

"There's an actual documented need for a reading specialist. And for whatever reason, the district won't provide it and the PTA spent a whole year paying half of a salary for a reading specialist. "

– Parent, Austin, TX



5. **Families believe schools need more funding and there is emerging consensus around areas that are under-funded.** 62% of families participating in the listening sessions believe their child’s school does not receive enough funding. Families of color were more likely than white families to indicate their child’s school doesn’t receive enough funding. Even more families (77%) believe schools nationwide do not receive enough funding.

When asked where the additional funding should come from, families were divided, with some indicating it should come from the state (40%) and others from the federal government (35%). Very few families (2%) believe private organizations should provide the additional funding.

Families noted priorities for increased funding for:

- **Teachers & Teachers Aides**

61% of families chose Teachers & Teacher’s Aides as one of their top priorities for more funding. Families emphasized the need to hire more teachers and increase teacher pay.

“There are teachers that are missing in some of [my daughter’s] classes. I don’t think she’s had a science teacher for a year and a half.” – Parent, Duval County, FL

“The pandemic has definitely shown us that teachers are completely underpaid, 100%. Please take my kids back.” – Parent, Vancouver, WA

- **Counselors & Counseling Services**

37% of families chose Counselors & Counseling Services as one of their top priorities for more funding. Families shared that counselors’ caseloads are too large and the services and support available tends to be more reactive than proactive. Given the toll the pandemic has taken on the mental health of families and youth, it is especially important to prioritize these services as students return to school.

“There’s never been enough counselors and psychologists at any school I’ve been to. Going back to first grade when kids had to be tested for one reason or another, sometimes you were waiting six months for the psychologist to get you in.” – Parent, Hillsborough County, FL

- **Specialized Services**

32% of families chose Services for Students with High Needs (supporting special education, English language learners, supporting homeless students, etc.) as one of their top priorities for more funding. Families noted that access to specialized services is inequitable. They also cited the need for more individualized support for

“I’ve got one child who’s gifted, but he just can’t hit that gifted metric, wherever it is. So, he spends his entire time at school bored to tears. He’s not getting that exceptional education or targeted education he needs. On the other end of the spectrum, I have my special needs student, who pretty much made zero advancement in second grade, academically or behaviorally, because nobody knew what to do with him.” – Parent, Austin, TX



students on both ends of the academic spectrum.

- **During the listening sessions, families also highlighted issues related to lack of funding for health & safety, instructional materials, and facilities.** Recurring concerns included that many schools do not have full-time nurses and schools lack basic supplies. Regarding facilities, families shared that issues with air conditioning often led to sweltering environments, and that bathrooms were in such an abysmal state that students avoided using them.

“I know that there have been times where something small, the handicap buttons on door will break. They will stay broken for months on end.”

– Parent, Duval County, FL

“You don't have a nurse full-time at any one school. If you get injured, you hope that there's a nurse there that day that you got injured. My second grader is prone to injury, and there have been many days that the principal and the secretary have taken care of the child instead of a nurse.”

– Parent, Vancouver, WA

- **If forced to make spending cuts, families noted the following priorities** for decreased funding: **District Central Office Roles (81%), Family Engagement Programs (24%), Gifted & Talented Services (20%), and Security and School Resource Officers (17%).** While these areas were the top choices for decreasing funding, it is important to note that there were still differing opinions regarding the funding for most of the items (see appendix B). While District Central Office Staff was a popular choice for potential cuts, salaries for these personnel tend to account for less than 2% of a district's budget.¹

Recommendations: Provide resources to help families learn to advocate for increased funding on the local level, and from the state and federal government. Prioritize investments in staffing including teachers, aides, specialists and counselors and specialized services.

Areas for Further Research

This project adds to a large and robust set of national studies around families' perceptions on the adequacy of school funding. It also provides a good launch pad for further inquiry and analysis across a representative sample of families. Specifically:

- How do families currently access information on school funding and how does this information affect their perceptions of funding adequacy and equity?
- How do families perceptions of school funding adequacy and equity change when presented with new information?
- What messaging and communication tactics resonate with families about funding equity and increases their likelihood to support equity-centered funding policies in their community and/or state?

¹ Protheroe, N. (n.d.). The Blob Revisited [Web log post]. Retrieved February 17, 2021, from <https://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=15404>



In addition, this research also suggests a need for raising awareness about the models to educate families about school spending so that they are able to advocate for needs in their communities. The complexity of understanding and influencing school budgets was a recurring theme even amongst experienced parent advocates in this study. More work is needed to translate publicly *available* data into publicly *useable* data related to school funding.

[Learn more](#)

For more information visit www.pta.org/schoolfunding. Contact familyengagement@pta.org with any questions.

Appendices

Appendix A – Demographic Information of Participants

Race/Ethnicity					Education		Annual Household Income		
<i>White or Caucasian</i>	<i>Latino/a or Hispanic</i>	<i>Two or more races</i>	<i>Black or African American</i>	<i>Asian or Pacific Islander</i>	<i>High School Degree or higher</i>	<i>Bachelor's degree or higher</i>	<i>Less than \$50,000</i>	<i>\$50,000 - \$99,999</i>	<i>\$100,000 or higher</i>
47%	32%	11%	9%	1%	97%	61%	36%	28%	37%

Gender		Age			
<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
92%	8%	11%	47%	38%	4%



Appendix B – Priorities for Increasing or Decreasing Funding

