Determining Costs of Comprehensive School Services

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Important advocates for educational reform such as Richard Rothstein, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Sean Reardon have argued that educational equity requires a full range of community-based services that support schools, families, and children. Schools alone cannot fulfill all of the health, social and emotional, academic, and family needs of students without a wider range of services than most schools can offer. In recognition of this concern, ESSA has a specific component which offers to support “wraparound” supplemental services.

But, there are basic questions in terms of how much schools should allocate to these priorities and what are their costs. To begin to answer these questions, the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education (www.cbcse.org) undertook a benefit-cost study of City Connects in Boston to ascertain both school costs and those sustained by community organizations providing school services (Bowden, Belfield, Levin, Shand, Wang, Morales, 2015). This work followed the ingredients method (Levin & McEwan, 2001). The research showed that addressing the question of what are the costs of effective approaches to providing community services to schools is complex because they are provided through partnerships with public services, not-for-profit organizations, and for-profit providers, each with different cost structures and the different services have very different marginal costs depending upon whether they have high fixed costs (e.g. athletics and educational technologies) or high variable costs (e.g. tutoring and psychological services).

This complexity has implications for evaluation because the services provided through partnerships mediate the outcome of interest. In order to examine the cost to produce an outcome, all changes in service receipt that are induced by the reform must be measured to understand the cost to produce an outcome (Bowden, Shand, Belfield, Levin, Wang, 2016). This paper builds upon this previous work in three ways. First, we will review some widely known approaches to providing comprehensive and integrated student support within schools, such as City Connects and Communities in Schools. Second, we will provide findings on our recent investigations into the processes and inputs of providing student support within schools more broadly, where the schools lack specific support from a designated program to carry out and manage the services and partnerships. Specifically, we address what services schools are providing and their costs; what services are provided by community partners and their costs; and the sources of financing these services based upon funders and marginal costs of school participation. The research will show the extent of services with and without community augmentation and methods for ascertaining their costs to schools, whether paid directly or contributed. Issues of allocation of funding will also be addressed.
In addition, this work highlights the complexity of understanding the contrast between treatment and control conditions in evaluation. Many schools are allocating resources internally to provide supplemental services as part of “business as usual” relative to the costs of community provided services. This paper will discuss the importance of looking at the approach from a whole school perspective where some services are provided internally, some may be provided by an intervention that is adopted by a school, and some services are provided by external agencies through partnerships with the school. To understand the impact and costs, an evaluation must carefully consider all sources of support.

