



HAWAI'I EDUCATIONAL POLICY CENTER
Informing the Education Community

Perspectives #10
Revisiting the ABC's of WSF

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[Perspectives are quick takes on Reinventing Education (Act 51) issues that are in transition. These issues will be revisited periodically as new developments warrant.]

1. What is WSF and how does it work?

Weighted student formula, sometimes called student-based budgeting, is a method for allocating funds to schools based on student characteristics. Since not all students are equal in ability and needs, WSF is an additive giving schools additional funds, over and above a base amount, for students who require more resources to educate. These “weighted” groups of students include the economically disadvantaged, non-English speaking students, and transient students. Special education students already receive extra resources. A Committee on Weights will determine yearly if there are other sub-populations of students to be weighted.

In addition to the weights, positive or negative funding adjustments go to schools that are especially big or small, geographically isolated ones, those who serve specific grade levels of students, and multi-track and combination schools.

2. So will WSF increase Hawai'i's education “pot” of approximately \$1.78 billion?

WSF does not increase the total funds in the education “pot.” Rather it allocates some of these funds to schools in a different denomination—dollars rather than staff positions.

3. Is this change significant?

In the past, schools received resources mainly in the form of staff positions based on school enrollment. Under WSF, schools will receive resources in dollars, a step toward allowing each school to decide how it will spend its money to directly benefit its own students. Therefore, WSF becomes a tool in decentralization efforts, moving decision-making from the state DOE level down to individual schools.

4. Where will the additional money come from to fund the weights since high percentages of Hawai'i's schools have large populations of weighted students?

Here's the problem. To give to Peter, you have to take from Paul. While all schools should gain money for their weighted students, only some will show a net gain. This gain will come from net losses at other schools (including a number of schools that are under No Child Left Behind sanctions for failing to make adequate yearly progress).

The DOE says “all schools ‘losing’ money are already under-funded as they are presently organized, but all schools ‘gaining’ money are currently more under-funded than schools losing money.”

Has WSF, generally defined as a methodology for giving more resources to schools based on student characteristics, become a vehicle for taking from those with few resources? No, but it has become a prescription for putting some schools on a diet.

5. What are some of the projected numbers?

Recent projections show Waipahu High School and Kapolei gaining over \$1 million under WSF and Kaiser High School losing \$813,000. Jarrett Middle School and Niu Valley will each lose over \$700,000 while Mililani Middle will gain about \$700,000. Haleiwa Elementary will lose over \$350,000 and Solomon will gain \$330,000.

6. What determines whether a school loses or gains funds under WSF?

Remember the DOE statement that “all schools ‘losing’ money are already under-funded *as they are currently organized* (my italics).” The DOE points to the fact that some schools are currently organized with more non-teaching staff than other schools of equal size, and these staffing inequities have built up over time. For instance, School A and B both have the same number of teachers (based on collective bargaining agreements), but school A has 4 more non-teaching staffers than School B. So, simply put, School A will lose funds under WSF.

Curiously, however, projections show School A (with more staff) losing \$75,000, while School B (with less staff) will lose \$380,000. (It should be noted that School A has a higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students, but this difference amounts to about \$73,000.)

Seemingly the problem of staffing inequities by itself can’t explain the large losses some schools will experience.

7. How will “losing” schools absorb the loss of funds?

Potentially, they will handle the loss by personnel reductions/reassignments in non-classroom staff. WSF, then, becomes a vehicle for rebalancing school staffing, an issue the DOE wrote about in its 2003 WSF Feasibility Study: “At different periods of time attempts to provide equity in this area [school staffing] have been made but the leveling up has never been fully completed. ...the wide disparity in classified office staffing among schools is conspicuous.”

8. Is it possible for losing schools to see WSF as an opportunity?

Change is difficult, and most of us find comfort in doing something the way we’ve always done it. Randy Moore (DOE project manager for Act 51 implementation) sees WSF as a “once-in-a-generation opportunity for schools to redesign/reinvent themselves to better serve their students.” Superintendent Pat Hamamoto believes everyone in the DOE must “change their set of skills, practices and expectations.” It’s clear the option of business as usual for Hawai‘i’s schools no longer exists.

How will schools gaining funds, as well as those losing funds, reorganize themselves? How will they get the biggest bang for their buck? Are principals and their School Community Councils on

a learning curve about how to do things differently? How can they be assisted by the DOE, the BOE, the legislature and the public?

9. What action has the Board of Education taken?

On October 17, 2005, the BOE Ad Hoc Committee on Act 51 voted to limit the loss or gain of any school to 10% in 2006–07. Some see this as delaying the inevitable, while others believe this will buy time in order to find the bugs in, or further refine, the formula. The full board will now consider this recommendation.

As a formula, WSF should be transparent. It is in the best interests of our community if doubts are fully addressed. Mixing two issues—giving schools addition funds for students who have greater learning needs (WSF) and taking funds away from schools that may be overstaffed—might be causing confusion. This is because WSF is about math decisions, while staffing equity is about management decisions, past and present. The bottom line, of course, is what positive difference WSF will make for Hawai‘i’s children.