SCHOOL FINANCE 101- The TAB

Why is it OK for Think Tanks to just make stuff up?

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Something that has perplexed me for some time in my field of school finance, is why it seems to be okay for policy advocates and "Think Tanks" to just make stuff up. For example, to just make up what level of funding would be appropriate for accomplishing any particular set of goals? or to just make up a figure for how much more a child with specific educational needs requires under state school finance policy. Just "making stuff up" seems particularly problematic for "Think Tanks," which as far as I can tell should be producing information backed by at least some degree of ... Thinking? Perhaps based on some of the more reasonable thinking of the field?

This topic comes to mind today because ConnCan has just released a report (http://www.conncan.org/matriarch/documents/TheTab.pdf) on how to fix Connecticut school funding which provides classic examples of just makin' stuff up (page 25). The report begins with a few random charts and graphs showing the differences in funding between wealthy and poor Connecticut school districts and their state and local shares of funding. These analyses, while reasonably descriptive are relatively meaningless because they are not anchored to any well conceived or articulated explanation of "what should be." Such a conception might be located here or even here (Chapters 13, 14 & 15 are particularly on target)!

The height of making stuff up in the report is the recommended policy solution to the problem which is never clearly articulated. There are problems in CT, but The Tab, certainly doesn't identify them!

The supposed ideal policy solution involves a pupil-based funding formula where each pupil should receive at least $11,000 per pupil (made up), and each child in poverty (no definition provided – just a few random ideas in a footnote) should receive an additional $3,000 per pupil (also made up) and each child with limited English language proficiency should receive an additional $400 per pupil (yep... totally made up). There is minimal attempt in the report (http://www.conncan.org/matriarch/documents/TheTab.pdf) to explain why these figures are reasonable. They're simply made up.

The authors do provide some back-of-the-napkin explanations for the numbers they made up – based on those numbers being larger than the amounts typically allocated (not necessarily true). They write off the possibility that better numbers might be derived by way of a general footnote reference to a chapter in the Handbook of Research on Education Finance and Policy by Bill Duncombe and John Yinger which actually explains methods for deriving such estimates.

The authors of The Tab conclude: *"Combined with federal funding that flows on the basis of poverty and (in some cases) the English Language Learner weight of an additional $400, the $3,000 poverty weight would enable districts and schools to devote considerable resources to meeting the needs of disadvantaged students."* I'm glad they are so confident in their "made up" numbers! I, however, am less so!

It would be one thing if there was no conceptual or methodological basis for figuring out which children require more resources or how much more they might actually need. Then, I guess, you might have to make stuff up. Even then, it might be reasonable to make at least some thoughtful attempt to explain why you made up the numbers you... well... made up. But alas, such thinking seems beyond the grasp of at least some "think tanks." Guess what? There

actually are some pretty good articles out there which attempt to distill additional costs associated with specific poverty measures... like this one, by Bill Duncombe and John Yinger:

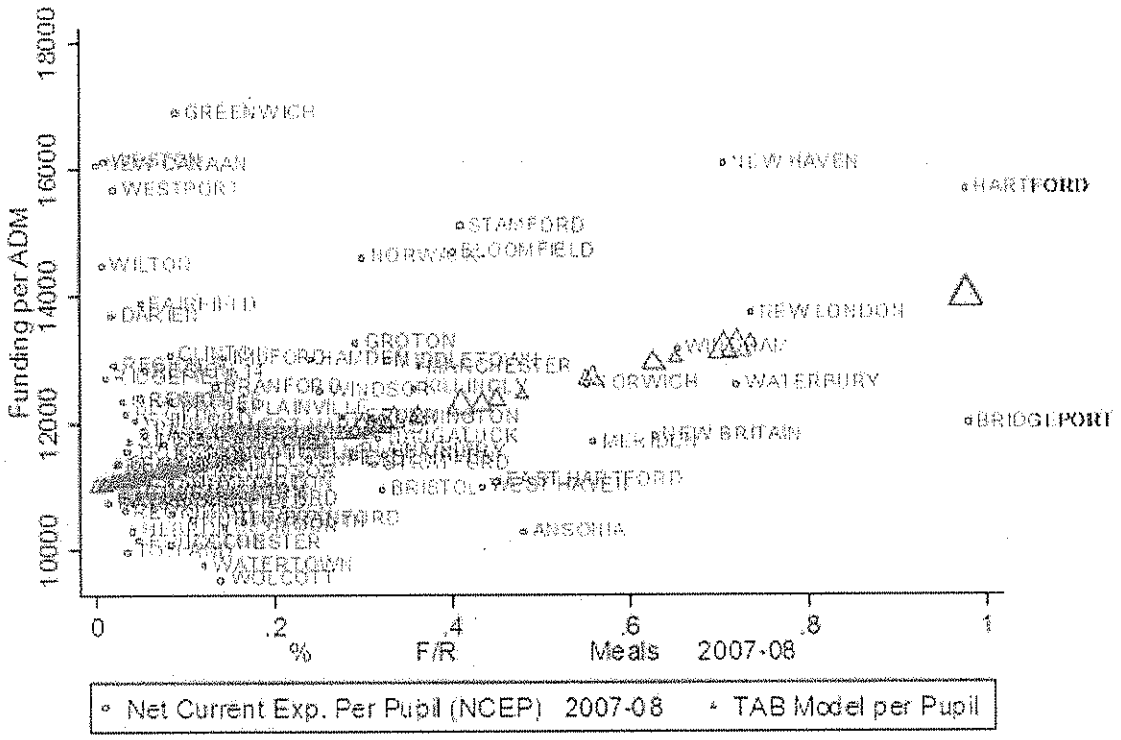
How much more does a disadvantaged student cost?
It's not like the title of this article somehow conceals its contents, does it? Nor is the journal in which it was published (Economics of Education Review) somehow tangential to the point at hand.This paper, prepared for the National Research Council provides some additional insights into additional costs associated with poverty and methods for estimating those costs.
Rather than even attempt to argue that these figures are somehow founded in something, the authors of The Tab seem to push the point that it really doesn't matter what these numbers are as long as the state allocates pupil-based funding. That's the fix! That's what matters... not how much funding or whether the right kids get the right amounts. In fact, the reverse is true. *The potential effectiveness, equity and adequacy of any decentralized weighted funding system is highly contingent upon driving appropriate levels of funding and funding differentials across schools and districts!*
I've critiqued the notion of pupil-based funding as a panacea, here:

Review of Fund the Child: Bringing Equity, Autonomy and Portability to Ohio School Finance
Review of Shortchanging Disadvantaged Students: An Analysis of Intra-district Spending Patterns in Ohio
Review of Weighted Student Formula Yearbook 2009
Oh, and also here: http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v17n3/
Among other things, in each of these critiques of think-tank reports I question why it seems okay to just make up "weights" and cost figures when applying distribution formulas – either for within or between district distribution.

Just thinking... but not making stuff up!

Categories:UncategorizedTags:Bryan Hassel, ConnCan, Public Impact, The Tab

As follow up to yesterday's post on the completely fabricated and back-of-the-napkin numbers presented in The Tab, here's a quick simulated allocation of the $11,000 foundation + $3,000 poverty weight (applied to free or reduced lunch) + $400 per ELL/LEP child.



The Tab pretty much conceals any real changes or patterns of changes by lumping them into a summary table by groups of districts without any documentation as to how the summary stats were estimated (page 27). Above is what the district by district changes would look like. Looks pretty much like a back-of-the-napkin attempt at roughly break-even analysis. Remember, this is a proposal for the future compared against actual spending from 2007-08 – two years back now!

Specifically, the proposal would appear to reduce funding in Hartford and New Haven by greater amounts than it would increase funding in districts like New Britain and Waterbury and only similarly to the increase for Bridgeport. **That is, it levels down high poverty districts as much as it levels some up – a fact concealed by the claims of a net increase of $620 per pupil in the short term. Mind you, The Tab certainly provides no evidence that districts like Hartford and New Haven are massively over-funded, as their own policy solutions would imply**. Oh wait... The Tab really doesn't rely on evidence at all. Silly me.

Just checkin the numbers – the made up numbers.

Bruce Baker is an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. From 1997 to 2008 he was a professor at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, KS. He is lead author with Preston Green (Penn State University) and Craig Richards (Teachers College, Columbia University) of Financing Education Systems, a

graduate level textbook on school finance policy published by Merrill/Prentice-Hall. Professor Baker has written a multitude of peer reviewed research articles on state school finance policy, teacher labor markets, school leadership labor markets and higher education finance and policy. His recent work has focused on measuring cost variations associated with schooling contexts and student population characteristics, including ways to better design state school finance policies and local district allocation formulas (including Weighted Student Funding) for better meeting the needs of students.