



STUDENT EQUITY NEED INDEX

Budgeting for Educational Equity is made possible by support from both the Sobrato Family Foundation and CASBO. Budgeting for Educational Equity is a podcast series that explores how education resources can be allocated to better meet the needs of all students. This brief is designed to provide opportunities for the listener to engage in tangible, practical application of the lessons derived from each podcast episode. The brief can serve as a launching point for cultivating discussions about equity within communities and school district administrative offices. Episodes can be found on the [Budgeting for Educational Equity Podcast Series webpage](#).

THE STUDENT EQUITY NEED INDEX AND ITS POLICY CONTEXT

Los Angeles Unified School District's Student Equity Need Index (SENI) is a holistic measure of need that directs how some dollars are allocated to the district's schools. The SENI was developed in the context of California's state-level weighted student funding formula, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). Although the LCFF has been consistently linked to higher test scores and positive impacts on student achievement, particularly in school districts that serve communities experiencing high levels of poverty, critiques of LCFF tend to center on persistent gaps in outcomes between student groups.¹

Districts have the power to determine how LCFF funds flow to schools. A study of LCFF showed that most districts planned to "spend less on high need students than the additional funding they received for high need students" and that districts do not allocate funds to schools in proportion to their share of high-need students, which generate the additional concentration dollars.² Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) implemented SENI as a way to direct more dollars to higher-need schools and empower schools to address local needs.





The SENI has not only had an impact at the district level but has also served as a sort of precursor to the state-wide Equity Multiplier. The Equity Multiplier—[covered in Episode 7 of this podcast](#)—was passed in June 2023 and can be understood as the state’s attempt to improve targeting and make more progress in closing outcome disparities between student groups, not just between districts.

HOW DOES THE STUDENT EQUITY NEED INDEX WORK?

In the 2021–22 school year, LAUSD reported that it distributed approximately \$700 million³ of its approximately \$13 billion dollar general operating budget to schools through SENI, although \$300 million of that \$700 million was from Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) pandemic relief funds.⁴ The district uses the SENI to calculate a score for each school based on several indicators (Table 1) and then uses the score to rank and divide schools into five groups by

need: highest, high, moderate, low, and lowest. All schools receive SENI funds and awards of concentrated funding in proportion to their need ranking. Schools with the highest need rating receive the most per pupil funding, and schools with the lowest need rating receive the least.

The funds are flexible, and principals have discretion over their use. This arrangement presents opportunities for those closest to students to make decisions about spending but does not come with “safeguards” and places a substantial responsibility on principals who may not have training in this type of financial decision-making.

TABLE 1. LAUSD SENI INDICATORS

Academic indicators	School climate indicators	School demographics	Community indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incoming 6th/9th grade math state test Incoming 6th/9th grade ELA state test 1st grade primary literacy test A-G completion rate (high school only) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chronic absenteeism Suspension rates I-Star reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> % youth in foster care % youth experiencing homelessness % English Learners % Standard English Learners % students with disabilities who are economically disadvantaged % unduplicated students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asthma severity rate in school neighborhood Nonfatal gunshot injuries in school neighborhood COVID-19 case rate COVID-19 death rate

Note. For more information on the SENI business rules, refer to [SENI+ 2021 Update Business Rules with Additional COVID-19-Related Metrics](#).

Source. Los Angeles Unified School District. (n.d.). *Student Needs Equity Index (SENI) documents*. <https://www.lausd.org/Page/17238>





A school's student need index score is determined by a combination of academic, school climate, school demographic, and community indicators. The community indicators in particular add a new dimension to the SENI not found in most other funding formulas. They were designed to account for a community's broader systemic challenges, many of which disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, and students of color.

The SENI's community indicators arose from what local groups identified as key indicators of need, including asthma rates and nonfatal gunshot injuries. About 9 percent of Los Angeles children have asthma compared with a statewide average of 6 percent, and asthma is a key driver of chronic absenteeism from pollutant exposure, which is negatively linked to life outcomes and other health conditions.⁵ Nonfatal gun injuries have profound physical and psychological impacts and are almost seven times more likely to happen to those who live in the least affluent neighborhoods compared with those living in the most affluent neighborhoods.⁶ Both asthma and nonfatal gun injuries disproportionately affect Black, Indigenous, and students of color.⁷ LAUSD also added COVID-19 indicators to capture the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on families who are economically disadvantaged and families of color.

An independent American Institutes for Research study found that SENI fund distribution did in fact correlate with need. Although the study did not find an overall improvement in outcomes at high-needs schools, it

did find a small increase in achievement and an improvement in attendance for some particularly high-need student groups.⁸ These findings point to the potential of a targeted, community-built student need index.

TIPS FOR DESIGNING A DISTRICT STUDENT NEED INDEX

The experience of LAUSD in creating and implementing the SENI can provide guidance to other districts that would like to design and utilize their own student need index.

Design the formula

1 | Collaborate with the community, including advocacy groups and community-based organizations that have a perspective on the student experience outside of school.

2 | Along with your community partners, **look at your district's data and at national and local research** and examples to understand what factors are closely correlated with student educational success and long-term outcomes.

3 | ⚠️ Avoid overloading the formula with so many indicators that it becomes confusing to communities and school leaders. Investigate which indicators are proxies for others and thus may be duplicative.

Communication tip!

Build buy-in by clearly communicating the values of equitable resource distribution and why particular indicators are important for the community.

Implement the formula

1 | Provide school leaders with support on how to spend new, flexible funds. Such support might include a menu of spending options principals can choose from or professional development and mentoring that helps increase school leaders' financial decision-making capacity.

2 | ⚠️ Consider how the index will work in practice, and be cautious about indicators that school leaders can control, such as suspensions or the identification of funded schools. Additionally, consider the implications of a formula that takes away dollars from schools that are increasing achievement, aiding multilingual students in reclassifying to Fluent English Proficient status, or are otherwise supporting student success. Basing the use of funds on the characteristics of incoming rather than current students can help decision-makers avoid some of these pitfalls.

3 | Bring together district leaders from your fiscal, accountability, and programmatic teams to ensure decision-making that considers all dollars (not only those that flow through the student need index) and to facilitate effective blending and braiding.

Communication tip!

Reiterate to your community the data that is driving the resource allocation strategy and the "why" behind new allocation patterns. This messaging may help people step back from a sole focus on whether their own school is receiving more or fewer dollars under a new formula.



Plan for continuous improvement

1 | Revisit the indicators and weights frequently enough to make sure the allocation of dollars still reflects need, especially as new needs emerge.

2 | ⚠️ While being responsive to changing needs, **keep funding levels stable enough to provide year-to-year predictability** for schools. Districts can provide stability by avoiding rigid funding thresholds that may result in dramatically different funding following a small shift in student, school, or neighborhood indicators.

Communication tip!

*After the implementation of the student need index, **communicate the changes in student outcomes and provide the rationale for any proposed changes.** This transparency can help sustain or build further buy-in.*

RESOURCE EQUITY BEYOND SCHOOL FUNDING

An impactful district student need index can be more than a mechanism for directing funding. It also can be a

tool that facilitates a new, holistic way for districts to think about and enact equity. In addition to using the SENI to distribute state and local funds, LAUSD has used it to drive ESSER dollars, choose locations for food distribution sites while students were out of school during the COVID-19 pandemic, prioritize teacher hiring at particular schools, and select sites to implement academic and enrichment programs. Need indices can foster a culture of equity in a district and be useful for several different resourcing decisions beyond the distribution of dollars.

ACTIVITY: PLANNING FOR A STUDENT NEED INDEX IN YOUR DISTRICT

IDENTIFY KEY COLLABORATIVE PARTNERS IN YOUR COMMUNITY AND HOW YOU MIGHT ENGAGE THEM IN THIS WORK.

Child-serving agencies and nonprofits

Organizations in your community

Opportunities to engage

Health care entities

Organizations in your community

Opportunities to engage

Issue-oriented advocacy organizations

Organizations in your community

Opportunities to engage





Parent groups

Organizations in your community

Opportunities to engage

Other?

Organizations in your community

Opportunities to engage

CONSIDER INDICATORS THAT MIGHT BE RELEVANT FOR YOUR LOCAL CONTEXT AND HOW THEY COULD ENABLE FURTHER RESOURCE EQUITY ACROSS YOUR DISTRICT'S SCHOOLS.

Consider consulting with local organizations about salient indicators. Indicators that may provide some initial ideas include LAUSD's SENI indicators (Table 1), the [Boston Public Schools Opportunity Index indicators](#),⁹ the [CTCAC/HCD Opportunity Map indicators](#),¹⁰ and key [social determinants of health](#).¹¹

Potential academic indicators

Potential school climate indicators

Potential school demographic indicators

Potential community indicators

BEYOND DISTRIBUTING STATE AND LOCAL FUNDS, CONSIDER HOW YOUR DISTRICT COULD USE A STUDENT NEED INDEX TO SUPPORT RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND SYSTEMS PLANNING.

For which of the following considerations might your district use a student need index? Are there others?

Staff distribution by role, seniority, and effectiveness

If/how your district would use a student need index in decision-making





School clinics or community school sites

If/how your district would use a student need index in decision-making

Access points for food, clothing, and other necessities

If/how your district would use a student need index in decision-making

Priority sites for facilities/capital upgrades

If/how your district would use a student need index in decision-making

After-school, summer school, extended school day sites

If/how your district would use a student need index in decision-making

Locations for meeting with families/conducting town halls

If/how your district would use a student need index in decision-making

Other?

If/how your district would use a student need index in decision-making





- 1 Johnson, R. C., & Tanner, S. (2018). Money and freedom: The impact of California’s school finance reform on academic achievement and the composition of district spending. *Getting Down to Facts II*. https://gettingdowntofacts.com/sites/default/files/2018-09/GDTFIL_Report_Johnson.pdf; Fan, Q., & Liang, J. (2020). The effects of California’s school finance reform: Empirical evidence from the local control funding formula (LCFF). *Journal of Education Finance*, 46(2), 140–157. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/784650>; Lafortune, J. (2021). *Targeted K–12 funding and student outcomes: Evaluating the local control funding formula*. Public Policy Institute of California. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/targeted-k-12-funding-and-student-outcomes/>; Johnson, R. (2023). *School funding effectiveness: Evidence from California’s local control funding formula*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/529.194>; Lafortune, J., Herrera, J., & Gao, N. (2023). *Examining the reach of targeted school funding*. Public Policy Institute of California. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/examining-the-reach-of-targeted-school-funding/>; Hahnel, C., & Humphrey, D. C. (2021). *What’s next for the Local Control Funding Formula?* Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/whats-next-local-control-funding-formula>
- 2 Lafortune et al., 2023.
- 3 See [2021–2022 SENI Allocations](#) for more details.
- 4 Los Angeles Unified School District, Budget Services & Financial Planning Division. (2021). *Los Angeles Unified School District final 2021–22 budget*. <https://www.lausd.org/cms/lib/CA01000043/Centricity/Domain/123/2021-22%20Final%20Budget%20Book%20rev.3%2012.18.21.pdf>
- 5 County of Los Angeles Public Health. (n.d). *Asthma Coalition of Los Angeles County (ACLAC)*. <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/mch/asthmacoalition/asthma1.htm>; California Air Resources Board. (n.d). *Asthma & air pollution*. <https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/resources/asthma-and-air-pollution>; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *Asthma*. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/asthma/index.htm>; Meng, Y.-Y., Babey, S. H., & Wolstein, J. (2012) Asthma-related school absenteeism and school concentration of low-income students in California. *Preventing Chronic Disease*, 9, E98. <https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd9.110312>; Eitland, E., Klingensmith, L., MacNaughton, P., Cedeno Laurent, J., Spengler, J., Bernstein, A., & Allen, J. G. (2017). *Schools for health: Foundations for student success*. https://forhealth.org/Harvard.Schools_For_Health.Foundations_for_Student_Success.pdf
- 6 The Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence. (2020). *Nonfatal gun violence*. <https://efsgv.org/learn/type-of-gun-violence/nonfatal-firearm-violence/>
- 7 County of Los Angeles Public Health, n.d.; Everytown Research & Policy. (2021). *A more complete picture: The contours of gun injury in the United States*. <https://everytownresearch.org/report/nonfatal-in-the-us/>
- 8 Levin, J., Brodziak de los Reyes, I., Atchison, D., Kearns, C., Martin, A., & González, R. (2021). *Evaluation of Los Angeles Unified School District’s Student Equity Needs Index*. American Institutes for Research. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dXhZOr4_PScbag80xkZNfX2c2Vyfap63/view?usp=sharing
- 9 The Boston Public Schools Opportunity Index includes neighborhood, individual, and past performance indicators. Neighborhood indicators include academic attainment, neighborhood safety, socioeconomic status, median household income, custodianship, having a physical disorder, and being foreign born. Individual indicators include economic disadvantage, residential mobility, living in public housing, and being a recent immigrant. Past performance indicators include chronic absenteeism, course failures, Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System failures, ever having been suspended, and number of suspensions.
- 10 The CTCAC/HCD Opportunity Map indicators are grouped into four domains: economic, environmental, education, and filter. The economic indicators include poverty, adult education, employment, job proximity, and median home value. Environmental indicators are the CalEnviroScreen 4.0 indicators that measure pollution. Education indicators include mathematics proficiency, reading proficiency, high school graduation rate, and student poverty rate. Filter indicators include poverty and racial segregation.
- 11 The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has grouped social determinants of health into five domains: economic stability, education access and quality, health care access and quality, neighborhood and built environment, and social and community context.

