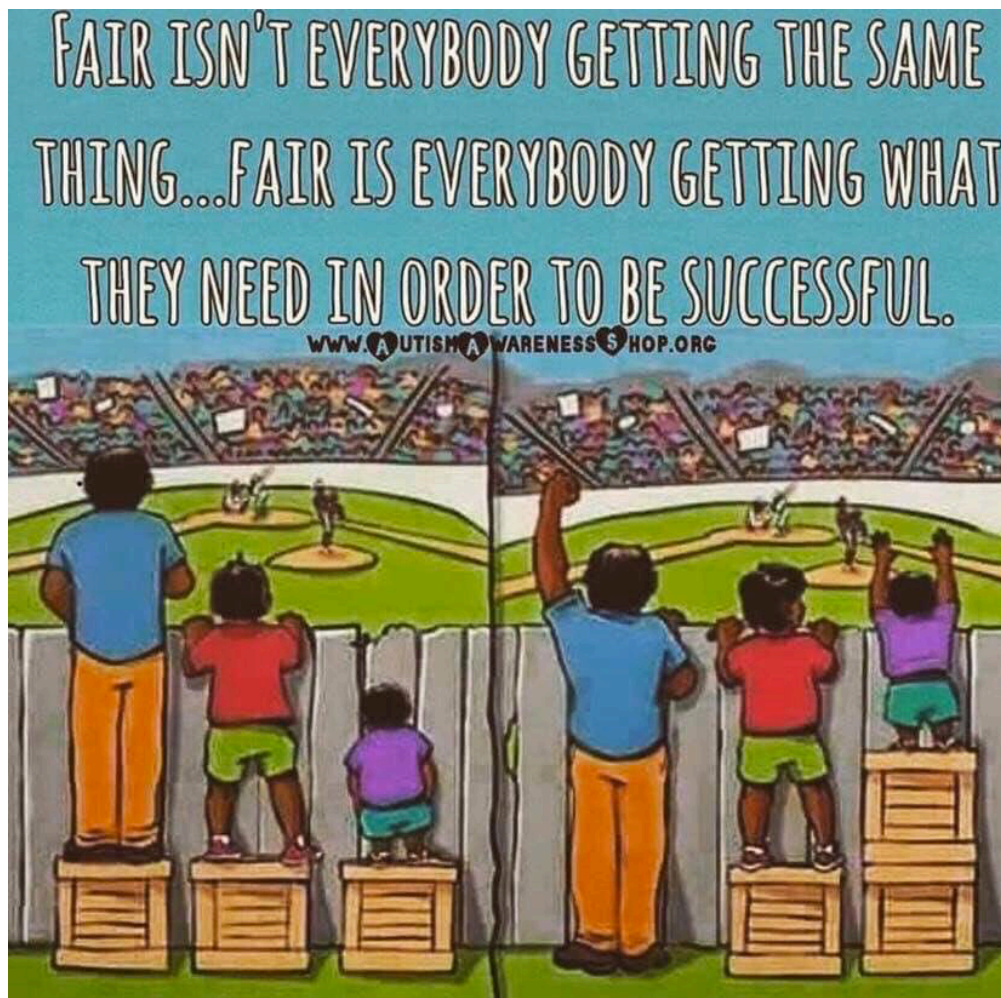


Back to School in the Show-Me-State.



“Gimme one about the teacher who’s tryin’ to change a life or two
Tomorrow she’ll be back in a red brick school
Where kids are climbin’ off the walls, it’s scary walkin’ down the halls
She’s underpaid, she’s overworked
Come on man, shout one out to her.”

- *Stick that in your country* song-Eric Church

Another school year and teachers in poor school districts across Missouri are debating about returning to their classrooms. Teachers gonna teach, but they are weary from fund raising, asking relatives to donate, or using their own money to help cover necessary school supplies. Missouri schools, particularly in poor neighborhoods, are woefully underfunded and teachers are tired of being asked to do more with less.

Consider Central School, in the Ferguson-Florissant school district, where some kindergartners begin their schooling. A red brick schoolhouse that opened in 1938, the building shows its age. Among the maintenance issues are fluorescent lights that blink or lack bulbs, neglected landscaping where grass is not mowed and weeds fill the cracks in the asphalt. Bathrooms that suffer from faulty plumbing and reek of urine. Windows won't open, doors won't lock. At Central School, teachers start their day by making sure the bathrooms have toilet paper and handing out breakfast to the kids. The \$11,089 in tax dollars per student is not enough in a neighborhood where almost 20% of parents live below the poverty line.

Eight miles away, in the Clayton, Missouri school district, kindergartners start their day at one of two campuses, the Gay Avenue campus or the Clayton High School (CHS) campus. The CHS campus includes access to the nearby Shaw Park playground. At the Gay Avenue campus, children may enjoy cooking in the kitchen, growing vegetables and herbs in the gardens and exploring the nature trail and the surrounding grounds. At Clayton schools, teachers start the day teaching; most students having arrived with more than what they need, some students carrying drinks from Starbucks. The \$17,868 tax dollars per student is plenty in this affluent neighborhood.

How does this happen? How did it come to be that Clayton, where per capita income is almost three times that of Ferguson-Florissant, receives \$6779 more tax dollars per student?

Let me try to explain. It's complicated so stay with me.

First, the numbers. The table below compares demographics and tax dollars per student between Ferguson/Florissant and Clayton school districts.

Demographic	Ferguson-Florissant	Clayton
Ethnicity	61% Black	8% Black
Median Income	\$46,844	\$117,593
Per Capita Income	\$25,519	\$72,276
Avg. Property Value	\$118,600	\$683,400
% Residents below Poverty Level	19.7%	6.9%
Tax Dollars Per Student		
From Federal	\$917	\$217
From State	\$3894	\$579
From Local	\$6278	\$17,072
Total	\$11,089	\$17,868

In Missouri, public school districts and public charter schools are funded using a combination of local, state and federal funding. Generally, the responsibility to provide the bulk of school funding falls to state and local communities; federal funding across the United States makes up less than 10% of total school funding.

Most funding for schools comes local, and almost all of these dollars come from local property taxes at a suggested rate of 3.43% of property value. Since this rate is applied consistently across all property values, schools in more affluent areas receive more local tax dollars.

State school funding in Missouri is distributed by a complicated formula that allegedly aims to bring “equity and adequacy” into account and “bridge the funding gap.” The formula: {Weighted Average Daily Attendance X State Adequacy Target X Dollar Value Modifier - Local Effort} is flawed. The central number in this formula is the State Adequacy Target (SAT). SAT is the state’s determination of the minimum dollar expenditure per student to achieve a good education. The current number is \$6131 and has not changed since 2012.

State funding, which comes from income taxes, sales tax, gaming and lottery revenues, is awarded based on a weighted average of ADA (average daily attendance) and DVM (dollar value metric). Since ADA adjusts funding based on attendance, and poor school districts have worse attendance than rich school districts, poor school districts lose. Similarly, DVM adjusts state funding up for schools in neighborhoods with a higher cost of living. Consequently, since cost of living in poor neighborhoods is generally lower than in rich neighborhoods, poor school districts lose again. Some of this funding gap is recovered with the allowance for the difference in local dollars but it’s not enough. As the table above illustrates, schools in rich neighborhoods receive more tax dollars than those in poor neighborhoods.

The system for funding schools in Missouri is complicated, archaic, and broken. It certainly fails to bring “equity and adequacy” into account nor “bridge the funding gap.” It disproportionately hurts schools in poor neighborhoods.

Which brings us back to teachers. Why would any teacher with the opportunity choose to teach in a school district short on resources versus one that is fully supplied? Why would any teacher choose the Ferguson-Florissant district versus the Clayton district?

Well, why do people volunteer to help the homeless, feed the hungry, care for the sick, or do anything that helps others at the expense of helping themselves? Perhaps they’re wired that way, perhaps they have a calling, perhaps they are the best amongst us.

Many teachers teach because they feel rewarded by making a significance difference in their student’s lives. Teachers that stay and teach in poor school districts take it a step further. They stay because they feel they make more of a difference in the life of an underprivileged student than they would in the life of a student from a well-off family.

For many teachers in poor school districts, ultimately their decision to stay comes down to one question, “Who needs good teachers and good schools more, the rich or the poor?”

Perhaps the people and politicians in Missouri need to ask themselves the same question.

That’s all I’m sayin’

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