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SCHOOLS

PARENTS UNVEIL DOCUMENTARY ON CHICAGO EDUCATION GAP

A North Shore parent group presented their documentary Thursday at Northwestern University.

By [Sofia Resnick](#) | [Email the author](#) | September 18, 2010



United we learned documentary *The Education They Deserve* highlights education disparities between Chicago-area suburban and city public schools through student voices
Credit [Sofia Resnick](#)

What's 60093 minus 60628? Approximately \$7,000.

That's the average difference between how much money is spent annually on each student at [New Trier Township High School](#) vs. each student at [Christian Fenger Academy High School](#), in Chicago's Roseland neighborhood. That number translates into materials, course offerings, athletic and arts programs, ACT/SAT scores, college enrollment and, ultimately, professional success. That's the difference a zip code makes.

Two Septembers ago, state [Sen. Rev. James Meeks](#) put a face on Illinois public-school-funding inequities by steering 30 school buses' worth of students from some of Chicago's underperforming public schools to "enroll" at New Trier's Northfield campus for one day. After this event, eight Northshore parents began meeting at Evanston resident Barbara Hiller's dining room table in Evanston to discuss this education gap and what to do about it.

They call their dining-room collective [United We Learn](#). And what they have to show for a year and a half of meeting with Illinois economists, educators and students (both the haves and the have-nots) is a 30-minute documentary called *The Education They Deserve*, which premiered last night at Northwestern University in Evanston.

The students that Meeks rounded up that day were used to being greeted by paddy wagons and gang fights every morning were faced with a different reality this fall morning: a beautiful campus, gleaming athletic facilities, seemingly endless academic and arts courses. It was the ultimate display of the haves vs. the have-nots.

The stunt gave the senator what he wanted – media attention, but his fundamental message was ultimately lost on state political leaders, who make this discrepancy possible by not addressing the education-funding formula set up in Illinois, which currently ranks 43rd among states in General Fund spending on schools, according to the [Center for Tax and Budget Accountability](#).

"All kids deserve access to quality education," Hiller said, before the film screening. "To me it's a social justice issue. A child born into poverty shouldn't be punished for that."

Hiller, now retired, is a former Nichols Middle School principal and Evanston assistant superintendent, but despite her 40 years in education, she was not aware that seniors at some high schools were learning from fifth-grade-level text books, as Fenger graduate Adella Bass points out in the film.

"The discrepancies are terrible," Hiller said. "And the issue is far more than state standards. Kids need access to arts and athletics so they can discover their own interests."

The documentary, which was funded by a Sally Mead Hands Foundation and produced by [MediaPros 24/7](#), addresses the funding gap, not through charts and graphs, but through faces and voices of students from various schools around Chicago and the northern suburbs. Despite varying income levels and home lives, all the students speak articulately; they all have dreams. And they know that, despite where and how they're educated, they will all end up working together in professional capacities.

"If those children could trade a week with us, they wouldn't make it," Bass says in the movie, referencing the violence in Roseland and other South Side neighborhoods that often takes precedent over education among student and parent concerns. Bass scored a 13 on her ACT and entered Truman College without knowing how to punctuate a sentence.

Then there's pretty Alyssa Topping, a Glenbrook South High School graduate who now attends the University of Notre Dame, on the back of a 31 ACT score.

"Even if you are the most motivated person in the world and have all the support from your family, you can only go as far as what is physically there for you to do," she says. "If there aren't the Advanced Placement classes, you can't do them. If you have a textbook from 1994, then that is what you know."

Though United We Learn did not get into the nitty-gritty of school funding, which in Illinois largely comes from property taxes, Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy President [Max McGee](#) and 13th District Cook County Commissioner [Larry Suffredin](#) briefly discussed complex policy issues with the 100-member audience, encouraging them to urge their local and state political leaders to reintroduce alternative funding solutions to Congress.

"The public has the power," Hiller said. "Politicians are elected by us, and we need to hold their feet to the fire."

Hiller said the group sent out e-vites to every politician in the state, but aside from Suffredin, none showed.

MediaPros 24/7 Anne Kavanaugh, who had a lead role in the film production, lambasted the absent leaders, saying she would spend today making angry calls and writing angry letters to local and state representatives.

"They don't want to deal with this issue because it's too difficult," she said. "We need to elect someone else then. Maybe some people here should run."

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