

Experiment in democracy: community groups vie for voice in new funding plan

By Hannah
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Draquari McGhee, a 10th grader at Edison High, concentrates in class. Draquari has lobbied state officials to require student input before districts draft annual budgets. ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE |[Buy Photo](#)

Edison High sophomore Draquari McGhee vividly remembers watching his elementary school classmates pull out new boxes of crayons at the start of each school year, while he had to make do with waxy stumps from his teacher's set.

"We would get our school supplies during the middle of the school year," he said of his early years. "That's when the tax returns came up, so my mom would get more money. That's when she could fend for us."

It's a single memory, but one that sticks with the 16-year-old, who knows what it's like to grow up in a low-income home without the frills, or even the basics, more fortunate children are used to.

The oldest of five wants better for his younger siblings — one of the main reasons he is fighting for a voice on how local schools spend new state money on low-income and foster children and English- learner students.

Draquari, a member of the [Californians for Justice](#) youth advocacy group, is just one of a collection of young activists trying to help direct how school districts use new state money. In Fresno, an experiment in democracy is bubbling, with more than two dozen community organizations and several more parent and student groups calling on school

officials for a voice.

The relatively new movement is part of the state's revamp in funding public schools. Districts are now required by law to collect suggestions from their communities — the “local” part of the Local Control Funding Formula education law.

Draquari has lobbied state officials to require student input before districts draft annual budgets. He said it's the basic things, like better desks and supplies, that students need most.

“Our books, for example, are so outdated,” he said. “Technology could be updated.”

Rhea Martin, an organizer for Californians for Justice, said the group scored a victory in November when state officials passed regulations that include students — along with parents and the community — as part of the budget process.

“So many times students are not seen as an integral part of the solutions. They're really seen as part of the problem,” she said. The group's “[Student Voice](#)” campaign changed the “perceptions of decision-makers, adults and the community in general, that students not only care, they deserve a say in their education.”

Other organizations, like [Stone Soup Fresno](#) and [Reading and Beyond](#), have pressed school officials on other issues such as ensuring parents have opportunities to comment.

In the spring, Reading and Beyond executive director Luis Santana rallied parents to attend Fresno Unified school board meetings; families from across the district showed up by the dozens to a few meetings to offer their ideas.

Unfortunately they didn't get the warm welcome they hoped for, Santana said.

“The day the board had the opportunity to hear the community, they overloaded the agenda with several items. The community had the chance to speak around 10 p.m. Those are the things I think measure their seriousness about this,” he said.

“(Trustees) need to trust us to share the information and we will trust them to continue the right steps. We are part of this process. We're paying for it.”

That's not to say no input was collected — school officials held two dozen community meetings and passed out surveys to hundreds of teachers, families and school administrators.

Alice Yang, community resource developer for Stone Soup Fresno, a southeast Asian advocacy group, said one district administrator was especially responsive to community concerns. Tammy Townsend, executive officer for state and federal programs, helped organize community meetings and was quick to respond when Stone Soup had questions, Yang said.

School districts across the state still are struggling with community engagement, said Daniel Humphrey, an education researcher who published a study on the new funding plan in October.

School districts are being asked to do something they've never really done before. “Why would anyone think a school district is good at community organizing?” Humphrey said.

Humphrey, a senior researcher for [SRI International's Center for Education Policy](#) research nonprofit in Menlo Park, said community engagement should include more than community meetings. Teachers and principals should be conduits to families and input could be gathered at a school instead of on a district-wide basis, he said.

“I think there were some glimmers of better ways to do it,” he said of the 10 districts he studied. “Bringing in people with the right skill set, investing in community leaders to elicit the public good conversation. But boy, it's a very heavy lift, and I think it's going to take a very radical change in how we approach this.”

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