

THE RECESSION AND
EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY IN THE SCHOOLS:

UNEMPLOYMENT AND EQUITY

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Within the last five years, unemployment in certain areas of the country has reached levels unknown since the Great Depression. The structural character of this unemployment means that those communities whose economies are based largely on heavy industry have shouldered a greater share of the burden. What little research there has been on the effects of unemployment on children has concentrated on the issue of the family's adaptation and coping. The goal of the present research was to demonstrate that levels of unemployment within a community affect the opportunity structure (specifically the quality of programs which local schools are able to provide) for all children within that community whether or not their own parents are unemployed.

The debate on educational excellence has focused national attention on issues of academic standards and teacher preparation and has all but ignored the impact that economic change may exert on the educational opportunities which a community can provide its children. Since school systems depend largely on local property taxes, the economic fortunes or failures of a community play a major role in the educational quality provided to the community's children. In the state of Michigan, where this research was conducted, despite a state equalization practice, the majority of funds needed to operate the state's public school system come from local taxes. When companies or industries shut down or reduce their work force the property tax base shrinks and the ability of the community to provide quality education is reduced. Financial instability makes the passage of millage requests increasingly difficult and schools are faced with belt tightening measures.

The prediction of this research is that school districts have been differentially impacted by the recent recession and that the quantity and quality of educational opportunities which individual schools provide will be associated with the economic conditions and changes existent within their respective communities.

METHOD

Surveys were sent to one hundred forty four teachers and fifty-one principals from twelve school districts in southeastern Michigan. Demographic information including social, income, and labor force characteristics as well as median family income and unemployment statistics were obtained for each district. Unemployment statistics from 1980 through 1983 were obtained for each six months interval in that period. These statistics were obtained for each township where the school districts were located from the Outstate Labor Market. During that period ? unemployment for the communities in the sample ranged from 7.1% to 21.0%.

Principals were asked to complete a survey about reductions and eliminations of programs, support personnel, and other services which had formerly been provided in their building. They were asked to focus only on those programs which had changed during the last two years. In addition, principals were asked about the teaching conditions and general morale of personnel in their building. Finally, they were asked to complete two open-ended items:

Michigan's economy is undergoing considerable change. What effect, if any, do you feel this change has had on education within your building?

What recommendations would you make for improving the quality of education for your students in the face of major changes in the economy?

Similarly, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers within each district were asked to respond to the following open-ended question:

Michigan's economy is undergoing considerable change. As a classroom teacher, in what way(s) have these changes affected your teaching?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Schools were categorized based on township unemployment statistics for April, 1983 (The survey was conducted in September, 1983) as high (15-21%), medium (11-14%) or low (7-10%) unemployment areas. Those districts where unemployment was high showed a pattern of millage defeats, reduction and elimination of school services such as gym, art, music, and support personnel. Chi-squared and maximum likelihood statistics were computed and revealed significant differences in reduction and elimination of services and personnel between low unemployment schools and the other two. No significant differences in teaching conditions (increased class size or teaching unaccustomed grade level) were found between schools, however. Teacher morale was reported to be lower in the middle and high unemployment schools than in the low unemployment schools.

Responses to open-ended questions resulted in a wide array of accommodative measures and recommendations for solving the crisis in the schools. Teachers and principals in districts hardest hit were much more likely to note the connection between the economy and the resources and stress within their institutions. Contrary to this pattern those districts where parents were not by and large experiencing periods of lay-off or more permanent termination, reported that the recession had not caused changes in their institutions.

Teachers in medium and high unemployment districts reported that their students were carrying the effects of stress at home to school with them. Such teachers perceived an increase in their duties of "filling in" for parents as emotional support to children. They also noted that the elimination of such "special" programs as music or gym meant an increase in ? teaching hours and a decrease in preparation time for them.

Principals in these districts noted that the failure of recent millages meant a lack of funds for basic building repair, textbook and equipment purchases, in addition to the loss of programs and support staff. Like the teachers, principals often added details about stress at home and lower morale within the community. One principal wrote:

Most parents are unemployed automotive workers. Many have been laid off for one or two years and have less money. There is less interest in school.

Another:

The future for many of our parents is very uncertain. These families are undergoing considerable stress. The children are pre-occupied in their thought processes and the stress is felt at school.

Perhaps the most telling connection between the health of the local economy and the school's ability to provide services was made by a principal who wrote:

McLouth Steel was our main means of support when it went bankrupt.

Schools have been historically considered a great equalizer of opportunity within the society. Data such as these suggest that the opportunity structure for children varies according to individual district resources and, in addition, that such resources are sensitive to patterns of economic change.

TABLE I

The Association between District Unemployment Rates
and Reductions in School Services

Basic Enrichment Programs	Unemployment Rates (April, 1983)						Maximum Likelihood Statistic
	<10%		11-14%		15-21%		
	N-6		N-25		N-18		
	% Reduced	% Eliminated	% Reduced	% Eliminated	% Reduced	% Eliminated	
Music	0	0	37	4	17	76	13.98 ^{xxx}
Band	0	0	14	28	26	40	4.93
Art	0	0	18	36	31	56	7.93*
Phys Ed	0	0	25	41	27	50	6.88*
Library	0	0	40	0	30	23	5.86*
Field Trips	0	25	52	26	37	18	.298
Talented/ Gifted	0	0	9	9	27	44	5.91*

* p ≤ .05

xxx p ≤ .001

N=50 Schools

TABLE II

**The Association between District Unemployment Rates
and Reductions in Support Personnel**

Support Personnel	Unemployment Rates (April, 1983)						Maximum Likelihood Statistic
	<10% N=6		11-14% N=25		15-21% N=18		
	% Reduced	% Eliminated	% Reduced	% Eliminated	% Reduced	% Eliminated	
Teacher Aide	0	0	78	0	66	22	7.97 ^{***}
Title I	0	0	38	0	0	8	9.33 ^{***}
Speech Therapist	0	0	27	0	20	0	3.32
Social Worker	16	16	62	16	43	0	4.67 ⁺
Psychologist	0	0	34	13	20	0	4.17

+ $p \leq .10$

* $p \leq .05$

*** $p \leq .01$

N= 50 Schools

TABLE III

**The Association between District Unemployment Rates
and Teaching Conditions**

Teaching Condition	Unemployment Rates (April, 1983)						Maximum Likelihood Statistic
	<10% N=6		11-14% N=25		15-21% N=18		
	° Of Cases	% In Category	° Of Cases	% In Category	° Of Cases	% In Category	
Lost Break Time	1	50	13	54	14	82	3.89
Increased Class Size	0		15	63	12	71	2.39
Unaccustomed Grade Level	5	83	16	67	15	79	1.80
Combined Grades	2	33	18	72	14	74	3.50

N= 50 Schools