2023 CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

OVERVIEW

Purpose
IDRA established the José A. Cárdenas School Finance Fellows Program to honor the memory of its founder, Dr. José Angel Cárdenas. The goal of the program is to engage the nation’s most promising researchers and practitioners in investigating school finance solutions that secure equity and excellence for all public school students. The program focuses on and funds school finance research that builds cross-disciplinary and inter-sector perspectives on equity. IDRA will select one or more fellows in this cycle who will dedicate themselves to a period of intense study and writing in school finance. IDRA will hold a symposium that includes the release and publication of the fellow’s program paper. IDRA will also disseminate the paper and findings to the education research and policymaker community. Additional information about the program and the work of previous fellows is online at: www.idra.org/research_articles/fellows-program.

Key Dates
October 15, 2023 Application deadline
November 15, 2023 Notification to applicants
November 30, 2023 Formalization of agreements and announcement of selection
Dec. 2023-Aug. 2024 Fellow, after a period of research in consultation with IDRA, develops initial findings and submits research paper with policy recommendations
Fall-Winter 2024 Fellow’s paper finalized
Early 2025 IDRA José A. Cárdenas School Finance Symposium

Total Award and Length of Appointment
The José A. Cárdenas School Finance Fellow(s) will be selected beginning in 2023. Fellow(s) will receive a stipend of up to $20,000 to include cost of release time. The awardees will spend the equivalent of one week at the IDRA office in San Antonio engaging in a structured program. IDRA staff will work with fellows to finalize program details.

ELIGIBILITY AND SELECTION CRITERIA

The IDRA José A. Cárdenas School Finance Fellows Program is open to all eligible applicants regardless of race, national origin, religion, gender, age, disability, or sexual orientation.

To be eligible, applicants must be:
- Doctoral candidate or completed doctoral training by time of selection, or
- Academic candidate reflecting scholarly experience in conducting school finance or related research, or
- Practitioner with an equivalent level of academic/professional achievement.

IDRA will evaluate the applicant’s past research record, career trajectory in education research and the quality of the project described in the application. Applications must be made by the individual applying for the fellowship. Group applications will not be accepted.
POTENTIAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED

The IDRA José A. Cárdenas School Finance Fellows Program is designed to inform policy reform in the area of school finance. Based on expert panel recommendations, we request that applicants develop a novel research question based on the topics of inquiry outlined below. Variations of these topics will be considered as well as other research questions, provided the applicant offers compelling arguments why their proposed focus topic is a strong alternative.

Topics of Inquiry (in no order of priority):

1. The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted education across the country. Schools saw drops in attendance and enrollment and were unprepared to fund education activities beyond the classroom. The pandemic further exposed vulnerabilities among underfunded schools and their students, especially students of color and those from families with low incomes. We welcome research projects aimed at understanding the pandemic’s impact on school funding and ongoing funding challenges related to students’ instruction recovery. The research could explore school funding systems across education levels (K-12 and/or higher education), and in one or more school districts or states or from a national perspective. Guiding questions might include:
   - How have state or school systems responded to school funding vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic?
   - How can state and local governments imbed school funding mechanisms that adapt to health, social and economic shocks?
   - What are new challenges to school funding post-pandemic, including for student learning, teacher workforce, facilities, etc.?

2. The systemic efforts to privatize schools have taken a three-prong approach: defund public schools, demonize public schools, and privatize schools. Guiding questions might include:
   - What has been the impact on funding for traditional public schools in states where separately-managed charter and private schools have opened?
   - How are school privatization efforts affecting taxpayer equity issues in certain states, for example, those basing school funding on property wealth per pupil?
   - How has this impacted the overall efficiency of the public school system, including the opening and closing of new schools?
   - What results are we seeing, in terms of student performance, segregated enrollment patterns by race and/or income, and college access and readiness?

3. In recent school finance litigation, some state courts (e.g., Texas, Connecticut, Florida) have suggested that even with additional resources, schools cannot effectively serve economically disadvantaged and other underserved groups of students because of the barriers they encounter in the home. Guiding questions might include:
   - How have portrayals of historically marginalized communities influenced funding policy?
   - To what extent are student outcomes related to variance in school funding as opposed to poverty in the home? Other variables may include, but not be limited to, quality and access to a high-quality curriculum, teaching quality, student engagement, and parent and community involvement, as noted in the IDRA Quality Schools Action Framework™.

4. Educator salaries and benefits make up the lion’s share of state education budgets. State policymakers often see the hefty price tag and offer proposals to try to reduce the budget allocation. These efforts may include increasing class sizes or pupil-teacher ratios, lowering certification requirements to recruit lesser-qualified people into the field of teaching, or shifting funding priorities to performance-based outcomes. Guiding questions might include:
   - What is the interrelationship between school finance and teaching quality?
   - What other factors may account for the variance in teaching quality between underserved schools and more affluent schools?
• How might the proposed “reform” measures impact teaching quality and student learning?
• Is the trade-off worth it, especially in light of the continuing achievement and opportunity gaps between underserved students and other students?
• What are some equity-based school finance alternatives that states should pursue to ensure all children have access to excellent teachers and schools?

5. Litigation has historically served as an effective strategy to accelerate policy reforms designed to improve educational equity. However, some courts have turned away advocates, suggesting battles on school funding and educational policy reform are more appropriate for the state houses than the court houses. Guiding questions might include
• What are important lessons learned from recent court challenges to school funding inequities?
• What are some novel legal arguments that could be made to secure school funding equity and what are the potential court and political barriers to their success?
• How might communities and advocates strategize for improved school finance systems both as a parallel strategy to litigation and as an independent effort to ensure excellent schools for all children, and what resources are available for communities?

6. While much discussion over the years at the state policy level in realizing equal educational opportunities for all has involved the debate over equitable and adequate state school finance systems, more recent research turns to closing “opportunity gaps,” such as access to high-quality teaching. Research questions should focus specifically on students of color and/or emergent bilingual students and guiding questions might include:
• What are some of the policy reforms addressing opportunity gaps, and how successful have they been in realizing equal educational opportunities for all?
• What is the relationship between opportunity gaps and funding mechanisms?
• What are some novel ideas for adjusting funding formulae to address opportunity gaps?

7. Public schools are largely supported by local property taxes, an issue that has been litigated and at the center of school finance reform. The question of how to equitably fund schools and leverage appropriate state revenue sources varies state to state based on taxing structures. This area of inquiry invites research into sustainable and equitable tax revenue streams to fund public education. Guiding questions might include:
• How does the longstanding relationship between land value and public education funding impact today’s school funding debates?
• What tax revenue models contribute to an adequately and equitably funded state school system?
• How do local school systems assess available revenue systems in their budget decisions?

APPLICATION PROCESS

To apply, submit the following.

Complete application form online: https://idra.news/FellowsApplicationForm

The online application requires the following:

• **Curriculum vita reflecting related experience, research and publications.**

• **Description of proposed research** (up to seven pages). Include the following information.

  1. Detailed description of the topic to be addressed and its significance in the area of school finance reform.
  2. The uniqueness or originality of the proposed effort.
  3. The project’s key research question and related hypotheses. (Note the research must address one of the topics of inquiry posed in the Call for Applications or provide compelling evidence for a variance from those options.)
4. Methodology, including key activities, timelines and techniques to be used to analyze data collected.

5. Brief overview of relevant literature in the area to be examined.

6. Relevance of the inquiry to contemporary school finance policy deliberations.

7. Timelines for data collection, analyses and research completion.

8. Budget of up to $20,000 to include research expenses, cost of release time, travel and one week at IDRA.

**Three letters of recommendation** from parties familiar with you and your academic experience. Practitioners may include letters from parties familiar with other professional experiences, but at least one letter must be from a recommender with knowledge about the applicant’s academic background and research capacities.

Questions may be directed to Dr. Joanna Sánchez, 210-444-1710, joanna.sanchez@idra.org.

*IDRA is a national independent, non-profit organization whose mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every young person through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. Learn more at https://www.idra.org.*