Appendix L:
District Finance Officer and District Administrator Interview Protocol and Consent Form for the Study of Weighted Student Funding (WSF) and School-Based Budgeting (SBB) Systems

District Finance Officer and District Administrator Interview Protocol

District:	Interviewer:
State:	
Interviewee(s):	Date/Time:

Introduction

Key points to convey to the respondent:

- This is a study conducted by American Institutes for Research on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education. The purpose of the study is to investigate the funding policies associated with school-based budgeting systems to see whether implementing such systems lead to changes in the way in which resources are allocated. Specifically, it examines: the structure of SBB systems; the outcomes of such systems in terms of the level of principal autonomy, transparency of resource allocation, empowerment of school stakeholders in the decision-making process, and equity of resource distribution; the interactions of SBB systems with school choice policies; and the challenges districts may have face in implementing these systems.

- **This is not an evaluation of your district's performance. Rather, this is an exploratory investigation to learn more about the different experiences districts have had in developing and implementing their SBB systems.**

- As part of this study, we are conducting case studies of nine study districts that have implemented WSF systems, which include interviews with district and school staff, as well as an in-depth analysis of audited fiscal files and budget data. In addition, we are administering a nationally representative survey of district officials and school principals to better understand the perceptions of practitioners in both SBB and non-SBB districts and schools regarding their funding and resource allocation practices.

- The study's results will be discussed in a final report that will be available publicly. Given the interest in learning from the specific experiences of districts implementing WSF systems, we will name the case study districts; however, we will not include any information in our public reporting that identifies schools or individuals. In addition, while staff from the U.S. Department of Education will see notes from our interviews, the notes we share will be reviewed and edited to ensure that we do not include any information that could identify individuals or specific schools. The study team will make sure that access to all data with identifiable information is limited to members of the study team. We will not provide information that identifies you or your school(s) to anyone outside the study team, except as required by law.

- We know that you are very busy, and we appreciate your time. We anticipate that this interview will take approximately 60 minutes.

- We would like to record this conversation so that we can be sure we have an accurate record of our conversation. We will not share this recording with anyone outside the research team, and we will delete the recording after the final report is complete. Is that okay with you?

- Your participation is completely voluntary—you may skip any question you like with no consequence. Through the course of the interview, if we touch on topics that you believe to be sensitive for any reason, please bring that to our attention, and we will not include these comments either in public reporting or in discussions with the U.S. Department of Education.

Do you have any questions for us about the study?

If asked why or how the district was selected for the study:

- The districts for the study were selected because they are all using a WSF system to allocate funds to schools. We aimed to include a set of case study districts that are diverse with respect to geographic location, age of WSF system, and formula design.

WSF Goals and Strategies

Note to interviewer: Items marked with '*' indicate topics that require the respondent to reflect on circumstances and activities before and around the initial implementation of the WSF system. If the respondent was not employed by the district at the time or does not recall historical details, consider reframing the item to focus on *current* implementation or skip the item, as appropriate.

Question	
1. **As we understand, your district adopted a WSF system in [***list school year***]. Is that correct?** **Are you aware of how the WSF system came about in your district? Were school leaders or other school-level staff involved in the decision-making process about the design and/or launch of the WSF system? If so, how? ***	**Probe for:** • *Which particular school staff were involved?* • *[If applicable] What, if any, role did the teachers' union have in the process? The school board? External stakeholders?* • *Were you involved in the process? Who else at the district level was involved? How?*
2. **In introducing a WSF system, what issues was your district intending to address? *** [*For districts with mature WSF systems only*] **Have the aims of the system changed at all since then? If so, how and why? ***	**Listen for:** • *Flexibility/autonomy of general funds, categorical funds; equity with which general or categorical funds are distributed to schools* • *School choice* • *Per-pupil allocations; actual versus average teacher salaries; staff mobility* • *Transparency, predictability; innovation* • *Staff and community engagement*
3. **How does your district's WSF system relate to the issues you mentioned?** [*If respondent indicated changes in aims of the system in Q2*] **Have you adapted the system to respond to its shifting aims? If so, how and why? ***	**Probe for:** • *What are the most important components of your district's WSF system?* • *Do you think these pieces make/will make a difference in addressing these issues? Why or why not?*
4. **How [do/will] you know if your district is successful in reaching these goals?**	**Probe for:** • *What benchmarks or indicators [are/will] be used to measure progress toward these goals? What are the data sources?* • *How [do/will] you use the data?*

Initial Implementation of WSF

Question	
5. **What was the original reaction from schools about implementing the WSF system? Has this reaction changed over time? If so, how?** *	**Probe for:** • *Did the district experience a problem of schools feeling like there were "winners" and "losers" under the WSF system, as some schools got more money and others got less?* • *Was there any opposition to the new WSF system? If so, from whom (principals, teachers parents)? What were their objections?*
6. [*If information on the WSF formula is collected prior to the interview in pre-interview survey or elsewhere*] **I understand that [summarize basic structure of the WSF formula, including the base per-pupil amount and weights included].** **Do you know how the weights for different students were originally determined? Have the weights changed since their original development?** * [*If information on the WSF formula is NOT collected prior to the interview*] **Can you describe how the WSF formula is structured, including what the base per-pupil amount is, what weights are included, and if there any other foundational amounts?** **Do you know how the weights for different students were originally determined? Have the weights changed since their original development?** *	**Probe for:** • *How was the base funding amount determined?* • *How did the district develop the weights?* * – *What data or information (literature, student outcome data, emulation of federal or state formula to districts) did you use to develop the weights?* • *Are there weights included in the formula other than those for specific student needs (e.g., based on school size, location, student outcomes)?* • [For districts with mature WSF systems] *How often are the weights reviewed and modified?* • [For districts with new WSF systems] *Are there plans to review and adjust the weights, as necessary? If so, how frequent will these reviews be?*

Question	
7. Which federal and state funds are distributed to schools through the WSF?	**Prove for:** - *Federal funds like Title I, II, or III?* - *State categorical funds?*

8. What other funding sources can schools receive outside of funds received through the WSF?	**Probe for:**
	• *Examples, if needed:*
	  – *Private education foundations that support schools?*
	  – *Federal grants?*
	  – *Private grants?*
	• *How do these other funding sources interact with the WSF? Does it affect how much schools might get through the WSF?*

9. How are funding allocation decisions different under the WSF system compared to the previous system? *	**Probe for:** • *Which services, if any, were devolved to the schools? Why?* • *How did the distribution of funds to schools change after WSF implementation?* • *How did changes in the distribution of funds affect small schools and other less traditional schools such as charters?*

Successes, Challenges, and Effects of the WSF System

Question	
10. What successes has your district experienced in implementing the WSF system? Can you describe any factors that may have enabled these successes?	**Probe for:** • [For districts with mature WSF systems] *Have the successes in implementation changed over time? If so, in what ways? *
11. What challenges has your district faced in implementing a WSF system? How well has your district been able to address these challenges, and how? *	**Probe for:** • *Obtaining buy-in from district- or school-level staff, unions, school board, parents, other community stakeholders?* • *Technical capacity?* • *Challenges for small schools or charter schools?* • *Were there any unpredicted challenges?*
12. How has the distribution of funding under the WSF system affected the opportunities of students with particular educational needs to succeed relative to others?	**Probe for:** • *For which groups of students?* • *Has the budgeting/planning process created an incentive for schools to attract students who require additional resources to educate? Why or why not? Has it created any disincentives?*

Ongoing Implementation of WSF / Decision-making Process

Question	
13. **Could you please walk me through your district's annual planning and budgeting process, from when it begins to when key decisions are made?**	**Probe for:** • *When does this process begin?* • *When and how is information on school allocations provided to schools?* • *When are schools' initial spending plans due? How does the amount of planning time compare to the amount before WSF was introduced?* * • *When and how does the district review these initial plans and work with schools to revise the plans?* • *When are schools' final plans due?* • *Who are the key stakeholders involved in the process? What are their roles?* • *As part of the process, do you conduct a needs assessment? What other data are used?* [**Note to interviewer:** *Needs assessment* refers to a systematic process to identify the district's educational strengths and the areas that need to improve and is used to prioritize the areas that most affect student achievement]

Question	
14. How would you describe your district's approach to giving principals autonomy in decision-making? **Over what proportion of their total school budgets do principals typically have decision-making autonomy? Are there any limitations or guidelines on how they may use these funds? If so, what?**	**Listen for:** ● *Autonomy for all: All principals have autonomy* ● *Earned autonomy: Autonomy granted to higher-performing, but not lower-performing schools; district more active in managing resources for lower-performing schools* ● *Tiered autonomy: Tiered levels of autonomy based on performance, growth, and school capacity; struggling schools provided more support, resources, and guidance* **Probe for:** ● *How consistent is the level of discretion across schools? Are there any differences in the district's approach to autonomy for smaller schools and other less traditional types of schools such as charters?* ● *How does the level of discretion and autonomy under the WSF system compare to the level under the previous system? Has it changed since the beginning of the WSF system? ** ● *Would you like to see the district or schools have more control over school-level expenditures?* ● *Which revenue sources are pushed through the WSF formula and what share of these sources does the amount flowing through the WSF represent?*
15. [Note to interviewer: Be sure to capture information on both input (budgeting and use of resources) and output (student performance) accountability.**]** **What kinds of accountability mechanisms, if any, has your district implemented in conjunction with the WSF system?** **How does the district review and monitor school plans and budgets?**	**Probe for:** ● *What tracking systems, if any, does the district have in place to understand how funds are spent at the school level?* ● *Are there any consequences for particular budget decisions made by schools? For declines in student outcomes (such as decreased autonomy)?* ● *Are the consequences consistent across schools? [If applicable] Are charter schools held to the same accountability standards?* ● *[If applicable] How has principal accountability changed under the WSF system, if at all?* *[If not implemented] Why were new accountability mechanisms not implemented?* ● *[If applicable] Does the district require modifications of plans to ensure resources are being used responsibly?*

Question	
16. How transparent is the current resource allocation process to stakeholders, including school board members, principals, teachers and other school staff, parents, and other community members?	**Probe for:** • *What steps, if any, has the district taken to increase transparency?* • *[If applicable] What successes or failures have you encountered in attempting to increase transparency?* • *Have changes in transparency affected the degree to which schools are held accountable for results?* • *What kinds of questions have you and your staff received from schools about fund allocations?* • *Are school budgets sufficiently predictable or stable for schools to effectively plan and budget from year to year?*

Support and Training on WSF

Question	

17. How well do principals, teachers, and school leadership team members understand the WSF system? How prepared are they to make decisions about program planning, budgeting, and resource allocation?	**Probe for:**
	
	• [If not clear understanding]
	  – *What do they know? What do you wish they knew?*
	  – *What perceptions or misperceptions do they have?*
	• [If not prepared]
	  – *What additional resources or supports do you think schools need to successfully implement the WSF system? Are there any plans to provide these?*

18. How would you characterize the district's approach to supporting schools with making resource allocation decisions?	**Listen for:**
	
	• *Providing schools directives versus disseminating best practices*
	
	Probe for:
	
	• *Has your department provided any technical assistance or training to the schools in your district on budgeting? If yes:*
	  – *Who was the intended audience for the training (principals, other school administrators, school leadership teams, teachers)?*
	  – *What was the focus?*
	• *Has the role of the district in assisting schools around budgeting changed at all since implementation of the WSF system? If yes, how?* *

Concluding Questions

I would like to end this conversation with a few questions about "lessons learned" to date about the implementation of the WSF policy.

Question	

19. Are there any district-, state-, or federal-level policies that promote or create barriers to more effective implementation of the budgeting/planning policy for your school? If so, what are they?	**Probe for:**
	• *Is there an impact from:*
	   – [If applicable] The district's collective bargaining agreements?
	   – District mandates and policies, such as:
	     » [If applicable] *School choice policies?*
	     » *Hiring and placement policies?*
	     » *Use of average versus actual salaries in charging against school budgets?*
	   – State school finance system?
	   – State charter school policies?
	   – Other federal or state policies (e.g., accountability, curriculum and standards)?
	   If so, what do you feel is the impact?
	• *For those policies that have created barriers, have you been able to find ways of overcoming the issues they present?*
	• *What, if anything, would you like to see changed about these policies?*

20. What changes would you make to the budgeting/planning process or the funding formula to improve its implementation or its benefits to schools? Why? **21. Is there anything I haven't asked you about your district's budgeting/planning process or the WSF system that you would like to comment on?**	

Thank you so much for your assistance with this important project!

**Study of Weighted Student Funding Systems and School-Based Budgeting Systems
Informed Consent**

Purpose

American Institutes for Research (AIR), under contract with the Policy and Program Studies Service (PPSS) of the U.S. Department of Education, is conducting a study of the funding policies associated with school-based budgeting (SBB) systems to see whether implementing such systems lead to changes in the way in which resources are allocated. Specifically, it examines: the structure of SBB systems; the outcomes of such systems in terms of the level of principal autonomy, transparency of resource allocation, empowerment of school stakeholders in the decision-making process, and equity of resource distribution; the interactions of SBB systems with school choice policies; and the challenges districts may have face in implementing these systems.

To assist with the study, we are asking district and school staff to participate in interviews. You will be asked about the following topics: how your funding formula is structured, your role in budgeting and resource allocation decision making, and challenges and successes in WSF implementation. The interview is designed to last approximately 60 minutes.

Risks and Discomfort

There are few anticipated or known risks in participating in this study.

Benefits

Your participation in the study will contribute to an understanding of the implementation, advantages, and challenges of SBB systems for use by state and federal policymakers to support districts.

Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to respond to certain questions or discontinue the interview at any time.

Privacy

Responses to this data collection will be used only for research purposes. No part of the study involves evaluation of any individual. The reports prepared for the study will identify the case study districts; however, we will not associate responses with specific schools or individuals. We will not provide information that identifies you or your school(s), except as required by law. If there is information that you do not want shared directly in any reporting, please let me know.

We would like your consent to record the interview. Recordings will be kept in a secure location and will not be accessed by anyone outside of the study team. The audio recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. You can participate in the interview but decline to have it recorded. Additionally, if you elect to have the interview recorded, you may stop the recording at any time.

More Information

If you would like more information about this study, you may contact the Project Director, Jesse Levin, at the American Institutes for Research at 650-376-6270 or jlevin@air.org. For questions regarding your rights as a subject participating in this research, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at IRBChair@air.org or toll free at 1–800–634–0797.

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Informed Consent

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____   **Date:** _____

Print Name: _____   **Position:** _____

District: _____

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