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North Shore activists tour Chicago's Fenger High School for school funding lesson

United We Learn group joins Sen. James Meeks on fact-finding mission

By [Lisa Black](#)

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North Shore civic activists arrived at Chicago's Fenger High School on Monday to learn about disparities in education, but it was hard to ignore the pile of stuffed animals and flowers near the front entrance.

The memorial to Derrion Albert, 16, a student beaten to death nearby last month, served as a powerful reminder about the stark differences between Chicago's impoverished South Side and the affluent North Shore.

The suburban group, United We Learn, went to the school on a fact-finding mission at the invitation of Sen. James Meeks, D-Chicago. Several parents and activists formed United We Learn in September 2008, when Meeks tried to register 1,000 Chicago public school students at New Trier Township High School in Winnetka.

The activists agree with Meeks that the state's reliance on property taxes causes inequities in the schools. They hope to influence their North Shore neighbors by educating them on how the disparities affect everyone statewide, said Lali Watt, a former Wilmette trustee.

Nearly all of Fenger's 1,200 students are African-American and come from low-income families, officials said.

State Sen. Chris Lauzen, R-Aurora, also attended the tour at Meeks' request to provide another viewpoint – one that argues against increasing school funding. After learning that most incoming freshmen cannot read beyond a fifth-grade level, Lauzen questioned if the current funds could be spent more wisely, such as on early-childhood programs.

"The question becomes ... is there ever going to be enough (money) when a child doesn't have a person who cares about how they do in school?" Lauzen said.

Lee Goodman of Northbrook choked up at that point, saying, "This hurts to hear a senator talk this way."

Later, Goodman explained that Lauzen was trying to deal with the issue at the level of budgets, dollars and taxes.

"It's never going to be enough," he said, "until we agree as a society that this needs to be done."