

EDUCATION JUSTICE

COST STUDIES

Upside Down

In most states, the amounts and distribution of state and local school funding are determined politically. Therefore, the amounts usually reflect the relative political power of suburban legislators, not necessarily the needs of the state's students and schools.

Meanwhile, states require schools to teach certain content and students to meet specific learning goals. To enable students to reach these targets, school funding and other state laws must ensure all children have a genuine “opportunity to learn” the required content. However, most states have not aligned their funding systems with educational goals. Cost studies offer a more rational process for state school funding decisions.

Right Side Up

To design a better funding approach, states should begin with their student learning goals and then determine, for all children:

- The programs and resources needed to give them sufficient “opportunity to learn” in order to reach the goals
- The costs of building and maintaining these opportunities in all schools and
- The state education finance system best suited to provide this level of funding on a sustained and stable basis

Each state can ensure its students a genuine opportunity to reach the state's educational goals, but only if the state is committed to doing so. For a brief explanation of educational cost studies, see [A Guide to Cost Study Methodologies](#).

Over 50 Studies

Over 50 statewide cost studies, conducted in 39 states have attempted to define an opportunity to learn (also called “adequacy”) and estimate the costs for all types of school districts and students. A few of these studies also recommend some of the details of a state finance system.

Numerous specific issue cost studies have focused on key programs or resources, such as pre-K and programs for English learners.

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Need for Improvement

Study methodologies and the data available have both improved, but important limitations remain.

First, education cost studies ignore the costs of overcoming school and district deficits caused by long-term under funding. In fact, the studies typically state that they assume adequate buildings and other school capacities are already in place. Similar to “deficiency correction” funding for neglected school buildings, under-funded districts face additional costs, such as professional development to build a strong faculty and an infusion of books and supplies and equipment to bring “instrumentalities of learning” up to par. Cost study experts should calculate and include these costs in future studies.

Second, researchers and finance experts need to better understand the costs of educating children from poverty backgrounds, students learning in schools with concentrated poverty, and students learning English. Mississippi adds only 5% of a “base cost” for low-income children, while Maryland adds 100%. The higher 100% amount is more realistic but not yet adequately researched and documented.

In Quality Education Litigation

Schoolchildren, parents, and school districts in low-wealth urban and rural communities bring lawsuits in state courts to obtain sufficient resources for educational opportunities.

During the trials in these cases, both sides sometimes submit cost studies as evidence. Plaintiffs typically present studies that show more funding is necessary for basic resources, such as qualified teachers, decent facilities, and programs for kids with special needs. Defendant states occasionally present cost studies as evidence that a lower increase is needed or that a [newly enacted funding system](#) solves the funding problem.

Courts in five states have ordered their states to perform cost studies as part of their remedy orders in these cases. In [Wyoming](#), [Ohio](#), [New York](#), and [Arkansas](#), the states have studied the costs of education as part of an effort to bring their state funding systems into compliance with their own state constitutions. In [Arizona](#), the state has studied the costs of educating English learners, as ordered by the federal district court.

Federal Goals

Education Justice and Education Law Center call for the federal government to “conduct studies to determine the costs of providing a high-quality education” for all students in the U.S., as part of the Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA) and its [recommendations](#) for improving federal education law.

The federal goal of “a fair, equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education” (20 U.S.C. § 6301) is denied to millions of children in America, and the federal government has not determined how much funding and which specific resources and programs are necessary

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to finally fulfill this long-standing dream. Although the GAO (Government Accountability Office) Strategic Plan for 2004-09 included the assessment of the educational needs of students for a “better congressional understanding of the resources needed for a world-class education system,” that assessment has not been done.

Resources

A Guide to Cost Study Methodologies (2009).

For a summary of the “deficiency correction” funding for school buildings in Arizona, see Molly A. Hunter (2005). “Building on Judicial Intervention: The Redesign of School Facilities Funding in Arizona,” *Journal of Law and Education* 34(2) 173.

William Mathis, *After Five Years: Revisiting the Cost of the No Child Left Behind Act*, in Rice, J. K. & Roellke, C. F. (Eds.). *The Costs of Accountability: Implications of High Stakes Education Policies for Resources and Capacities*. Information Age Publishing. 2007.

See discussion of three cost studies conducted in Ohio, in Molly A. Hunter, *Trying to Bridge the Gaps: Ohio's Search for an Education Finance Remedy*, 26 *Journal of Education Finance* 63 (Summer 2000).

Cost Study Examples

New Mexico - “An Independent Comprehensive Study of the New Mexico Public School Funding Formula”

Pennsylvania “Costing Out the Resources Needed to Meet Pennsylvania’s Public Education Goals”

Arkansas “Recalibrating the Arkansas School Funding Structure”

Kansas “Elementary and Secondary Education in Kansas: Estimating the Costs of K-12 Education Using Two Approaches”