



## Printable Edition

*Note: This resource includes all articles from the October 2010 Rural Policy Matters newsletter.*

### Facts and Figures About States with the Highest Percentage of Small Rural Districts

**Question:** Which eight states have the highest percentage of small rural districts?

**Answer:** North Dakota, Montana, Vermont, South Dakota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Maine, and Alaska.

### i3 Awards Don't Reach Many High-Needs Rural Districts

The U.S. Education Department's Investing in Innovation (i3) competitive grant program is supposed to improve K-12 achievement and close achievement gaps, decrease dropout rates, increase high school graduation rates, and improve teacher and school leader effectiveness. All laudable objectives, and critical for high poverty rural schools that serve communities that face some of the most difficult challenges.

Forty-nine of 1,698 applicants won awards totaling close to \$650 million, so we wondered how many of those winners plan to serve Rural 900 school districts. The Rural 900 are the 900 rural and small town school districts with the highest percentages of disadvantaged students (roughly the top ten percent).

It is not a very encouraging inquiry. The R900 districts are located in 37 states. In 19 of those 37 states, there was no i3 project that identified any school district of any kind that it planned to serve (some project applications did not identify school districts to be served, or did so only in documents not made available to the public).

Those 19 states serve 38% of all students in R900 districts, and the average poverty rate among them is 39%, greater than nearly every inner city urban district.

There are i3 projects in another 12 states, but none of those projects are in any rural districts. These 12 states serve 39% of all students in R900 districts and their average poverty rate is 37%, higher than all but the Bronx and Detroit among major inner city school districts. (Note: poverty rates in small urban districts, like Flint, Michigan; Rochester, New York; and Laredo, Texas are actually higher than the rate in major inner city districts).

Four more R900 states had an i3 project that did plan to serve rural areas, but no R900 districts. Eight percent of all R900 students live in those four states; they have a combined poverty rate of 34%, about the rate of Philadelphia.

In all, only six i3 winners named R900 districts they intended to include. The total number of R900 districts they named? Thirteen.

And in four of these six projects, the R900 participation was a shadow of the larger effort planned for urban districts by these i3 programs.

There were four projects that may serve more R900 districts, but they did not disclose exactly which districts they would serve. In two cases, these players-to-be-named-later may well include more R900 districts. One project, Teach for America, lists 20 or so districts that we believe to be Rural 900 districts, but they are buried in the midst of 148 districts that include the largest school systems in the nation. The project most likely to actually target R900 districts is a project sponsored by the University of Missouri that does not name the schools but says all 60 to be served will meet the criteria for the federal Rural Education Assistance Program. Many will almost certainly be R900 districts.

Finally, one project will serve small, isolated schools run by the Bureau of Indian Education on reservations in the Southwest and the Northern Plains. These would be R900 districts if they were public schools entitled to receive Title I funds, the data base we use to identify R900 districts.

But for most of these projects, the rural effort is either non-existent or merely an appendage designed to qualify the applicant for the two extra scoring points they could get if they included some rural component. The handful that focus primarily on rural schools — and reach into high poverty rural communities — stand out as exceptions that prove the rule: This program was not made for them.

## Rural Trust's Doris Williams Authors National Report on Community Schools

*Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.*

"Community is a place where people and institutions collaborate to build social capital that in turn strengthens families, institutions — including the school, and the community itself," says Doris Williams, Executive Director of the Rural School and Community Trust and Director of the Trust's Capacity Building program. Williams is author of a report on rural "community schools," co-released last month by the Center for American [Progress](#) and the Rural Trust.

The report, ***The Rural Solution: How Community Schools Can Reinvigorate Rural Education***, addresses the potential of the community school movement to concentrate supports and resources in low-wealth rural schools and build the kind of community-school partnerships that help children, their families, and the school and community succeed and thrive. The paper also includes profiles of three communities that have applied the concept in their schools.

### What is a Community School?

Williams points out that it is necessary to re-claim the language of "community" and notes that sometimes the words "community school" or "neighborhood school" are code for school re-segregation along racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic lines. "We need a broader and more justice-oriented understanding of the concept of "community," she says.

The Coalition for Community [Schools](#) defines a community [school](#) as "both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone — all day, every day, evenings and weekends."

But the concept of community schools as developed in *The Rural Solution* is about much more than co-locating services. "It's about shaking people out of the bushes, getting them to the table," laughs Williams. "It's a process for connecting resources and initiating community dialogue that engages grassroots community residents in authentic ways and integrates educators in that process."

A community process of planning for community schools will help ensure that the programs and services offered at the school are appropriate for the specific place. Typically programs offered through a community school might include pre-K classes, extended school day and year, and a range of child and family supports including health care, social services, and adult education. Programs usually have a variety of avenues for parent and family engagement and strengthen the community through place-based academic initiatives and partnerships between the school and local groups.

"In community schools, 'engagement' becomes the act of investing in, co-creating, and owning the school," Williams observes, referencing work by Peter Block. "There is a conscious effort to ensure that services are integrated in a way that increases the social capital that goes into overcoming or removing the barriers to student, family, and community success and citizenship."

### Potential of Community Schools for Rural Places

The community schools concept offers particular possibility for many rural communities. Across the country low-wealth, smaller, or more isolated rural communities typically lack access to health clinics, formal social services offices, and sometimes institutions like public libraries. Public services tend to be concentrated in larger towns and county seats, often inaccessible to distant rural residents and those with transportation challenges.

By locating services in the rural school, it brings them to a place where they not only serve students but become available to other residents as well. "Community schools are a way to address the issue of scale in rural places,"

says Williams. "By concentrating services together and by treating the child as whole person with connections to family, community, faith-based or other groups, you get to scale."

Community schools also offer a way to bring the community's strengths and assets into the school. Rural communities usually have rich networks of interpersonal connections, important cultural traditions, and residents with a range of expertise rooted in formal education and/or local knowledge and awareness.

"Community schools offer one way for schools to expand their teacher base," says Williams. "Communities and schools can develop ways to 'certify' local residents to work with students directly."

And although many communities have few chartered non-profits, almost all communities have more or less formal groups like volunteer fire departments, alumni groups, sewing circles, reading groups, seed exchanges, and a variety of faith-based organizations and programs that are interested in improving community life and opportunities for children.

### **As a Potential Turnaround Model**

The report underscores the reality that the poorest rural communities tend to be concentrated in geographic regions where there may be little political will to improve education for low-income children, especially children of color. In such circumstances, it can be hard to get approval from the school board to initiate a community school approach.

In these cases especially, an external investment, such as a federal program to encourage cross agency collaboration could make a big difference in bringing resources to rural low-income communities and better educational opportunities to children. But such federal investments are currently too small to match the need, the report notes.

The community school approach could also be an option for schools that have persistently struggled for academic achievement. With supports available to address students' out-of-school needs, teachers can focus more time and energy on teaching, and teaching could be less stressful. That might help rural low-wealth schools recruit and retain teachers, one of their ongoing challenges.

"The turnaround models currently offered through federal initiatives don't really work for most rural places," says Williams. "If school closure or turning a school over to a for-profit company are options for struggling schools, why not make community schools an option? It is a way to make sure that low-wealth communities and their children have access to the supports that middle class families rely on and take for granted."

### **Challenges, Recommendations, Examples**

*The Rural Solution* identifies several challenges facing many rural communities in the implementation of the community school concept, including finding the will to educate all children, especially children of color in the rural South; attracting and retaining teachers; making better use of facilities; negotiating agreements and reducing risks among community and agency partners; establishing community consensus; and making federal turnaround models and federal funding relevant and available to rural schools.

The report's three examples of communities that have initiated community schools — Owsley County, Kentucky; Bennington, Vermont; and Noble, Maine — provide a rich overview of community school approaches. The three communities face different local circumstances, used different processes for developing partnerships, and created different kinds of programs. But all three communities came up with models that address local circumstances and improve education and quality of life in the community, thereby improving prospects for students and other residents.

### **Education as a Civil Right**

"Understanding community as a place where people and institutions collaborate to build social capital implies that community schools are centers where the basic principles of a democratic society are practiced," says Williams. "In this way, schools become places where a sense of isolation is removed and where 'service providers' see themselves and are seen as community members guided by those same principles."

Williams continues, "A commitment to the principles implied by this broader understanding of community is an opportunity to change the discourse and direction of the education of rural children. It provides an opportunity to confront the issues of race, power, and injustice as they have impacted education, obstructed the success of children and families, and threatened the security of our nation as a whole."

Williams observes that community schools, rooted in this deeper meaning of community, may be unrivaled in their potential to provide quality education for all children whether urban or rural.

"This really is a civil rights issue," Williams concludes.

*The report, **The Rural Solution: How Community Schools Can Reinstantiate Rural Education**, is available through the Rural [Trust](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/09/rural_solution.html) and at the Center for American Progress at [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/09/rural\\_solution.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/09/rural_solution.html).*

## **Child Poverty Highest Among Rural African-Americans and Rural Single Mothers**

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Young children (those under age six) in rural America are much more likely to live in poverty than children in suburban or central city communities.

A brief from the University of New Hampshire's Carsey [Institute](#) reports that one in five young rural white children, two in five young rural Hispanic children, and one in two young rural African-American children live in poverty. That compares to central city poverty rates of 45.3% for young African-American children, 40.4% for young Hispanic children, and 22.2% for young white children. Poverty is defined in 2009 as \$21,756 annual income for a family of four with two adults and two children. A young child is defined in the report as a child under six years of age.

The brief, "The Unequal Distribution of Child Poverty: Highest Rates among Young Blacks and Children of Single Mothers in Rural [America](#)," packs a wealth of information into a short easy-to-understand paper.

No matter where they live, children living with single mothers face much higher rates of poverty (40%) than children in two-parent families (8%). Rural single-mother families have an even higher rate of poverty at about 50%, with poverty rates among single mothers reaching 54% in the rural South.

The brief notes that rural families may have less access to such social programs as Women, Infants, and Children (WIC, a food and nutrition program), Medicaid, home visits, and Early Head Start. Research demonstrates these programs have positive effects on child development that help mitigate the life-long negative consequences of childhood poverty.

## **School Discipline: An Occasional Series on Developments in School Disciplinary Policies and Practices**

*Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.*

### ***North Carolina Court Requires Districts to Provide Students with More Info in Discipline Cases***

The North Carolina Supreme Court has ruled that a Beaufort County student who received a long-term suspension should have been given a reason for the decision that denied alternative education during the punishment.

Viktoria King was suspended for involvement in a school fight but was not provided any education while she was out of school. She sued the school district in trial court, stating that her fundamental right to an education had been denied. The trial court dismissed her case, and the North Carolina Court of Appeals upheld that dismissal. King appealed to the state's highest court, and the court remanded the case to the trial court to give the school district an opportunity to explain why they denied Viktoria any alternative education.

The decision has a positive effect since it affords students and their families more information about school district discipline decisions. Decisions of school officials are usually given deference by courts, an approach called the "rational basis" analysis. When fundamental rights are in jeopardy, however, courts take a much closer look at government actions, a practice referred to as "strict scrutiny."

In order to balance the need for schools to make daily decisions about what punishments students should receive with the importance of protecting students' right to an education, the North Carolina court applied a middle approach in this case, called "intermediate scrutiny" to arrive at its decision.

However, in *King v. Beaufort Co. Board of Education*, the state's high court was careful to say that they would not extend full *Leandro* rights to students in disciplinary trouble with the school. *Leandro* is the school finance decision that mandates that all students in North Carolina have a right to a sound basic education, and King's attorneys had argued that the right is also given to students who are suspended. King also had the support of student

advocacy organizations from across the country that are working against exclusionary discipline that jeopardizes students' ability to receive an education.

*Read more:*

Read the N.C. Supreme Court decision here:

- [www.aoc.state.nc.us/www/public/sc/opinions/2010/pdf/480A09-1.pdf](http://www.aoc.state.nc.us/www/public/sc/opinions/2010/pdf/480A09-1.pdf)

*New York Times* coverage of the decision here:

- [www.nytimes.com/2010/10/09/us/09suspend.html?scp=3&sq=NOOrth%20Carolina%20education%20&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/09/us/09suspend.html?scp=3&sq=NOOrth%20Carolina%20education%20&st=cse) and background on the case and national attention to discipline issues here:
- [www.nytimes.com/2010/03/19/education/19suspend.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/19/education/19suspend.html) and local response to that NYT coverage here:
- [www.beaufortcountynow.com/post/275/29/beaufort-county-schools-make-the-new-york-times.html](http://www.beaufortcountynow.com/post/275/29/beaufort-county-schools-make-the-new-york-times.html)

More local coverage:

- [www.newsobserver.com/2010/10/09/729784/supreme-court-sides-with-expelled.html](http://www.newsobserver.com/2010/10/09/729784/supreme-court-sides-with-expelled.html)

## ***Mississippi Working on Discipline***

Some Mississippi schools are suspending and expelling fewer students now that they have implemented various policy changes aimed at reducing the number of students removed from school as a result of harsh discipline. The approaches implemented by schools are wide-ranging and include physical education initiatives and block scheduling. In most districts, changes stem from district and local leaders' renewed commitment and specific efforts to keeping students in school. The number of both suspensions and expulsions reported to the State Department of Education dropped 30% last year from the 2005–06 reports.

Mississippi schools have received national notoriety for their disciplinary policies and practices, including corporal punishment. Jackson Public Schools was one of the 18 urban school districts included in *Suspended Education: Urban Middle Schools in Crisis*, reviewed in RPM last month at <http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2561>.

*Read more:*

*Local coverage:*

- [www.clarionledger.com/article/20101004/NEWS/10040319/Mississippi-schools-see-dip-in-suspended-expelled-students](http://www.clarionledger.com/article/20101004/NEWS/10040319/Mississippi-schools-see-dip-in-suspended-expelled-students)

## **Consolidation Watch: State Policies on an Important Rural Issue**

*Consolidation news from Michigan and Vermont.*

### **Michigan**

Governor Jennifer Granholm's state budget recommendation to set aside \$50 million for a competitive grant program to encourage consolidation and cost-sharing was denied by the legislature. Despite the controversy around studies on both sides of the issue, the Grand Rapids *Press* takes the Michigan Legislature to task over its decision and continues to cite the same cost savings estimates that have since been discredited. Granholm has said she still supports the program and will continue to work for its adoption in the state.

*Read more:*

[www.mlive.com/opinion/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2010/10/editorial\\_revive\\_incentives\\_fo.html](http://www.mlive.com/opinion/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2010/10/editorial_revive_incentives_fo.html)

[www.mlive.com/politics/index.ssf/2010/10/granholm\\_lawmakers\\_debate\\_who.html](http://www.mlive.com/politics/index.ssf/2010/10/granholm_lawmakers_debate_who.html)

### **Vermont**

More school districts in Vermont are beginning to consider consolidation talks with neighboring districts as enrollments decline and worry grows that the state might mandate consolidation.

Currently under Act 153, passed earlier this year, districts can receive [tax incentives](#) for voluntary consolidation. Vermont Education Commissioner Armando Vilaseca favors mandatory consolidation and says he is happy with the

effects of Act 153. Much attention is also being given to the state's two gubernatorial candidates' positions on consolidation.

*Read more:*

[www.burlingtonfreepress.com/article/20101010/NEWS02/101009014/Vermont-s-small-schools-feeling-pressure-to-consolidate#ixzz12wDfZPK5](http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/article/20101010/NEWS02/101009014/Vermont-s-small-schools-feeling-pressure-to-consolidate#ixzz12wDfZPK5)

[www.burlingtonfreepress.com/article/20101011/NEWS03/101010025/Dubie-s-record-mixed-on-taxes-school-consolidation](http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/article/20101011/NEWS03/101010025/Dubie-s-record-mixed-on-taxes-school-consolidation)

## **Rural School Funding News**

### ***RSFN Special Series:***

## **Financing Rural Schools: Characteristics of Strong Rural School Finance Systems**

*In this series, Rural School Funding News is reviewing general principles of school finance and sharing information about school funding systems that support rural schools and their unique characteristics and needs. While there are no easy answers to questions about how to fund schools, especially in this economic climate, we hope that these articles will provide you promising practices, ideas for advocacy, and guidelines that are easily transferable in your analysis and work on your own school finance systems.*

*If you are new to the series, you can review a brief introduction to the subject and discussion of Characteristic 1: A Strong Foundation Formula, [here](#); Characteristic 2: Effective Use of the Judicial System, [here](#); Characteristic 3: Fair Accounting for Cost of Living and Geographic Differences, [here](#); and Characteristic 4: Recognition of the Benefits of Small Schools, [here](#).*

### **Characteristic Five: A Balance of Revenue Sources for Schools**

Schools rely on a funding "pie" that is typically cut into two very large and one very small piece. The two larger portions are state and local funding, and the smallest piece is federal funding. Nationally, the average percentage from each source is about 44% from local government, 48% from state government, and 8% from the federal government. Each of these revenue sources has their limitations and issues to consider.

Federal funding for specific purposes is generally inadequate to meet mandates like special education or accountability. Title I funding for addressing poverty also does not go far enough in many districts.

Inequity is also a problem. Federal funding formulas use state per-pupil spending to determine aid, which hurts students in low-spending states. And, as the Rural Trust is publicizing through its Formula Fairness Campaign, the Title I funding formula sends more Title I funding to larger districts at the expense of smaller ones.

Determining the right level of state aid to districts can be problematic too. As the state share of education funding decreases, wealthy districts have the means to make up the difference while poorer districts do not. Raising state share would seem to be a way to ensure greater equity, but this is not always the case because, in most states, richer areas are able to build in additional funding no matter what the level of state funding is. Increased local contributions in some states effectively cause a draw-down of additional state funding, which causes greater inequity. Typically, the state share should exceed the local share across the state.

Another issue is the weakening of local control over school management decisions that tends to occur when state-directed funding increases. Often increased state funding is accompanied by additional state requirements to implement policies and procedures that are one-size-fits all approaches not appropriate for small and rural districts.

Local contributions must be a part of the overall funding system for schools, but determining the appropriate share can be difficult. One general guideline is that local share should not exceed state share.

On average, local contributions hover near the 50% mark, so local communities have a significant investment in their schools. However, many school districts face serious challenges in trying to fill the funding gap not covered by federal and state support. In some communities, the ability to raise school funds through local property taxes is limited by state law, either through a tax cap or limits on the usage of levy funds. In other districts, especially in the South, school boards lack fiscal autonomy over their own school budgets and must seek approval from some

other entity to make tax assessments.

A guiding principle of Rural Trust school finance work is that local rural citizens are well-informed to make decisions about their schools, including financial ones.

Other factors complicating equity in school funding are local property values and the taxpaying ability of local citizens. Property-poor districts need state funding levels to be sensitive to varying needs. But such sensitivity is not always the case, and even if some equalization mechanism is in place, rural districts are often still left with budget shortfalls. In sum, local investment in public schools is essential, but must not be the sole determinant of local schools' ability to provide a first-class education to students. (See June 2009 RPM in-depth coverage of property tax and revenue issues in rural districts.)

Knowing the limitations of each source of revenue is important, but it is equally important to monitor the overall level of state and local spending. As stimulus funding from the federal government is depleted, states will be facing even more severe funding deficits. Rural school finance advocates will have to watch how their funding pie is being cut and keep working to ensure that their local community does not bear a disproportionate burden. Every child is entitled to a high-quality education, no matter what community they call home. The Rural Trust is committed to finding solutions to rural school funding issues. Call us for help.

## **Kansas Political Buzz All About School Finance**

*Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.*

In the Sunflower State, school funding continues to dominate the political landscape as policy makers, school leaders and political candidates address the issue.

The gubernatorial candidates continue to put school finance at the forefront of their educational platforms. Republican candidate Sam Brownback has expressed interest in changing Kansas' state funding law to something more similar to what was in place prior to the last round of school funding litigation. He has also said he wants local districts to have greater authority to raise taxes, but has not released more specific information.

Some of Brownback's opponents have tried to link him to a proposal put forth by Republican House Speaker *pro tem* Arlen Siegfroid that would cap state support, introduce more competitive grants into the funding system, and leave more responsibility to local districts for school funding.

Siegfried made this recommendation to the 2010 Special Committee on Education, which is made up of members from both houses of the Kansas Legislature. Republicans, including Brownback, have since tried to distance themselves from that proposal.

Democrat Tom Holland supports the current system but has also said he supports local districts' ability to raise more money. That ability is currently limited in Kansas.

In late summer, the Kansas Association of School Boards convened a group of superintendents and school board members to study the school funding system and look for ways to improve it. Their work was furthered by the revival of school funding litigation plans and initial legislative responses. The group includes both rural and non-rural district superintendents and board member. The rural leaders have pointed out that the current formula is helpful to rural schools, and does not need to be discarded. The group hopes its "on-the-ground" insights will be valuable to legislators.

Schools for Fair Funding, a coalition of school districts, plans to file a new school finance lawsuit in the coming weeks. (RSFN has followed the litigation plans closely over the past year; see coverage beginning in October 2009).

Much of the recent activity and commentary is focused on avoiding this suit, but lawyers for the plaintiff group have called the proposed finance system changes "rearranging deck chairs on a sinking ship."

Kansas' earlier school finance decision was notable for the relative speed with which the legislature responded to the court's ruling by commissioning cost studies and implementing needed funding increases. Since then, however, severe shortfalls in school funding have undermined the ruling's effect.

*Read more:*

KASB activity:

- [www2.ljworld.com/news/2010/sep/07/association-study-how-kansas-schools-are-funded/](http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2010/sep/07/association-study-how-kansas-schools-are-funded/)

- [www.hdnews.net/Story/kasb091510](http://www.hdnews.net/Story/kasb091510)

Political developments around school finance:

- <http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2010/sep/29/school-funding-center-race/>
- [www.kansasreporter.org/66719.aspx](http://www.kansasreporter.org/66719.aspx)

Special Committee on Education members:

- <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/ksleg/KLRD/2010CommMembership/2010-education.pdf>

## Florida Voters Will Weigh in on Class Size Limits

*Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.*

The Florida Supreme Court has ended the Florida Education Association's challenge to Amendment 8, a ballot initiative that would change a current state provision that sets strict limits on the size of every class. As reported in August and September RSN, the FEA sought to remove Amendment 8 from this November's ballot, claiming that its language is misleading and fails to advise voters of its true effects.

The FEA's position was that if schools could meet the amendment's requirement by averaging class sizes, they would effectively be giving up funding they would have received from the state to keep class sizes lower. Because the ballot description did not mention the potential loss of funds, the FEA challenged it in court.

Proponents of the FEA challenge had pointed out that savings to the state could be as high as \$1 billion dollars, and that there would be no guarantee that funds would continue to be spent on schools.

The state high court agreed with the lower court that not describing the financial implications did not make the ballot initiative defective. The decision found that even though the dollar amount for schools could be different if the amendment is changed, the requirement on the state to provide sufficient funds for schools would not be altered.

Amendment 8 set maximum class sizes of 18 students in K-3, 22 students in grades 4-8, and 25 students in high school. The limits became fully enforceable this year, and many schools complained that the addition of even one student could put them at risk of noncompliance with the law and subject to high fines.

Rural districts in the state have said that despite their efforts, they remain over the per-class limit without the financial ability to hire new teachers to comply with rules. Under Florida law, 60% voter approval is needed to change the constitutional amendment.

Dueling reports on the impact of class size reductions have added to confusion on the issue.

*Read more:*

Background on efforts to change class size limits:

- [http://weblogs.sun-sentinel.com/news/politics/dcblog/2010/09/backers\\_of\\_right\\_size\\_class\\_si.html](http://weblogs.sun-sentinel.com/news/politics/dcblog/2010/09/backers_of_right_size_class_si.html)

Coverage of court challenge:

- [www.miamiherald.com/2010/10/07/1861227/in-states-high-court-teachers.html](http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/10/07/1861227/in-states-high-court-teachers.html)
- <http://jacksonville.com/news/florida/2010-10-08/story/class-size-amendment-go-florida-voters>

Harvard study on Florida class size reduction effects:

- [www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/PEPG10-03\\_Chingos.pdf](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/PEPG10-03_Chingos.pdf)

National Education Policy Center review of that paper:

- <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-class-size-florida>

## Texas Preparing for Funding Challenge

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Some Texas state senators want the state to adopt a statewide property tax to try to avoid more school finance

litigation, and school leadership organizations are putting forth their own recommendations about how to fix the funding system.

In Texas, the Foundation School Program mandates that “excess” local property tax revenues be redistributed in one of several ways to benefit poorer districts. The system is a result of a 1989 school finance case, *Edgewood v. Kirby*, which found the state funding system unconstitutional.

The last funding case, brought in 2005 by several wealthy districts, claimed the system had effectively become an illegal statewide property tax, which is prohibited under the Texas Constitution. The legislature increased state-level funding and replaced one-third of local school property taxes with money from a new business tax, higher cigarette taxes, and budget surplus. The reforms included give school districts more discretion in setting rates. These changes were intended as temporary fixes but are still in place today.

The judge in that lawsuit ordered changes to the revenue system but found that funding overall was adequate. At that time, low-wealth districts announced that they would revisit the adequacy question in court.

A special legislative committee is studying various solutions to the funding system as talks about another school finance lawsuit grow more serious. This time, however, the case would likely not be an adequacy case because the state is facing an \$18–21 billion budget shortfall. Legislators, business, and school leaders on the committee acknowledge the serious problems with the funding system but are far from consensus on a solution. Recommendations range from increasing the sales tax to creating an independent school policy center to study the issue.

The Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) has, for the first time, released its own recommendations about how to revamp the system. TASB members say the recommendations are warranted because many districts are at the maximum allowed tax rate for maintenance and operations. The TASB plan would try to equalize districts’ revenue based on tax effort and would eventually phase out the current complicated two-tiered system in which some districts receive a guaranteed yield on property tax collections and others receive a targeted revenue amount.

A recent report released by the Equity Project, which represents low-wealth districts, explains the inequity of the Texas system and other challenges facing schools, including that the state’s cost of education index has become outdated, and current weighted student formulas don’t account for real costs. A significant part of the report is dedicated to highlighting the inequity of funding between wealthy districts and districts with very low numbers of students living in poverty and facing other challenges.

*Read more:*

Coverage of the property tax increase proposal and other proposals before the legislative committee:

- [www.mysanantonio.com/news/education/key\\_lawmaker\\_wants\\_to\\_change\\_school\\_funding\\_103100029.html?c=y&page=1#storytop](http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/education/key_lawmaker_wants_to_change_school_funding_103100029.html?c=y&page=1#storytop)
- [www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/APStories/stories/D9IN8F901.html](http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/APStories/stories/D9IN8F901.html)

The Equity Center report, “Money Matters”:

- [www.equitycenter.org/moneymatters/Money%20Matters%20Publication.Sept%202010.pdf](http://www.equitycenter.org/moneymatters/Money%20Matters%20Publication.Sept%202010.pdf) and commentary on the report:
- [www.star-telegram.com/2010/10/02/2513286/is-another-school-finance-lawsuit.html](http://www.star-telegram.com/2010/10/02/2513286/is-another-school-finance-lawsuit.html)

Coverage on the Texas School Board Association’s proposal:

- [www.star-telegram.com/2010/09/24/2493845/texas-school-boards-group-presents.html](http://www.star-telegram.com/2010/09/24/2493845/texas-school-boards-group-presents.html) and TASB documents here:
- [www.tasb.org/legislative/resources/finance/index.aspx](http://www.tasb.org/legislative/resources/finance/index.aspx)

## Arizona School Funding Lawsuit Ends

*Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.*

The Arizona Supreme Court has refused to hear a lawsuit filed this summer by a group of school districts, district representatives, and education organizations, including the Arizona Rural Schools Association.

The plaintiffs claimed that the legislature did not provide an inflationary increase in school funding as required by a 2000 law. Republican legislators argued that the law gave discretion over which portions of school funding must be increased, while plaintiffs claimed that the full per-pupil amount should have received the inflationary increase.

The Attorney General's office had argued that court involvement in the matter would violate separation of powers principles if judges inserted themselves into the legislative appropriation process. The group had filed the case as a special action directly with the state high court, but now plans start over in trial court.

*Read more:*

Local coverage:

- [www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/local/articles/2010/09/22/20100922politics-education0922.html#ixzz10Fq0IUtR](http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/local/articles/2010/09/22/20100922politics-education0922.html#ixzz10Fq0IUtR)
- [www.kswt.com/Global/story.asp?S=13194349](http://www.kswt.com/Global/story.asp?S=13194349)

June RSFN coverage of the filing of the suit:

- [www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2502](http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2502)

## A New School Finance Report Ranks State Funding Systems

*Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.*

A new national report card on school finance has been developed by the Education Law Center (ELC). The report, "Is School Funding Fair? A National Report Card," uses four measures to gauge how well the poorest districts in states are treated under state funding mechanisms. The report's authors include Bruce Baker of Rutgers University Graduate School of Education; David G. Sciarra, a school finance attorney and executive director of the ELC; and Danielle Farrie, ELC Research Director.

The "fairness" measures used in the report are funding level, which is the average state and local revenue per pupil; funding distribution, which shows whether a state provides more or less funding to schools based on their poverty concentration; effort, which gauges spending relative to fiscal capacity; and coverage, a measure encompassing the proportion of students attending public schools as well as the income ration of private and public school families.

Author Baker points out that states have significant control over two of the measures, effort and funding distribution. States determine how much financial effort to put into their schools and make determinations through their funding formulas about how schools will receive funds.

In the report, a state's funding system is labeled "progressive" if it systemically directs more funds toward school districts with higher percentages of students living in poverty, and "regressive" if more funding is going to districts with less poverty. Notably, the report uses U.S. Census measures of poverty rather than free or reduced price meal eligibility. Many policymakers believe the Census measures are more accurate indications of how many students are living with serious hardships.

The "coverage" indicator in the report highlights the effect on states when high numbers of students — and more specifically, students from higher income families — leave the public schools for private ones.

Report authors hope the report will spark conversation and action on how well states are getting resources to the students who most need them.

*Read more:*

Read the full report here:

- [www.schoolfundingfairness.org/](http://www.schoolfundingfairness.org/)

Local coverage of the report, including a quote from RT Board Member Kathy Gephardt of Colorado:

- [www.ednewscolorado.org/2010/10/12/9170-national-study-gives-colorado-f-in-funding](http://www.ednewscolorado.org/2010/10/12/9170-national-study-gives-colorado-f-in-funding)

## Do Court Cases Matter?

*Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.*

A recently released article discusses the difficulty in accurately measuring the effects of school finance litigation.

In "School Finance and Courts: Does Reform Matter, and How Can We Tell?" which [was](#) recently published in *Teachers College Record*, authors Bruce Baker and Kevin Welner respond to a book by Eric Hanushek and Al

Linseth that concludes school finance lawsuits have had “disappointing” results.

In *Courting Failure: How School Finance Lawsuits Exploit Judges' Good Intentions and Harm Our Children*, Hanushek and Linseth looked at cases in Kentucky, New Jersey, Wyoming, and Massachusetts, and concluded that, except for Massachusetts, the rulings in the cases did not improve student performance

Baker and Welner were inspired to revisit these four finance lawsuits after the book was cited in a U.S. Supreme Court opinion for its proposition that increased funding, and specifically judicially-ordered funding, do not improve student achievement. The opinion, authored by Justice Samuel Alito in *Horne v. Flores*, weighed in on Arizona’s treatment of English Language Learners in public schools. (RSFN has followed the *Flores* case regularly; see coverage of this decision at <http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2267>).

The book had not been released for review before the case was heard.

In "School Finance and Courts" Baker characterizes the Hanushek and Linseth book as “advocacy research,” poorly grounded in method and application, which could be used to prove either side of the argument at hand.

The paper is not meant to specifically refute the claims of Hanushek and Linseth, but to point out that the outcomes for students are nuanced and that analyzing impacts of court decisions requires careful and refined research.

The authors also call for good research evidence for other school reform strategies currently being touted.

*Read more:*

The abstract of the article can be read on the Teachers College Record website:

- [www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=16106](http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=16106)

The interview with Bruce Baker is available here:

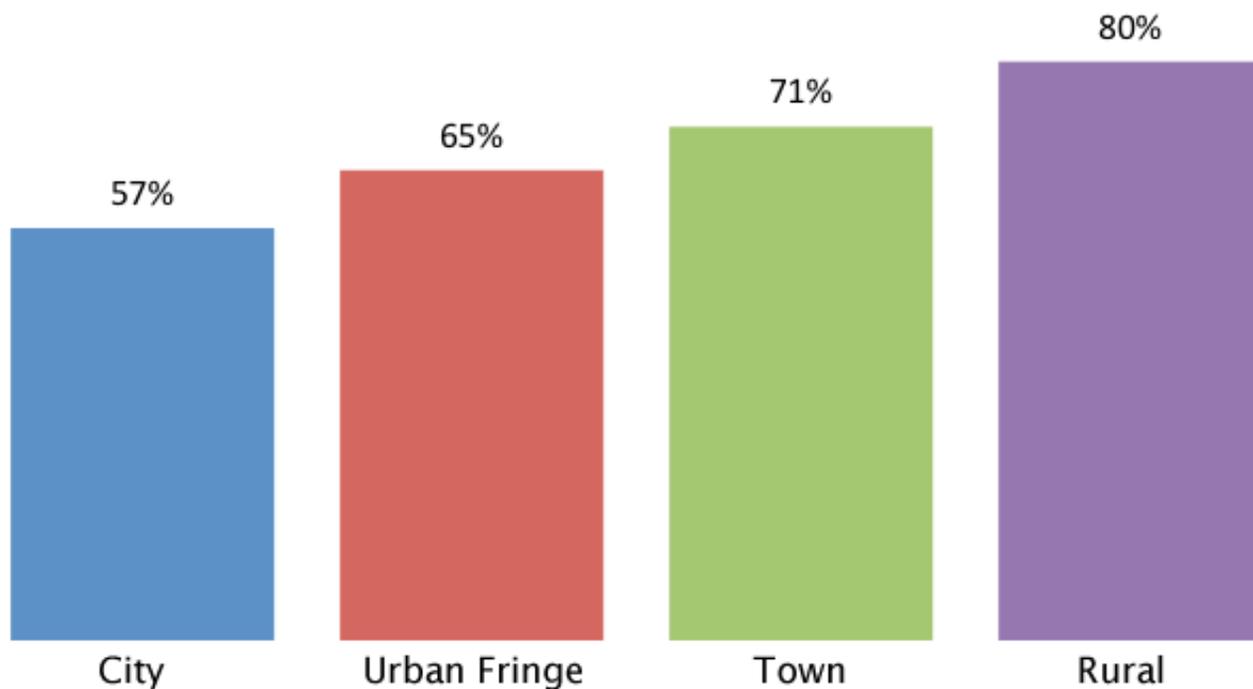
- <http://thevoice.pressible.org/edlabteam/school-finance-and-courts-does-reform-matter-and-how-can-we-tell>

Full text of Baker and Welner’s article:

- <http://schoolfinance101.files.wordpress.com/2010/01/doreformsmatter-baker-welner.pdf>



## **Percent Schools Reporting Discipline Policies That Allow Long-Term Suspensions Without Continuing School Services, 2005-06 School Year**



*Notes: Long-term suspensions are those extending to the end of the current school year or beyond.*

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2005–06 School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2006.

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