



Printable Edition

Note: This resource includes all articles from the March 2014 Rural Policy Matters newsletter. For the latest content updates, please check the [issue index](#) for this edition.

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Fact and Figures About Where U.S. Poverty Rates Are Highest

Question: Are poverty rates higher in metro or nonmetro counties in the U.S.?

Answer: Nonmetro counties. The U. S. poverty rate (\$23,492 for a family of four) was 17.7% in nonmetro counties in 2012, compared to 14.5% in metro counties and 15.0% nationally. Many high-poverty nonmetro counties (those with poverty rates over 20%) have been poor for decades, and many of these are concentrated in the South and Southwest. The number of high-poverty nonmetro counties is also increasing. Between 2000 and 2011, 230 counties joined the ranks of high-poverty nonmetro counties, a 30% increase. Many of these counties are not adjacent to existing clusters, suggesting that rural poverty is both increasing and becoming more geographically widespread.

Source: [Rural America At A Glance, 2013 Edition](#).

Focusing on Wellness Connects Students to Their Communities

Lucky students at North Mitchell Elementary get to work in the school's garden. And at "the North" all students are lucky.

The rural southwest Georgia school serves students preK through fifth grade. It began the gardening program two years ago as part of an increased emphasis on health and wellness.

"The students are so excited by the garden," says principal Jacquelyn White, adding that the garden presents many opportunities for teaching subjects across the curriculum. The garden has also been one way the school connects its students to their own communities.

Local residents work with the school, helping to prepare the soil and talking with students about gardening. Each class has a plot for which they are responsible. This fall the school grew lettuce, radishes, collard greens, turnip greens, broccoli, and cauliflower. Soon students will begin planting tomatoes, okra, beans, peppers, squash, sunflowers, and even corn. Adults will help tend the garden over the early summer. Some of the vegetables will be coming in when students return to class in late July.

Several years before North Mitchell started its garden, the school began providing students with a

fresh fruit or vegetable snack every day. Selena Montgomery, who teaches fifth grade, says the school's emphasis on healthy food has been a way to connect kids to their own cultures and to each other. "We are a rural place and a lot of our families work at one of the local dairies or food processing plants, but there's been such a lifestyle change. Most families don't garden anymore. Kids aren't eating the healthier foods everyone here ate a couple of generations back. And they aren't learning how to grow and cook their own food either. Everyone needs to know how to do those things."

Some of the snack vegetables are local. White says that kids love eating raw squash—a traditional southern vegetable usually cooked stewed or fried. "Who knew kids would eat that," she laughs.

Other snacks, like pomegranates, are new to everyone; some are more familiar to the school's Latino students. It's been a learning experience for everyone, Montgomery says. "I've even had parents call me and ask what our snack was that day because their child is asking them to buy it at the grocery store."

The garden and healthy snacks program are just two ways that North Mitchell Elementary supports academic growth by helping students get and stay healthy. The school used a grant to install an exercise room. "Physical fitness had been put on the back burner," mostly because of funding, White explains. "Now we have equipment, mats, jump ropes, fun exercise videos, and stationary bikes in all sizes," she continues.

All students work out twice a week as part of their health and p.e. classes. Parents sometimes come to school and exercise with their child's class, and classroom teachers are encouraged to use the equipment with their students through the week. "The kids love to see their teachers using the adult bikes with them," White adds.

The building itself is also healthy. Just four years old, North Mitchell Elementary was designed as a "daylighting school."

Mitchell County Superintendent of Schools Victor Hill explains that a daylighting building is one that harnesses natural light to best effect throughout the day. "There's better visibility and less strain and fatigue when you can see well. The research suggests that's good for your brain and your long-term health," he says. Daylighted buildings with natural views are also linked to better behavior and mood, increased productivity, and positive outlook. "And, the school is more sustainable and saves money on energy," Hill adds.



Students add plot identification signs and tend plants in the garden at North Mitchell Elementary.



North Mitchell students are excited to receive plants for their garden plot.

As an expression of its commitment to connectivity in all senses of the word, Mitchell County launched a systematic effort, beginning about ten years ago, to build its technology infrastructure. Five years ago it began beefing up classroom technology. Now the school system's high speed internet is one of the fastest in the state and schools are rich with computers and other technology. North Mitchell's building is part and parcel of this commitment. "It's unbelievable all the things the building can do," observes White.

At its core, the attention of "the North" to the physical and social health of its students and its efforts to connect them to the community and the world is about relationship. "It's an everyday practice to see staff pulling students aside, taking them under their wing, talking them through a situation, sprucing them up in some way," says White. "Our mission is to educate every child to the best of our ability, to connect them to everything we can, not just for the moment, but so they can be citizens in their community, here in Mitchell County and in the global society."

Superintendent Hill says that teachers at North Mitchell sit down together every three weeks and with an administrator review how each child they teach is doing. "They are identifying every child, if there's a need, if the child is struggling with something or really excelling, they are going to talk about it and what they can do in response," he says. And they are not just focusing on problems. "They are also looking for strengths, leadership qualities, talents or interests the child is expressing. Then they do something about it."

All these efforts have paid off academically as well. In 2012, North Mitchell Elementary was recognized by the state as a Reward School for high progress.

"A lot of schools have as their mission statement that they are preparing lifelong learners and global citizens," says Hill. "At the North they're working extremely hard to do just that—and to make students part of their own community. It's a wonderful staff, truly committed to students."

Read more:

Mitchell County Board of Education:

- www.mitchell.k12.ga.us/

North Mitchell County Elementary School:

- <http://mitchell2.nme.schooldesk.net/>



Kindergarten students enjoy physical activity in North Mitchell's new exercise room.



Everyone working out on stationary bikes at North Mitchell Elementary School.



North Mitchell Elementary, a healthy school flooded with natural light.

Discipline, Teachers, Curriculum, Preschool: Equity a Big Challenge in U.S. Schools

The U.S. Department of Education's [Office for Civil Rights](#) (OCR) released data and reports this month on disparities in the nation's schools as they relate to gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and English speaking skills. Data, collected from every public school and school district in the U.S. during the 2011–12 school year, found widespread differences in access to qualified and experienced teachers, a full high school curriculum for college and career readiness, and pre-school. The disparities were especially pronounced among groups of students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds. The report also documents large disparities in discipline rates between students of color and white students and between students with disabilities and those with no identified disabilities.

The OCR has been collecting data since 1968 in order to enforce the nation's civil rights laws as they relate to educational opportunity. Under the Obama administration, the Office began collecting data related to school discipline. This year's report includes data on pre-schools as well as public charter schools and juvenile detention centers.

Discipline

The data found major disparities in disciplinary rates, with students of color and students with disabilities receiving disproportionately high rates of suspension and expulsion. Within groups of students of color, African-American students are much more likely than any other group to be suspended or expelled.

Disciplinary differences by race/ethnicity

- African-American students are expelled at three times the rate of white students, with 5% of white students suspended and 16% of African-American students suspended at least once.
- American Indian and Native Alaskan students, representing 1% of students, represented 2% of out-of-school suspensions and 3% of expulsions.
- African-American girls are suspended at higher rates than girls of any other race or ethnicity and at higher rates than most boys, even though boys, overall, make up two-thirds of all suspensions. American Indian and Native-Alaskan girls are also suspended at higher rates than white boys.
- African-American students are more likely to be arrested or referred to law enforcement than other students. Black students represent 16% of all students but 27% of students referred to law enforcement and 31% of students arrested at school. White students are 51% of enrollment and 41% of students referred to law enforcement and 39% of those arrested at school.

Disciplinary differences by disability status

- Students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be suspended (13%) than students without disabilities (6%).
- Students with disabilities are 12% of the student population and 58% of students placed in seclusion or involuntary confinement and 75% of those physically restrained at school. African-American students represent 19% of students with disabilities and 35% of students restrained with a mechanical device or equipment at school.
- Students with disabilities represent a quarter of all students arrested and referred to law enforcement at school.

Preschool discipline

The report found that many schools suspend students as young as three or four years old. Moreover, schools' disciplinary disparities begin among the youngest students. African-American children make up 18% of preschool enrollment and 48% of students suspended from preschool more than once. White students make up 43% of preschool enrollment and 26% of preschoolers suspended multiple times.

Behavior Infractions

The OCR report does not address disciplinary infractions or connect punishments to specific infractions. However, prior research, including research from the [UCLA Civil Rights Project](#), the [Equity Project](#) at Indiana University, the [Advancement Project](#), and the [Discipline Disparities Research-to-Action Collaborative](#) among others, has found that there are no racially significant differences in behavior among students. However, research has consistently confirmed that African-American students, as well as Latino and American Indian students to a lesser extent, receive harsher punishments than white students for the same infraction; are more likely to be punished for first-time infractions; and are more likely to be punished harshly for non-observable or subjective infractions like disrespect, noise, and "disturbing schools." Research has shown few racial differences in violent or criminal infractions like those related to drugs, alcohol, and weapons.

Measures to improve school climate, promote fairness in all aspects of school life, improve academic instruction and outcomes, practice positive disciplinary interventions, and emphasize restorative justice over punishment have been found to improve behavior, reduce disciplinary referrals, and improve disciplinary fairness. However,

many schools have not put these approaches into practice.

The [Discipline Disparities Research-to-Action Collaborative](#) notes that out-of-school suspensions have risen steadily since the early 1970s and attribute some of that rise to policy changes that are not directly discipline-related. For example, punitive accountability measures may create subtle incentives to push out students who are struggling or are perceived as troublemakers. Further, high rates of inexperienced, transient, or substitute teachers—concentrated most heavily in schools with high rates of poverty and students of color—make it much harder to establish the staff continuity necessary to create positive, personalized school environments that support academic achievement and engagement. Such disparities were also documented in the OCR report.

Teacher Equity

The OCR report found disparities in the access of different groups of students to experienced teachers and school counselors. Here again, students of color, especially African-American students, Latino students, and Native-Alaskan students had less access to experienced and certified teachers than other students. For example:

- Between 3% and 4% of African-American, Latino, American Indian, and Native-Alaskan students attend schools with high concentrations of first-year teachers, compared to 1% of White students.
- Nearly 7% of African-American students—half a million students—attend schools where at least 20% of teachers lack certification or licensure. African-American are four times more likely than white students to attend these schools. Latino students are twice as likely as white students to attend schools where significant numbers of teachers lack certification.
- Among districts that have at least two high schools, nearly 25% report an average gap of at least \$5,000 between the salaries of teachers at the school with the highest and lowest African-American and Latino enrollments.

Curriculum: College and career readiness

Access to a full range of college prep classes is a problem across the U.S. The OCR report found that only 63% of high schools offer physics and just 50% offer calculus. Between 10% and 25% do not offer at least one core math or science course. Students of color are more likely than white students to attend high schools that lack one or more core course in math or science. In addition, students of color and students with disabilities are more likely to be held back (made to repeat a grade) in high school than are other students.

- Among high schools with the highest concentrations of African-American and Latino students, 25% do not offer Algebra II; one-third do not offer chemistry.
- Less than half of American Indian and Native-Alaskan high school students have access to a full range of math and science courses.
- Students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities are more likely to be retained in grade. At the high school level, students with disabilities (12% of student population) are 19% of those who are held back. Twelve percent of African American students are retained, compared to 6% of all students.

Preschool access

Preschool programs are a growing part of the K–12 education landscape, but even so, only about 60% of school districts offer programs for children younger than five. Among districts that do offer preschool programs there are a range of restrictions and inequities.

- Only 43% of districts offer full-day pre-school programs.
- About half of districts that offer pre-school programs make those programs available to all students.
- Students of color and boys are over-represented among students who are retained in kindergarten. Native-Hawaiian, American Indian, Native-Alaskan, and other Pacific Islander kindergarten students are held back at nearly twice the rate of white kindergartners. Boys make up nearly two-thirds of students retained in kindergarten.

Read more:

- www.aic.com/weblogs/get-schooled/2014/mar/21/new-federal-report-racial-disparities-school-disci/
- www.npr.org/2014/03/21/292470976/report-widespread-racial-disparities-in-public-school-punishments
- www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2014/03/21/292456211/black-preschoolers-far-more-likely-to-be-suspended
- www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=292204659
- <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2014/03/discipline-disparities-persist-newest-federal-civil-rights-data-show.html>

Office of Civil Rights

- <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/data.html?src=rt/>

Complete OCR data set:

- <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/>

Other research on racial, disability, and other disparities in schools.

- http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/events/2013/summary-of-new-research-closing-the-school-discipline-gap-research-to-policy/Research_Summary_Closing_the_School_Discipline_Gap.pdf
- <http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/NEPC-SchoolDiscipline.pdf>
- www.indiana.edu/~atlantic/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/African-American-Differential-Behavior_031214.pdf
- www.advancementproject.org/issues/stopping-the-school-to-prison-pipeline
- www.indiana.edu/~atlantic/
- http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/10/black_students_suspended_from_schools_for_minor_infractions_more Often_than_whites_says_a_new_report.html

School Funding Unconstitutional in Kansas

The Kansas Supreme Court has ruled that the state's recent across-the-board funding cuts to public K–12 schools are a violation of the state's constitution. The decision upholds a unanimous January 2013 decision by a three-judge panel that found the finance system fails to meet constitutional standards.

In its decision in *Gannon v. State of Kansas*, the Court gave the state legislature until July 1, 2014 to remedy inequities in state aid to districts for both capital expenses (equipment and buildings) and operations (general expenses). The cost to the state is expected to be about \$130 million.

The ruling is the latest in a long-running battle over school funding that has pitted conservative lawmakers against school districts. In response to a ruling in the 2006 *Montoy v. State*, the legislature established and began phasing in cost-based funding standards that provided (among other things) additional funding for students who cost more to educate and to improve funding adequacy across the state.

But after only two years of the phase-in, the recession reduced revenues and legislators reduced funding for schools by \$386 million. Legislators further reduced revenues with tax cuts in 2012 and 2013 that will amount to \$3.9 billion over the next five years, according to the Associated Press. *Gannon* was filed in 2010 in response to funding cuts.

The state had argued that the *Gannon* districts lacked standing to bring the lawsuit and that school funding issues are not subject to judicial review—that they are non-justiciable. But the Court found the districts did have standing because of their constitutional duties to operate local school systems. The Court also found that funding issues are subject to review as part of the judiciary's duty to review legislation. The Court cited Kansas precedent as well as rulings in several other states on the justiciability question.

Two issues: equity and adequacy

The decision is especially important to low wealth districts that lack capacity to generate significant revenues at the local level. The Court found that the legislature's across-the-board cuts in aid established wealth-based disparities that are inequitable.

The Court has not yet determined whether the state is providing enough funding to meet educational standards, however. Instead, the Court clarified that funding must be sufficient to meet the adequacy requirements currently set forth in Kansas law and the standards of the *Rose* case. *Rose* is the name of the Kentucky school finance case that established adequacy standards that have been adopted by several states, including Kansas. The Supreme Court clarified these adequacy standards and sent *Gannon* back to the three-judge panel to determine whether the state is meeting its constitutional duty as it relates to school funding adequacy.

What's next?

The Court did not tell the state how much it must spend to meet adequacy requirements, something that has

happened in the past. Some lawmakers who defend reductions in school spending have hailed this fact. Advocates for students and school districts, however, claim the decision establishes that the state must provide funding at an adequate level and further clarifies a high bar for meeting the adequacy requirement.

The legislature is expected to address the equity question by the end of the current session. No deadline has been established for the three-judge panel to review the remaining adequacy questions.

Read more:

Education Justice coverage:

- www.educationjustice.org/newsletters/ej_newsblast_140314_KansasFundingUnconstitutional.htm
- www.educationjustice.org/news/january17-2013-plaintiffs-win-in-kansas-state-response-may-create-crisis.html
- www.educationjustice.org/news/january17-2013-plaintiffs-win-in-kansas-state-response-may-create-crisis.html

State and national news coverage:

- www.kansas.com/2014/03/07/3330863/kansas-supreme-court-sends-school.html
- <http://salina.com/news/funding3-7-14>
- www.nytimes.com/2014/03/08/us/kansas-school-spending-ruling.html?_r=0
- www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/03/21/26kansas.h33.html

The full ruling:

- www.kscourts.org/Cases-and-Opinions/opinions/SupCt/2014/20140307/109335.pdf

RPM coverage of long-running school finance activity in Kansas:

- www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=3060
- www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2958
- www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2395
- www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2345
- www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2810
- www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2673
- www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2415
- www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2547
- www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2916

Report Finds Negative Effects of Recession on School Funding

Earlier this month when the Kansas Supreme Court found the state in violation of its constitutional duty to fund schools equitably, it was acknowledging a problem that has become worse since the Great Recession. That problem is one that many states are facing, according to a recent report from [Education Law Center](http://www.educationlawcenter.org/) (ELC).

[Is School Funding Fair? A National Report Card](http://www.educationlawcenter.org/Is-School-Funding-Fair-A-National-Report-Card) is the third edition of the ELC report. The report notes that at least 34 states are providing less funding per student in 2013–14 than in 2007–08. Further, the share of state budget devoted to education is down in most states.

The impact of funding reductions falls most heavily on schools with high percentages of students living in poverty. Those percentages climbed drastically during the Recession. In 2011, 21% of children ages five to eighteen were living in poverty, a 30% increase from 2007 levels and an additional 2.5 million children. The federal poverty line is \$23,492 for a family of four.

[Is School Funding Fair?](http://www.educationlawcenter.org/Is-School-Funding-Fair-A-National-Report-Card) also notes that poor children are increasingly concentrated in schools with other poor children. It is well established in research that very poor children who attend schools with high concentrations of poverty face higher barriers to educational success than do similar students who attend schools with lower poverty levels. Between 2007 and 2011, the percentage of students who attend high-poverty schools (those with over 30% of students living in poverty) doubled from 7% to 16%, according to the report.

The effect of recession-era school funding cuts has made school funding systems in many states more regressive, that is, they provide less funding to school districts with high levels of student poverty than to other

districts. *Is School Funding Fair?* found that 27 states became less fair, particularly in the period from 2010–11; twelve states improved fairness.

Four measures of school funding fairness

The report defines fairness as whether or not the state “ensures equal educational opportunity by providing a sufficient level of funding distributed to districts within the state to account for additional needs generated by student poverty.” The report makes no attempt to determine how much funding is necessary or to set thresholds for which states could be considered fair or not. Rather, it explores four measures that offer a lens for considering and comparing state funding systems.

The report does not provide analysis in terms of district locale. However, some of the fairness measures use statistical techniques to control for cost-affecting conditions and other variables. *RPM* notes that several of these variables, including district size, population density, and wage comparisons, are often incorporated in statistical analyses in ways that are harmful for rural schools and districts. For example, wage comparisons are sometimes used to justify the lower salaries of rural teachers. Further, rural districts typically have less local revenue generating capacity than other districts of similar income levels, making rural districts more vulnerable to inequities in funding. For these reasons, it is possible that the report underestimates unfair funding conditions faced by high-poverty rural districts.

The four measures used in *Is School Funding Fair?* include funding level, funding distribution, effort, and coverage.

Funding level measures the overall level of state and local revenue provided to school districts per student compared to other states. The report finds that funding levels vary widely from a high of \$17,397 per student in Wyoming to a low of \$6,753 in Idaho. Per pupil revenues in 26 states have fallen since 2010.

Funding distribution measures how funding is distributed to districts relative to student poverty. In other words, it considers whether more (or less) funding is available to districts with higher concentrations of student poverty. Fourteen states have funding systems that provide more funding per student to districts with higher concentrations of student poverty. Nineteen states have systems that are regressive, that is they provide less funding for schools with higher poverty levels, though differences in 12 of those states are not statistically significant.

Effort measures how much the state spends on education relative to its fiscal capacity defined as the ratio of spending to state gross domestic product (GDP). The recession had a significant effect on GDP in most states, declining an average of 3% in 43 states between 2008 and 2009. Because school funding is tied to revenue capacity reflected in GDP, the recession reduced state revenues overall. Only fifteen states have seen their GDP return to or exceed 2007 levels. Many states reduced effort during the recession, with only six states increasing effort since 2007.

Coverage measures the proportion of school age children enrolled in public schools compared to those enrolled in private schools; the report also looks at the median income levels of public and private school families. Coverage affects public and political will to fund public schools, especially if high-income families are not participating in public schools. Coverage is also an indicator of distribution of funding as it relates to student poverty. The report found that coverage rates are highest in Utah at 94% and lowest in Hawaii at 78%. It also found that income levels of private school students are higher on average than those of public school students, ranging from 104% in Alaska (where incomes are nearly the same) to 199% in Louisiana (income levels are twice as high for private school students). In Washington, DC, the income level of private school students is more than three times (367%) higher than public school students.

Fairness consequences

In addition to considering the condition of school funding as depicted by its four fairness measures, *Is School Funding Fair?* examines the impact of fairness on three key areas of educational quality: early childhood education, pupil to teacher ratios, and wage competitiveness. Not surprisingly, states with better funding systems also do better on these indicators.

Early Childhood Education Research consistently demonstrates that high-quality preschool education is one of the most important ways to boost academic achievement and life-long opportunity and to close opportunity gaps. Nevertheless, the report found that only 47% of three and four year olds in the U.S. are enrolled in a preschool program. The enrollment rate for low-income children is just 38%.

The report finds that preschool participation correlates with other measures of funding fairness. For example, many of the states with the lowest preschool enrollment rates for low-income children are also states with low funding levels; states with highest enrollment rates tend to be among those with higher funding levels. Enrollment of low-income students in preschool is also correlated to the effort levels of states, with high-effort

states generally doing a better job of providing educational opportunity for very young children living in poverty.

Pupil-to-Teacher Ratios Low ratios of students to teachers have a positive effect on educational achievement, especially for students living in poverty, according to a number of studies. In addition, schools with high rates of poverty benefit from additional staff like academic coaches, literacy specialists, and counselors. Therefore, the pupil-to-teacher-ratio is an indicator of the fairness of funding at the district level. The report finds that 32 states provide greater staffing resources in higher-poverty districts, although these are minimal in many states. The recession's impact on budgets negatively affected staffing. Pupil-teacher ratios increased in 34 states and became less fair in 32 states between 2009 and 2010.

Wage Competitiveness The report found that teacher salaries are on par with or exceed those of other similar professions in only six states. States with higher levels of funding also tend to have higher average teacher salaries.

Is School Funding Fair? concludes with a call to advocacy. "The unfair condition of school funding in far too many states demonstrates again the importance of sustained advocacy to convince elected officials and policymakers to undertake meaningful and enduring school finance reform."

Read more:

Education Law Center

- www.edlawcenter.org/

Read the full report here:

- www.edlawcenter.org/assets/files/pdfs/publications/National_Report_Card_2014.pdf

More from the Rural Trust

[RPM Special Edition on School Violence](#)

[Consolidation Fight-Back Toolkit](#)

[Global Teacher Fellowship](#)



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