

SHUFFLING THE DECK

In February 2023, Judge Renée Cohn Jubelirer called for a new funding system in Pennsylvania to fulfill the state's obligation to provide a thorough and efficient education for its children. But, opponents of increased education funding cite the state's high per-student spending, compared to other states, as a reason not to increase our total spending on K-12 schools.

The comparison to other states' spending per student is misleading in multiple ways.

To begin with, it does not consider variations in the **cost of living and education expenses**. Pennsylvania's education spending per student is **below the average of the 11 New England and other Mid-Atlantic states that are closest to Pennsylvania regarding the costs of education**.

In addition, overall levels of funding **skirt the core issue in Judge Jubelirer's decision—that in PA school funding is highly inequitable from one school district to another**. The evidence presented to Judge Jubelirer, and confirmed by multiple research studies, shows that:

- the state's share of K-12 education spending is **among the lowest in the country**.
- PA school districts thus must rely on funds raised by local taxes.
- the state's few, relatively wealthy school districts can generate far more funding, even at low and moderate local tax rates, than the many less wealthy school districts can provide with high local tax rates.
- as a result, school funding in less wealthy school districts, which disproportionately teach students from low-income families, are drastically underfunded and provide an inadequate education.

The high level of spending in a few districts pushes up our state average, but most of our kids are still left behind. Finally, national funding comparisons are irrelevant, because the goal required by the constitution is not to provide an education that meets national achievement averages—which are not high—but an education that enables every child to receive a “comprehensive, effective, and contemporary system of public education.”

Some legislators suggest reallocating funds from well-funded districts to meet this goal—but this approach is both impractical and impolitic. It is impractical because the funds that push some wealthy districts to the top are not state funds but their own locally-raised revenues. It is impolitic because no General Assembly majority can be formed that eliminates all state funding to wealthier school districts or shifts revenues those districts raise locally to other districts.

So how do we rectify this problem? The Basic Education Funding Commission should:

- use the spending of high-achieving schools as a model to estimate how much each school district should spend per student, also known as adequacy targets.
- set two goals: one for new state funding that increases the share of K-12 expenses to ensure that underfunded districts receive the necessary resources and the other to build broad political support.
- create realistic expectations about what level of funding local school districts must provide and mechanisms to encourage school boards to meet them.
- develop a comprehensive plan that the General Assembly can implement over five years to enable every school district to raise its funding to the level required by the all-inclusive adequacy targets.