

Report: NYS gets A for effort, D for equity in education spending

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UTICA — New York gets an “A” for effort in school spending but earns a “D” when it comes to sharing equally with poor schools.

Those are the findings of a recent report, “Is School Funding Fair? A National Report Card,” released by the Education Law Center in New Jersey.

The report ranks the financing of public schools by state governments based on “four fairness” indicators:

- Funding distribution; i.e. fairness (compared to other states).
- Effort.
- Funding rank among states.
- “Coverage,” or proportion of students in public schools that receive aid.

According to the report, “New York's relatively high average spending of \$17,385 per pupil ... places it third among all states. On fairness, however, the state receives a 'D' grade because average funding levels in high poverty districts are lower than average spending levels in low poverty districts.

This 'regressive' funding structure, in which poor districts spend only 82 cents for every dollar spent in wealthier districts, severely disadvantages low-income students.”

Big spending on education statewide hides what the report calls a “fundamental flaw” in how New York funds public schools.

“The regressive nature of the funding in New York has to do with the amount the wealthy districts spend in local property taxes,” report co-author Danielle Farrie said.

Wealthy suburban districts use local property taxes to keep spending high, while poor urban and rural districts “struggle with levels of state aid that are inadequate to offset their low property wealth.”

Unequal funding, particularly for small city school districts such as Utica, is the complaint of a lawsuit called *Hussein v. the State of New York*, which has been brought by 13 small city school districts, including Utica.

“That's why we're in this lawsuit,” Utica City School District Superintendent Bruce Karam said. “This is going on across the whole state, mainly upstate.”

“It's exactly what we're saying,” said Robert Biggerstaff, the lead attorney on the Hussein case. “When you average everything out, maybe the total level is high, but that doesn't mean that the poorest school districts in the state are getting the resources they need.”

He said the study could be used in the lawsuit to bolster his case.

Unequal funding, particularly with state-aid dollars, has long been the complaint of Richard Timbs, executive director of the Statewide School Finance Consortium.

“I really don't have a problem with the amount of money they're spending,” he said. “It's always the distribution. It's just not going to the place it's needed.”

Advocates for more equitable funding to low-income schools point to the Foundation Aid Formula - a complex calculation that doles out most of the \$20 billion the state spends on education each year - as the problem.

Timbs said the formula isn't being fed the amount of money that it was created to use.

“If it was fully funded, it would probably be close to enough, but the problem is it's not fully funded,” he said.

Fully funding that formula was supposed to happen already, said Frank Mauro, executive director of the Fiscal Policy Institute.

“While it's technically still on the books, it's stretched out so long it will never be fully implemented,” he said. “For the high needs districts, what's more important is that the state also put a cap on how much aid can increase each year.

“We have this promise on the books of a sound basic education, but we put a parameter on it.”