

Talk

about Today's Public Schools

Editor's Note:

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State lawmakers fail miserably; continue to ignore investing in public education

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As Texas works toward implementation of an “A-F” rating system for its districts and schools, a new report is out that, ironically, grades the 50 states on several aspects of funding public schools.

The report produced by Rutgers University and the Education Law Center rates the states on their efforts to produce a system of finance that provides educational opportunity to every child regardless of family background or the geographic location in which they live. I think we can agree that this sounds like a reasonable standard on which to rate a system of finance.

The report concludes that school funding levels are widely disparate among the states and that certain states dedicate a very low portion of their economic capacity to fund public schools. The report also finds that low rankings on state funding fairness correlate with poor performance on other key resource indicators.

The report grades states on funding level, funding distribution, effort and coverage. So, how did Texas do? Not well.

Texas fails miserably on all four measures

Funding level compares each state's average per-pupil revenue. These numbers are then corrected for regional wage differences, poverty, population density and other factors to get a true “apples to apples” comparison. Using 2013 data, Texas was 40th in funding among the states.

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Funding distribution measures the funding across districts relative to student poverty. This metric looks at the amount of funding provided to schools with higher concentrations of poverty. You may be amazed to learn that Texas, and a number of other states, actually fund higher poverty districts, on average, less than their relatively low poverty neighbors. In this measure Texas earns a “D”.

Effort measures a state’s spending relative to its capacity. In this report that means state spending on schools compared to its gross state product (GSP). In this area, Texas earns an “F” with only seven states contributing a smaller percentage of their GSP to public school children. In addition, the study finds that the percentage change in this effort index from 2008 to 2013 places Texas 47th among the 50 states with an actual decline over that period of time!

The final measure is particularly important given our state’s stand on privatizing public schools. **Coverage** refers to the percentage of the state’s students who attend its public schools as well as the economic disparity between those students who attend public schools and those in the non-public sector.

According to the report, “the proportion of students enrolled in public schools affects the level of financial support necessary for public education. There are two important consequences to wealthier families opting out of public education: these opt outs further concentrate poverty and increase the need for resources in schools, and they can affect the public and political will necessary to generate fair funding through a state’s school finance formula.”

This is exactly what many of us have been saying about the issue of students leaving public schools. While Texas scores in the middle of the pack, this is largely because a very large portion of the state’s students are still enrolled in public schools. The income disparity between public and other schooling options in Texas is a whopping 182%.

Among the major findings in the report is that, “Texas is the only state that is very poorly positioned on all four fairness measures, receiving an “F” in Funding Effort, a “D” in Funding Distribution and scoring in the lower half of the Funding Level and Coverage rankings (emphasis added). The full report can be found at:
http://www.schoolfundingfairness.org/National_Report_Card_2016.pdf

When will we begin to hold our state lawmakers accountable for taking a long term view of our state’s future? Only with investment in public education can we guarantee a solid economic future for Texas.

