

Connecticut's Equal Educational Opportunity Problem

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Monday, May 25, 2026

Introduction

In 2021, Dr. Robert Cotto of Trinity College, Dr. Preston Green of the University of Connecticut and I wrote an Op-Ed in the CT Mirror in which we explained that *Now is the time to fix Connecticut school Finance*.¹ We laid out a three-step process for that fix:

- Step 1: Conduct rigorous analyses to answer the question: *What is needed to achieve equal opportunity for all of the state's children to achieve a sufficiently robust set of outcomes?*
- Step 2: Recalibrate ECS with a formula specifically designed to hit these cost targets through a combination of a) equitable local effort and b) sufficient state aid;
- Step 3: Fund it! (Raise sufficient tax revenues to support the system.)

We are now well past time to get this done. Five more years have passed and the state has taken none of these steps. In that time, Connecticut has fallen to having one of the least equitably funded public education systems in the nation. In our most recent national report – The Adequacy and Fairness of School Funding² – Connecticut ranked second to last among states in Equal Educational Opportunity.³

The analyses that follow are informed by a set of core principles and findings from a vast and growing body of rigorous empirical research. Most notably, money matters for the quality of schooling that can be provided. A 2025 comprehensive, deep dive review of studies completed over the past several years in particular explains that:

- **Money matters whether it's going up or down:** Increases to school funding lead to improved student outcomes and decreased in funding lead to decreases in outcomes;
- **Money matters whether that money is driven into annual operating expenditures or capital investments:** Increased funding for annual operations typically leads to better teacher wages and smaller class sizes, showing positive effects on student outcomes. Increases to capital spending, from improved classroom facilities, to heating/cooling system improvements lead to improved student outcomes, but often with a lag between when the money is raised and spent and when students have access to the improved facilities.

¹ <https://ctmirror.org/2021/01/04/fixing-connecticut-school-finance-the-time-is-now/>

² <https://www.schoolfinancedata.org/>

³ https://www.schoolfinancedata.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/profiles26_CT.pdf

- **Money matters more- and has a more profound impact – for children experiencing poverty and in school districts and communities in which states have historically underinvested:** Progressive funding matters, often yielding a several fold difference in the return on investment to spending additional dollars in previously low spending and/or higher poverty settings than in lower poverty settings.
- **Money matters regardless of how changes in funding come about:** That is, whether funding increases result from legislative action, fluctuations in economic conditions, federal stimulus, local voter approval or judicial order increases to funding yield improvements to student outcomes.⁴

Finally, the plethora of recent rigorous studies find that increased funding not only improves student academic achievement, but also educational attainment, adult income, lower mortality and lower crime rates.

Consistent with the findings that money matters and that money matters more for some than others, are two core principles of education cost analysis and school finance reform.

- **Principle #1:** It costs more to achieve higher outcomes than lower ones;
- **Principle #2:** It costs more to achieve the same outcomes in some places than others and with some populations than others.

The goal of a state school finance system is to raise and distribute the funding necessary for every school in every district to provide students with the educational programs and services needed to achieve common, adequate outcome goals.⁵ The policy conversation starts with the outcome goals and standards defined by states for what children are expected to achieve. Educational equity is attained when all participants have equal opportunity to achieve a set of common outcomes. Educational adequacy is attained when the outcomes that participants are able to achieve are sufficient for them to become productive, self-determined, and civically engaged citizens. Combining the two, an education system that is equitable and adequate provides all children with equal opportunity to achieve sufficiently rigorous outcomes.

Designing and implementing a school funding system involves a) identifying the costs of providing the system in question and b) identifying the revenue sources that can consistently, stably and equitably fund those costs over time and across settings. A well-designed school funding system must:

⁴ Baker, B. D., & Knight, D. (2025). Does money matter in education?. Albert Shanker Institute.

https://www.shankerinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/moneymatters3rdedition_final.pdf

⁵ Baker, Bruce D. (2025). Framework for Evaluating & Reforming Education Finance Systems. (EdWorkingPaper: 25-1127).

Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/pa0r-n548>

Baker, B.D., Green, P.C. III “Conceptions of Equity and Adequacy in School Finance,” in Handbook of Research in Education Finance and Policy, ed. Helen Ladd and Edward Fiske (New York: Routledge, 2008), 203–21;

Baker, B.D., Green, P.C. III “Conceptions, Measurement, and Application of Educational Adequacy and Equal Educational Opportunity,” in The Handbook of Education Policy Research, ed. Gary Sykes, Barbara Schneider, and David Plank (New York: Routledge, 2009), 438–52.

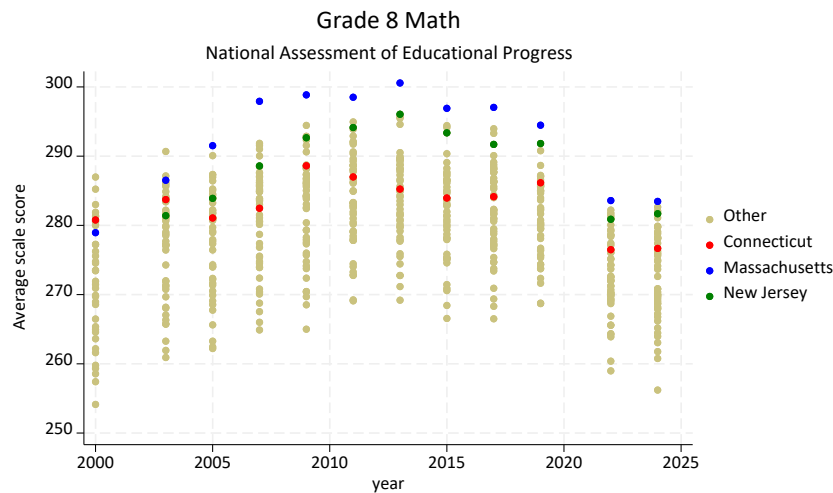
- 1) Fully, publicly finance the costs associated with providing all eligible participants with equal educational opportunity to achieve common, adequate outcomes;
- 2) Be based on a system of public financing and taxation that treats taxpayers equitably and yields revenue sources that can provide stable support for systemwide costs and can be distributed equitably across institutions serving all eligible participants.

Connecticut’s Education Cost Sharing formula is a relic of a past era, having only been marginally tweaked on occasion, including modest adjustments in the most recent legislative session.⁶ But that system has long needed an overhaul if not complete replacement. Here, we provide a review of current conditions in Connecticut school finance and a roadmap to reform.

Review of National Data & Reports

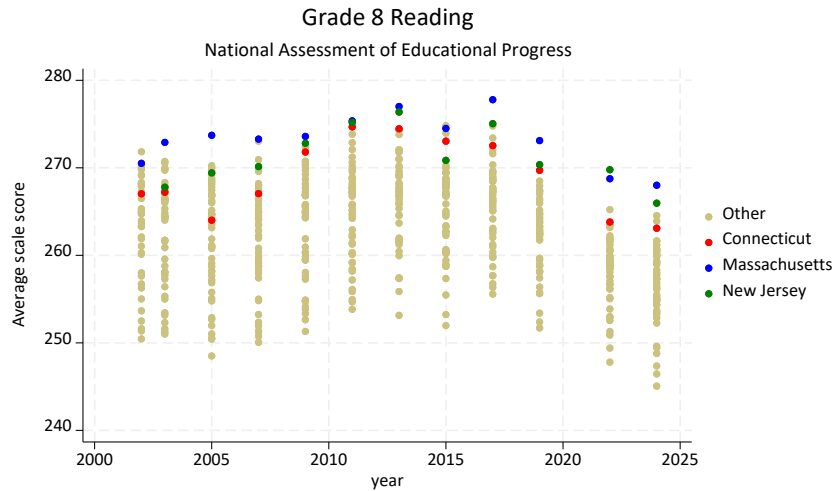
Figures 1 and 2 show that for 8th grade students, Connecticut’s outcomes in reading and math remain relatively high among states. But Connecticut trails behind its most comparable peers, Massachusetts and New Jersey and has generally lost ground since the early 2010s.

Figure 1



⁶ <https://ctmirror.org/2026/05/12/education-bills-legislative-session-2026/>

Figure 2



Connecticut’s average outcomes are strong, but weaker than peer states. It’s average spending is relatively high and the share of economic capacity spent on schooling above average.⁷ Connecticut’s problem is an equity and equal educational opportunity problem, and one that the state is wealthy enough to fix.

Connecticut’s opportunity gap of -148.1 points is ranked #46 out of 47 (#1=most equal).⁸ So, what exactly do we mean by “opportunity gap” and who is most adversely affected by that opportunity gap? The next several figures illustrate this problem. Figure 3 groups Connecticut school districts into quintiles by their child poverty rates, from lowest to highest poverty. Figure 3 shows in navy blue bars, the average current spending per pupil for those districts in 2023. Light blue bars show what those districts are predicted to need to spend in order for their students to achieve national average outcomes in reading and math. That would be a significant reduction in outcomes, per Figures 1 and 2. It would in fact cost less to achieve lower outcomes in Connecticut than is currently being spent.

But national average outcomes are not an aspirational goal for Connecticut. Still, while low poverty districts spend more than double what they’d need to spend to achieve this low bar, high poverty districts nominally spend slightly less than low poverty districts and spend only slightly more than needed to achieve this low bar outcome goal. Such is the nature of the equal opportunity problem.

If we raise the outcome goal to a more robust standard (Massachusetts average outcomes), high poverty districts fall well short of spending needed to achieve this standard. Even within the high poverty quintile, there are districts whose spending level is insufficient to achieve the lower outcome goal.

⁷ https://www.schoolfinancedata.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/profiles26_CT.pdf

⁸ https://www.schoolfinancedata.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/profiles26_CT.pdf

Figure 3

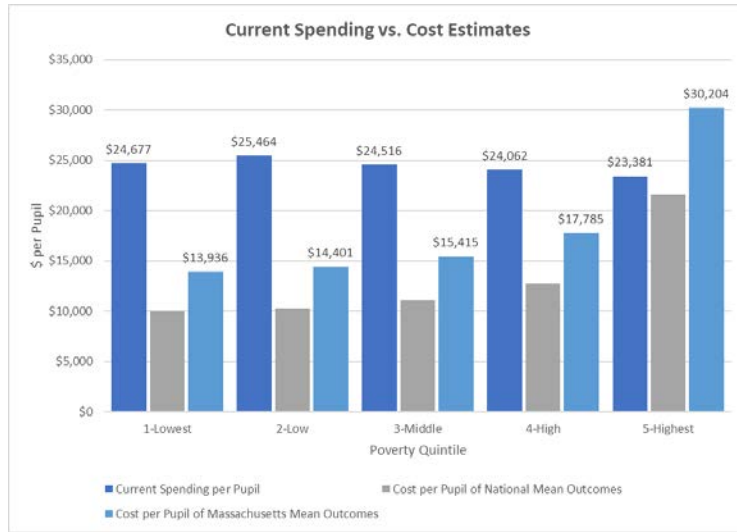


Figure 4 illustrates the trend in outcomes by poverty quintile, showing that while adequacy has declined, outcomes have declined, and that outcomes in the highest poverty quintile of districts have fallen well below nationally normed outcomes. Whatever outcome goal is set, children from the lowest to highest poverty districts have vastly different ability to reach that goal, as a function of vastly different school funding adequacy. These gaps exist because the Education Cost Sharing formula has never been appropriately calibrated to address the cost differences in providing equal educational opportunity from one school or district to the next, or one child to the next.

Figure 4

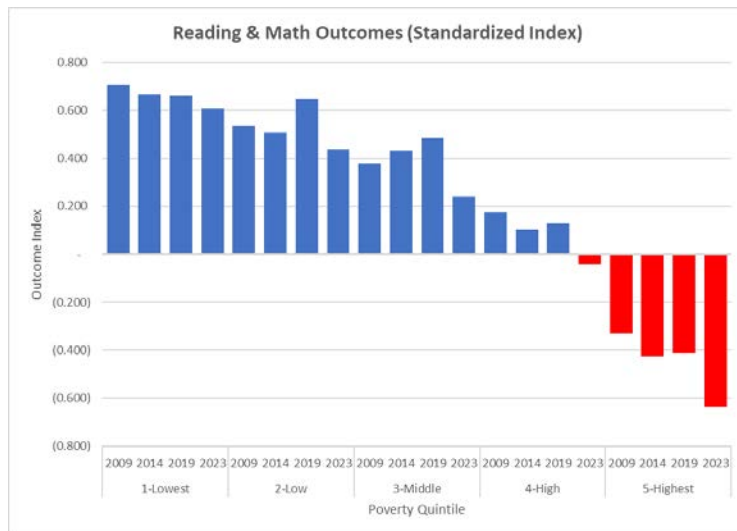


Figure 5 provides a demographic break down, and trends for the districts by quintile. The lowest poverty quintile of districts is by definition, low in child poverty rate, but also low in shares of Black and Hispanic students. By contrast the highest poverty districts have relatively high Black enrollment

shares and very high and growing Hispanic enrollment shares. By 2023, the highest poverty quintile of Connecticut school districts was nearly 50% Hispanic on average.

Figure 5

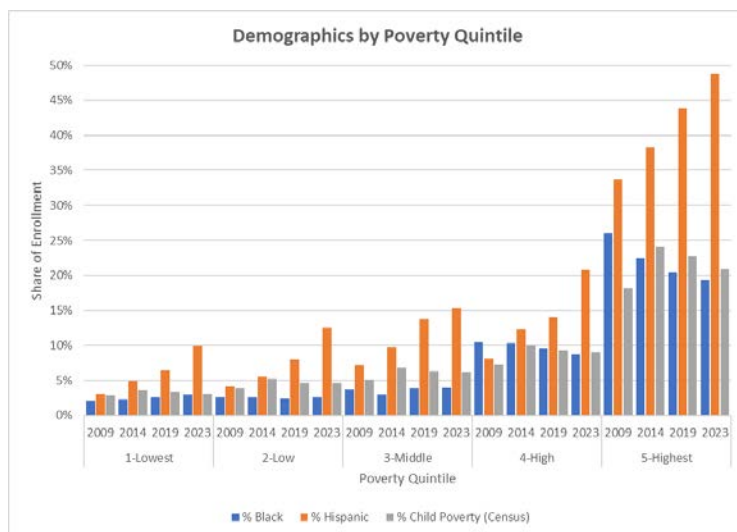


Figure 6 is perhaps the most important illustration here, but somewhat more complicated. Each bubble in the figure is a Connecticut school district. Bubble size represents the enrollment size of the district. Along the horizontal axis is the ratio of the district’s current spending to the predicted spending needed to achieve the outcome target, where 1.0 (vertical dashed line) is the adequacy bar. One might view the horizontal axis here as representing degrees of deprivation, with respect to funding needed to achieve a given standard.

On the vertical axis are the actual outcomes in reading and math. As was apparent in the previous graphs, but clearer here, districts with more adequate funding also tend to have higher student outcomes. One might view the vertical axis here as representing degrees of damages that result from that deprivation.

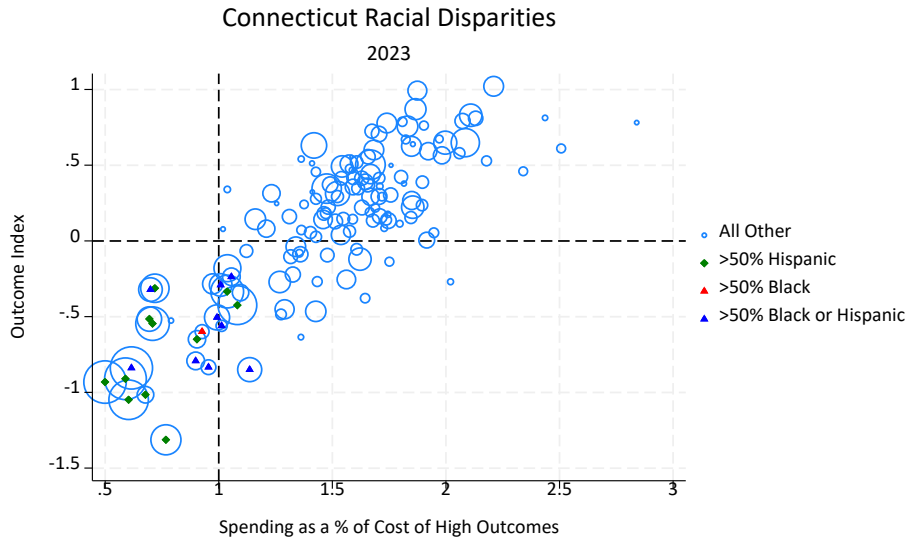
Spending adequacy ranges from as low as 50% adequate to more than double what is predicted to be needed to achieve the target outcomes. Meanwhile, outcomes vary more than a full standard deviation above and below the goal (mean of 0). Every district in the lower left-hand corner – that is, districts with the least adequate spending and lower outcomes – is either majority Hispanic enrollment, majority Black enrollment, or majority combination of the two. Connecticut has a long history of systematic school funding deprivation of the state’s predominantly Hispanic communities, as we explained in our 2021 CT Mirror Op-Ed.⁹ Not only has this not changed, it has actually gotten worse.

⁹ Baker, B. D., Srikanth, A., Cotto Jr, R., & Green III, P. C. (2020). School Funding Disparities and the Plight of Latinx Children. Education policy analysis archives, 28(135), n135.

Baker, B., & Cotto Jr, R. (2020). The under-funding of Latinx-serving school districts. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 101(6), 40-46.

Baker, B. D. (2014). America's Most Financially Disadvantaged School Districts and How They Got That Way: How State and Local Governance Causes School Funding Disparities. Center for American Progress.

Figure 6



The state’s majority Latino and Black districts are systematically deprived of the funding they need to achieve desired (and mandated outcomes) and children in those districts are suffering measurable damages.

Table 1 provides detail on districts that lie at both ends (lower left and upper right) of Figure 7. New Canaan, for example spends more than twice what it would need to spend (2.21x) to achieve target outcomes, and achieves a full standard deviation above that goal, putting it in the far upper right of Figure 6. New Canaan’s socioeconomic index¹⁰ is more than double the national average, and incomes in the community are more than 10x the poverty income level. The district has few Black or Hispanic students.

Meanwhile, Bridgeport has an SES index well below the national average, is majority Black and Hispanic, with the vast majority of children from families qualified for free or reduced priced lunch. Neighborhood income levels are barely above the qualifying level for reduced lunch (1.97 x the poverty income threshold, where reduced lunch qualification is at 1.85). Current nominal spending per pupil is substantially less in Bridgeport than New Canaan, and is only 50% of what is predicted to be needed to achieve the outcome goals (index = 0) in the model.

The contrast between New Britain and Farmington is somewhat less, but still striking. Importantly, while their nominal spending per pupil is more similar, New Britain’s needs are far greater, leaving New Britain at an adequacy ratio of .77 (77% of cost) and Farmington at 74% above cost to achieve the target outcomes.

¹⁰Includes a weighted combination of: Median Family Income, % with Bachelors Degree or Higher, Census Poverty Rate, SNAP eligibility Rate, Unemployment Rate, Single Mother Headed Household Rate for resident households in school district. See Table 20 here: https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/xh833nn4025/SEDA_documentation_6.0.pdf

Table 1. Disparities among example districts

District Name	Socioeconomic Index[1]	% Hispanic[2]	% Black[2]	% Free or Reduced Lunch[2]	Ratio of Neighborhood Income to Poverty Income[3]	Current Spending per Pupil[4]	Spending as a Percent of Adequacy Cost[5]	Outcome Index[6]
Bridgeport	-1.53	58%	29%	81%	197	\$20,514	0.50	-0.93
New Canaan	2.32	6%	1%	0%	1,026	\$27,979	2.21	1.02
New Britain	-1.33	68%	11%	76%	287	\$24,023	0.77	-1.31
Farmington	1.62	11%	5%	16%	435	\$23,030	1.74	0.78

[1] <https://edopportunity.org/opportunity/data/downloads/> (covariates file)

[2] National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data, Local Education Agency Universe

[3] National Center for Education Statistics, EDGE. Neighborhood Poverty Index

<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Economic/NeighborhoodPoverty>

[4] U.S. Census Bureau, Fiscal Survey of Local Governments (F33) Public Elementary and Secondary Finances.

<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/school-finances/data/tables.html>

[5] School Finance Indicators Database. District Cost Database. <https://www.schoolfinancedata.org/download-data/>

[6] constructed using data from the Stanford education data archive, Education Opportunity Trends project.

<https://edopportunity.org/trends/data/>

How to Fix the Problem

In our 2021 Op-Ed, as noted at the outset of this brief, we laid out a three step process to *Fixing* Connecticut school finance. In April of this year, Governor Ned Lamont announced establishment of a commission to reevaluate education funding.¹¹ This commission should start this process. To reiterate:

- Step 1: Conduct rigorous analyses to answer the question: *What is needed to achieve equal opportunity for all of the state’s children to achieve a sufficiently robust set of outcomes?*
- Step 2: Recalibrate (or replace) ECS with a formula specifically designed to hit these cost targets through a combination of a) equitable local effort and b) sufficient state aid;
- Step 3: Fund it! (Raise sufficient tax revenues to support the system.)

The problems with Connecticut school finance are well documented herein, and by myself and others in national reports and peer reviewed publications.¹² Similar solutions have even been proposed by others, using methods like those I use here to summarize Connecticut’s dire equal educational opportunity problems.¹³ Several states have, in recent years, engaged in analyses of the

¹¹ https://portal.ct.gov/governor/news/press-releases/2026/04-2026/governor-lamont-establishes-commission-to-reevaluate-education-funding-improve-student-outcomes?language=en_US

¹² Baker, B. D., Di Carlo, M., & Weber, M. (2025). The Adequacy and Fairness of State School Finance Systems, School Year 2021-22. Albert Shanker Institute.

Zhao, B. (2023). Estimating the cost function of Connecticut public K–12 education: implications for inequity and inadequacy in school spending. *Education Economics*, 31(4), 439-470.

¹³ Zhao, B. (2023). How to design a state education aid formula using a regression-based estimate of the cost-capacity gap: The case of Connecticut, USA. *Journal of Education Finance*, 48(4), 349-378.

costs associated with meeting common outcome goals.¹⁴ Methods for conducting such analyses have become both more rigorous and more consistent in their findings over time.¹⁵

It has now been 12 years since I first laid out the plight of majority Hispanic Connecticut school districts in a report for the Center for American Progress. An entire cohort of children has passed from Grade 1 to 12 in that time, with conditions only worsening each year and no real signs of the substantive and substantial changes needed.

The Governor's commission must put forth language to request that a high quality, rigorous study of the state's school finance system be conducted during the 2027 calendar year to inform the overhaul or replacement of ECS in the 2028 legislative session. A new formula should begin phase-in by the Fall of 2028. Template language for the request for proposals to conduct the evaluation of Connecticut school finance and propose reforms is included below.

Template Language for RFP

- The study should engage multiple constituencies to determine the desired outcomes and related programs and services for ensuring that all children in Connecticut are provided equal educational opportunity to achieve high academic standards.
- The study should provide a comprehensive, inclusive estimate of the costs for all children to meet the proposed standards.
- The study should consider how costs differ when either raising standards from the current standards to new, aspirational standards, and the costs associated with either broadening or narrowing the expectations and standards to be provided through local and regional education agencies.
- The study should identify, include and/or develop appropriate measures of differences in needs of individual students and groups of students and determine how those needs affect the costs associated with achieving the established standards (above).
- The study should identify, include and/or develop measures and/or classifications of local public school districts and schools, such as economies of scale, remoteness of location, population sparsity, grade ranges served, etc. and determine how these differences across schools, districts and locations affect the costs of achieving the established standards (above).

¹⁴ Atchison, D., Baker, B.D., Levin, J., Fatima, S., Trauth, A., Srikanth, A., Herberle, C., Gannon-Slater, N., Junk, K., Wallace, L. (2023) Assessment of Delaware Public School Funding. https://education.delaware.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/23-22933_1_Delaware_Full_Report-FMT-ed103023-Version-2.pdf

Atchison, D., Levin, S., Levin, J., Kolar, A., Blair, D., Srikanth, A., & Salvato, B. (2024). Equity and Adequacy of Colorado School Funding: A Cost-Modeling Approach. <https://air.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/Colorado-Adequacy-Study-Final-Report-December-2024.pdf>

Brooks, C. D., Levin, J., Salvato, B., & Baker, B. D. (2025). Understanding the Cost of Providing Adequate Educational Opportunity in Oregon. <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/Task-5-Understanding-the-Cost-of-Providing-Adequate-Educational-Opportunity-in-Oregon-Jan-2025.pdf>

¹⁵ Baker, Bruce D.. (2025). Framework for Evaluating & Reforming Education Finance Systems. (EdWorkingPaper: 25-1127). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/pa0r-n548>

- The study should identify, include and/or develop measures of variations in the competitive wages for school staff and include in cost estimation, how regional differences in competitive wages affect the costs of achieving the established standards (above).
- The study should provide school and district level estimates of the per pupil costs (inclusive of all relevant programs and services) of achieving the established standards (above), taking into account students served, structural and geographic differences across schools and districts and regional differences in competitive wages.
- The study should include evaluation of whether and to what extent districts and schools are currently organizing their resources efficiently toward achieving the established standards (above).
- The study should provide recommendations for reforming or replacing the current Education Cost Sharing formula to meet the needs of each school and district, ensuring that they have the revenues available to cover the costs of achieving the established standards (above).