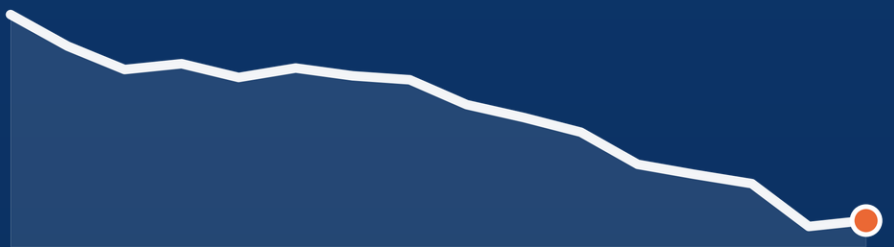


Connecticut's Equal Educational Opportunity Problem

Why the state's school funding formula is falling further behind — and what fixing it would require

STATEWIDE ADEQUACY, 2009–2024



Bruce D. Baker

University of Miami • Co-Director, School Finance Indicators Database

Monday, May 25, 2026

145% → 115%

Statewide funding adequacy,
2009–2024

–148.1

Connecticut's opportunity gap
— ranked 46th of 47 states

9% → 25%

Share of CT districts funded
below adequacy since 2009

Prepared for Connecticut's school-finance reform commission, this brief reviews the state's widening equal-educational-opportunity gap and lays out a three-step path — study, recalibrate, and fund — to bring Connecticut's Education Cost Sharing formula back in line with what students actually need.

Introduction

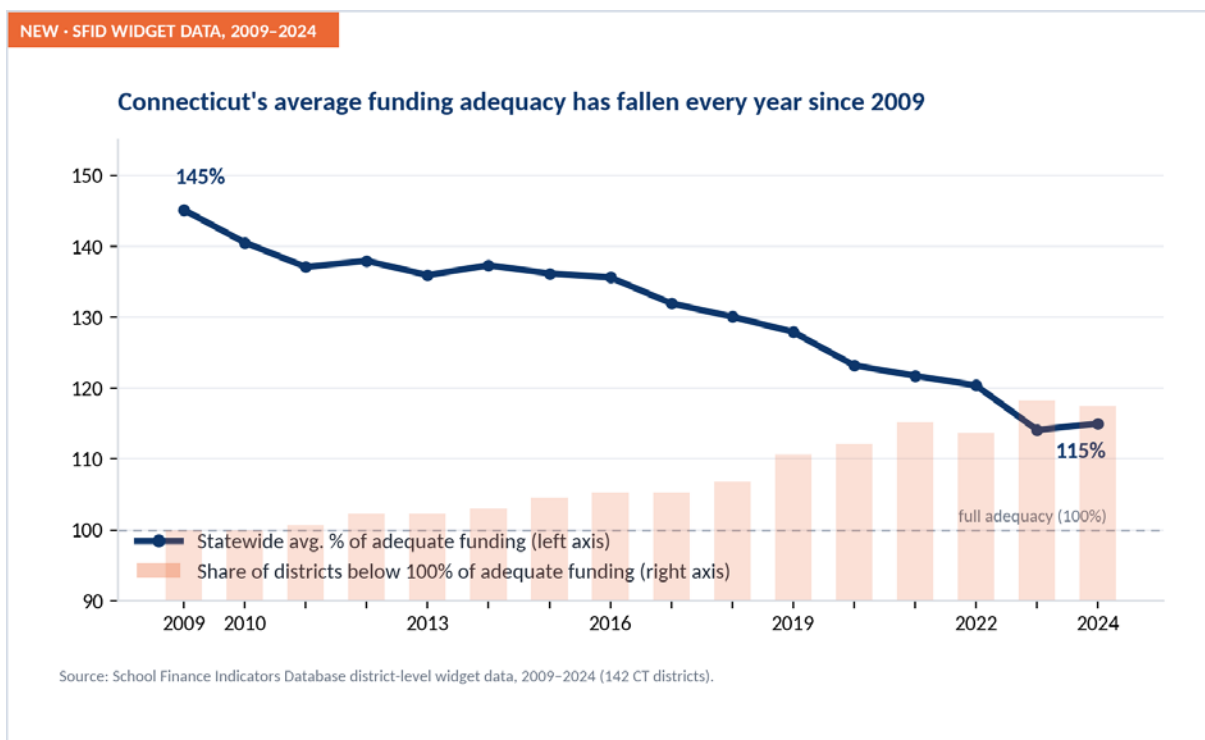
In 2021, Dr. Robert Cotto of Trinity College, Dr. Preston Green of the University of Connecticut and I wrote an Op-Ed in the *CT Mirror* in which we explained that now is the time to fix Connecticut school finance. We laid out a three-step process for that fix:

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 Funding* — Connecticut ranked second to last among states in Equal Educational Opportunity.



Statewide average funding adequacy has fallen almost every year since 2009, while the share of districts funded below full adequacy has nearly tripled. Source: School Finance Indicators Database district-level widget data, 2009-2024.

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 explains that:

- **Money matters whether it's going up or down:** Increases to school funding lead to improved student outcomes, and decreases 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.
- **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:** 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.

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. 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:

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

Connecticut's Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula is a relic of a past era, having only been marginally tweaked on occasion, including modest adjustments in the most recent legislative session. 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.

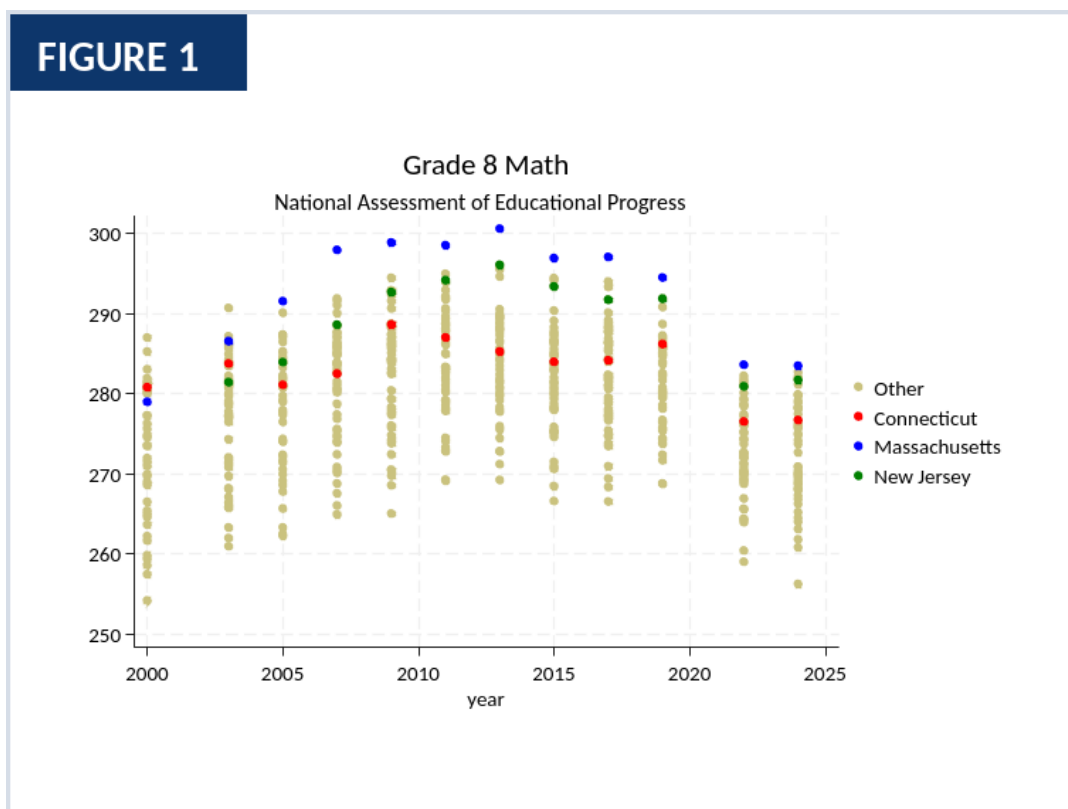
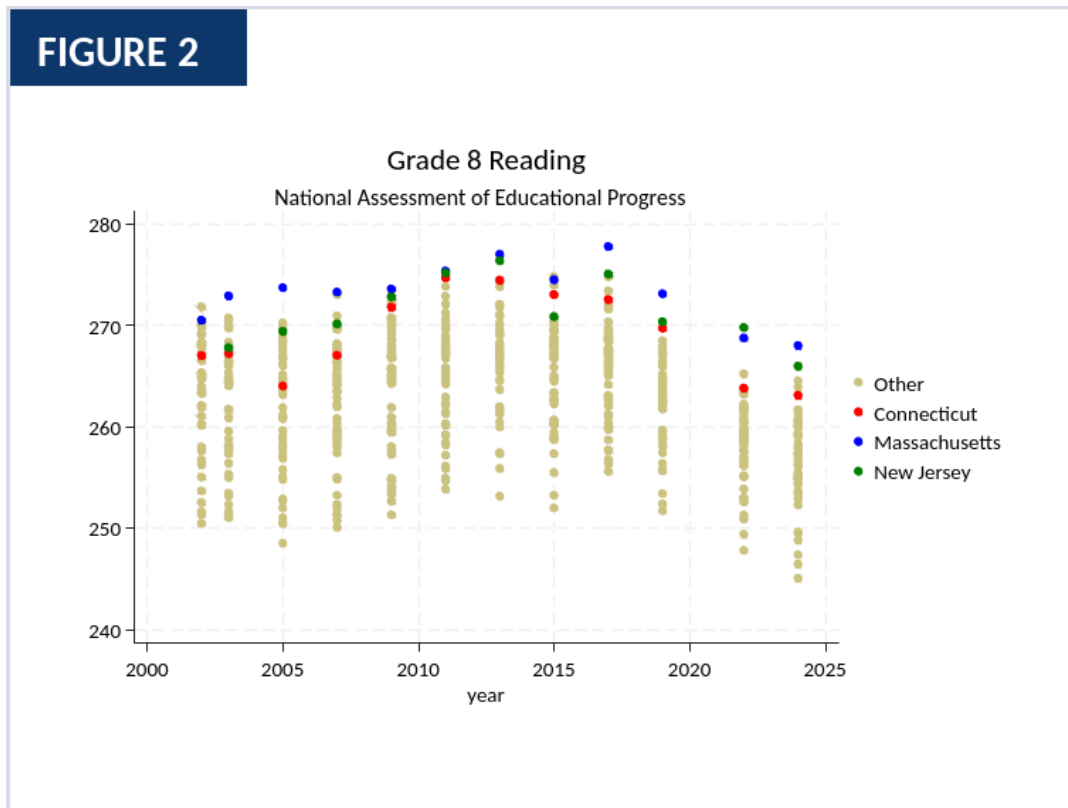


Figure 1. NAEP Grade 8 Math, 2000–2024.

FIGURE 2*Figure 2. NAEP Grade 8 Reading, 2000–2024.*

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

–148.1 — ranked 46th of 47 states

Connecticut's opportunity gap (#1 = most equal). The next several figures illustrate who is most affected.

So, what exactly do we mean by “opportunity gap,” and who is most adversely affected by it? Figure 3 groups Connecticut school districts into quintiles by their child poverty rates, from lowest to highest poverty. Figure 3 shows, in navy 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 — a significant reduction from current 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.

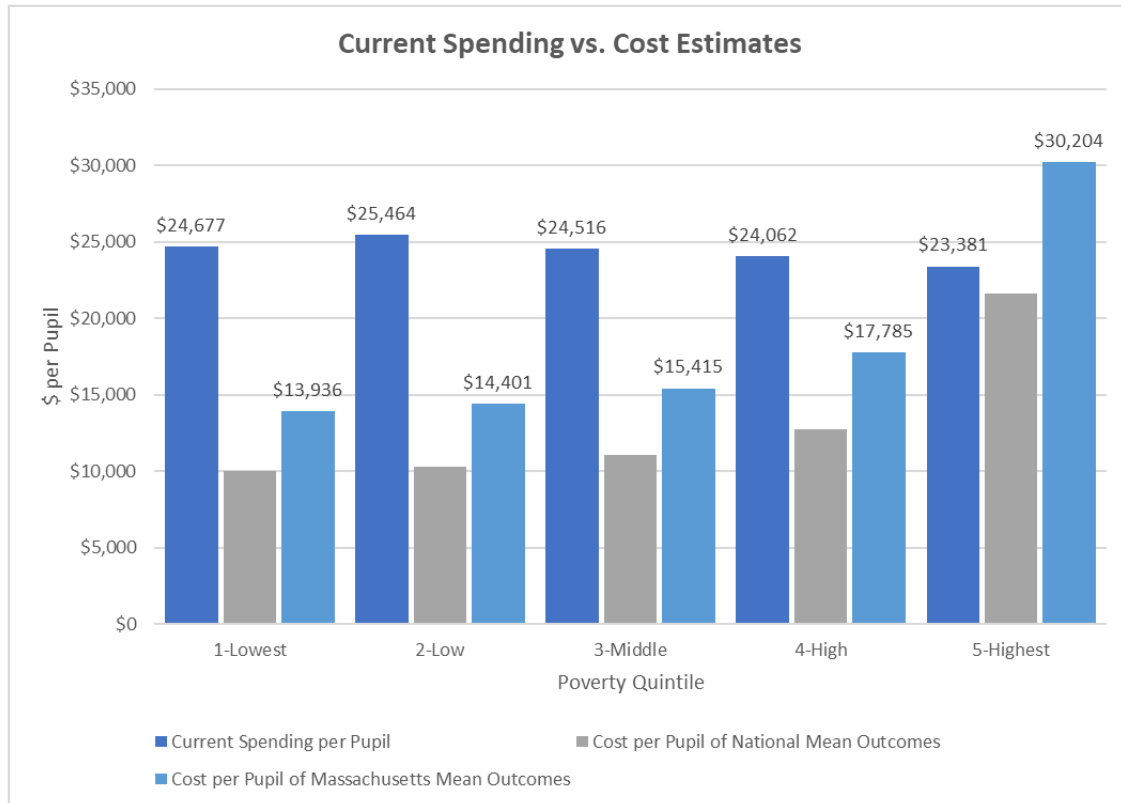
FIGURE 3

Figure 3. Current spending vs. cost of national- and Massachusetts-average outcomes, by poverty quintile.

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.

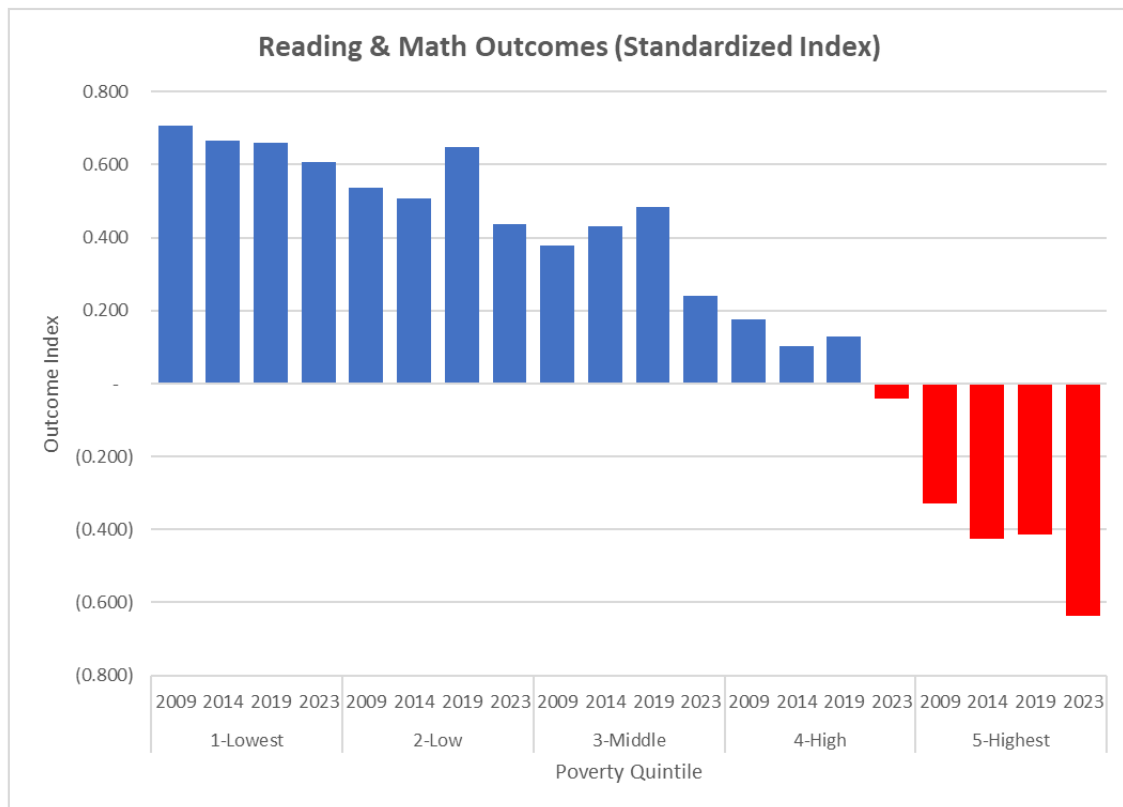
FIGURE 4

Figure 4. Reading & math outcomes (standardized index) by poverty quintile, 2009–2023.

Figure 5 provides a demographic breakdown 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, growing Hispanic enrollment shares. By 2023, the highest-poverty quintile of Connecticut school districts was nearly 50% Hispanic on average.

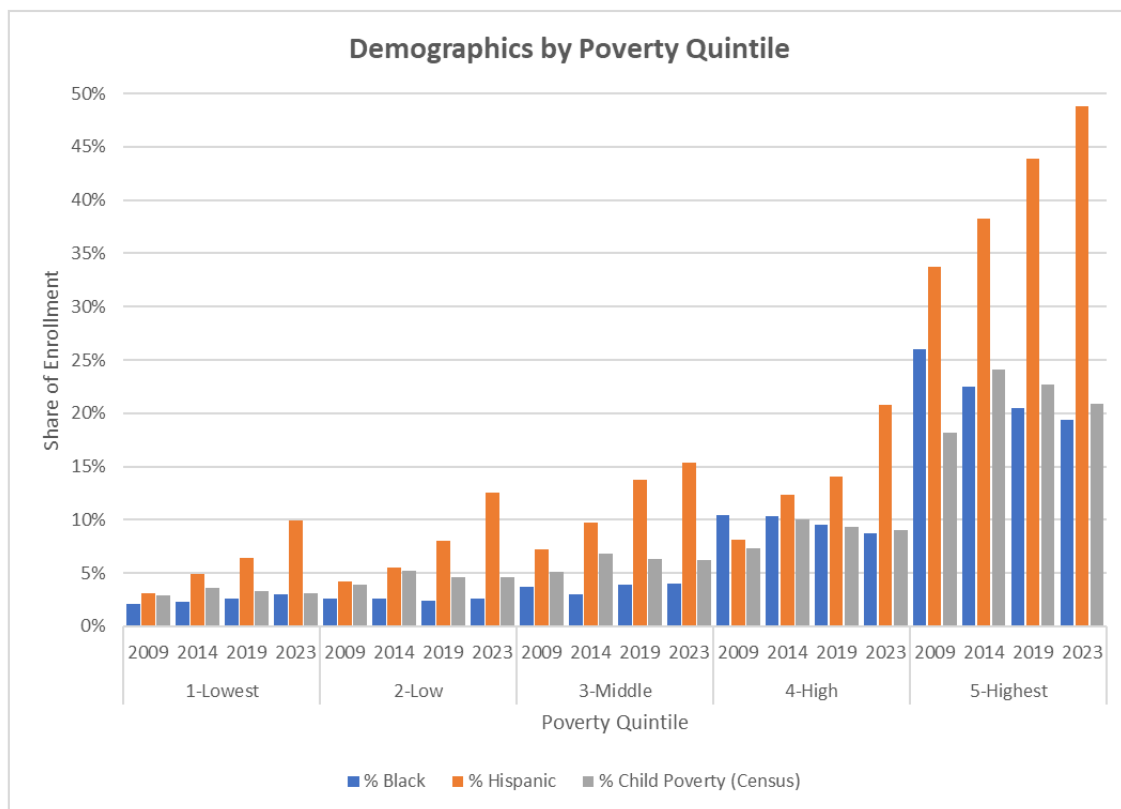
FIGURE 5*Figure 5. Demographics by poverty quintile, 2009–2023.*

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 a 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. Not only has this not changed, it has actually gotten worse.

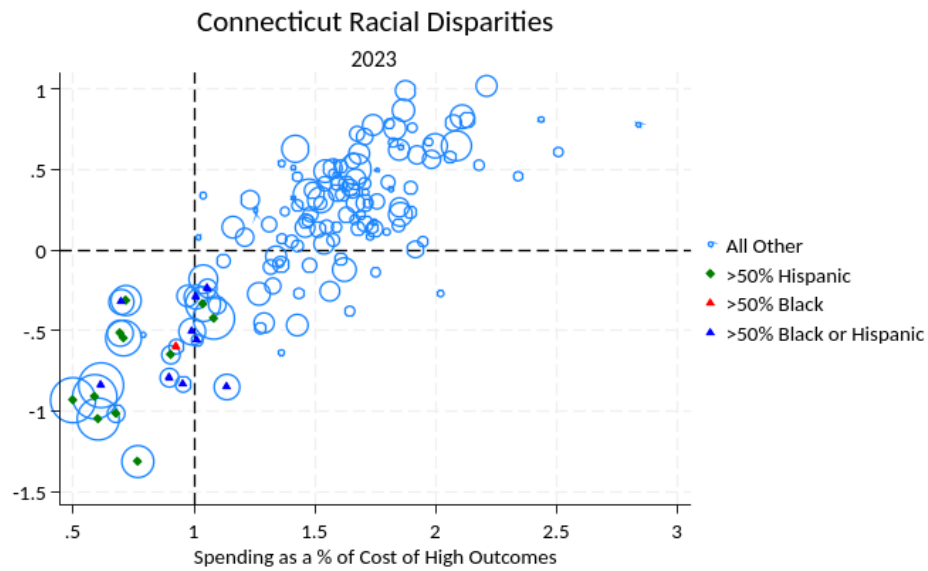
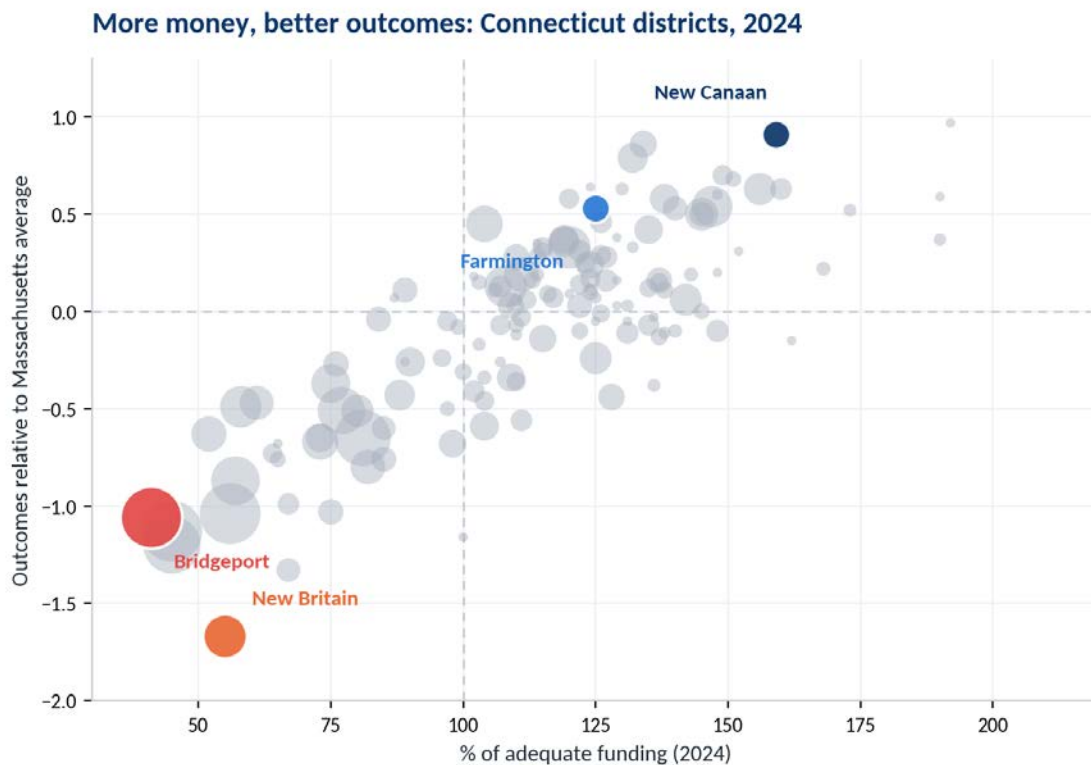
FIGURE 6

Figure 6. Connecticut racial disparities: spending adequacy vs. outcomes, 2023.

NEW · SFID WIDGET DATA, 2024



The same relationship using School Finance Indicators Database widget data for 2024, with the four Table 1 districts highlighted — each bubble is a CT district, sized by enrollment.

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.

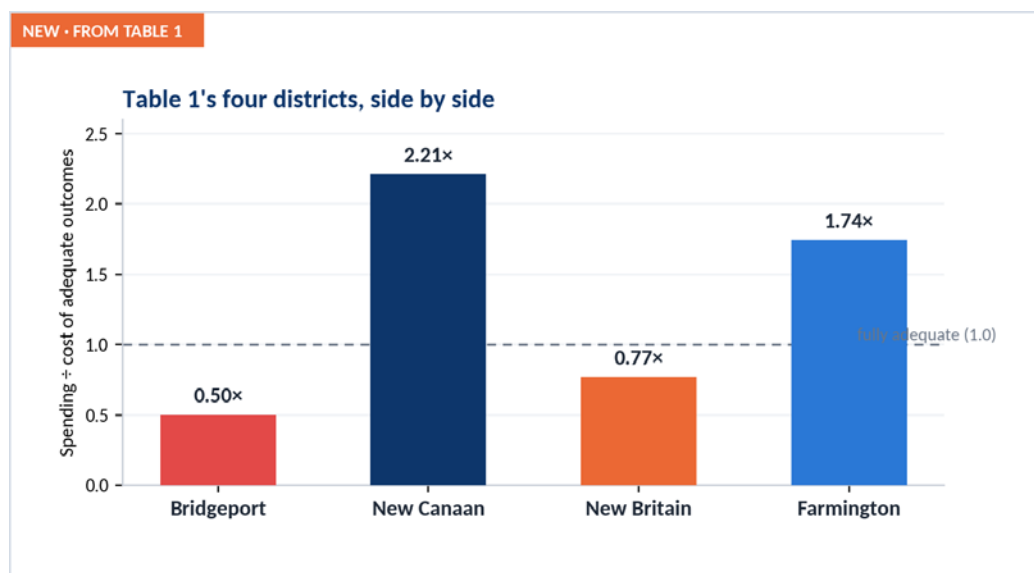
Table 1 provides detail on districts that lie at both ends (lower left and upper right) of Figure 6. New Canaan, for example, spends more than twice what it would need to spend (2.21×) to achieve target outcomes, and achieves a full standard deviation above that goal, putting it in the far upper right of Figure 6. New Canaan's socioeconomic index is more than double the national average, and incomes in the community are more than 10× 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-price lunch. Neighborhood income levels are barely above the qualifying level for reduced lunch (1.97× 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.

Table 1. Disparities Among Example Districts

District	SES Index ¹	% Hisp. ²	% Black ²	% FRL ²	Nbhd. Income / Poverty Ratio ³	Spending per Pupil ⁴	% 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



Spending as a percent of the cost of adequate outcomes, Table 1's four districts.

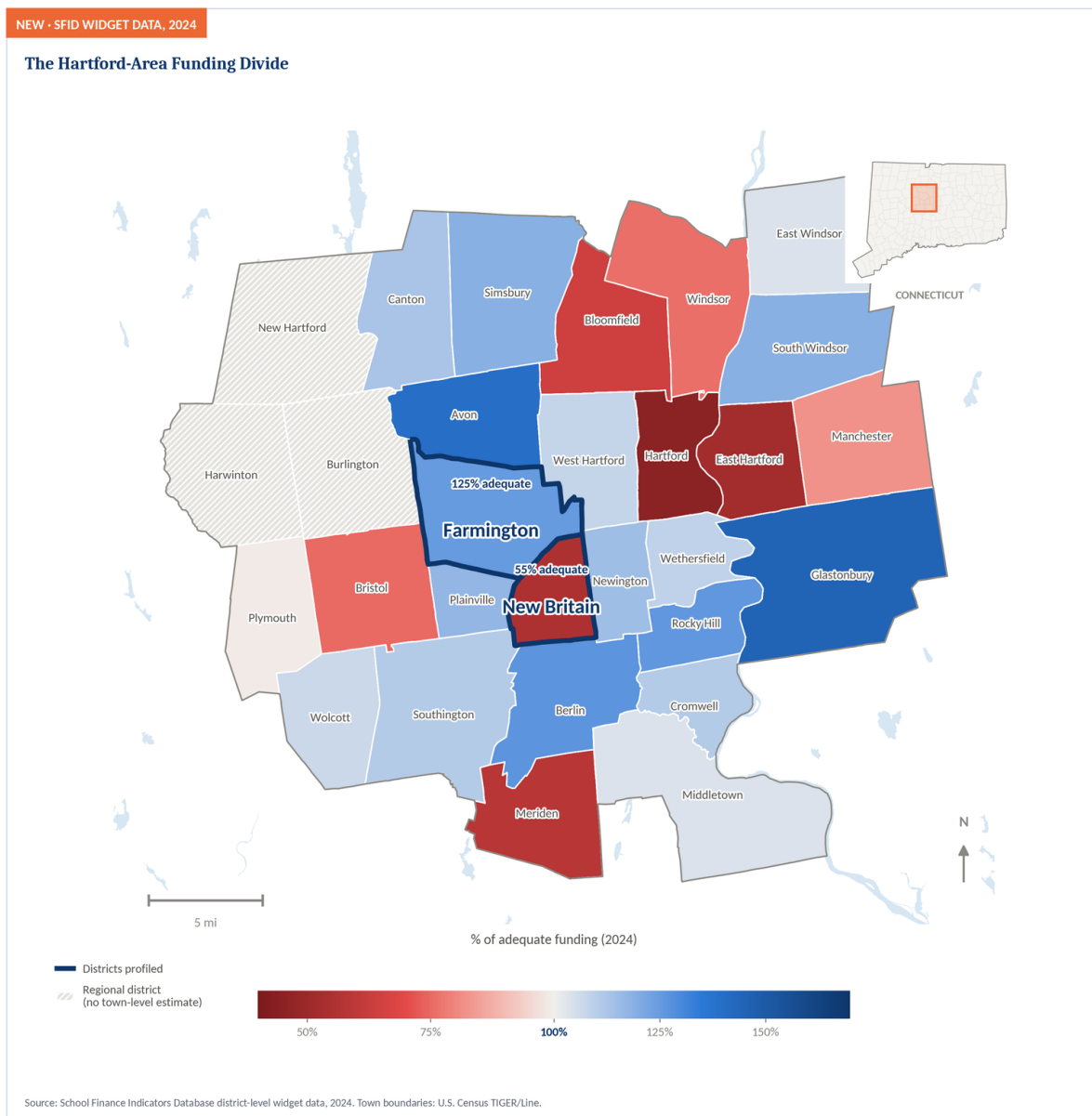
Sources

- [1] 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 — nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Economic/NeighborhoodPoverty
- [4] U.S. Census Bureau, Fiscal Survey of Local Governments (F33), Public Elementary and Secondary Finances — census.gov/programs-surveys/school-finances/data/tables.html
- [5] School Finance Indicators Database, District Cost Database — schoolfinancedata.org/download-data
- [6] Constructed using data from the Stanford Education Data Archive, Education Opportunity Trends project — edopportunity.org/trends/data

How to Fix the Problem

Where the Divide Shows Up on the Map

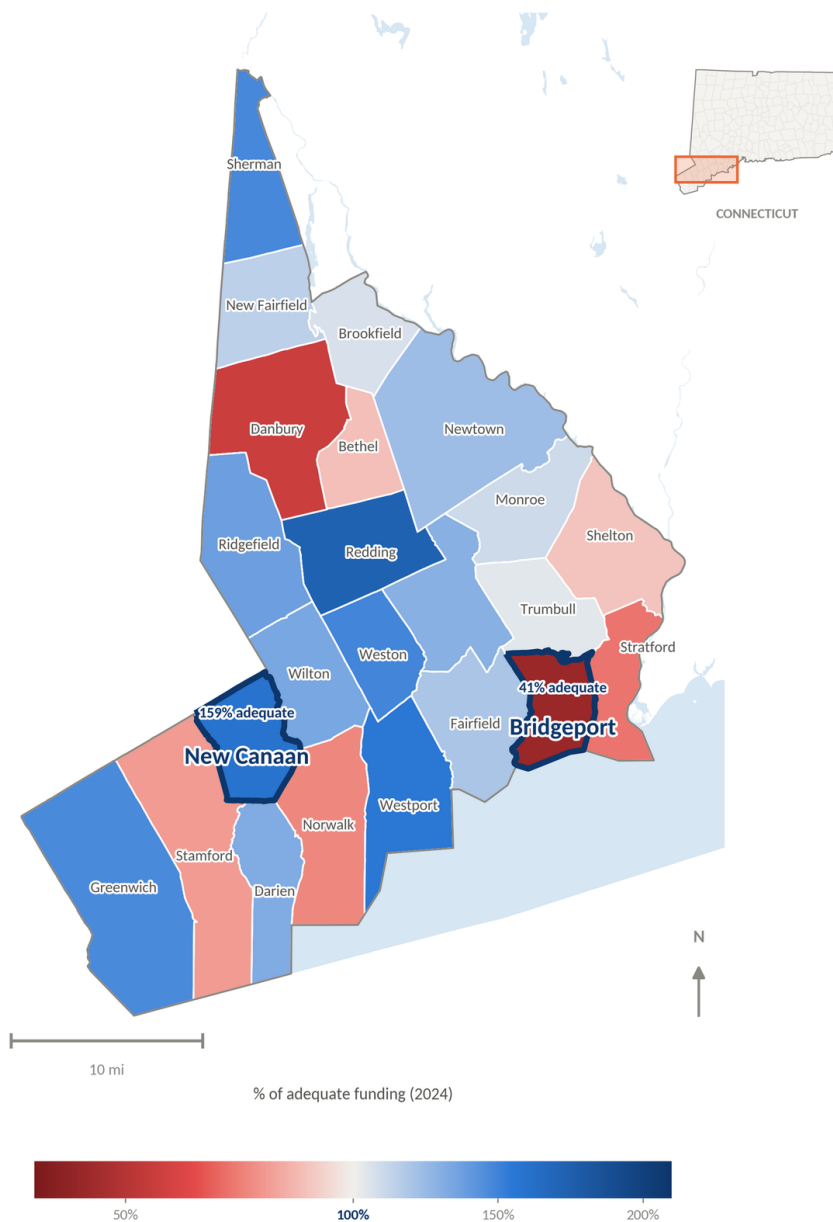
The four districts in Table 1 are not scattered randomly across the state — they cluster into two familiar regional stories. In the Hartford area, Farmington and New Britain sit less than ten miles apart on opposite sides of the adequacy line. In Fairfield County, Bridgeport and New Canaan are a 25-minute drive apart on the Merritt Parkway, and just as far apart in what they spend.



Farmington (125% adequate) and New Britain (55% adequate) and their neighboring towns, 2024. Source: School Finance Indicators Database district-level widget data; town boundaries from U.S. Census TIGER/Line.

NEW • SFID WIDGET DATA, 2024

Fairfield County's Funding Divide



Source: School Finance Indicators Database district-level widget data, 2024. Town boundaries: U.S. Census TIGER/Line.

Bridgeport (41% adequate) and New Canaan (159% adequate) and the rest of Fairfield County, 2024. Source: School Finance Indicators Database district-level widget data; town boundaries from U.S. Census TIGER/Line.

These two pairs are not isolated cases. They are the geography behind a statewide pattern in which the districts serving the state's highest-need students are consistently funded furthest below the adequacy bar (Figure 6). The next section lays out a path to fix it.

In our 2021 Op-Ed, as noted at the outset of this brief, we laid out a three-step process for fixing Connecticut school finance. In April of this year, Governor Ned Lamont announced establishment of a commission to reevaluate education funding. 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. Similar solutions have even been proposed by others, using methods like those I use here to summarize Connecticut's dire equal educational opportunity problems. Several states have, in recent years, engaged in analyses of the costs associated with meeting common outcome goals. Methods for conducting such analyses have become both more rigorous and more consistent in their findings over time.

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

1. 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.
2. The study should provide a comprehensive, inclusive estimate of the costs for all children to meet the proposed standards.
3. 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.
4. 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).

5. 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).
6. 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).
7. 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.
8. 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).
9. 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).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bruce D. Baker

Professor, Department of Teaching and Learning, University of Miami

Bruce D. Baker is a leading expert on public education funding, with more than 25 years of research, writing, and consulting in school finance. He is co-director and creator of the School Finance Indicators Database, a national resource for tracking school funding fairness and adequacy across the United States, and he blogs on education finance policy at School Finance 101 (schoolfinance101.com).

He is the author of three recent books from Harvard Education Press — *Segregation & School Funding: How States Reinforce Inequality and What to Do About It*; *Educational Inequality and School Finance: Why Money Matters for America's Students*; and *School Finance and Education Equity: Lessons from Kansas* — and was named a Fellow of the American Educational Research Association in 2024.

His work has been cited by the U.S. Supreme Court on racial inequalities in school funding, and he has consulted on state school-funding policy for Vermont, New Hampshire, Kansas, Texas, Colorado, Wyoming, Washington, Virginia, Missouri, Delaware, and Oregon, and testified in state and federal courts on school funding inequalities.

Blog: schoolfinance101.com

Data: schoolfinancedata.org (School Finance Indicators Database)