

Minnesota's Equal Educational Opportunity Problem

Progressive on paper — because of two cities. An independent cost-modeling analysis of adequacy and equal educational opportunity in Minnesota, 2009–2024.

STATEWIDE FUNDING ADEQUACY, 2009–2024



Bruce D. Baker

University of Miami • Co-Director, School Finance Indicators Database
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1.35 → 1.09

Progressiveness of state & local
revenue, with vs. without
Minneapolis & St. Paul

91% vs. 19%

Students in majority Black &
Hispanic districts underfunded and
below national outcomes, vs. all
others

11% → 38%

Share of students in districts below
adequacy, 2009 to 2023

Minnesota directs more money to high-poverty districts than almost any state — but nearly all of that progressiveness comes from Minneapolis and St. Paul and their local levies. This brief documents the gaps between what Minnesota districts spend and what it would cost to reach common outcome goals, and lays out a three-step path — study, recalibrate, and fund — to fix the state's general education formula.

Executive Summary

In this brief I use data and models from the School Finance Indicators Database (SFID) and National Education Cost Model (NECM) to evaluate the adequacy and equity of Minnesota school funding from 2009 to 2024. Minnesota has a reputation for a progressive, state-funded system. That reputation rests largely on two districts, and spending in much of the state has drifted below the cost of even modest outcome goals. The analyses presented herein show that:

- Minnesota's funding appears highly progressive in national rankings — 5th of 50 states on state and local revenue in 2024 — but that progressiveness is driven almost entirely by **Minneapolis and St. Paul**. Excluding the two cities, the enrollment-weighted ratio of state and local revenue at 30% vs. 0% child poverty falls from 1.35 to 1.09. Outside the two cities, the highest-poverty fifth of students receives \$18,562 per pupil in state and local revenue — the same as the lowest-poverty fifth (\$18,624).
- The Equal Educational Opportunity Gap narrowed from 67 points in 2009 to 34 points in 2024, but mainly by **leveling down**: the lowest-poverty quintile fell from 171% to 127% of cost, the highest-poverty quintile from 104% to 94%.
- The share of students in districts spending below the cost of national-average outcomes rose from 11% in 2009 to 38% in 2023 (28% in 2024).
- **Funding gaps track outcome gaps** under both national-average and Massachusetts-average outcome standards.
- 91% of students in majority Black and Hispanic districts attend districts both funded and performing below national-average standards, compared with 19% elsewhere.
- Raising every underfunded district to the cost of national-average outcomes would cost about \$0.5 billion a year; to Massachusetts-average outcomes, about \$6.1 billion.

Minnesota's general education formula has never been calibrated to the cost of achieving any particular outcome goal. That should be the next step. Evidence herein is preliminary, based on national data rather than state-adopted standards. I recommend the state pursue a state-specific study, as described at the end of this brief, following the same three-step path I have proposed for Connecticut: study, recalibrate, and fund.

Introduction

Minnesota funds its schools mainly through a per-pupil basic formula, pupil weights for poverty (compensatory revenue) and English learners, categorical aids, and voter-approved operating referendum levies. The state supplies about 63% of school revenue, the 8th-highest share in the nation, which gives the legislature unusual leverage over both the level and the distribution of funding.

The Minnesota Constitution requires the legislature to “secure a thorough and efficient system of public schools throughout the state” (Art. XIII, §1). In *Skeen v. State* (1993), the Supreme Court held education to

be a fundamental right but upheld the finance system, reasoning that the basic formula was distributed equally and sufficient for an adequate education. In *Cruz-Guzman v. State* (2018), the Court held Education Clause claims justiciable and the clause's adequacy guarantee to have a qualitative dimension. In December 2023, it held that de facto segregation in Minneapolis and St. Paul can violate the clause if it is a substantial factor in denying an adequate education, whether or not the state caused it. The case returned to the trial court.

The 2023 legislature added nearly \$2.3 billion, indexed the basic formula to inflation (2% floor, 3% cap), raised state coverage of the special education cross-subsidy from 6.43% to 44% (50% from FY2027) and phased out the English learner cross-subsidy. The 2025 session held most of those gains, setting the basic formula at \$7,481 in FY2026 and \$7,705 in FY2027, while cutting special education transportation aid and setting a \$250 million annual special education savings target for FY2028–29.

None of these formula parameters was derived from evidence of the costs of achieving any particular set of outcomes, or of how those costs vary across student populations, labor markets, and district size and sparsity. The data below run through 2024. They capture the first year of the 2023 increases and the last year of federal pandemic relief, but not the 2025 changes.

Principles of School Finance

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 lead to improved student outcomes, often with a lag.
- **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, often yielding a several-fold difference in the return on investment.
- **Money matters regardless of how changes in funding come about:** whether from legislative action, economic conditions, federal stimulus, local voter approval, or judicial order.

Increased funding improves not only student academic achievement, but also educational attainment and adult income, and lowers mortality and crime. Consistent with these findings 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. 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. An education system that is equitable and adequate provides all children with equal opportunity to achieve sufficiently rigorous outcomes. 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.

Cost Modeling & the National Education Cost Model

Minnesota's general education formula has never been set on the basis of a comprehensive, outcome-based cost study. Recent studies in Delaware, Colorado, Oregon and New Jersey have applied data-driven cost modeling to estimate the costs of providing equal opportunity across varied student populations and settings, several drawing on the National Education Cost Model (NECM) developed by Baker and colleagues at the Albert Shanker Institute. When state-specific, school-level cost models are aggregated to the district level, they correlate with NECM district estimates at .80 to .94. The NECM can therefore inform the calibration of a state formula, at least as a first step toward a Minnesota-specific model.

The NECM estimates predicted per-pupil costs for all local public school districts nationally from 2009 to 2024, combining equated reading and math outcome data from the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA) with School Finance Indicators Database (SFID) data on district spending, demographics, and economic context. Complete cost data are available for 307 to 338 Minnesota districts per year, enrolling about 783,000 students in 2024. The NECM provides cost predictions at two outcome standards: (1) national-average reading and math outcomes (a low standard), and (2) Massachusetts-average reading and math outcomes (a high standard).

Setting Outcomes and Goals

Minnesota's 8th graders remain above the national average, but the state has lost most of the ground it once held over the nation, and the gap to Massachusetts has persisted. In reading, Minnesota scored 271 in 2013, 3.4 points above the nation and 6 below Massachusetts. By 2024 it scored 260, only 2 points

above the nation and 8 below Massachusetts. In math, Minnesota's decline from 295 to 282 began before the pandemic.

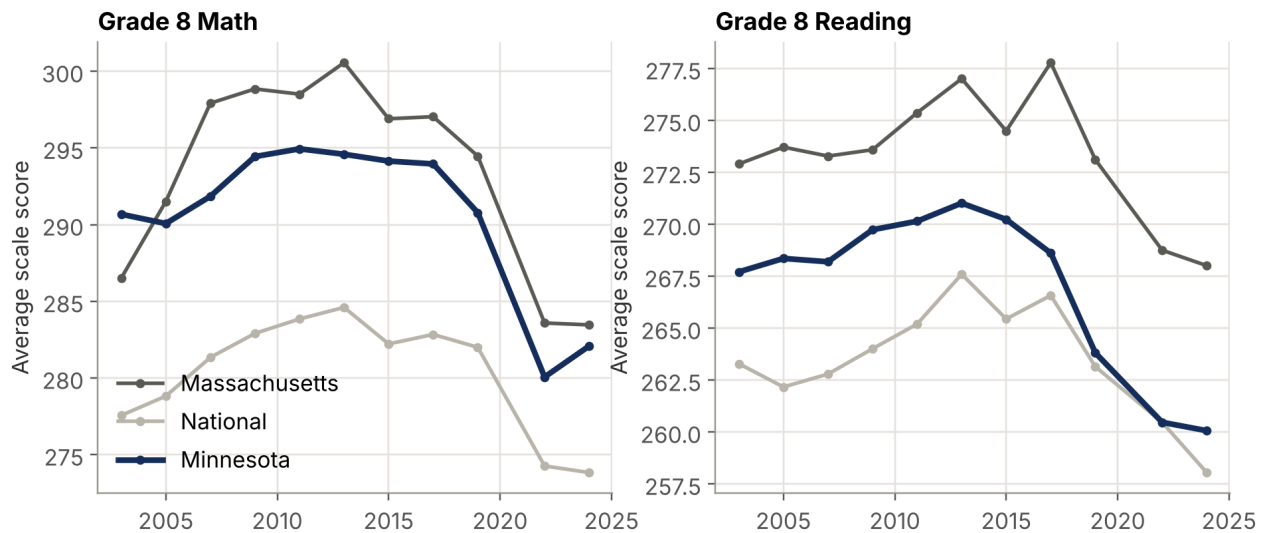
FIGURE 1

Figure 1. NAEP Grade 8 math and reading: Minnesota vs. Massachusetts and national, 2003–2024. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Averages hide who is falling behind. Minnesota's low-income 4th graders ranked 27th of 50 states in reading in 2013 and 46th in 2022, and its income-adjusted achievement gaps rank among the five widest in the nation. On the NECM/SEDA district outcome index, Minnesota's enrollment-weighted advantage over the national district average shrank from 0.28 standard deviations in 2009 to 0.16 in 2024.

Measuring “Progressiveness” & “Adequacy”

It has long been common to characterize school spending by its **level** (per-pupil spending, perhaps adjusted for regional wages, size, and sparsity) and its **progressiveness** (whether districts with higher child poverty spend more or less than those with lower child poverty). These measures flag blatant inequities, but miss two critical amounts: how much money is needed to serve a given student population toward a given set of outcomes, and how much more is needed where poverty is concentrated. The SFID and our annual report *The Adequacy and Fairness of State School Finance Systems* therefore focus on **spending adequacy** — whether current spending is sufficient for children in each district to achieve common outcome goals — and **equal educational opportunity** — whether children in different settings have resources equally sufficient toward those goals.

Statewide Progressiveness: A Tale of Two Cities

Minnesota's progressive reputation is driven almost entirely by Minneapolis and St. Paul. In SFID's national rankings, Minnesota ranked 5th of 50 states in 2024 on the progressiveness of state and local revenue and 2nd on current spending. But Minneapolis and St. Paul together enroll 61,000 students — nearly two in five students in the state's highest-poverty fifth of districts — and they raise far more revenue than other high-poverty districts.

Figure 2 re-estimates progressiveness across Minnesota districts, weighted by enrollment, with and without the two cities. With them, a district at 30% child poverty is predicted to receive 35% more state and local revenue per pupil than a district at 0% poverty. Without them, the advantage falls to 9%, and it never exceeds 14% in any year. Across 2009–2024, the two cities account for roughly three-quarters of the state's state-and-local-revenue progressiveness.

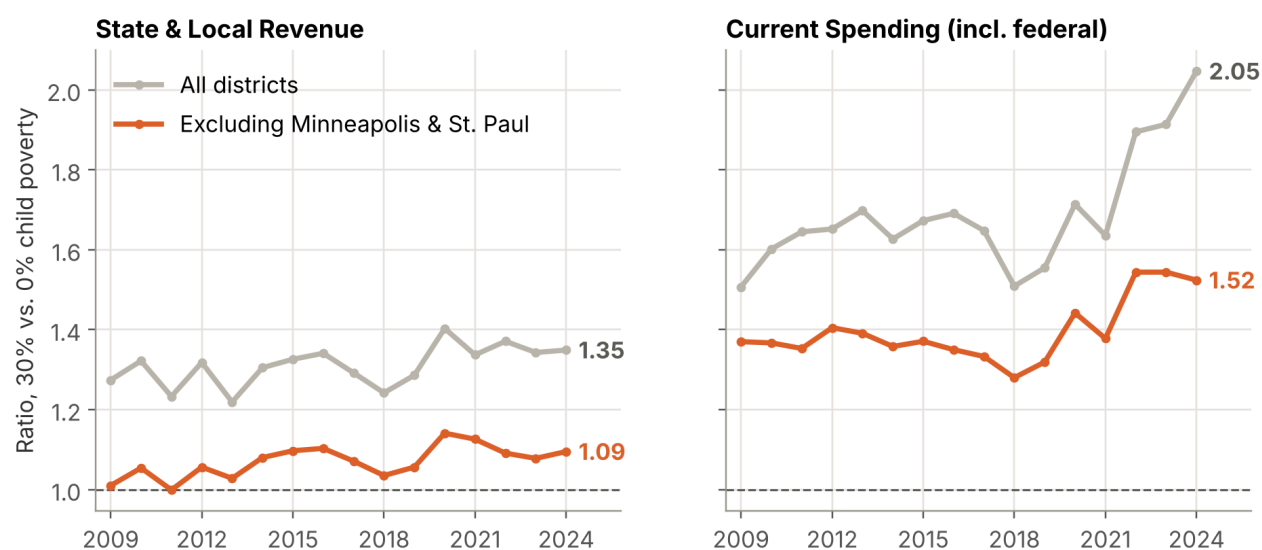
FIGURE 2

Figure 2. Progressiveness of Minnesota funding with and without Minneapolis and St. Paul, 2009–2024 (ratio of predicted per-pupil amount at 30% vs. 0% child poverty; 1.0 = flat).

The source of the cities' advantage is local, not state, revenue (Table 1). State aid is modestly progressive everywhere: high-poverty districts outside the two cities receive \$2,722 more per pupil from the state than the lowest-poverty districts. But they raise \$2,784 less locally, which cancels the state's effort almost exactly. Minneapolis and St. Paul, with large voter-approved operating levies, raise \$4,475 more per pupil locally than other high-poverty districts.

Table 1. Revenue and spending per pupil, 2024

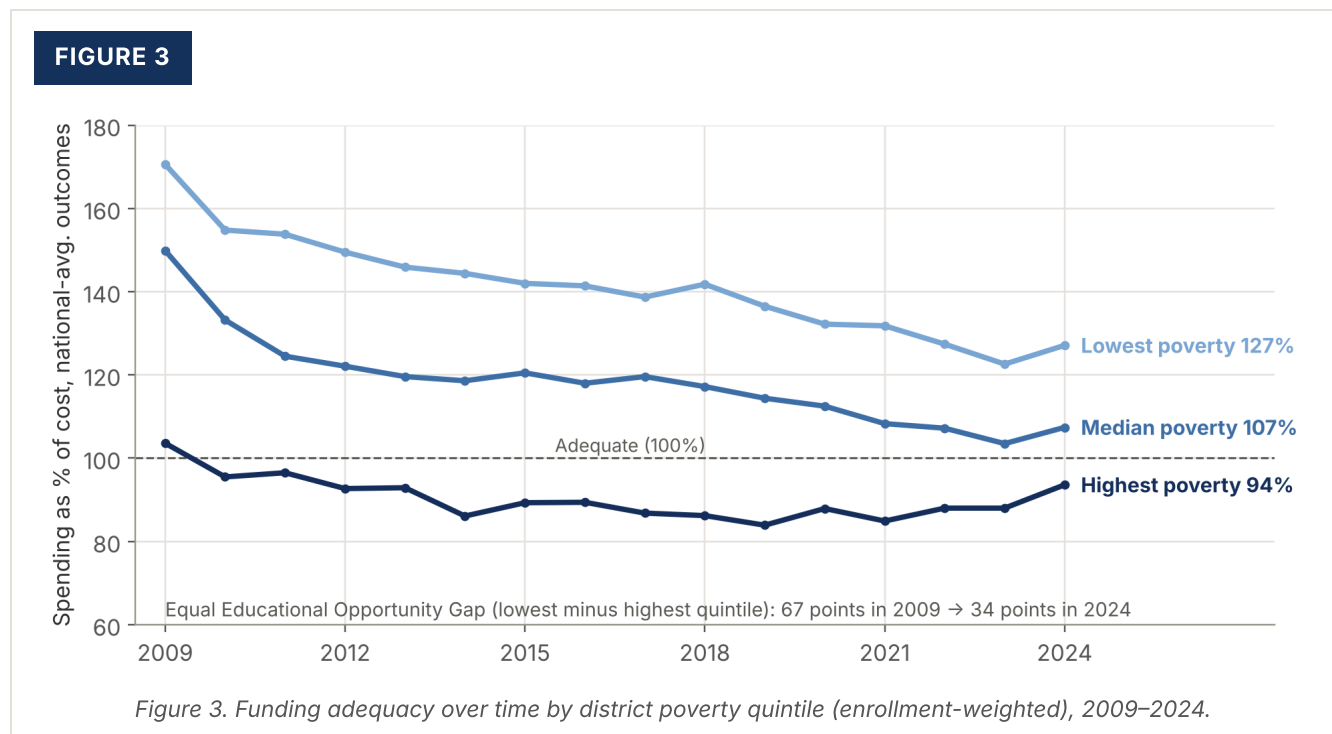
Group	State revenue	Local revenue	State + local	Current spending
Minneapolis & St. Paul	\$14,901	\$8,794	\$23,695	\$23,856
Other districts in highest-poverty fifth	\$14,243	\$4,319	\$18,562	\$16,716
Lowest-poverty fifth	\$11,521	\$7,103	\$18,624	\$14,482

Source: NECM/SEDA district file, 2024; enrollment-weighted. State and local revenue includes capital revenue.

Current spending remains progressive without the two cities (1.52 in 2024) because it includes federal Title I and pandemic relief, and because a set of small, remote, very high-poverty districts (Red Lake, Cass Lake-Bena, Kelliher) spend heavily for reasons of scale and sparsity as much as poverty. For the typical high-poverty student outside the Twin Cities core, the state formula and local levies combined deliver about what a low-poverty student receives.

Statewide Adequacy & the Equal Educational Opportunity Gap

Figure 3 uses the NECM to compare spending in low-, median-, and high-poverty districts with the cost of achieving national-average reading and math outcomes. In 2009, Minnesota's lowest-poverty fifth of students attended districts spending 171% of that cost, and even the highest-poverty fifth was slightly above it (104%). Since then, adequacy has fallen for every group.



The difference in relative adequacy between the lowest- and highest-poverty quintiles — the Equal Educational Opportunity Gap — narrowed from 67 points in 2009 to 34 points in 2024, and Minnesota's gap now ranks 18th smallest of 44 states. But unlike California under LCFF, Minnesota closed its gap mainly by leveling down: the lowest-poverty quintile lost 44 points of adequacy while the highest-poverty quintile lost 10. The highest-poverty fifth has been below adequate funding every year since 2010.

11% → 38%

Share of Minnesota students in districts spending below the cost of national-average outcomes, 2009 to 2023 (28% in 2024).

FIGURE 4

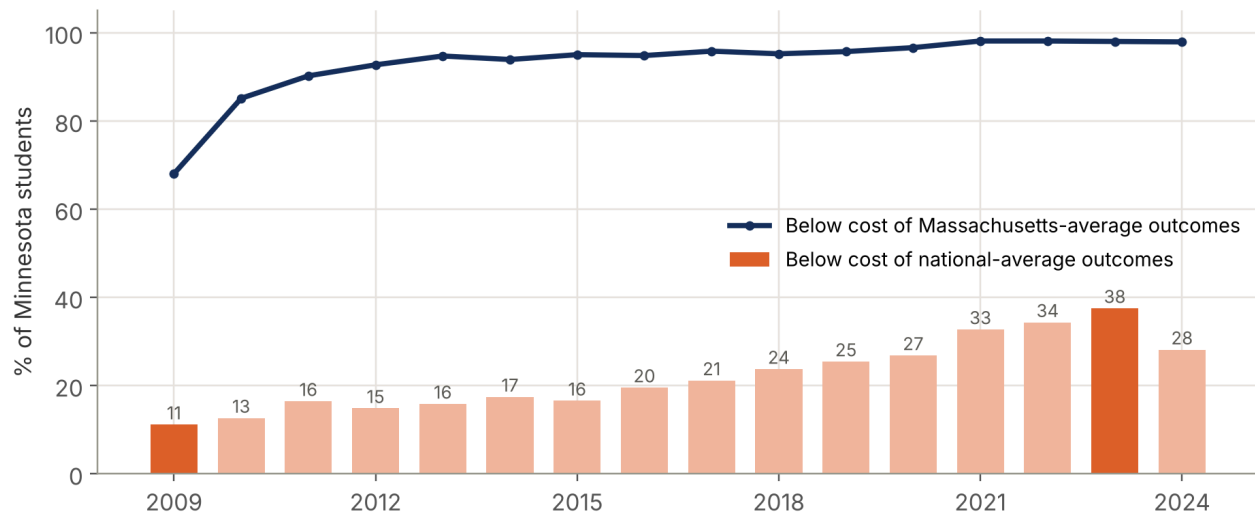


Figure 4. Share of Minnesota students in districts spending below the cost of national-average and Massachusetts-average outcomes, 2009–2024.

The 2024 improvement reflects the first year of the 2023 formula increases, but also the final year of federal pandemic relief, which ended in September 2024. Against the higher standard of Massachusetts-average outcomes, 98% of Minnesota students attended districts spending below cost in 2024; only five districts, led by Minnetonka, cleared it.

Equal Educational Opportunity

Figure 5 groups Minnesota students into fifths by district child poverty. Navy bars show average current spending per pupil in 2024; gray bars show what those districts are predicted to need to spend for their students to reach national-average outcomes; light-blue bars show the cost of Massachusetts-average outcomes. Low-poverty districts spend \$2,000 to \$3,000 per pupil more than needed for the low bar. The highest-poverty fifth spends about \$2,000 less. Even this shortfall is softened by the two cities: outside Minneapolis and St. Paul, the highest-poverty fifth spends \$16,716 against a cost of \$18,569 (90%).

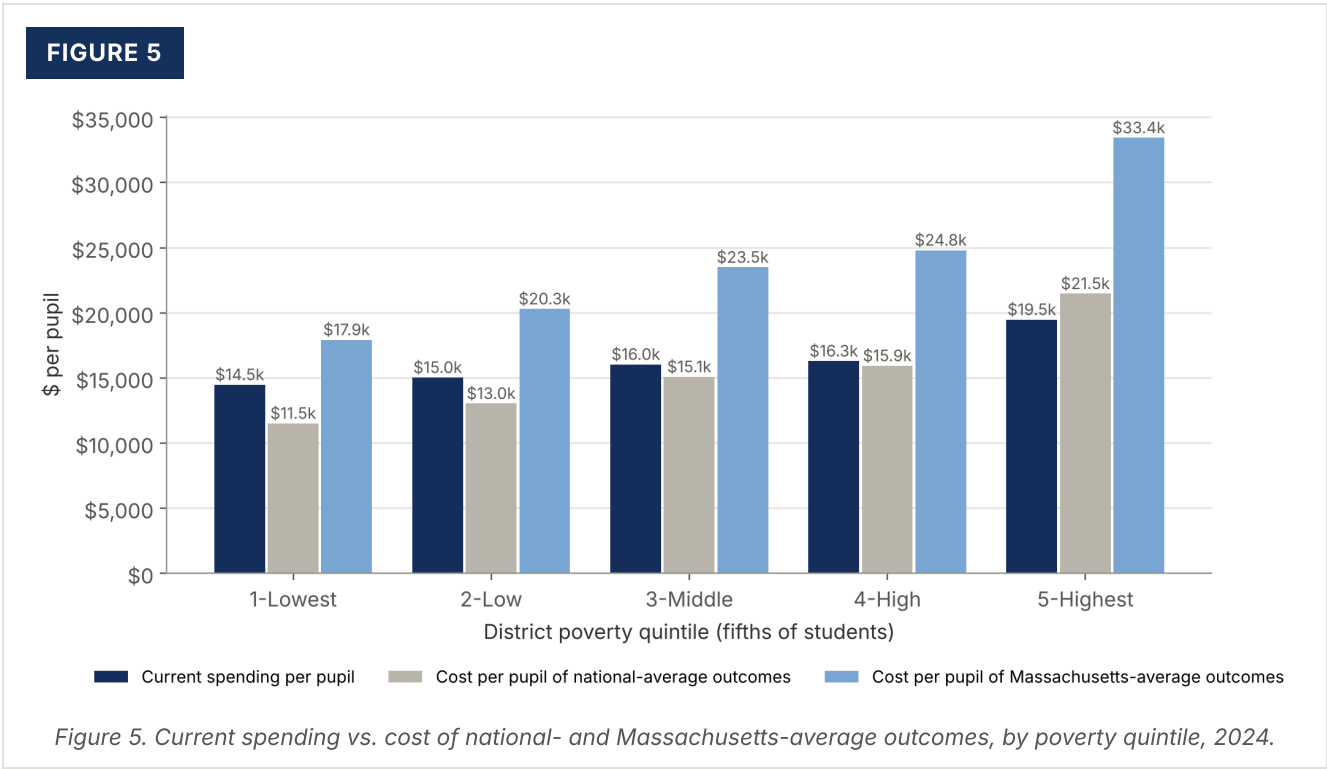


Table 2 shows what these averages mean for neighboring districts. In each pair, the districts sit within a short drive of each other but on opposite sides of the adequacy line.

Table 2. Disparities among example districts, 2024

District	SES index ¹	% Hisp. ²	% Black ²	% FRL ²	Spending per pupil ³	% of cost, national ⁴	% of cost, Mass. ⁴	Outcome index ⁵
Minneapolis	0.49	20%	27%	55%	\$24,469	98%	63%	-0.13
Edina	2.18	8%	10%	18%	\$16,017	138%	89%	+0.69
Saint Paul	0.16	15%	24%	70%	\$23,301	86%	55%	-0.26
Mahtomedi	1.84	5%	5%	14%	\$15,463	152%	98%	+0.68
Columbia Heights	0.15	49%	27%	78%	\$15,590	64%	41%	-0.92
St. Anthony-New Brighton	1.30	10%	13%	31%	\$14,295	105%	68%	+0.24
St. Cloud	0.04	11%	40%	70%	\$17,140	55%	35%	-0.49
Sartell-St. Stephen	1.42	4%	3%	23%	\$13,911	120%	77%	+0.57

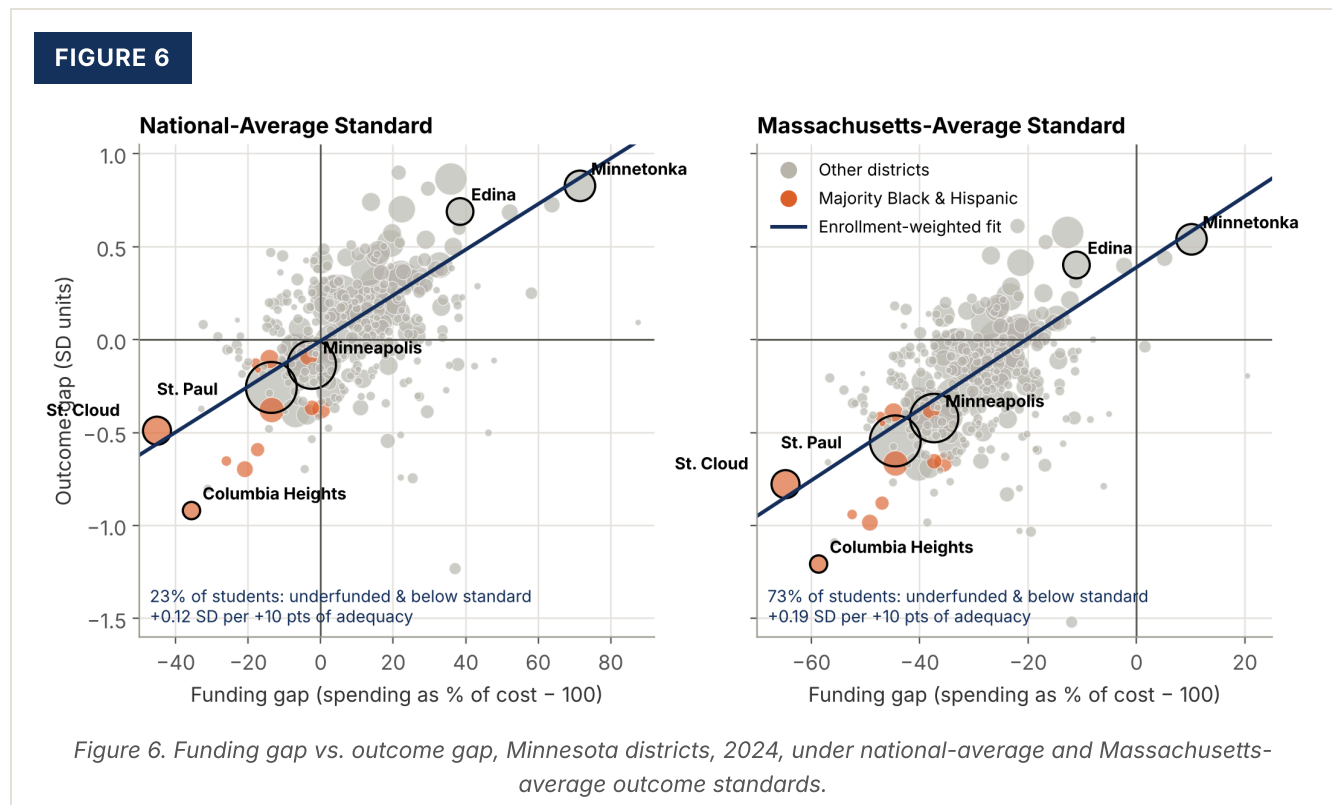
Sources: [1] SEDA covariates (SES composite; 0 = national average). [2] NCES Common Core of Data. [3] U.S. Census Bureau F-33 current spending per pupil. [4] School Finance Indicators Database, District Cost Database (NECM). [5] NECM outcome index (SEDA grades 6–8 reading and math) relative to the national district mean.

Minneapolis and Edina share a border. Minneapolis spends \$8,452 more per pupil than Edina, yet only Edina is adequately funded, because the cost of reaching common outcomes with Minneapolis’s

students is more than twice Edina's. Columbia Heights, a majority-Hispanic and Black inner-ring suburb, spends more per pupil than neighboring St. Anthony-New Brighton but only 64% of what it would need to reach national-average outcomes. St. Cloud spends \$3,229 more per pupil than Sartell-St. Stephen but sits at 55% of cost; Sartell-St. Stephen sits at 120%.

Funding Gaps and Outcome Gaps

Where Minnesota districts fall short of the cost of a given outcome standard, their students fall short of that standard. Each bubble in Figure 6 is a Minnesota school district, sized by enrollment. The horizontal axis is the district's funding gap — degrees of deprivation with respect to the funding needed to achieve a given standard. The vertical axis is the outcome gap — the degree of damage that results from that deprivation.



Against the national-average standard, each 10 points of additional funding adequacy is associated with outcomes about 0.12 standard deviations higher, and 23% of Minnesota students attend districts that are both underfunded and below the national-average outcome. Every majority Black and Hispanic district sits in or near that lower-left quadrant. **Against the Massachusetts-average standard**, almost every district is underfunded, 73% of students attend districts both underfunded and below that outcome level, and the relationship is steeper: about 0.19 standard deviations per 10 points.

Two patterns stand out. Minneapolis and St. Paul sit near the funding line on the national standard because of their high spending, yet their outcomes remain below average; on the Massachusetts

standard both are 37 to 45 points short. And a handful of high-spending districts serving American Indian communities, including Red Lake and Cass Lake-Bena, sit above the cost line but far below outcome standards, suggesting the national cost model understates what those communities need.

Racial Disparities in Equal Educational Opportunity

Minnesota's majority Black and Hispanic districts are systematically funded below what they need to reach common outcome goals, and their students show measurable damage. Twelve districts enrolling 42,917 students were majority Black and Hispanic in 2024, among them St. Cloud, Burnsville-Eagan-Savage, Willmar, Richfield, Worthington, Columbia Heights, Faribault, Fridley, and Brooklyn Center. Not one was both adequately funded and performing above the national average.

Table 3. Share of students by funding-and-outcome quadrant, 2024

Quadrant	Majority Black & Hispanic, national std.	All other, national std.	Majority Black & Hispanic, Mass. std.	All other, Mass. std.
At/above cost, outcomes at/above standard	0%	60%	0%	2%
At/above cost, outcomes below standard	9%	16%	0%	0%
Below cost, outcomes at/above standard	0%	6%	0%	26%
Below cost, outcomes below standard	91%	19%	100%	72%

Source: NECM/SEDA district file, 2024; enrollment-weighted. Majority = Black plus Hispanic enrollment above 50%.

91% vs. 19%

Share of students in majority Black and Hispanic districts that are both underfunded and below national-average outcomes, vs. students in all other districts.

These counts understate racial isolation in Minnesota: Minneapolis and St. Paul are not majority Black and Hispanic by this measure because large shares of their students are Asian American (notably Hmong) and American Indian.

Costs of Mitigating Inequities & Inadequacies

Raising every underfunded Minnesota district to the cost of national-average outcomes would cost about \$0.5 billion a year; raising them to the cost of Massachusetts-average outcomes would cost about \$6.1 billion. Totals cover districts with complete data, about 783,000 students in 2024.

Table 4. Statewide spending, costs, and funding gaps, selected years (\$ billions)

Year	Total current spending	Cost of national-avg. outcomes	Cost of Mass.-avg. outcomes	Gap to national avg.*	Gap to Mass. avg.*
2009	8.36	6.30	9.81	0.37	1.86
2014	8.66	7.93	12.34	0.59	3.70
2019	10.32	9.73	15.15	0.72	4.84
2023	11.98	11.89	18.51	0.82	6.53
2024	12.75	12.08	18.81	0.54	6.08

*Amount needed to lift every district below cost to its cost, without reducing any district above cost. Source: NECM/SEDA district file.

In aggregate, Minnesota spends slightly more than the total cost of national-average outcomes, but that surplus has nearly vanished, from \$2.1 billion in 2009 to under \$0.1 billion in 2023, and it assumes money could be moved from districts above cost to those below. The leveling-up gap more than doubled from 2009 to 2023 on the national standard and more than tripled on the Massachusetts standard.

Table 5. Funding gaps by district poverty quintile, 2024 (\$ billions)

Poverty quintile (avg. child poverty)	Total current spending	Cost of national-avg. outcomes	Cost of Mass.-avg. outcomes	Gap to national avg.*	Gap to Mass. avg.*
Lowest (3%)	2.26	1.80	2.80	0.00	0.56
Second (5%)	2.36	2.04	3.18	0.01	0.83
Middle (7%)	2.52	2.37	3.69	0.04	1.17
Fourth (9%)	2.53	2.48	3.85	0.09	1.32
Highest (15%)	3.08	3.39	5.29	0.40	2.21

*Underfunded districts only. Quintiles are fifths of students. Source: NECM/SEDA district file.

Three-quarters of the national-standard gap (\$0.40 of \$0.54 billion) is in the highest-poverty quintile. Minneapolis and St. Paul account for \$0.14 billion of the national-standard gap and \$1.0 billion of the Massachusetts-standard gap; the remainder sits in districts like St. Cloud, Columbia Heights, Faribault, and Brooklyn Center.

How to Fix the Problem

Minnesota's school finance problem is a problem of calibration, and of reliance on local revenue for equity. The state is wealthy enough to fix it: it devotes about 3.1% of its economy to K-12 schools, about the average state's share and below its own 2009 level of 3.7%. The fix follows the same three steps I have laid out for Connecticut:

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) the general education formula 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 2027 legislature should commission a high-quality, rigorous study of the state's school finance system, to be conducted during the 2027–28 school year, to inform recalibration or replacement of the general education formula in the 2029 budget session. A new formula should begin phase-in by the fall of 2029. The *Cruz-Guzman* litigation gives the state an additional reason not to wait: a trial court evaluating whether Minneapolis and St. Paul students receive an adequate education will need a definition of adequacy, and its cost. In recalibrating the formula, the state should:

1. **Set the formula to a cost target.** Inflation indexing at 2% to 3% preserves a basic formula never calibrated to any outcome goal.
2. **Build progressiveness into state aid, not local levies.** Compensatory and English learner weights should be large enough that high-poverty districts outside the core cities reach their cost without depending on referendum levies. Stronger equalization of referendum and local optional revenue would narrow the local revenue gap that now cancels the state's effort.
3. **Replace federal relief in the base.** The 2024 gains in high-need districts partly reflect pandemic relief that has now ended.
4. **Finish the special education commitment.** Unreimbursed special education costs come out of general education revenue and weigh most on districts already short. The planned \$250 million in annual special education savings for FY2028–29 runs in the wrong direction.
5. **Make teacher pay competitive.** At age 35, Minnesota teachers earn about 73% of what similarly educated non-teachers earn (33rd among states), down from 81% in 2009.
6. **Connect finance to *Cruz-Guzman*.** The districts with the largest funding and outcome gaps are among the state's most racially isolated, which makes adequate funding part of any credible remedy.

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 Minnesota 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 — including students in poverty, English learners, students with disabilities, and American Indian students — and determine how those needs affect the costs associated with achieving the established standards.
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 affect the costs of achieving the established standards.
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.
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, 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.
9. The study should provide recommendations for reforming or replacing the current general education formula, its pupil weights, and the role of referendum and other local levies, 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.

Data & Sources

District data: National Education Cost Model (NECM) merged with the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA), 2009–2024. Spending = current spending per pupil (ppcstot). Costs = NECM predictions of per-pupil cost of national-average (sim_cost_1_bd) and Massachusetts-average (sim_cost_2_bd) outcomes. Quintiles are fifths of students, enrollment-weighted. Progressiveness with/without the two cities: enrollment-weighted regressions of per-pupil amounts on Census child poverty, predicted at 30% vs. 0% poverty; national ranks use SFID regression-based measures with size, density and wage controls. Spending in 2021–2024 includes federal pandemic relief. St. Cloud's estimated cost (\$31,250) tracks rapid growth in high-need enrollment but is best read as an upper-range estimate.

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About the Author

Bruce D. Baker, Professor, Department of Teaching and Learning, University of Miami. Baker is co-director and creator of the School Finance Indicators Database and blogs on education finance policy at School Finance 101 (schoolfinance101.com).

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