School Finance Rock

An Open Course in School Finance, Set to Music, with Receipts

Instructor: Bruce D. Baker, University of Miami · **Course page:** schoolfinance101.com/school-finance-rock · **Format:** 15 weeks

Course description

This course covers how U.S. public schools are financed: why money matters, what states owe children, how to tell spending from cost, where school money comes from, how state aid formulas should work, and how today's funding gaps were built. Each week pairs a chapter of the core text with a School Finance Rock video, a 1970s Saturday-morning-style song that teaches one idea. Every video has a companion blog post with receipts: the data, sources and key literature behind each line, plus the full lyrics.

Each week: (1) read the assigned book chapter; (2) watch the video; (3) open the receipts post and follow at least two sources back to the original; (4) do the key readings; (5) come ready to discuss the question at the end of each week.

Books (Harvard Education Press)

Core text. Baker, B. D. (2018). *Educational Inequality and School Finance: Why Money Matters for America's Students*. Harvard Education Press. Paperback ISBN 9781682532423. Buy from Harvard Education Press or Bookshop.org; also sold by major booksellers and as an e-book.

Companion. Baker, B. D. (2021). *School Finance and Education Equity: Lessons from Kansas*. Harvard Education Press. Paperback ISBN 9781682536803. Buy from Harvard Education Press or Bookshop.org; also sold by major booksellers and as an e-book.

Companion. Di Carlo, M., & Baker, B. D. (2026). *Segregation and School Funding: How States Reinforce Inequality and What to Do About It*. Harvard Education Press. Paperback ISBN 9798895570548. Buy from Harvard Education Press or Bookshop.org; also sold by major booksellers and as an e-book.

Course map

Wk	Topic	Video(s)	Book
1	Why Invest in Schools, and Does Money Matter?	Human Capital Pays; Money Matters	EISF 1
2	School Finance 101: The Goal and the Layers	Same Finish Line; Layer It Up	EISF 2
3	Money Myths: Spending, Cost, Efficiency and Inflation	Spendin' Ain't the Same as Cost; Not the Price of Bread	EISF 3
4	How Schools Use Money: Schools as Public Institutions	Schools Are Not Socks	EISF 4
5	Rights, Courts and Reform Results	Words on Paper	EISF 5; KS I
6	Funding Formulas, Disparities and How They Were Built	Cost Minus Capacity; Built That Way	EISF 6; SSF 1–3
7	Cost Analysis I: Evaluating Programs and Innovations	Cost Analysis (coming soon)	EISF 8

Wk	Topic	Video(s)	Book
8	Cost Analysis II: Modeling the Cost of Equal Opportunity	Why Cost Matters	EISF 9; KS II
9	Liberty, Equality and Local Control	Two Different Things	SSF 4
10	The Company Store: Related-Party Deals	The Company Store	—
11	Following the Money: Opacity and Real Estate	Follow the Money; We Bought It Twice	—
12	Connecticut: When the Court Steps Aside	Challenge Accepted	EISF 7; SSF 6
13	New York: Foundation Aid at Twenty	Cost-Based State of Mind; Cost-Based State of Mind	EISF 9
14	Florida: ¿Dónde Está la Plata?	¿Dónde Está la Plata?	EISF 7
15	Synthesis: Equitable, Adequate and Sustainable	Review	EISF 10; SSF 7; KS II

EISF = *Educational Inequality and School Finance* (2018); KS = *Lessons from Kansas* (2021); SSF = *Segregation and School Funding* (2026). Shaded rows: Week 7 is reserved for the forthcoming cost analysis post; Weeks 10–11 are Part II.

Assignments

Receipt checks (weekly). Pick one lyric from the week's video. Trace its receipt to the original source and write a one-page memo: what the source actually says, how the lyric compresses it, and anything the lyric leaves out.

Cost analysis exercise (Weeks 7–8). Use the ingredients method to cost out a school program, then compare it with an alternative aimed at the same outcome. Report cost-effectiveness ratios and explain what a cost model would add at the district level.

State finance brief (final, Week 15). Choose a state. Using SFID data and the unified framework from Weeks 2 and 6, evaluate its system for equal opportunity and adequacy, then propose a cost-minus-capacity fix. Optional: write the lyrics for your state's song.

Part I. School Finance Prerequisites

Weeks 1–9 follow the arc of *Educational Inequality and School Finance*: why money matters, what we owe children, how to measure cost, and how money is raised and distributed.

Week 1 Why Invest in Schools, and Does Money Matter?

BOOK *Educational Inequality and School Finance* (2018), Ch. 1, Why Money Matters

WATCH
Human Capital Pays (If You Count the Cost) (5:02)
Money Matters (The Receipts Rag) (5:34)

RECEIPTS
Human Capital Pays: receipts and lyrics
Money Matters: receipts and lyrics

READ
Becker, G. S. (1964). *Human Capital*. Columbia University Press / NBER.

Psacharopoulos, G., & Patrinos, H. A. (2018). Returns to investment in education: A decennial review of the global literature. *Education Economics*, 26(5).

Baker, B. D. (2025). *Does Money Matter in Education? (3rd ed.)*. Albert Shanker Institute.

Jackson, C. K., Johnson, R. C., & Persico, C. (2016). The effects of school spending on educational and economic outcomes. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 131(1).

Baker, B. D. (2026). Money Matters. And the Evidence Keeps Piling Up. School Finance 101.

DISCUSS *If returns to schooling are high everywhere, why would fifty U.S. state systems pull apart rather than converge? What would have to be true for "money doesn't matter" to hold?*

Week 2 School Finance 101: The Goal and the Layers

BOOK *Educational Inequality and School Finance* (2018), Ch. 2, School Finance 101

WATCH
Same Finish Line (Equal Opportunity Trilogy, Part 1) (3:57)
Layer It Up (The Source Code) (3:55)

RECEIPTS
Equal Opportunity Trilogy: receipts and lyrics
Layer It Up: receipts and lyrics

READ
Baker, B. D., Atchison, D., & Levin, J. A unified framework of equal educational opportunity and an empirical framework for evaluating state school finance systems. EdWorkingPapers, Annenberg Institute at Brown University (rev. 2026).

Clune, W. H. (1994). The shift from equity to adequacy in school finance. *Educational Policy*, 8(4).

Baker, B. D., Di Carlo, M., & Oberfield, Z. (2023). *The Source Code: Revenue Composition and the Adequacy, Equity, and Stability of K-12 School Spending*. Albert Shanker Institute.

Friday Finance 101: On Parfaits & Property Taxes (School Finance 101, 2012).

DISCUSS *Why keep equal opportunity and adequacy as separate standards? What does a state gain, and risk, by leaning more on the state layer of the parfait?*

Week 3 Money Myths: Spending, Cost, Efficiency and Inflation

BOOK *Educational Inequality and School Finance* (2018), Ch. 3, Money Myths and Misdirections

WATCH
Spendin' Ain't the Same as Cost (4:30)
Not the Price of Bread (One, Two, Three) (4:41)

RECEIPTS
Spendin' Ain't the Same as Cost: receipts and lyrics
Not the Price of Bread: receipts and lyrics

READ
Defining Productivity, Cost, and Efficiency (School Finance 101, 2024).

Understanding Education Costs versus "Inflation" (School Finance 101, 2011).

Baumol, W. J. (1967). Macroeconomics of unbalanced growth: The anatomy of urban crisis. *American Economic Review*, 57(3).

Baker, B. D., & Welner, K. G. (2011). Productivity research, the U.S. Department of Education, and high-quality evidence. NEPC.

DISCUSS *A legislator says school spending "kept up with inflation." Which of the three yardsticks did she use, and what does the shaded gap between the lines represent?*

Week 4 How Schools Use Money: Schools as Public Institutions

BOOK *Educational Inequality and School Finance* (2018), Ch. 4, How Schools Use Money

WATCH Schools Are Not Socks (4:43)

RECEIPTS Schools Are Not Socks: receipts and lyrics

READ
School Finance Prerequisites: On the Provision of Public Education (School Finance 101, 2017).

Andrews, M., Duncombe, W., & Yinger, J. (2002). Revisiting economies of size in American education. *Economics of Education Review*, 21(3).

Ladd, H. F., & Singleton, J. D. (2020). The fiscal externalities of charter schools: Evidence from North Carolina. *Education Finance and Policy*, 15(1).

Bifulco, R., & Reback, R. (2014). Fiscal impacts of charter schools: Lessons from New York. *Education Finance and Policy*, 9(1).

DISCUSS *When one child leaves with "her" money, which costs fall and which stay put? Use fixed costs and economies of scale to explain who absorbs the difference.*

Week 5 Rights, Courts and Reform Results

BOOK

Educational Inequality and School Finance (2018), Ch. 5, School Finance Reforms and Results
School Finance and Education Equity: Lessons from Kansas (2021), Section I, The Kansas School Finance Saga

WATCH

Words on Paper (Equal Opportunity Trilogy, Part 2) (4:11)

RECEIPTS

Equal Opportunity Trilogy: receipts and lyrics

READ

San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez, 411 U.S. 1 (1973).

Koski, W. S., & Reich, R. (2006). When "adequate" isn't: The retreat from equity in educational law and policy and why it matters. *Emory Law Journal*, 56, 545.

Citizens for Strong Schools v. Florida State Board of Education, 262 So. 3d 127 (Fla. 2019). Opinion (Justia).

On North Carolina's *Leandro* reversal (Apr. 2, 2026): EdNC coverage.

DISCUSS

Compare the 23 states whose courts enforced compliance with the 4 that enforced and then withdrew. What can, and can't, a descriptive comparison like this tell us?

Week 6 Funding Formulas, Disparities and How They Were Built

BOOK

Educational Inequality and School Finance (2018), Ch. 6, State Funding Formulas and District Disparities
Segregation and School Funding (2026), Chs. 1–3 (Land and Opportunity; The Cycle of Unequal Opportunity; The Enduring Legacy of Housing Discrimination)

WATCH

Cost Minus Capacity (Equal Opportunity Trilogy, Part 3) (3:36)
Built That Way (Drawn in Red) (5:04)

RECEIPTS

Equal Opportunity Trilogy: receipts and lyrics
Built That Way: receipts and lyrics

READ

Duncombe, W., & Yinger, J. (2005). How much more does a disadvantaged student cost? *Economics of Education Review*, 24(5).

Baker, B. D., Di Carlo, M., & Green, P. C. (2022). *Segregation and School Funding*. Albert Shanker Institute.

Baker, B. D. (2025). How and why racial isolation affects education costs and the provision of equal educational opportunity. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 33(55).

DISCUSS

Trace the three "orders" in Built That Way (property values, tax revenue, cost) through the cost-minus-capacity formula. Which term in the formula does each one hit?

Week 7 Cost Analysis I: Evaluating Programs and Innovations

Reserved week. The School Finance Rock cost analysis video and methods post are in production. Until they're posted, use the readings below.

BOOK *Educational Inequality and School Finance* (2018), Ch. 8, Evaluating Education Innovations

WATCH *Cost Analysis song and video: coming soon*

RECEIPTS *Cost analysis methods post: coming soon. Links will be added here.*

TOPICS The ingredients method; cost-benefit, cost-effectiveness and cost-utility analysis; comparing alternatives toward the same goal.

READ

Levin, H. M. (1983). *Cost-Effectiveness: A Primer*. Sage.

Levin, H. M., & McEwan, P. J. (2001). *Cost-Effectiveness Analysis: Methods and Applications* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Levin, H. M., McEwan, P. J., Belfield, C., Bowden, A. B., & Shand, R. (2018). *Economic Evaluation in Education: Cost-Effectiveness and Benefit-Cost Analysis* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Baker, B. D., & Welner, K. G. (2012). Evidence and rigor: Scrutinizing the rhetorical embrace of evidence-based decision making. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3).

DISCUSS *Two programs raise reading scores by the same amount. One costs twice as much per pupil. What else would you need to know before calling the cheaper one "more efficient"?*

Week 8 Cost Analysis II: Modeling the Cost of Equal Opportunity

BOOK *Educational Inequality and School Finance* (2018), Ch. 9, Applying High-Quality Cost Analysis to School Finance Policy
School Finance and Education Equity: Lessons from Kansas (2021), Section II, Insights and Lessons

WATCH Why Cost Matters (A School Finance Blues) (4:46)

RECEIPTS Why Cost Matters: receipts and lyrics

READ

Duncombe, W., & Yinger, J. (1999). Performance standards and educational cost indexes: You can't have one without the other. In *Equity and Adequacy in Education Finance*. National Academy Press.

Baker, B. D., & Losen, D. J. (2026). Unpacking racial disparities in school spending: Why "progressiveness" and "comparability" are not enough. EdWorkingPaper 26-1558.

Baker, B. D., Weber, M., & Srikanth, A. (2021). Informing federal school finance policy with empirical evidence. *Journal of Education Finance*, 47(1).

School Finance Indicators Database (SFID) and the National Education Cost Model.

DISCUSS *Why does a district that gets 30 percent more per pupil than its neighbors end up at half of adequate? What does "holding outcomes constant" add?*

Week 9 Liberty, Equality and Local Control

BOOK *Segregation and School Funding* (2026), Ch. 4, The Suburbanization of Unequal Opportunity

WATCH Two Different Things (Mes Amis) (4:03)

RECEIPTS Two Different Things: receipts and lyrics

READ School Finance Prerequisites: On Liberty vs. Equality (School Finance 101, 2017).

Tocqueville, A. de (1840). *Democracy in America*, Vol. II, Pt. 2, Ch. 1 (Reeve trans.). Online text.

Friedman, M. (1955). The role of government in education. In R. Solo (Ed.), *Economics and the Public Interest*.

Labaree, D. F. (1997). Public goods, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34(1).

DISCUSS *Local control and school choice both expand liberty. Where does each one trade away equality, and how would you make that tradeoff visible to voters?*

Part II. Charter School Finances

Weeks 10–11 apply the prerequisites to charter schools: who sells to whom, and how to follow public dollars into private hands.

Week 10 The Company Store: Related-Party Deals

WATCH The Company Store (Same Hands on Both Ends) (4:28)

RECEIPTS The Company Store: receipts and lyrics

READ The Charter School Company Store, Revisited: Five Cases (School Finance 101, 2026).

The Company Store Goes to Tallahassee (School Finance 101, 2026).

Green, P. C., Baker, B. D., & Oluwole, J. (2014). Having it both ways: How charter schools try to obtain funding of public schools and the autonomy of private schools. *Emory Law Journal*.

Baker, B. D., & Miron, G. (2015). *The Business of Charter Schooling*. NEPC.

DISCUSS *Every case in the song was disclosed and audited. Why doesn't disclosure stop the practice, and which of the song's fixes would?*

Week 11 Following the Money: Opacity and Real Estate

WATCH
Follow the Money (If You Can) (6:01)
We Bought It Twice (And We No Longer Own It) (5:22)

RECEIPTS
Follow the Money: field guide, receipts and lyrics
We Bought It Twice: receipts and lyrics

READ
The Charter Money Trail (School Finance 101, 2026).
Green, P. C., Baker, B. D., & Oluwole, J. (2018). Are charter schools the second coming of Enron? *Indiana Law Journal*.
Black, D. W., Baker, B. D., & Green, P. C. (2019). Essay in *The Conversation* on charter school finances.

DISCUSS
Pick one charter school and walk the opacity ladder: which filings can you pull at each level, and where does the trail go dark?

Part III. State Case Studies

Weeks 12–14 are three state stories: Connecticut, New York and Florida. Week 15 brings it all together.

Week 12 Connecticut: When the Court Steps Aside

BOOK
Educational Inequality and School Finance (2018), Ch. 7, The Erosion of Equity and Adequacy
Segregation and School Funding (2026), Ch. 6, States of Urgency

WATCH
Challenge Accepted (3:58)

RECEIPTS
Challenge Accepted: the post

READ
The Collapse of Fairness in Connecticut School Funding (School Finance 101, 2026).
Fixing Connecticut School Finance: The Time Is Now (School Finance 101, 2021).
Baker, B. D., Di Carlo, M., & Weber, M. *The Adequacy and Fairness of State School Finance Systems*. SFID.
Sheff v. O'Neill, 238 Conn. 1 (1996); *CCJEF v. Rell* (Conn. 2018).

DISCUSS
Connecticut's funding was progressive until about 2013. Using Weeks 5 and 6, explain how a state can slide to "fourth most regressive" without a single dramatic vote.

Week 13 New York: Foundation Aid at Twenty

BOOK *Educational Inequality and School Finance* (2018), Ch. 9 (revisit)

WATCH Cost-Based State of Mind (Empire Remix) (5:12)
Cost-Based State of Mind (Piano Ballad) (6:23)

RECEIPTS Cost-Based State of Mind: receipts, lyrics, brief and deck

READ Baker, B. D. (2026). *Foundation Aid at 20: The Need for Cost-Based Reform*. Policy brief and deck (linked from the post).
Duncombe, W., & Yinger, J. (2005). How much more does a disadvantaged student cost? (revisit from Week 6).

DISCUSS *Foundation Aid's base averages the lower-spending half of "successful" districts. Why is that a shortcut, not a cost study, and what would a FY 2029 formula need instead?*

Week 14 Florida: ¿Dónde Está la Plata?

BOOK *Educational Inequality and School Finance* (2018), Ch. 7 (revisit)

WATCH ¿Dónde Está la Plata? (3:49)

RECEIPTS Two Songs for Florida's Public Schools: receipts

READ Financing a High-Quality System of Free Public Schools for Florida's Children (School Finance 101, 2025).
Time to Rein in Vouchers (School Finance 101, 2024).
America's Worst States for Education, 2026 Edition (School Finance 101, 2026).
Citizens for Strong Schools (Fla. 2019), revisit from Week 5.

DISCUSS *Florida's constitution promises a "high quality system." Connect three threads: falling fiscal effort, the charter company store, and vouchers for students already in private school.*

Week 15 Synthesis: Equitable, Adequate and Sustainable

BOOK *Educational Inequality and School Finance* (2018), Ch. 10, Equitable, Adequate, and Sustainable School Funding
Segregation and School Funding (2026), Ch. 7, The Long Game
School Finance and Education Equity: Lessons from Kansas (2021), Section II (revisit)

WATCH *Review: Cost Minus Capacity and Layer It Up*

RECEIPTS The full School Finance Rock page

READ Final project presentations (see Assignments).

DISCUSS *Kansas built a stable, balanced, equitable system for a time in a politically conservative state. What would it take to do that in Connecticut, New York or Florida?*

All videos and receipts posts live on the School Finance Rock page. New songs will be added to this syllabus as they're posted.