



A VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM

Ensuring the fair distribution of resources



Ensuring the Fair Distribution of Resources

When so many children start school without the early-childhood opportunities experienced by others, an achievement gap is born. Connecticut schools inherit this gap and strive to close it. But Connecticut teachers, who are asked to compensate for these differences, must do so even when resources are dwindling. Surveys of Connecticut teachers indicate that each year many spend hundreds of dollars (some in excess of \$1,000) out of pocket to provide basic provisions in their schools: paper, pencils, lab materials, books, color copies, notebooks, maps, computer drives, and even lunches for students.

When the number of children in a class exceeds manageable numbers, each child receives less individualized attention. Effective teachers have class sizes that enable them to address each child's unique needs and intuitive questions. Dwindling resources and staff reductions erect barriers to learning, especially in districts facing the greatest financial and socioeconomic challenges.

Equalizing educational opportunity was precisely the goal behind the state's Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant program. Unfortunately, the program remains significantly underfunded, shifting the costs to local property taxpayers. If we are to meet the constitutional goal of ensuring substantially equal educational opportunity, we must correct the ECS grant formula by restoring key factors envisioned in its original design.

If Connecticut is truly going to provide substantially equal educational opportunity and continually enhance its economic competitiveness, it is incumbent on the state to meet its financial commitment to adequately and equitably fund its schools. In short, education must become a more significant state priority if we are ever to grow jobs.

Resources for Small Class Size

The research is in, and state policies to reduce class size would improve educational opportunities significantly while providing a substantial return on the state's investment.⁷⁵ Reducing class size will go a long way toward reducing the achievement gap in the critical early grades.⁷⁶ The benefits of reducing class size are even stronger for children of color, resulting in greater opportunities for college.⁷⁷ The positive effects are not just in the early grades. A study by the U.S. Department of Education found that student achievement was more strongly linked to smaller classes in the upper grades than in lower grades.⁷⁸

Reducing class size does more than just boost student achievement. Researchers say that a policy of reducing class size “appears to be more cost-effective than most medical and public health interventions ...[and]... may exert a greater positive impact on public health outcomes than comparable investments in medical care.”⁷⁹ Reducing class size also improves high school graduation rates,⁸⁰ which brings additional benefits, such as fewer incarcerations and higher future earnings. Considering that it costs more to send a student to prison⁸¹ than it does to Princeton,⁸² investing in class size reduction has a clear payoff.

During this time of fiscal uncertainty, class sizes have increased in many districts, particularly those serving lower-income students and children of color. This trend must stop. Large class sizes expand the achievement gap and violate the state's constitutional obligation to equalize and maximize educational opportunity for all.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Increase state funding of local education expenses equitably and target a portion of additional resources toward meeting and sustaining smaller class size goals.

State Funding Equity

Any increases in state aid should be targeted equitably. CEA urges lawmakers to steer the ECS formula back toward its intended result, driven by Horton vs. Meskill, to equalize funding based on districts' ability to pay.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Increase the per-pupil grant (also known as the “foundation”) level to reflect the real cost of adequately educating students and index the amount to adjust for changing costs over time.
- ➔ Use more current and accurate data to determine town wealth and measures of personal and/or household income.
- ➔ Use free and reduced-price lunch/breakfast eligibility as a more accurate measure of poverty in schools.

**CLOSING THE
ACHIEVEMENT
GAP REQUIRES
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RESOURCE GAP.**

- ➔ Use a scheduled phase-in approach (in the absence of full funding) to increase funding over time rather than impose freezes or other arbitrary and politically driven limits on funding changes.

One major cost of schooling is the unfunded federal special education mandate. Connecticut lawmakers must recognize that the responsibility for funding special education ultimately falls to the state, particularly for children whose education costs exceed local per-pupil expenditures. The unpredictable nature of excess special education costs places an unfair burden on local budgets and, in an environment of fiscal austerity, squeezes out funds for regular programs.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Set a goal of reimbursing districts for the excess cost of providing a student with special education when such costs exceed local per-pupil expenditures. The current threshold of 4.5 times local per-pupil expenditures is unfair and unsustainable for local districts.
- ➔ Reject proposals to fold special education into ECS, as was done nearly 20 years ago, thereby diluting its impact.

