

HOW ARE FUNDING GAPS RELATED TO ACHIEVEMENT GAPS IN PENNSYLVANIA?

It is no exaggeration in Pennsylvania to say that a student's zip code can become her destiny. Because of our state's heavy reliance on local property taxes for school funding, the community where a child lives can play a big role in determining whether she has qualified teachers, small enough classes, a well-equipped building, and other components of a quality education. While spending does not always correspond neatly with achievement, it is fair to say that low income students and students of color generally have less access to educational opportunities based on where they live.

The Funding Gaps

The amount spent on a child's education varies greatly from one district to another. Some high-spending districts spend two or three times the amount per child that other districts spend. For example, wealthy districts spend over \$17,000 per student. The lowest spending districts spend around \$7,000 per student. These figures are from 2005-06, the most recent year for which data are available.

Most districts spend between \$9,000 and \$11,000 per student, but this wide range has a significant impact on the educational opportunities available to students in different districts. For instance, a \$2,000 funding gap per student translates into an opportunity gap of \$50,000 per class of 25 students. Also, while some districts spend significantly more than \$13,000 per student, half of all Pennsylvania districts spend less than \$9,600.

The Achievement Gaps

These large funding differences can create huge achievement gaps. Students in lower spending districts are automatically at a disadvantage when it comes to available resources and access to a high quality education. Student performance on standardized tests is one way of showing how less funding can lead to lower achievement.

For example, in 2003-04 the 50 districts with the highest overall PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) passing rate spent an average of nearly \$2,000 more per student than the statewide average. This adds up to \$50,000 dollars more per classroom of 25 students and \$1.5 million more per school enrolling 750 students. The overall PSSA passing rate in these high-spending districts is 81%, compared to 42% in the lowest performing districts.

While PSSA scores are a simple way to measure achievement in Pennsylvania schools, it is also important to look at how funding differences affect other measures of educational opportunity. Some of these measures may include manageable class size, a safe building, challenging academic courses such as Advanced Placement, enrichment classes such as art and music, highly qualified and experienced teachers, and supports for struggling students, to name a few. Lower spending districts are often unable to provide their students with many of these pieces of a quality, well-rounded education.

Accountability for Results

Pennsylvania has high state standards for the academic achievement of students in public schools. These standards are mandatory for all students and schools. But the state does not currently provide the resources needed for all students to receive a quality education and reach the state standards. In short, the state's education funding system is broken, allowing severe funding gaps and the resulting achievement gaps between school districts to limit the educational and career opportunities for children throughout Pennsylvania.

Under the current funding system, the state does not hold itself accountable for providing enough educational resources to all students and schools. Without real responsibility at the state level, there can be no accountability at the local level. The Governor and the General Assembly must close the funding gap before they can expect local schools to successfully close the achievement gap for all students.

GET INVOLVED!

To find out more about these issues and to learn how you can get involved in changing school funding in Pennsylvania, visit the websites listed above for the Education Law Center and Good Schools Pennsylvania.