



VIEWPOINT

ON PUBLIC ISSUES

September 27, 2006 • No. 2006 - 43

School Funding: Adequate versus Equitable

By: David Kirkpatrick

Summary

Although litigation concerning the adequacy of school funding abounds, there is little evidence that school districts will ever consider their funding adequate. They will always say they need more funding. Moreover, the funding increases that usually accompany litigation have not advanced educational achievement in any appreciable way.

Main text word count: 746

About 40 years ago, plaintiffs began to introduce lawsuits arguing that there was not enough funding for public schools. The first such suit, *Serrano v. Priest*, in California during the late 1960s, was won by the plaintiffs on the basis that school funding in the state was inequitable.

Equitable funding quickly became a significant issue, with dozens of lawsuits arising across the nation during the next 30 years. In some states, such as California and New Jersey there were repeated cases on the same issue. About half of the cases were won by the plaintiffs and about half were lost. Whatever each case's outcome, two results were fairly common. First, even when plaintiffs lost there tended to be some change in the method of education funding and at least a modest increase in the dollars spent. Second, nowhere did there seem to be an appreciable advance in school effectiveness.

Recently, proponents of increased school funding have shifted gears. A few years ago, a case was won on the basis of *adequacy*—an arbitrary funding threshold at which every student will supposedly have the opportunity to meet basic educational standards. The courts seemed to conclude that adequacy was a more objective measure of proper funding than the more exotic, or at least more complex, issue of equity.

In any event, adequacy has replaced equity as the litigation motif of the day. Using the adequacy argument, plaintiffs have been winning with more regularity. Perhaps the classic instance is a current case in New York State where the court has ordered billions of more dollars to be appropriated just for New York City schools, ignoring the fact that funding of those schools has increased by billions in recent years without equivalent gains in results.

Nor did the court spell out how the money is to be used. That leads to the assumption that they do not know. In other words, they did not determine what should be done, how much each improvement would cost and, therefore, how much the total cost of reform would be. They apparently pulled the multibillion dollar answer out of thin air or, based on someone's rhetorical argument of how much money the court should mandate.

Despite the legal rhetoric, the argument seems to boil down to the thesis that if a district's education results are deemed to be inadequate—and there is no shortage of such districts—it must be due to inadequate spending. It does not seem to occur to the attorneys, or the courts themselves, that the



“Adequate funding” has done little to improve educational standards.

Source: Corbis

way to determine adequacy might not be theoretical arguments but empirical evidence. For instance, they could find a successful district (let us all know where it is) and find out how much money has been adequate for its program.

If the courts were not so arrogant about their own power and brilliance they might consider that there are more than 14,000 school districts in this nation, no two of which have exactly the same budget in terms of total cost and the various ways in which those cost are derived—salaries, fringe benefits, capital costs, transportation, etc.

Consider the following:

Somewhere there may be district that spends \$6,000 per pupil annually. Undoubtedly the district thinks that is not enough. At the very least they can point out that the great majority of districts spend far more than that. So let us pleasantly surprise them with a 50% increase, to \$9,000 a year.

But, wait a minute. There are districts already spending \$9,000. And virtually without exception they say they need more.

These districts would also be pleased with a 50% increase—to \$13,500. But again, there are districts spending that much who complain of a need for still more funding.

A 50% increase for those districts would place them at about \$20,000. There are districts spending at that level also.

A 50% increase would place them at \$30,000. Sorry, but there are districts spending that much too.

A final boost of 50% would place a district at \$45,000 per student per year. Ridiculous? Not for Bridgehampton, one of the very wealthy Hamptons on New York State's Long Island, which still increases its spending every year. They have about four students per teacher. Class sizes range from five to twelve. Yet their students still score below the state average in some categories.

So while adequacy may be more attractive to the courts than equity, in the real world of school districts there is no such thing.

#####

(David Kirkpatrick is a Senior Education Fellow with the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, a research and educational institute located in Columbus, Ohio. More information is available at www.buckeyeinstitute.org. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.

It does not seem to occur to the attorneys, or the courts themselves, that the way to determine adequacy might not be theoretical arguments but empirical evidence.

**Attention
Editors and Producers**

Viewpoint commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications. Authors are available for print or broadcast interviews. Electronic text is available at www.buckeyeinstitute.org. Please contact:

Dorothea Prouty
88 East Broad Street, Suite 1120
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Phone: (614) 224-4422
Fax: (614) 224-4644

www.buckeyeinstitute.org
prouty@buckeyeinstitute.org

