

Opinion

BROKEN SCHOOLS: State's unfair funding system creates the problem

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By Dianne Kaplan deVries

CONNECTICUT'S education system is in trouble. Schools across the state lack the resources to provide all our children with an adequate education, and it shows. We have the greatest achievement gap between rich and poor students in the country, and the performance of our poor students ranks 49th among states. We can and must do better.

A root cause of the problem lies in a school funding infrastructure that provides too little state aid to cities and towns and relies far too heavily on regressive local property taxes. Annually, the flawed system pits parents and the schools against other important local services and the need to hold the line on mill rates. Overburdened cities and towns are expected to bear the lion's share of education costs.

Our education funding system is not only inadequate and inequitable, but also unconstitutional. The state constitution guarantees children a fundamental right to education, a principle reaffirmed in the 1977 Connecticut Supreme Court decision in *Horton v. Meskill* and many times since.

In *Horton*, the court found that the state's heavy reliance on local property taxes to fund the schools, without regard to wealth disparities across municipalities, resulted in inequities of educational opportunity and was therefore unconstitutional.

The legislature promised to fix the inequities through a funding system that would equalize state education aid. Yet, taking inflation into account, some 45 communities still receive less state education equalization aid than what was ruled unconstitutional in *Horton* 30 years ago!

Moreover, the "wide disparities" of community wealth cited in *Horton* have magnified dramatically over the years. So have the disparities in mill rates, teaching and learning environments, student performance and state support of the schools.

Recognizing the problems facing our public schools, a group of parents, educators, advocacy organizations and municipalities formed the Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding.

In late 2005, CCJEF brought legal action to enforce schoolchildren's fundamental constitutional right to suitable and substantially equal educational opportunities. The complaint asserts that the state's approach to funding education, embodied in the Education Cost Sharing grant, lacks any rational relationship to the real costs of providing an adequate education in the 21st century and even fails to provide enough money to meet the state's own statutes and policies.

CCJEF v. Rell now awaits a pivotal state Supreme Court decision as to whether Connecticut schoolchildren do indeed have the right to an "adequate" or "suitable" education.

In its response to CCJEF's appeal of a lower-court pre-trial decision, the state has made the incredible claim that it has no responsibility to provide our children with an education that will prepare them to be successful members of society; rather, it need only ensure that children receive an equal education — either equally good or equally bad — to pass constitutional muster.

Unfortunately, this cynical posture has often been reflected in the state's actions around education, promising much but delivering little more than spin. We witnessed this last week, as the governor proposed level funding for education in her budget address, knowing full well that for most school districts this would mean a 4 to 6 percent budget cut, owing to rising wages tied to contractual obligations and a need to offer competitive salaries, ever-escalating health care premiums, soaring special education costs and other fixed expenditures essential to school operations.

The pending Supreme Court decision in *CCJEF v. Rell* may well have profound public policy ramifications for schoolchildren, school boards and municipalities. A clear, affirmative ruling in favor of schoolchildren's right to quality education will help ensure that state policymakers do much more than talk about level funding for education, and it should pave the way for long-overdue school finance reform and property tax relief.

Should the court rule against schoolchildren, however, municipalities and taxpayers have great cause to worry. The state's share of funding will almost certainly further erode. At present, the state contributes just under 40 percent of schools' costs, among the lowest state aid contributions in the nation.

High-performing public schools in every community are essential for ensuring the common good. Quality public schools build invaluable social capital and make a lasting difference in students' lives, their long-term educational attainment, values and pursuits, earnings and tax-paying potential. However, the state's outdated education funding system remains grossly underfunded and fails to generate the resources necessary to break the nexus between poverty, race and student performance. Either we pay now, or we pay in many more distressful ways later.

Adequate and equitable funding won't solve all our education problems. But it's a necessary first step.

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