

# How grossly underfunded are public schools?

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: November 25, 2012

It is common to hear school reformers say that money isn't a real issue in improving schools. Here's a piece that says otherwise. It was written by Wendy Lecker, parent of three children in Stamford, Connecticut's public schools, and Jonathan Peltó, a former member of the Connecticut House of Representatives who now provides commentary on politics and public policy at his blog, ["Wait, What?"](#) This appeared in the [Hartford Courant](#).

By Wendy Lecker and Jonathan Peltó

The Connecticut Conference of Municipalities just issued a report concluding that Connecticut's public schools are grossly under-funded and calling for meaningful reform of Connecticut's school funding system.

Pulling no punches, the report acknowledges that school finance reform cannot be done on the cheap and that significantly more funding is needed in order to provide all students with a quality education.

As the report declared, "the State should not sacrifice the futures of another generation of school children waiting for the courts to tell them — yet again — to meet its state constitutional funding responsibilities."

The Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM) estimates \$763 million in underfunding, representing only the gap between current funding and fully funding the Education Cost Sharing formula as it stands now. However, that formula is flawed and does not reflect the true cost of education in Connecticut. In fact, as part of its recommendations, CCM calls for an "education adequacy cost study" to assess the actual cost of education, including all the factors affecting this cost. Doing so increases the number beyond \$1 billion.

CCM's clarity of vision derives from the experience of its members: the municipalities that deal on a daily basis with escalating education costs and inadequate funding. Because of the state's underfunding of public schools, Connecticut's cities and towns, especially its poorer communities, are forced to deprive their own schools of needed resources.

The result is that children and teachers must endure large classes, insufficient textbooks, computers and other learning tools, buildings in disrepair, slashing of teaching positions, and the elimination of programs and courses.

In Connecticut and around the country, courts have consistently ruled that underfunded schools amount to constitutional violations of children's right to an education.

In New York, Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, Washington and many other states, courts have determined that there is "a causal connection between the poor performance of ... students and the low funding provided their schools."

Unlike the modern corporate education reformers, rather than vilify teachers and educational experts, courts value their firsthand knowledge of school conditions, their effects on learning, and the resources needed to give all students an equal opportunity to learn.

When shown evidence of conditions in actual schools, courts consistently find what CCM contends – without adequate funding, schools cannot provide an adequate education.

New York's highest court found that "tens of thousands of students are placed in overcrowded classrooms, taught by unqualified teachers, and provided with inadequate facilities and equipment," representing a "systemic failure."

North Carolina's court found that the state's under-funding of its schools was evident in the students' "dropout rates, their graduation rates, their need for remedial help, their inability to compete in the job markets, and their inability to compete in collegiate ranks."

Courts have been equally clear that "improved inputs yields improved results."

When schools are given adequate resources, learning improves.

In New Jersey, Maryland, Colorado, Massachusetts and elsewhere, increased spending on basic educational resources has led to demonstrated improved achievement.

Despite vast differences among states, courts enumerated a remarkably consistent list of necessary inputs, including: high quality preschool, small class size, additional services for at-risk students, supports for teachers such as professional development, curriculum supports, supplies, equipment, adequate facilities, and adequate books and other learning tools.

As mayor of Stamford, Dan Malloy understood the direct causal link between resources and achievement. He was a founding member of the Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding, the plaintiff in Connecticut's pending school funding lawsuit.

By joining that lawsuit, Mayor Malloy acknowledged that the state cannot meet its duty to provide every child with a quality education without providing every school with the necessary resources to meet each child's needs.

Sadly, as governor, Malloy has not made resolving the lawsuit and properly funding education a true priority. Instead, his new "solutions" for education are privately-run

charter schools and teacher evaluations based on test scores.

Yet charter schools, serving one percent of Connecticut's public school students, have dismal graduation rates and routinely exclude Latino students, English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities.

Furthermore, teacher evaluations based on standardized test scores have been proven to be wildly inaccurate and to massively increase the frequency of standardized tests children must take.

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~~Instead of diverting funds to reforms that do not work, this Governor has the historic~~ opportunity to create a fair and equitable school funding system. Malloy's legacy will rest on how he deals with the education-funding crisis highlighted in CCM's report. More importantly, our children's futures depend on it.

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