

# FROM A CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE

## Briefings on Educational Research From The Education Consumers Consultants Network

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### Featured Research:

#### "Court-ordered Spending Brings More of the Same"

[\(click here for full article\)](#)

By Richard Phelps, Ph.D.

Economist

Education Consumers Consultants Network

### Briefing:

Advocates of increased public spending for poor children spent years in state courts unsuccessfully arguing an *equity* case. Specifically, they argued that children residing in poor communities were treated inequitably because the tax base generated inadequate funding for local schools. Their contention was that unequal school financing violates the equal-protection provisions in some state constitutions.

But judges typically found no language in state constitutions requiring educational equity so advocates had to shift their arguments and strategies. Recognizing that a number of constitutions do require an *adequate* education, equity advocates changed accordingly. The standards movement in education played a role in their reasoning: If states require students and schools to reach specific performance targets, they should provide the level of funding necessary to achieve those targets.

The adequacy argument seems reasonable except for a key point made by Lew Solmon ([Fatally Flawed](#), <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=40solmon.h17&keywords=Solmon>): Many state constitutions call for a "thorough and efficient" education, not an "adequate education."

Will suits calling for more funding now be brought on grounds that public education should become more thorough and efficient?

As yet no one has filed a suit calling for *efficiency* but funding adequacy proponents should not be underestimated. Thus far, they have prevailed in suits seeking *equity* by relying on a legal premise of *adequacy* derived from constitutions that require *efficiency*.

### How adequacy is determined

In practice, only a small number of consulting firms in the United States perform funding adequacy studies. The two most prominent are Denver's Augenblick & Myers (A&M) and Management Analysis and Planning (MAP) headed by James Guthrie of Vanderbilt and Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute. They use study methods called the *Successful Schools* and *Professional Judgment* approaches.

The *Successful Schools* approach identifies schools that have met the relevant performance standard, say, a high average score on a state test, and then looks at those schools' expenses. Not surprisingly, schools identified by this means typically stand out more for their high socioeconomic status and other favorable demographics than for anything they do programmatically. The selection process skews the results.

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By failing to control for socioeconomic advantages that are known to influence test scores, A&M and MAP tend to identify schools that have lavish resources and ignore ones that may be far more efficient. Schools with high numbers of disadvantaged students are not often among those with the highest exit scores; but when they use effective methods, their gains can be exceptional.

The *Professional Judgment* approach used by A&M and MAP brings together experts who are familiar with schooling costs and asks them how much it will take to bring a school district to a threshold level of quality, for example, a minimum score on a state high school exit examination. The group then renders an opinion as to the cost of labor, materials, supplies, services, and so on and sums them.

Experts in such matters can disagree substantially depending on their academic and professional perspective. A&M and MAP, however, rely exclusively on public school professionals; and looked at from their standpoint, it makes sense: school personnel are the individuals most intimately familiar with what it takes to run a public school. But school personnel are hardly impartial. They tend to see need in the way their institution sees it, and they may be the direct or indirect beneficiaries of any increase in funding.

### **Why more money doesn't yield better results**

Advocates of more spending often bristle when they hear the argument "how money is spent is more important than how much is spent." But, in truth, schools that are simply given more money typically spend in the same old ineffective ways: raising teacher salaries and benefits (regardless of productivity), lowering class size, building more facilities, and so on. Given a windfall and the usual political pressures, the easy road for school districts is to give teachers and administrators what they want, build showpieces, and otherwise spend the money in ways that have little impact on student achievement.

By contrast, actions that could improve student achievement may be less expensive but are typically far more difficult to undertake. For example, instituting more effective accountability for learning and linking it to teacher and administrator pay or offering higher salaries for teachers in hard-to-find subject matter areas.

If the windfalls generated by equity suits could be coupled to changes in how schools do their business, *then* funding adequacy suits might actually improve student achievement. Otherwise they only bring more of the same.

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*The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: [professor@education-consumers.com](mailto:professor@education-consumers.com)*