

The Funding Gap

By Carmen G. Arroyo



In the increasingly competitive international economy, a good education is the best – and perhaps only – insurance. This is especially true for students who are poor, English language learners, or members of minority groups. “Get a good education,” we say. “It’s the best chance you have.”

Unfortunately, too many states provide no such assurance – or insurance – for the students who need it most. Despite national imagery full of high-flying concepts like “equal opportunity” and “level playing field,” English-learner, low-income and minority students do not get the extra school supports they need to catch up to their more advantaged peers; they all too frequently receive less than do other students.

This report examines one way in which these students are shortchanged: the inequitable distribution of state and local funding. A hard look at the funding data makes it clear that many of the school districts with the greatest needs often receive the least funding, begging the question of whether we’re setting some students up for failure.

But here’s the good news: while some states persist in promoting inequality, others are showing us that, with the right leadership, inequitable funding patterns can be changed. We can unstack the deck. We can ensure that our most vulnerable students get a fair shot at success. Some states have provided extras to their neediest children for years; still others are beginning to acknowledge that their futures hinge on providing quality education to

all and have begun to adjust their funding patterns.

In this report, we’ll provide both the “good news” and the “bad news.” Facts – even the uncomfortable ones – are the best way to help people face up to the need for change. But it also helps to have evidence that change is possible, to see actual models of success.

We hope the data will make people at least pause before they offer platitudes about the “critical importance of closing our achievement gaps.” If closing those gaps is as important as people say, then it’s time – past time – that we acted like it.

This Year’s Report

This is the seventh in a series of annual Education Trust reports analyzing education spending patterns in the states. This year we present changes in funding gaps, state-by-state, from 1999 to 2005. The analysis compares state and local spending in school districts with the highest numbers of low-income students to those that have the lowest concentration of such students. We do the same for districts with the highest and lowest numbers of minority students. This year we also look at a third category: spending in school districts serving high numbers of English language learners (ELLs) compared to those serving few or none of these students.

