



**EPSL** | **EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES LABORATORY**  
Education Policy Research Unit

**Funding Florida's Schools:**

**Adequacy, Costs, and the State Constitution**

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**Executive Summary**

In 1998, Florida voters passed a unique amendment to the state constitution requiring the state to make “adequate provision . . . for a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools.” This brief examines how Florida courts are likely to interpret this constitutional amendment and whether Florida’s funding system will be successful in meeting the increased constitutional demands.

Florida ranked 38<sup>th</sup> among the fifty states in funding during the 1999-2000 school year, spending \$5,831 per pupil in K–12. These funds are distributed equitably across school districts compared with other states, although Florida’s funding system is less equitable than it appears at first glance.

The relative *equity* of funding in Florida does not mean, however, that funding is *adequate*. The adequacy standard focuses on whether students’ needs are being met, whereas the more traditional equity standard considers whether schools receive similar funding. The interpretation of these standards has been subject to a large number of lawsuits in Florida and across the nation.

Three key questions have been considered in previous cases and would likely be involved if an adequacy lawsuit were filed in Florida: First, is there evidence of inadequate education in Florida? Higher academic standards pursued by state policymakers, and previous legal opinions given by Florida’s Supreme Court justices, suggest that the answer is “yes.”

Second, is there any reasonable way to make the education system adequate without increased funding? A discussion of current state policies and research evidence suggests that, although some improvements are possible, it is highly unlikely that the adequacy standard could be met through non-funding changes alone.

Third, if other approaches fail to work on their own, will increased funding help bring the education system closer to adequacy? Again, the evidence suggests that the answer is “yes.”

If these answers are correct, and research suggests that they are, then it is highly likely that the Florida Supreme Court will judge the state’s education funding system to be unconstitutional. Indeed, many other funding schemes have been overturned when judged on the adequacy standard, even in states that have weaker constitutional requirements. Cost studies have shown that a 30 percent increase in funding would be required to obtain adequacy in other states. These same studies have played important roles in the political discussion and court decisions on the issue.

The cost studies from other states are relevant, but Florida is unique in its constitutional demands and in the needs of its student population. It is therefore recommended that the Florida Legislature establish and fund a bipartisan commission of key education experts and stakeholders to oversee a cost study.

The charge to the commission is to recommend what constitutes an adequate education based on Florida's Constitution and the state's unique circumstances. To accomplish this charge, the commission should hire and work with appropriate consultants to design and conduct various aspects of the cost study.

The study should:

1. Review state education standards and other related policies in order to identify specific objectives of the education system and provide guidance about how the constitution's mandate for an "adequate" and "high quality" system of education should be interpreted.
2. Identify gaps between the state's educational objectives and actual educational outcomes and services.
3. Identify and measure the costs of eliminating these gaps.
4. Recommend changes in funding and other education policies that are necessary to meet the definition of adequacy established by the commission.

The purpose of the adequacy movement is to give all students the opportunity to reach their potentials. This is no easy task, but the results of a cost study would provide a basis for reasoned discussion and policy reform.

The foregoing is a summary of a policy brief in the report *Reform Florida* (Education Policy Research Unit, April 2004). The complete policy brief is available on the Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL) website at:

<http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/EPRU/documents/EPSSL-0401-110-EPRU.doc>

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