



SCHOOL FUNDING IS SHAMEFUL. HERE'S HOW TO CHANGE THAT.



For 19 straight years, Americans surveyed for the [annual PDK K12 education poll](#) have cited funding as the number one problem facing public schools.

Yet fighting for real and substantial change can sometimes seem to be an overwhelming and insurmountable task involving byzantine funding formulas, recalcitrant state legislatures, and court cases that can take decades to drive meaningful change.

Adding to this perception are reports that target the news media and the general public with false arguments that court involvement inevitably fails and that money does not matter anyway, NEPC Fellow Bruce Baker of Rutgers and Director Kevin Welner of CU Boulder say in a 2011 article in *Teachers College Record* (“School Finance and Courts: Does Reform Matter, and How Can We Tell?”). Baker and Welner explain the process of how litigation has generated important change, even though the process does take some time.

In a recent report, *From Courthouse to Statehouse—and Back Again*, the Education Law Center, a nonprofit organization with five decades of involvement in school finance, uses a series of new case studies from Kansas, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Washington to again demonstrate that courts *can* indeed make a difference, especially if certain conditions are met. The report provides a roadmap for battle-weary and novice advocates alike who can see the school funding problems in their own states yet remain unsure how to bring about real and meaningful change. In doing so, the study highlights five traits of successful school finance reforms that have involved court cases.

- 1. Leverage the state legislature.** The law might be on your side, but you also need the lawmakers. They're the ones who will approve the new funding formula and decide how much money to put into it. In Massachusetts, a school funding lawsuit, *Mussotte v. Peyser*, provided the late push, but it was the legislature that ultimately realized long-term efforts to reform school funding in that state.
- 2. Courts can play multiple roles.** They can define what the state is responsible for providing, influence the legislature, or simply keep the case open until voters elect lawmakers with a reasonable chance of supporting the reforms. In Kansas, an ongoing series of court rulings kept reform efforts alive until voters expelled anti-government lawmakers, replacing them with elected officials willing to consider a fairer and better-funded system of school finance.
- 3. Harness research,** and do so early or often and with multiple audiences in mind. For instance, there is a large body of [increasingly sophisticated and compelling research](#) that demonstrates that money *does* matter. In New Jersey, the [National Institute for Early Education Research](#), founded by NEPC Fellow W. Steven Barnett, provided critical evidence demonstrating the importance of funding preschool for children from low-income families, a key outcome of that state's so-called *Abbott* reforms.
- 4. Messaging matters.** The public and the legislature need to hear strong and consistent messaging about the need for reform. In Washington, the Washington Education Association provided regular updates to their affiliates and to other unions to encourage everyone to support the funding reform.
- 5. Don't expect fast or cheap results.** Successful reforms typically take time and, as a result, require long-term, ongoing investments. In New Jersey, a core coalition of funders provided millions in ongoing support over many years.

NEPC Resources on School Finance and Funding

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