



ANOTHER TROUBLING LINK BETWEEN K-12 SPENDING AND STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



As the holiday gift season gets underway for consumers, a [new study](#) takes stock of a different type of spending: the public's investment in K-12 public schools.

Conducted by [Zachary Oberfield](#) of Haverford College and NEPC Fellow [Bruce Baker](#) of the University of Miami, the research appears in the current issue of the *American Educational Research Journal*, a peer-refereed publication.

The study draws upon data collected between 1995 and 2016 to examine potential explanations for changes in "progressivity"—the degree to which districts that serve students from lower-income families are funded at higher rates than districts that serve students from higher-income families. Progressivity is important because research suggests that, relative to students from higher-income families, students from lower-income families cost more to educate (from 122 to 167 percent more, according to [one estimate](#)).

"Thus, if states are to ensure that all students have an equal chance at success, they must strive for finance equity, funding districts commensurate with their needs rather than aiming for mere parity," Oberfield and Baker write. Currently, "most states have achieved some level of progressivity in how they fund education," but "states are underspending on education for poor students," the authors warn.

They note variation among states in how much they "remedy local disparities and exhibit significant within-state changes over time." And they find mixed evidence for two common explanations for changes in progressivity: court-ordered school finance reforms and shifts in political ideologies of citizens and lawmakers within states. They caution, for instance, that the "mere issuing of a court order did not push states into significantly different pro-

gressivity trajectories.” Additionally, they find “little evidence that as citizens became more liberal or conservative, policymakers made their school finance systems more or less progressive” or that “shifts in legislator ideology and party were unassociated with changes in progressivity.”

Rather, Oberfield and Baker conclude,

[C]hanges in K-12 school finance progressivity were most consistently and strongly related to state-level demographic changes. Specifically, changes in child demography appeared to influence decisions about redistribution: As the percentage of poor children within a state grew, or as the percentage of students of color rose, policymakers created less progressive school-finance systems.

The finding raises serious concerns, as an ongoing instance of public policies with racially disparate impacts. Moreover, as the authors point out, “over the last 40 years, one of the most significant demographic changes in the United States has been the shrinking and aging of the non-Hispanic White population relative to various racial and ethnic minority groups.”

The authors also urge further research into multiple aspects of their findings, including the association between changes in school funding progressivity and demographic shifts in the student population. “Although we document how changing racial demographics are associated with changes in progressivity, we do not explore the reason(s) behind it,” they write. “Thus, we highlight the need to understand when and why demographic changes alter citizens’ political perspectives and choices.”

This holiday season is a good time to ask how public budgets might support public education. Explore that question and more at [Spend it on Schools](#), an interactive tool that allows users to reimagine public education by estimating what expenses might be covered with investments of different sizes.

NEPC Resources on School Finance and Funding

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