

How to Improve Arizona's Worst in the Nation School Funding System

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When it comes to school funding systems in the 50 states, Arizona ranks dead last, and inadequate funding is at the root of the state's severe teacher shortage and lackluster student achievement. It's time for Arizona lawmakers to make the kind of changes in the state's school funding formula that will benefit students and the adults responsible for their education.

A new report released today by Education Law Center, [Starting from the Bottom: First Steps to Improve School Funding in Arizona](#), recommends increasing the base per pupil funding level and boosting at-risk funding by enacting an "opportunity weight" based on student poverty as crucial first steps to set the stage for a more comprehensive reform of the state's public school finance system.

The report is published by ELC's "[Resource Equity in the States](#)" initiative, which builds on ELC's ongoing research examining the condition of public education funding in the states. The Resource Equity project analyzes the capacity of state finance systems to deliver essential education resources to students, especially those at-risk from family and community poverty.

Starting from the Bottom lays bare the deep deficiencies in Arizona public school funding. According to ELC's national report card on school funding – [Making the Grade 2019](#) – Arizona ranks last in the nation on per pupil funding and level of investment in K-12 public schools. Arizona is one of eight states that does not increase funding to account for student poverty, resulting in lower funding for the state's higher poverty school districts.

The ELC report provides detailed analysis of two short-term measures that could be implemented quickly to begin to improve Arizona's public education system:

- (1) Increase the base level of funding per pupil in the state funding formula. This funding increase can be targeted to critical resource needs, including high-quality preschool, qualified teachers, and sufficient support staff, such as social workers, counselors and nurses.
- (2) Increase funding for at-risk and struggling students in the form of an opportunity weight based on student poverty. This reform – similar to provisions in model funding formulas enacted in other states – would target additional dollars to districts for each student in poverty.

The report also examines the impact of these initial reforms on students and schools based on a modest 10% increase in the base per pupil amount and by adding an opportunity weight of 0.5 to the current formula. The combined increases would boost Arizona's equalization formula allocations by \$1.1 billion, with half of the funding targeted to students in poverty and the other half to the base per pupil funding amount for all students statewide.

[Interactive charts](#) that accompany the report simulate the impact of adding funding and resources for each district in Arizona.

For example, in Tucson Unified School District, with over 42,000 students and nearly one in four students in poverty, district funding would increase from \$5,514 per pupil to \$6,917. These additional funds would add approximately \$60 million to Tucson's current budget. This increase is sufficient to support a 20% boost in teacher salaries; reduce the student-teacher ratio from 16 to 15 students per teacher by adding two new teacher positions in every school; and reduce the student-counselor ratio from 470:1 to 245:1 by adding one school counselor to every school, matching the professional standard of 250:1.

"This report shows why it is time for Arizona to join most other states in the country in providing increased funding for high-poverty districts," said David Lujan of the Arizona Center for Economic

Progress. “Providing students in these districts with the additional resources needed to succeed is critical to building the skilled workforce Arizona will need for future economic growth.”

“Arizona’s outdated school funding system requires a broad overhaul, but the recommendations contained in the ELC report should be implemented without delay,” said Mary McKillip, ELC Senior Researcher and Resource Equity project lead. “All Arizona school districts would see an immediate increase in their budgets, but high poverty districts would finally be in a position to make critical investments in their teacher workforce, support staff and interventions for academically struggling students.”

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