

School Funding

by Peggy Farber

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This week, Jesse Robinson, a 1999 graduate of Oberlin College, who is starting her second year as a math teacher at Junior High School 145 in the Bronx, was thinking about her friend, Amy Jones, who taught by her side last year. Jones is starting a new year as a teacher in Great Neck, Long Island.

The contrasts between what the two teachers' schools will offer students this year could not be sharper. Robinson teaches several classes a day, each with 30 sixth graders. Jones has 17 students, period. JHS 145 offers Robinson and her students a library that is tidy but almost empty of books. At the Great Neck school, Jones has access to a rich, varied, collection, including a whole shelf devoted to the latest education research.

Jones has already met with her new principal and a school reading specialist to talk about the strength and weaknesses of each of the 17 children in her room, something Robinson has never done at JHS145.

It's not that Jones didn't love teaching at JHS 145. She did. She just couldn't pass up the opportunity to teach in a district that spends more than twice as much on each child as New York City does - or to earn an extra \$15,000. Jones has gone from earning \$35,000 in New York to \$50,000 in the suburbs.

Robinson shook her head. "The students here need what the suburban students have even more than they do," she said. "And they get so much less."

Few things are as constant in education as the gap in spending between New York City and other districts in New York State. Two years ago, the last year for which there is data, the city spent about \$8,100 per child. Neighboring suburban districts in Westchester and Long Island spent on average close to \$13,000, and districts around the state spent over \$10,000. Great Neck spent \$18,915. Year in and year out New York State assemblymen, senators, and the governor vow to put an end to the disparities. Year after year it survives.

A lawsuit brought by the [Campaign For Fiscal Equity](#), a coalition of reformers, seeking to overturn the state's school finance system is drawing to a close. After seven years of motions,

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challenges and appeals, a trial in State Supreme Court on the constitutionality of the system ended in July and a ruling by Judge Leland DeGrasse is expected within the next eight weeks.

This is just one of some 70 lawsuits across the nation addressing the huge disparities separating city schools from those in the suburbs.

THE CONTEXT: SCHOOLS OPEN UNDER SIEGE, AGAIN

Despite record increases in both state and city education spending, as city schools open this week tens of thousands of students are returning to buildings that are severely overcrowded and under-supplied. Sixteen thousand students are reporting to 31 high schools that have no science labs.

Thousands of children are going back to buildings [surrounded by scaffolding](#) , erected as stopgap measures until repairs to crumbling facades can be made. Five thousand Queens high school students will be lucky if they can get into an art room because their seven high schools have one art room a piece. In District 13, none of the existing art rooms has running water.

In elementary schools throughout the city thousands of children, like the kids at PS 71 in Queens, will go a year without a [single gym class](#) or, like the children at PS 8 in upper Manhattan, they'll spend the entire year indoors because their schools don't have playgrounds.

If this year is like last, only 40 percent of the students citywide will pass the city's [reading exam](#) - given in grades 3,5,6, and 7 - and only 33 percent will pass the [math test](#) . And that includes kids in the best districts. In Jesse Robinson's school, 14 percent of students passed the math exam and 29 percent passed reading.

As if the City's schools weren't beleaguered enough, a [new study](#) , released last week by a Harvard University researcher, reports that African-American students in New York City who took advantage of privately funded vouchers scored significantly better than their peers after two years in private schools. White and Hispanic students did not show any gains.

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It is statistics like these that keep vouchers and privatization alive in local races and in this year's presidential campaign. If elected, Republican nominee George W. Bush will give children vouchers if the schools they attended fail to meet state standards for three years in a row.

Some economists, notably [Erik A. Hanushek](#) of the Hoover Institution argue that increasing school funding does little to improve student achievement, but inner-city public school administrators, teachers, parents and an [army of researchers](#) across the country say the evidence shows that financing makes a huge difference.

THE NATIONAL SCENE

Since 1971, there have been [70 lawsuits](#) in 41 states against state finance systems that allow suburban districts to flourish while inner-city schools starve for funds.

Plaintiffs in these cases take advantage of a historical fact that sets education apart from all other public services: state constitutions mention education as a state responsibility. Courts have repeatedly interpreted this to mean that states must fund schools equitably.

Litigation has resulted in a wide range of reforms, according to the [Consortium For Policy Research In Education](#). The most controversial law may be the one enacted in [Vermont](#) two years ago, where wealthy residents were made to cut back on spending in their districts and high poverty schools were supplied with much more.

Most states, however, find it difficult to alter spending radically, even after they've been ordered to by courts. One reason is that states do not control all school spending. Almost every school district in the country is an independent revenue-generating entity with the power to raise money for schools by taxing local property. States around the nation contribute only about half of what it costs to run schools. Though states use their education budgets to counterbalance disparities among districts - giving smaller shares of the state's overall school budget to wealthy districts - districts have the power to supplement state aid with their own revenues.

Another reason that states have trouble making school funding equitable is, in a word, politics.

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Even though states contribute only half of schools' budgets, education is expensive. State education packages are almost always the largest item in a state's budget. As a result they come in for a lot of political attention. In New York State, education spending is 45 percent of the overall budget, and every state legislator has a stake in how the money is spent.

"It's not like energy where there may or may not be a plant in the legislator's district. Every senator and assemblyman has a school," said State Assemblyman [Steven Sanders](#), chair of New York Assembly's education committee.

HOW NEW YORK STATE FINANCES ITS SCHOOLS

The New York City public school population includes 60 percent of the state's neediest children, and the city has the highest costs of any of the state's school districts. Yet New York City gets less state aid per capita than the average per capita aid in the rest of the state.

Over the years, special commissions and a parade of state officials deplore the fact that the state's finance system under-funds New York City. Nevertheless, each year the system is still standing at the end of the legislative season.

New York allocates state aid - at least when it comes to New York City - on the basis of student enrollment. The City enrolls 1.1 million students, 37.2 percent of the state's total, and gets 35.65 percent of the state's aid.

On paper, the state vigorously denies that money is divvied up on the basis of the number of students enrolled in each district. Theoretically, each district's share is calculated using a [series of formulas](#) that give special weight to factors like student socio-economic status and district wealth.

In reality though, according to the Campaign for Fiscal Equity and state education officials who testified earlier this year in the lawsuit against the state, New York State distributes aid on the basis of a longstanding political deal to hold New York City funding to 37 percent of the state's annual school budget.

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"The political decisions are made first and the formulas are tacked on later," said Dr. Thomas Sobol, New York State Commissioner of Education from 1987 to 1995. "It's a reflection of stability in the balance of power [in Albany]."

Steven Sanders, the assemblyman who heads the education committee, said using enrollment to calculate aid actually boosts the city's share of state funding. "When I first became chair, New York City's overall share of state education dollars was somewhere around 33 percent or 34 percent. Enrollment is not a good definition of equity but at the very least, we thought, New York City ought to be receiving at least as much as its student enrollment."

Sanders said that after difficult negotiations, the Republican leadership in Albany has agreed to give New York City roughly a 39 percent share of each year's increase in state spending, as a way of bringing per capita spending in the city up to the state average.

But the Campaign for Fiscal Equity is not satisfied - either with the Albany deal or with the system of formulas the legislature ignores. It is calling on Judge DeGrasse to toss out the state's system entirely and to replace it with one that distributes aid on the basis of what it actually costs to educate students in a given district.

Under the system envisioned by the Campaign, the state would figure out what educational essentials were necessary for different types of students to meet the state's new learning standards. What would high poverty kids need to succeed? What about immigrant children? What about middle-income kids? Once that was determined, budget negotiators would distribute money on the basis of student need. The New York State Board of Regents endorses a similar plan in its most [recent report](#) .

There's only one problem. "Nobody knows how much it costs to educate these kids," said John Augenblick, a Denver-based expert on school finance. "What you have is 50 different ways of doing it, none of which is scientific."

Jesse Robinson looked over at the four computers in her room, which didn't work last year, and sighed. A brand-new first year teacher stuck his head in her room and introduced himself. Robinson gave him a huge smile and welcomed him with hearty and enthusiastic encouragement. She loves her job and her school, she said. But she can't tell yet whether she'll

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stay. The demands placed on her by low funding might just be too great.