

Why Are the States So Different?

This month the National Center for Education Statistics released its, [“First Look” report of state-by-state education expenditures for the 2014-15 school year](#). The report indicates that school funding continued to increase by over 3% between 2014 and 2015. But I was most interested in two other facts.

First, I was reminded once again of how little the federal government spends on public education. Of the \$648.6 billion that was collected for public education in 2014-15 the federal government provided only \$55 billion, or 8.5% of the total. This fact helps us fully realize that running the public schools is one of the many responsibilities the Constitution leaves for the states.

The second thing I found startling is the large differences among the states in how much they spend per pupil on their schools. New York state was the top spender at \$20,744 per pupil, spending over 3 times more than Utah, the lowest spending state, at \$6,751 for each student.

Those who believe that spending on education is the biggest determinant of education quality would surely say that New York should have much better academic results than Utah. However, this is not the case.

Education Week in their annual Quality Counts report includes one indicator based on the very reliable results of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) tests in reading and mathematics. This indicator clearly shows how states are doing in teaching academics. Their [state-by-state academic achievement data table](#) shows that Utah scores 73.2%, which is significantly higher than New York’s score of 70.6%. This is not just a quirk of the data, or something unique about Utah. Twenty-six other states including Arizona, Ohio, Texas, Rhode Island, Georgia, Wyoming, Tennessee and Kentucky, to name just a few, all did better on the NAEP test than New York. Some of the other high spending states like Massachusetts and New Jersey scored at the very top of these academic rankings, so spending a lot of money per pupil does not necessarily harm academic results, but it is clear that the amount spent does not, in and of itself, guarantee academic quality.

How is it possible that Utah, spending less than 1/3 of what New York spends gets better results in reading and mathematics? Of course, we know that the cost of living in New York is about 40% higher than in Utah, so we would expect all their expenses to be as much as 40% higher – but not 200% higher. There must be other things going on, and there certainly are. Here are a few of the factors that I believe influence differences in the cost per pupil and academic outcomes of the states.

- Average teacher salaries [vary among states](#) from just over \$40,000 to just under \$80,000.

- Average class sizes also vary wildly, in part due to methods states use for special education classes. But even among self-contained classes the [average class size in 2007-2008](#) varied from 17 to 25 students per teacher.
- The number of students who are from high poverty backgrounds, and the accommodations that the states expect their schools to make for this, differs.
- Different states have diverse expectations for what they teach students with some sticking fairly close to “reading, writing and arithmetic,” and others expecting instruction in social skills, certain career based skills, values, and even shaping student beliefs and attitudes toward human sexuality.
- Methods required for handling extreme discipline problems vary a lot. It is much more expensive (at least in the short-run) to keep all students in school than it is to expel the most anti-social students.
- Some states are just wealthier than others. Typically, if you have more money you tend to spend more.

In the Old Testament, one solution for governing the small but growing nation of Israel was to divide it into twelve different regions to be governed by the twelve tribes. In the United States our founders, knowing that the human heart is fallen and tends toward evil (Genesis 6:5), also thought it wise to have a division of power between the federal government and a multitude of state governments. They severely limited the federal government to certain listed powers and left the states all the other governmental powers not listed. They also felt it best to divide the power of the federal government between the executive, judicial and legislative branches.

So far, the system seems to be working. Except for the Civil War, where the elimination of slavery was at stake, we have been able to survive many disagreements and challenges without dividing. We have held onto a few fundamental truths across the nation while allowing great flexibility for different states to adopt and support much different values, education systems, and life styles. Allowing our states to have fifty very different education systems is no-doubt one of the features that has provided the flexibility needed to hold together as a nation.

During these very politically polarized days the separation of powers is being tested. A few states and cities feel they should not enforce certain federal laws, particularly immigration statutes, and courts have challenged the power of the executive branch to enforce these same statutes. In education, the pressure from the Bush and Obama administrations to control local education though the No Child Left Behind Act was recently reversed by Congress and the Trump administration.

While political divisions are deep, and at times rancorous, there is still much that binds us together. To strengthen our resolve to maintain our unity and value our diversity it may be a good time to reflect on the closing lines of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address delivered at the close of

the Civil War, *“that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”*

While historians disagree about Lincoln’s faith, his acknowledgment that we are “under God,” may be the most important thought he ever penned; for Psalm 2 tells us that the Lord has given the nations to his son, Jesus, and that it is only by taking refuge in him that our nation will be blessed.

*“The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”
Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
Serve the Lord with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

Psalm 2:8-12

If you feel that our nation and the President needs your prayers to help keep the nation safe, here is a [prayer for protection](#) based on Proverbs 20:26, “A wise king winnows the wicked and drives the wheel over them.”

CEAI is interested in your thoughts. Members are encouraged to enter comments below. Personal comments may be addressed to the author at JMitchell@ceai.org.

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