



Is Lack of Funds Really Hurting San Diego Unified Students?

By Stephen D. Rosen

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If we generally accept that money talks, let's at least admit that it doesn't speak above a whisper in the educational community. For many years, the plaintive message of administrators has been that more cash would trigger better student outcomes. [San Diego Unified School District](#) has stood tall on that bandwagon.

A growing chorus of research analysts, however, is more stridently begging to differ. Recently, Lisa Snell, director of education at the [Reason Foundation](#), pointed out that since 1970, spending on K-12 education has increased by 80 percent in California and has tripled in inflation-adjusted dollars nationally. However, the latest results from the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) tests, known as the "Nation's Report Card," show no national score improvements for high school seniors in reading and math, and little progress for the country's students over the past decade.

"The results make it clear there is no relationship between increasing school spending and increasing academic performance. California has been a particularly dismal example of this trend," Snell concludes.

A separate, recently released study from the [Cato Institute](#) stated that while spending has just about tripled in inflation-adjusted dollars and the number of school employees has almost doubled since 1970, reading, math and science scores for students have remained stagnant. What does this research mean for San Diego Unified schools? Simply, any connection between district revenue and student achievement should generate parental skepticism. Claims otherwise deny the facts. Clearly, lack of more money doesn't correlate with dismal student outcomes.

A financial status report on the district, released in February by the [Center for Education Policy and Law](#) at the University of San Diego, looked at per-student spending. The study tracked spending that indicates that from 2003-04 through 2012-13, dollars available per pupil decreased by 3.4 percent, hardly apocalyptic.

The district spends about \$13,000 per year per student. Is this not enough to foster significant performance success? Based on this recent research, would spending \$26,000 per student make a difference? We think the school board should face the reality that money is not its biggest problem and more money won't necessarily mean better outcomes.

But there is another big fail: as complex as educational finance is, it is unhelpful when the district also plays Pollyanna with minimal progress reports that misinform parents. While the board trumpets success, parents are not getting critical information on the real performance of the district or our students.

The statistical truth we reported earlier still stands: 59 percent of our high school students are not proficient in science and 52 percent aren't proficient in history or social studies. Yet, although 50 percent of parents consider themselves to be informed about student performance, most parents in a recent survey guessed wrong when asked about those proficiency percentages. Equally alarming, only 17 percent of residents offered a figure that was in the right ballpark in terms of per-pupil spending. A majority of parents guessed well below the actual amount.

Parents should not have to become education finance experts to understand how well their children are doing for the money they are paying. The district owes parents a clear and complete explanation of those finances without creating a corn maze of confusing numbers requiring a Ph.D. to interpret.

A clear and legible district analysis will provide true transparency and a real cost vs. outcome accounting. Ask district leadership why, REALLY, are our student achievements and outcomes consistently so low? Send your concerns to qualityassurance@sandi.net and copy us at SDUSD@UPforEd.org.