

# The Gazette

## Link elusive between Iowa education funding and achievement

*Meager increase for schools in Iowa revives debate over how much is enough*

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DES MOINES — Student achievement in Iowa's K-12 schools has not necessarily risen at the same rate as increases to state funding for public education since 2010.

Public education advocates say, however, the impact of school funding cannot be measured solely by test scores and other metrics, and that the state's assessment program doesn't accurately measure what teachers are teaching.

Lawmakers just concluded their debate over how much taxpayer funding to send to the state's K-12 public education system. In what has become an annual ritual since Republicans regained at least some portion of control at the Iowa Capitol in 2011, Democrats and public education advocates said the state needs to put more money into schools, while Republicans said they agreed to an appropriate level within budgetary constraints.

In the 39 years before Republicans regained control of the Iowa House in 2011, state funding to K-12 public education increased by less than 3 percent only seven times; it has dipped below 3 percent six times in the seven years since.

Nonetheless, per pupil spending in Iowa has continued to increase annually, but student achievement has been a mixed bag, metrics show.

Total per pupil state funding was \$7,419 in fiscal 2010 and \$9,173 in fiscal 2017.

Since 2010, Iowa's high school graduation rates have increased 2 points to 90.8 percent for the class of 2015.

ACT scores, on the other hand, have hovered steadily between 22.0 and 22.3 since 2010, among the best scores in the nation each year.

Results are mixed from the Iowa Assessments, which measure educational progress in grades 3-8 and 11 in reading, mathematics and science. In the state's most recent condition of education report, Iowa students over a two-year period showed improvement in eighth-grade reading but regression in fourth-grade math.

The question of the extent that education funding translates to student achievement has been debated for years, and the answer varies depending on who is asked.

Studies by the Albert Shanker Institute, a think tank, and the National Education Policy Center, a research center, concluded funding has a direct effect on achievement.

"On average, aggregate measures of per-pupil spending are positively associated with improved or higher student outcomes," the Albert Shanker Institute report said.

But studies from the libertarian Cato Institute and the conservative Heritage Foundation suggest there is not a direct correlation.

"A basic comparison of long-term spending trends with long-term measures of student academic achievement challenges the belief that spending is correlated with achievement," said the Heritage Foundation report, which compared increases in school funding nationally with stagnant reading scores.

That's how Drew Klein, with Iowa's chapter of the conservative advocacy group Americans for Prosperity, sees it. He cited the Cato Institute report when discussing the issue recently at the Capitol.

"Right now, the system itself is failing kids, and I don't think it matters how much money you put in there, you're still not going to see significant improvement in student achievement," Klein said.

Tammy Wawro, Iowa State Education Association president, said metrics available do not accurately measure achievement and progress. That makes it difficult, she said, to prove that better funding does improve student performance, as she believes.