



Wendy Davis says Texas ranks 49th in what it is doing in per-pupil education spending

By: W. Gardner Selby – April 18, 2013

Says Texas ranks 49th nationally in "what we are doing to support our per-pupil investment in education in the state."

-Wendy Davis on Tuesday, April 9th, 2013 in a Senate Education Committee meeting.

A state senator opposed to a proposal intended to enable some children to attend private schools with government aid asserted that Texas already has a hard time keeping pace with other states.

Wendy Davis, D-Fort Worth, told Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, during an April 9, 2013, committee meeting that "we in the state of Texas are 49th in the country in what we are doing to support our per-pupil investment in education in the state." She added that she prefers to prioritize putting dollars into the public schools.

A reader asked us to check that ranking.

Senator cites newspaper report

By email, Davis' spokesman, Rick Svatora, told us she was referring to a report described in a Feb. 22, 2013, Dallas Morning News article stating that preliminary figures released by the National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers union, indicate Texas schools are spending \$8,400 per student this year. The national average is \$11,455, the report said, putting Texas' per-student expenditures below every state save Arizona and Nevada.

So, compared to other states, Texas reportedly ranks 48th in per-student spending. Then again, the News' story notes that the association's analysis also considered spending in District of Columbia schools, a consideration leaving Texas 49th in per-student spending among 51 jurisdictions.

The News' story said the association's comparisons, based on data furnished by state education agencies, are "among the most reliable in the nation and are frequently cited by officials in Texas and other states. The NEA has been issuing its annual reports on public school spending since the early 1960s."

Education association report

We turned to the association's report, downloadable [here](#), finding the figures cited by the newspaper in Summary Table K, "Estimated Expenditures for Public Schools, 2012-13," which indicates that Texas this year is spending less per student in average daily attendance (the aggregate attendance of a school during a reporting period divided by the number of days school is in session that period) than all states but Arizona and Nevada. Elsewhere, the report says these expenses include salaries for school personnel, student transportation, school books and materials and energy costs.

A wrinkle: Part of the report says that in making useful comparisons among states, a different way of counting students, fall enrollment, is preferred to average daily attendance because of its standardized definition. Based on fall enrollment, the report says, Texas is spending an estimated \$7,886 per pupil, less than every state except Utah and Arizona, according to Table K.

So, it looks like two states trail Texas in per-pupil spending, either way you count students.

For each state, Table K also lists current estimated expenditures for other programs, meaning such expenses as summer school and adult education, which are not part of regular public elementary and secondary day-school programs, the report says.

The table also shows spending by each state's schools on interest on debt and capital outlays, which conservative observers such as the Texas Public Policy Foundation have said should always be taken into account when making state-by-state comparisons.

Considering all education-related expenditures

When we checked a similar Davis claim about Texas' spending on education in 2011, a foundation spokesman pointed out a March 2010 report by the Libertarian-leaning Cato Institute that reviewed 2008-09 budgets for districts in the nation's five largest cities, including Houston, concluding that average per-pupil spending was 44 percent higher than was otherwise reported by public schools. Separately at the time, Frank Johnson, a statistician with the National Center for Education Statistics, told us the center doesn't take into account capital outlays in estimating per-pupil spending because such costs can create false assumptions about what's spent on instructional programs, school supplies and teachers.

In the latest education association report, Table K's last column presents each state's total school spending, rolling in all subcategories.

We wondered, then, how Texas stacks up by all expenditures per pupil. The report does not present such a calculation, so we made our own run, dividing the total spending for each state by the state's average daily attendance, as shown in the report's Summary Table D. And by this approach, it appears that more than \$50 billion in total Texas school spending breaks out to nearly \$11,090 per pupil, placing Texas 38th nationally, ahead of states including California, Georgia, Oklahoma and Arizona.

By phone, a spokesman for the education association's Texas affiliate, the Texas State Teachers Association, suggested it doesn't make sense to roll in all expenditures because school districts have varied commitments to capital outlays and debt, while spending

reflected in the presented per-pupil tallies are driven by legislative decisions about spending and finance formulas.

Clay Robison followed up by email, saying that "in many cases those expenditures pay to build football stadiums and other facilities, such as fine arts centers. I am not going to engage in the argument about football stadiums, but I don't think it gives a fair comparison of how much states are spending on students. In other words, capital costs lump new classroom construction, which benefits all students, with expenditures that don't apply to all students."

Robison pointed out that according to the report's Table H-14, Texas spent \$9,462 per pupil in 2010-11, which was before legislators cut education aid in the 2011 legislative session. This year, the association's report suggests, such spending is down by more than \$1,000 per pupil from 2010-11.

Our ruling

Davis said Texas ranks 49th in "what we are doing to support our per-pupil investment in education in the state."

A report drawing on states' figures estimates Texas is spending \$7,886 or \$8,400 per student this year, depending on how students are counted. Both ways, Texas ranks third to last among the states. Then again, folding in capital outlays, other education expenditures and interest on debt, total estimated spending in Texas of nearly \$11,090 per pupil lands the state 38th among the states.

But the senator focused on state investment which, unlike locally determined debt and capital outlays, are driven by legislative actions. Our sense is that this is the appropriate comparison, though Davis failed to clarify that Texas is 49th by this yardstick in comparison to other states plus Washington, D.C., which is not a state. Absent this clarification, her claim rates as Mostly True.