

Los Angeles Times

Editorial

Equal funding for California's schools

No one really understands the crazy quilt system now in place.

September 5, 2009

If there is one bright spot in the state's dismal funding of schools this year, it's that the Legislature is finally paying attention to long-standing and truly nonsensical disparities in the way that money is distributed.

There is no particular pattern to the inequities, except that a handful of the wealthiest school districts receive far more money per student than others, and the differences have nothing to do with what those districts' relative needs are. Rather, the crazy quilt of funding relies on outdated formulas that made little sense when they were devised and make even less sense now.

The Los Angeles and Inglewood school districts, for instance, have similar populations and educational challenges. Yet Inglewood received \$1,400 less per student in 2007-08, the last year for which figures are available. And the relatively affluent Capistrano Unified School District in south Orange County got \$1,000 less than that, while the well-off [Laguna Beach](#) schools received \$3,000 more than Inglewood.

Education funding in this state is so arcane that only a handful of people claim to understand it. Sometimes it's based on land values in the late 1970s, so that districts that were largely agricultural at the time receive less money even though they are built out or even urbanized now. Other school districts received dramatically more money for food programs that were later taken over by the federal government -- and yet they continue to receive the extra sums to spend however they please.

The harsh cuts to education spending this year have thrown a glaring light on these unfair funding gaps, which should persuade the Legislature to bring more logic to the equation.

[Assembly Bill 8](#), sponsored by Assemblywoman Julia Brownley (D-Santa Monica), would convene a working group to study the formulas that are used to allocate education money. The panel would produce a report and recommendations for simpler, more rational funding mechanisms by December 2010. Another bill would be required to enact the recommendations.

Any such bill will surely be challenged by the school districts that now receive more generous sums; previous attempts to reform the formulas have repeatedly fallen victim to lobbying by educators who cannot imagine making do with less. We sympathize with them -- but sympathize more with the districts that already make do with less every day.

But that's getting ahead of the issue. California's convoluted school funding system begs for impartial study and new clarity. Brownley's bill is the best starting point for an open debate about how best to provide money for schools.