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## State ranks low in per-pupil spending

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Texas spends less on its students than three quarters of the other states, highlighting why the state Legislature will convene a special session this month to fix the state's broken education funding formula.

At \$7,104 per pupil, the state ranks 38th in expenditures, down from from 35th the previous year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Annual Survey of Local Government Finances released Monday. The national average is \$8,287.

That ranking is representative of a number of problems in how Texas funds public schools, according to policy experts and educators.

"This is a reflection of the lack of increased funding of Texas schools. We're falling behind the rest of the nation," said Wayne Pierce, executive director of the Austin-based Equity Center, which represents the state's poor and mid-level school districts.

But others, including Rep. Vicki Truitt, R-Keller, downplay the report, insisting that money isn't everything, and that simply putting more dollars into public schools won't improve them.

According to the federal report, New Jersey, New York and Washington, D.C., spent the most per child. Utah spent the least. The rankings are based on figures from the 2003-04 school year, the most recent figures available.

Texas has not increased education funding since 1999, Pierce said. In fact, the percentage of money contributed by the state to local school districts has slowly decreased, while the amount shouldered by local taxpayers has increased.

The Texas Education Agency's per-pupil expenditure numbers differ slightly from the Census Bureau's. According to the TEA's Web site, in 2003-04, the state spent \$7,084 per student. Local taxpayers contributed 51.4 percent, just over a 1 percent increase from the previous year, while the state contributed 38.3 percent, a 2.5 percent decrease from 2002-03. The federal government contributed the rest.

"School districts have had to raise taxes or live off of increased tax revenue," Pierce said.

The Legislature will begin meeting in a sixth special session on April 17 to revamp the public education funding system. The Texas Supreme Court ruled that the system is unconstitutional because of its heavy reliance on property taxes, and gave a June 1 deadline for a solution.

Hurst-Eules-Bedford Superintendent Gene Buinger said that many districts are on the verge of "using up the good will of the taxpayer."

Looking at the 135-page report, Buinger said he found other statistics that interested him. Texas, for example, ranks 47th in funds coming from state sources, and 16th in money provided by local taxpayers. Also, Texas ranks 27th in money spent on salaries.

"The single biggest component of a budget for a school district is your salaries that you pay, especially for your teachers," Buinger said. "Teaching salaries in Texas are below the national average."

But the Census Bureau's numbers don't give a complete picture of expenditures, said Jamie Story, education policy analyst for the conservative nonprofit Texas Public Policy Foundation. For example, the numbers do not include an adjustment for cost of living, she said.

She also warned against believing that spending more money will yield a higher quality education.

"There is no evidence that the amount of overall spending has anything to do with student achievement," Story said.

Truitt said intangible factors, such as parent involvement, can often determine a school district's success more than money.

"If per pupil spending were the most important factor in education, then Washington, D.C. would be the best district in the nation," Truitt said. "Money isn't everything."

Pierce and Buinger disagreed with that assessment.

"Every effort should be made by schools to get the biggest bang for the buck," Pierce said. "But the idea that you can't do more with more money is just silly."

ONLINE: [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

#### IN THE KNOW

##### Education spending

Texas' ranking for per pupil spending has decreased, according to a U.S. Census Bureau report released Monday. Here is how Texas compared to the states at the top, and bottom, of the list.

#### **2003-04**

1. New Jersey - \$12,981
  2. New York - \$12,930
  3. Washington, D.C. - \$12,801
- National Average - \$8,287
38. Texas - \$7,104
  49. Arizona - \$6,036
  50. Idaho - \$6,028
  51. Utah - \$5,008

#### **2002-03**

1. Washington, D.C. - \$13,328
  2. New Jersey - \$12,202
  3. New York - \$12,140
- National Average - \$8,019
35. Texas - \$7,076
  49. Mississippi - \$5,816
  50. Arizona - \$5,672
  51. Utah - \$4,860

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