

Thornton II Commission



Increases in child poverty and English language learners, coupled with changing district enrollments mean the Thornton formula is no longer keeping up with our children's education needs. It's time for a new era in Maryland school funding.

More than half of Maryland's elementary school students are now living in poverty.



Maryland's Growing Child Poverty Problem

The percentage of Maryland public school students living in poverty has more than doubled since 1990—from 22% to 45%—putting our statewide student population on the verge of becoming majority low-income.

This steady growth in child poverty is driven largely by more concentrated poverty in an alarming number of counties. There are now majority low-income student populations in nine districts (Allegany, Baltimore City, Caroline, Dorchester, Prince George's, Somerset, Washington, and Wicomico)—but that was the case in just two subdivisions a decade ago (Baltimore City and Somerset, where students are now 88% and 85% low-income respectively).

Maryland's state and local school funding systems have not been able to keep up with growing low-income student populations. In a 2015 Washington Post report, Maryland ranked 38th in the nation for equitable funding between the most affluent and most poor school districts. According to their analysis of federal education data, Maryland's poorest school districts receive 4.9% less local and state funding than the most affluent districts.

Some calculations show even larger funding gaps. According to Education Trust, a leading national advocate for low-income students, Maryland's highest poverty districts receive 7% less in state and local education funding than the lowest poverty districts—or \$1,248 per student.

While Maryland's Thornton Plan was a national model in the early 2000s, a spike in child poverty has strained its ability to make sure that all students receive the supports and opportunities they need to be successful. We need an updated school finance system to get back to leading the country in equitable school funding—and educational outcomes for our students.

Since the Thornton Commission, the number of students living in poverty has increased by 50%.

In Education Week's 2016 rankings for top state education systems, seven of the top ten states are also in the nation's top ten for per pupil spending—including Maryland.



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More English Language-Learners

The low-income compensatory program is just one of several supplemental components of Thornton. There's also a program in Thornton that gives additional funding for English Language Learners (ELLs), since those students require more staff and resources to catch up and stay on track with their English-speaking peers. But the number of ELLs has increased from 29,304 in 2005 (when Thornton was being phased-in) to 65,323 in 2015.

This shift is especially consequential for elementary schools where one in ten Maryland students is limited English proficient. When Thornton was being rolled out, just one in twenty students was an ELL. This is a greater challenge in Montgomery and Prince George's counties, where ELLs make up more than a fifth of all elementary students. We need a new investment in education services to account for the growing ELL student population.

A Statewide Strategy For Protecting Districts With Shifting Enrollment

Over time, the current formula has had the unfortunate consequence of simultaneously hurting districts with declining enrollment while squeezing school systems with increasing enrollment. Districts from Allegany to Carroll to Baltimore City have seen drops in state funding as their enrollment declines due to the per pupil nature of the formula. Meanwhile, districts with increasing enrollment like Montgomery, Howard, and Anne Arundel are dealing with increasing class sizes and overcrowding issues because the formula has not kept pace with their growth.

There are also concerns with how tax policy has affected the wealth component of the formula, which is used to make sure education funding is equitable across the state. For example, Baltimore City has been penalized for tax incentives it has provided to businesses to spur economic development. These issues surrounding enrollment and wealth calculation can only be addressed through a comprehensive, statewide dialogue that builds consensus among different interests. It was accomplished in the original Thornton Commission, and it can get accomplished through a similar process today.

Successful Education Strategies Require Funding

Research shows that as state and district-level per-pupil funding increase, so do educational outcomes. A landmark 2014 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research looked at funding systems in 28 states and found that a 20% increase in per-pupil funding for low-income students was associated with a 23% increase in high school completion rates, nearly a full additional year of completed education, and a 20 percentage-point reduction in poverty during adulthood.

Why is this the case? Almost all of the evidence-based strategies for improving public schools—including reducing class sizes, lowering teacher and principal turnover by improving salary and retirement security, access to public pre-K and afterschool programming—require additional funding. While school privatization options like voucher programs and for-profit charter schools have failed to help the vast majority of low-income students, we know investing in public education works.

Now is the time for a new commitment to public education funding in Maryland. We need a Thornton II Commission to get it done.