



WHAT IS THE KIRWAN COMMISSION?

Named after its chair, former University System of Maryland Chancellor Brit Kirwan, the Commission's 25 members worked for three years to rewrite Maryland's school funding formula. They finalized their recommendations to the General Assembly in November 2019.

Since legislators passed the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act (also known as the Thornton Plan) in 2002, Maryland has tried to provide adequate and equitable funding to all school systems. Unfortunately, the funding formula developed by Thornton is no longer keeping up with the needs of our students. 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. When you consider those increased needs together with the higher standards and new programs implemented over the last five years alone, our current levels of education spending fall short for too many students.

How much funding are we talking about? Early on in their work, the Kirwan Commission received a report from national school funding experts that found that, as of 2015, each Maryland public school was annually underfunded by about \$2 million a year. To close that gap and make sure that every student has a high-quality public school in their neighborhood, the Commission is recommending an increase of approximately \$4 billion statewide (\$2.8 billion in state funding and \$1.2 billion in county funding). That funding would go towards expanding career and technical education, hiring more educators and increasing their pay, providing additional support to struggling learners, and other best practices from top-performing states and countries.

How and why are schools so underfunded? The Thornton Commission developed a plan that in the early 2000s was considered a national model for equitable school funding—and it was remarkably successful. Following its implementation, Maryland schools placed first in Education Week's state rankings from 2009-2013, first in the College Board's Advanced Placement performance rankings from 2007-2016, and second in fourth-grade reading improvement and fourth in fourth-grade math improvement on NAEP from 2003 to 2013.

But just like every other state in the country, Maryland had to make some serious budget compromises in the aftermath of the Great Recession. While Maryland did better than most states in avoiding massive education cuts, the state froze, then capped, the amount of funding increases allowed for a number of years—which had a compounding effect in the Thornton Plan. Under Thornton, each year's increase, due to inflation and enrollment growth, is based on the previous year's allocation. The aggregate effect of this has ballooned the underfunding of our schools to billions of dollars annually.

What are some of the ideas recommended by the commission? Included in the recommendations are: expanded career and technical education; increased educator pay; 15,000 new educators; early intervention for struggling learners; increased special education funding; expanded pre-k; more mental health staffing; expanded community schools; equitable funding for all schools; and more accountability.

Taking maximum advantage of the student-centered recommendations of the three-year Kirwan Commission will open the door to more staffing for classrooms and services and more programs that make a difference for students in every community.