

As state increased school aid, grades went up

By Liz Bowie
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Five years after Maryland increased spending by \$2 billion to provide greater academic equity, students have made remarkable gains in reading and math, according to a report given to the Maryland General Assembly yesterday by an outside consultant.

For every additional \$1,000 spent per student, there was a significant increase in pass rates in both subjects. The improvement was twice as great for middle school students as for those in elementary grades.

The report by MGT of America also confirms what most educators have intuitively believed for decades: Money invested in teachers appears to pay off. About 80 percent of additional local and state funding has been spent on the teaching staff - raising salaries, hiring more to reduce class sizes and requiring a highly qualified teacher in every classroom.

"I think it is a validation of a leap of faith that the legislature and the governor took to continue to fund it," said state Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick, referring to The Bridge to Excellence Act. Passed in 2002, that law put into effect the recommendations of a state education funding commission chaired by Alvin Thornton.

Grasmick said the report points out the wisdom of the legislature's decision to pass the law, which required not just an 80 percent increase in the level of funding but targeted the money to provide the most help to special education and poor students and those learning English. Students in those categories did not make as much progress in learning math and reading as did the general population. The achievement gaps are still a matter of concern, she said.

The legislature mandated that school systems not reduce the amount of money they provided schools from county budgets while the state dollars increased. Local appropriations per pupil did not drop during the five-year period, but there is still little equality among the school systems in how much is spent per pupil. Montgomery County allots more per pupil than any other system, for example, and rural Caroline County contributes least.

There will never be equality in school funding, said Jerry Ciesla, a senior partner at MGT, because each local government will contribute more or less to its school system on top of what the state gives. But, he said, there is more equity since the Thornton law was passed. There is "fairness of state funding," he said. "Those that need it the most get the most."

State dollars account for, on average, about 44 percent of the school system budgets across the state.

The report's release came the same day Education Week ranked Maryland schools No. 1 in the nation, giving yesterday's press conference in Annapolis with Grasmick and [Gov. Martin O'Malley](#) a congratulatory air. Just one year after the governor said he wanted to get rid of the education secretary, the two appeared happy to share the announcement.

"They really deserve the No. 1 ranking," said Ciesla, whose company is doing 66 education studies in many states around the country. Educators in other states, Ciesla said, hold Maryland's schools in high regard. The combination of this positive report and the ranking will likely bring more attention to the state, he said. "I think Maryland is going to be bombarded by all the other states. . . . How did you do this?"

In the spring of 2002, Maryland became the first state in the nation to adopt a major reform of its school finance system to provide greater equity for all students without the pressure of a court order. The state, in part through an increase in the tax on cigarettes, began gradually increasing the amount of money given to local school systems for pre-kindergarten through 12th grade.

By the 2007-2008 school year, the state was spending \$2.03 billion more or \$2,438 per pupil on education. As part of the revamping, the General Assembly required a final report to detail how the money had been spent and whether it had made a difference. State education spending would continue at the current level, unless the legislature took action to change it. The report recommends that another study of the adequacy of state funding be conducted in 2012.

Part of the MGT analysis included a survey of 16,000 teachers in the state about their practices and their schools. The survey was an attempt to find out what practices worked best so that the information could be used to improve struggling schools. At high-performing schools, teachers collaborated on lesson plans, analyzed test data and believed their principal was a strong leader.

More of these best practices are being implemented in elementary and middle schools than in high schools. The report notes that the greater the number of qualified teachers in a school, the better students did and that the correlation was particularly true at schools with large numbers of economically disadvantaged students.

More money for schools

Since 2002, education spending in Maryland has risen in several categories:

- Funds from federal, state and local sources grew from \$6.9 billion to \$10.4 billion.
- Total state funds for local school systems increased from \$2.5 billion to \$4.6 billion.
- Total local funds rose from \$3.8 billion to \$5.1 billion.
- [**InsideEd: Thornton's results**](#)