



Tables 1 & 2. Top and bottom 25 school districts of over 10,000 students in per-pupil spending, 2002-03 school year.

The relationship, if any, between the amounts spent on public education and the results achieved, is responsible for a large number of public policy arguments. Opposing sides generate a lot of heat, but not much light. Generally speaking, people who spend the money want more of it to spend, and people who pay and collect the money don't want to give more, especially if they lack assurances that the money is being efficiently spent.

There is no "correct" amount of money to spend for each pupil in the public education system. So few standard economic principles are applied that it is a virtual impossibility to determine things like marginal costs and optimal pricing. If we accept as given that public education's financial structure will never be comparable to that of IBM or Delta Airlines, we still can't help but notice the vast differences in per-pupil spending from state to state, even from district to district within a state, occur without discernible economic justification.

Tables 1 and 2 list, respectively, the top 25 large school districts in per-pupil spending for the school year 2002-03, and the bottom 25 large school districts in per-pupil spending. The top spending large district in the entire United States -- Newark, New Jersey -- spent 4 times the amount spent by the lowest spending district in Nebo, Utah. Cost-of-living accounts for the fact that the high-spending districts are in the Northeast and the upper Midwest, while the low-spending districts are in the South and Mountain regions. But geography can't explain such large discrepancies. If Newark required \$17,652 per-pupil to get along, how could nearby Jersey City make it on a mere \$14,820? What's that extra \$2,600 per student buying?

Your child could get a good education in Yonkers, New York, for \$13,892, but could get one just as good - perhaps better - in Davis, Utah, for \$4,692. And you could find lousy test scores in Desoto County, Mississippi, but you could find even lousier test scores in Washington, DC - for more than twice the cost.

Per-pupil spending statistics are helpful, but when they stand alone they do little for our understanding of the costs of public education. Does Newark's high per-pupil spending signify a deeper commitment to education than that of the citizens of Nebo? Or conversely, is Nebo's fiscal management 4 times more efficient than Newark's? Both? Neither?

It may be easier to answer these questions if we take a small step away from the standard way of looking at school spending and approached it from a different angle.



**Table 1. Top 25 school districts of over 10,000 students in per-pupil spending, 2002-03 school year
(Derived from Table 17 C
Public Education Finances 2003,
US Census Bureau, March 2005)**

U.S. \$8,019		
1)	Newark, NJ	\$17,652
2)	Trenton, NJ	\$15,438
3)	Jersey City, NJ	\$14,820
4)	Paterson, NJ	\$14,514
5)	Camden, NJ	\$14,499
6)	Passaic, NJ	\$14,380
7)	East Orange, NJ	\$14,047
8)	Yonkers, NY	\$13,892
9)	New Rochelle, NY	\$13,803
10)	Boston, MA	\$13,730
11)	Arlington Heights, IL	\$13,643
12)	Union City, NJ	\$13,520
13)	Arlington, VA	\$13,334
14)	Washington, DC	\$13,328
15)	Hartford, CT	\$13,292
16)	Sachem, NY	\$13,226
17)	Newton, MA	\$13,177
18)	Palatine, IL	\$13,073
19)	Elizabeth, NJ	\$12,982
20)	Alexandria, VA	\$12,736
21)	New Haven, CT	\$12,724
22)	William Floyd, NY	\$12,433
23)	Mount Vernon, NY	\$12,351
24)	Brentwood, NY	\$12,332
25)	Rochester, NY	\$12,276

**Table 2. Bottom 25 school districts of over 10,000 students in per-pupil spending, 2002-03 school year
(Derived from Table 17 C
Public Education Finances 2003,
US Census Bureau, March 2005)**

U.S. \$8,019		
1)	Nebo, UT	\$4,339
2)	Tooele, UT	\$4,374
3)	Alpine, UT	\$4,413
4)	Desoto County, MS	\$4,444
5)	Jordan, UT	\$4,520
6)	Weber, UT	\$4,521
7)	Washington, UT	\$4,524
8)	Granite, UT	\$4,595
9)	Davis, UT	\$4,692
10)	Gilbert, AZ	\$4,698
11)	Box Elder, UT	\$4,728
12)	Glendale, AZ	\$4,886
13)	Cartwright, AZ	\$4,947
14)	Kyrene, AZ	\$4,950
15)	Alhambra, AZ	\$4,970
16)	Cache County, UT	\$4,973
17)	Marana, AZ	\$5,034
18)	Yuma, AZ	\$5,037
19)	Deer Valley, AZ	\$5,056
20)	Meridian, ID	\$5,066
21)	Peoria, AZ	\$5,093
22)	Amphitheater, AZ	\$5,132
23)	Union, OK	\$5,150
24)	Montgomery County, TN	\$5,170
25)	Victor Valley, CA	\$5,172