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For the first time, school report cards show spending per student. Here's why it varies.

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Wheeling High School counselor Brandi Rojas, left, talks with junior Liza Tkachuk during an exercise focusing on technology and social media in an Advancement Via Individual Placement, or AVID, program class. The program contributes significantly to the school's per-pupil cost of \$22,057.



Wheeling High School students work on a class project in their Advancement Via Individual Placement, or AVID, program class, which is among the reasons the school's per-pupil spending is high.



Wheeling High School freshman Samantha Lorusso works on a writing exercise with fellow students in her Advancement Via Individual Placement, or AVID, program class. The program contributes to Wheeling's high per-pupil cost.



Wheeling High School Advancement Via Individual Placement, or AVID, program teacher Bruce Varela listens to students as they work on a writing project in class.



Wheeling High School juniors, from left, Brian Aguirre-Lorenzo, Alex Ramos Perez, Maria Escanuela and Liza Tkachuk work on a list of ways people communicate during a technology exercise in their Advancement Via Individual Placement, or AVID, program class. It's among the costlier programs at the school.

School rivalries often are about which school has the best sports team, the brightest students and the most resources.

Now, for the first time, parents also can compare how much money individual schools spend to educate students in the [2019 Illinois Report Card](#).

The data released Wednesday highlight site-based per-pupil expenditures, as required by the federal [Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA](#), and the vast differences across the suburbs in how funding is allocated that could raise questions about fairness and equity.

For instance, why are early childhood centers the biggest spenders across the board? And how is it that [Wheeling High School](#), which has a significantly high low-income student population, spends more money per pupil than [Stevenson High School](#) in Lincolnshire, long considered among the wealthiest suburban districts? Wheeling spends \$22,057 per student, higher than Stevenson, which spends \$21,525.

Educators stress the numbers can't be taken at face value. It's not about equality but equity -- spending according to each student's needs.

The devil is in the details of what factors drive spending. Common reasons for spending differences are additional resources allocated for special programs and student populations, such as dual language programs and gifted and special needs students; school size; and districts' priority investments.

"These differences that we see in spending between schools, it's very difficult to tell simply from looking at the data set whether they are positives or negatives," said Sara Shaw, the Illinois State Board of Education's senior manager of fiscal and academic solvency.

The goal of providing this new data is to encourage questions and urge school districts to have those deeper conversations about equity, funding priorities, and why and how resources are allocated with their communities, Shaw said.

The state has been rolling out new report card data since making the switch to ESSA, a new statewide accountability and support system shifting the focus away from standardized test proficiency scores with the promise of more help for schools to improve.

For the first time in 2018, schools were designated as exemplary, commendable, underperforming or lowest-performing based on [10 performance measures](#). Other new features included: average student growth percentiles for English language arts and mathematics showing student improvement from the previous year compared to peers; how much districts received in new evidence-based funding; and the state funding gap to bring schools up to a level of adequacy.

In 2019, new information includes civil rights data, special student groups and the first year of performance results from the [Illinois Assessment of Readiness](#), which replaced the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers test.

Why early learners need more support

Categorically, schools spending the most per pupil are educating the youngest learners with varying levels of ability and special needs, data show. The reason for that is early intervention helps close achievement gaps in later grades, educators say.

While the average per-pupil cost at a typical suburban preschool is \$15,250 and median cost is \$13,814, the top five suburban early childhood schools are spending roughly \$30,000 or more. Average is derived from total spending for all schools divided by the number of schools; median reflects schools whose per-pupil cost is in the middle of that spectrum.

Among the big spenders is [Ann Reid Early Childhood Center](#) in Naperville Unit District 203, which spends \$36,633 per pupil and serves 411 students from 3 to 5 years old.

Its population largely comprises at-risk students -- 38% are special needs, 34% are English language learners, and 31% are from low-income families -- requiring speech and language services, occupational and physical therapy, psychological services and developmental screening, which collectively bump up the per-pupil cost.

"When we are able to offer those services early, we know that later that pays off for us," said Christine Igoe, District 203 assistant superintendent for student services. "For us, early childhood really is one of our key gap-closing strategies."

The preschool provides an inclusive environment in which students with and without special needs and English language learners learn together in classrooms capped at 20 students. Classroom teachers are licensed and certified in all areas, requiring higher salaries, officials said.

"That site requires a different level of resource and support to work with a lot of developmental disabilities, regulation issues, cognitive delays, working with parents on accessing community resources ... that level of involvement makes a big difference," said Patrick Nolten, District 203 assistant superintendent for assessment and accountability. "We are talking about a concentrated student population that really requires a high level of intensive work, expertise, background, knowledge and experience. You are paying for that through hiring people who are well-qualified."

How spending varies

Among 441 suburban elementary schools, per-student costs range from \$8,000 to \$31,000. The average per-pupil expense at the elementary level is \$14,545 for the suburbs -- the median per-pupil cost is \$13,986.

At [Elgin Area School District U-46](#), the state's second-largest district with 40 elementary schools, per-pupil spending ranges from \$9,426 at [Bartlett Elementary School](#) to \$13,568 at [Sunnydale Elementary School](#) in Streamwood, which educates a larger percentage of special needs students than the district average.

"Some of our sites require more specialized personnel to be able to support those programs," said Josh Carpenter, assistant superintendent for teaching and learning.

Other factors include: longevity, experience and professional qualifications of teachers at a school, which dictates salaries and benefits; unique transportation costs for special populations; and the size, usage and age of buildings, Carpenter said.

At 130 suburban middle schools, per-student costs range from \$7,400 to \$25,000, with schools spending \$14,377 per student on average, while the median cost is \$13,991.

Per-pupil spending at 72 suburban high schools ranges from \$10,500 to \$24,700. On average, high schools spend \$14,612 per student, while the median cost is \$13,905.

Wheeling really doesn't compare with Stevenson because 40% of its 1,730 students are low-income -- double the average for [Northwest Suburban High School District 214](#) -- and roughly 60% are considered at-risk, for which the school receives more federal Title I funding. English language learners comprise 16% of the school's population, and students with Individualized Education Programs make up 12%.

Adding to the per-pupil cost is the school's employment of three social workers, two psychologists and 3½ teachers devoted to AVID, or Advancement Via Individual Determination, a program aimed at closing achievement gaps among student groups.

"We are really spending more money for the social and emotional supports that our students need due to them coming from disadvantaged backgrounds," Principal Jerry

Cook said. "On the flip side of that, we are also spending a considerable amount of money for enrichment for those students."

The AVID program's enrollment has grown to 350 students, resulting in increased spending to train classroom teachers in its strategy and curriculum. Students in the program have a 100% graduation rate with a roughly 3.2 grade-point average and are four times more likely to graduate from college. Roughly 86% are accepted into a four-year university, Cook said.

"We're leveling the playing field for our students and giving them the supports and training to be successful in college and beyond," Cook said. "Those with greater needs require greater resources, and if we want to level the playing field, we really need to think about how we fund schools equitably."

**Report card per-pupil spending at a glance
Top per-pupil spenders are five early childhood education centers and one elementary school:**

1. Ann Reid in Naperville, \$36,633
2. Jefferson in Wheaton, \$34,969
3. Prairie Children Preschool in Aurora, \$34,274
4. Queen Bee in Glendale Heights, \$33,751
5. Rondout Elementary in Lake Forest, \$31,491
6. Geneva 304 Early Learning Program, \$30,875.

Per-pupil cost explained

- Ongoing educational expenses, such as staffing, supplies, transportation, security and administrative services, and a school's proportional share of other centralized district expenditures factor into a school's per-pupil expense. On the 2019 report card, that spending is broken down by federal, state and local funding sources.
- Excluded is money spent from a district's special funds, such as capital projects, debt service, working cash and fire prevention and safety, and spent on adult education, community services, and tuition payments to charter schools. For a list of exclusions, visit [isbe.net](https://www.isbe.net).

Source: Illinois State Board of Education