

GUIDE



LEADING THOUGHTFUL CONVERSATIONS ON RESOURCE EQUITY USING SCHOOL-BY-SCHOOL SPENDING DATA

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Leading Thoughtful Conversations on Resource Equity Using School-by-School Spending Data

The National Comprehensive Center

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A copy of this publication can be downloaded from <https://www.compcenternetwork.org/>.



Data Visualizations of School-by-School Spending Data

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act required the release of school-by-school spending per pupil starting in 2020. These data can inform questions like, “How equitably does our district distribute dollars across schools?” and “How do different schools compare in leveraging dollars for student outcomes and affect policy and management?” However, the published data alone is insufficient to foster meaningful conversations about financial strategy; the data must be in a format that is engaging, easily understood, and provides context and comparison points.

This resource is a product of a federally funded study to support both the U.S. Department of Education and the field more broadly to understand what data visualizations work to fuel thoughtful conversation among district and school leaders on financial strategy and management.

Looking at school-by-school spending data is new, and common reactions include:

1. Missing the overall patterns in district resource allocation, instead focusing on individual schools.
2. Ignoring the most substantial amounts of money—teachers and staff—and focusing on non-labor costs, federal money, or smaller program allocations.
3. Needing to be nudged to engage in conversations about leveraging dollars for student outcomes (rather than focusing on other factors, such as student demographics).
4. Reluctance to make peers feel uncomfortable by sharing the spending and outcomes visualizations (or be uncomfortable themselves)—but communications training helps.

With these initial reactions in mind, this resource guides leaders in using the data visualizations to foster thoughtful conversations with different stakeholder groups on topics of financial strategy and management, equity, and using resources to improve student outcomes.



This Resource Provides the Following

1. Talking Points for Interpreting the Data Displays: Explains the components of research-tested data visualizations of school-by-school spending.
2. How District Leaders Can Productively Communicate About the Data: Guides district leaders on how to communicate the data.
 - » Addresses how to avoid common pitfalls in conversations about school-by-school spending data.
 - » Provides communication tips to support district leaders in addressing tough-to-answer questions they may receive about their data while building trust.
3. Getting the Conversation Started: Provides a framework for using these data visualization to lead a conversation with various stakeholder groups about equity and using dollars to do the most for students.
 - » Page 7: School Leaders
 - » Page 8: Other District Leaders and School Board
 - » Page 10: Parents and Community Members

How to Use This Resource

The primary audience for this resource is district leaders and those supporting district leaders. Users can use the entire guide or each page as a standalone resource. Page 4 can be distributed to district stakeholders as a primer to any data visualization conversations, and district leaders can select the preparation sheet (pages 7-10) that best matches their intended audience.

Coming in fall 2022, there will be additional tools for users to download data visualizations, for any district. In the meantime, district leaders can reach out to Edunomics Lab at edunomics@georgetown.edu to receive their visualization or instructions for building their own visualizations.

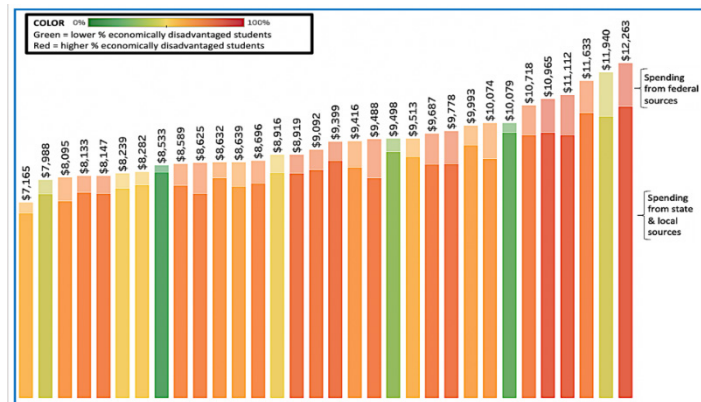


Talking Points for Interpreting the Data Displays and Getting the Conversation Started

The following pages serve as a guide for sharing your district's financial data displays and using them to prompt important conversations about resource equity, how resources are applied in schools, and what is and isn't working for students.

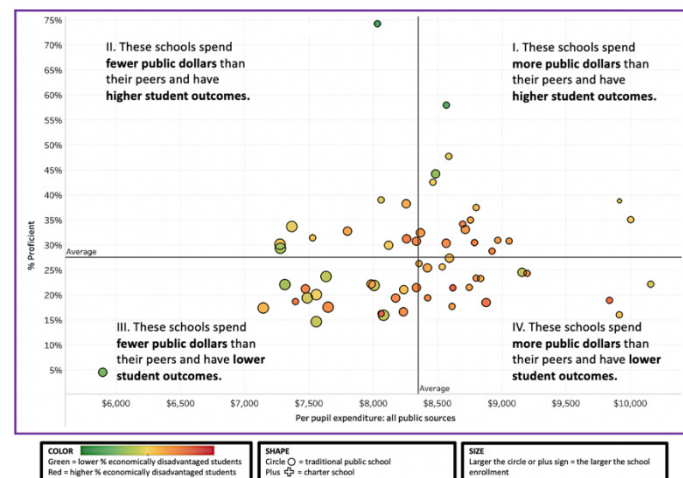
Spending by School

- » Shown here is actual spending data, per student, for each school for a particular school year including all public fund sources (local, state, federal).
- » The color of the bar reflects the percentage of students whose families are economically disadvantaged. The deeper the shade of red, the higher the percentage of disadvantaged students.
- » The darker section of each bar reflects state and local funds. The lighter section at the top reflects federal funds.



Spending vs. Outcomes by School

- » Shown here is actual spending data for each school and student outcomes (state test results) for the same school year.
- » A circle (•) represents a traditional public school, while a plus sign (+) represents a public charter school.
- » The color reflects the percentage of students whose families are economically disadvantaged.
- » The size reflects the size of the enrollment. The larger the circle or plus sign, the larger the enrollment.
- » The horizontal axis (on the bottom) shows how much was spent in each school, per student. Note at what value the axis starts (this is often > zero).



- » The vertical axis (on the left) shows student outcomes—the percentage of students who were proficient¹ on the state test. The proficiency is averaged across English language arts and mathematics in tested grades. There are many ways to measure the success of a school. Student outcomes on state tests are one measure that is available by law.
- » The **average lines** represent the average per pupil spending and average percent of students proficient for the schools displayed on the visualization.

¹ Please review notes for your state.



How District Leaders Can Productively Communicate About the Data

Four Common Communication Pitfalls to Avoid

<p>1 Focusing solely on what we don't know</p> <p>"We'd need to know what programs the school implemented." "Is there a problem with teacher hiring?" "How well did the school perform the year before?"</p>	<p>2 Focusing only on metrics, e.g. flaws/details</p> <p>"Test don't measure everything -- including mental well-being" and "Does this adjust for special education spending?"</p>
<p>3 Avoiding saying the obvious</p> <p>*Crickets* vs. "Our larger investments in this school aren't working for students."</p>	<p>4 Explanations that don't acknowledge that the district made spending choices</p> <p>"This school costs more per student because it's smaller" vs. "The district chose to subsidize smaller schools with one-per-school staffing"</p>

If or when this happens: What districts can say (and do).

<p>District leader: "Yikes I don't know how this happened or how to fix it."</p>	→	"Looking at the district's expenses from the school lens is new to us and reveals some noteworthy patterns. We're eager to engage with our principals/community/board to explore how to best deploy our limited funds to do the most for all the district's students."
<p>School Board Member: "Wow - teacher seniority seems to be driving up spending at some of our schools."</p>	→	"We use a salary scale based on experience, so we spend more on schools that attract senior teachers. That leaves fewer dollars for schools with junior teachers. We're eager to engage with our principals/teachers/community about options that might both retain our teachers and work better for all our students."
<p>Parent: "Why is this magnet school so expensive?"</p>	→	"The extra funds we've been applying to our special programs do leave fewer dollars for other schools. This is good time to explore whether there are ways to protect those programs without drawing funds from other schools and students."
<p>Parent: "Why is the district giving more money to higher-poverty schools?"</p>	→	"Our approach to equity means delivering more resources to students with higher needs. Going forward, we'll try to make that clear by clarifying allocations by student type."
<p>Principal: "If the school is so small, why is it so expensive per student?"</p>	→	"The district does deploy more dollars to its smaller (or under-enrolled) schools, leaving fewer dollars for all other schools. Given the limited district resources, it may be time to explore how we can construct a budget that better serves all our students where they are."

Access our [LEA Communications Pilot Communications Training Deck](#).

District Leaders Sharing the Data with School Leader(s)

Before the meeting:

- » **Preparation:** Review your data displays, consider what questions or concerns principals may raise, and review communications training tools.

During the meeting:

- » **Share background:** The data reflects the dollars spent, per student, on schools in our district (state the school year/timeframe) as well as student outcomes on the state test. The data do not tell the whole story on what is happening in each school or community but are a useful tool to inform our resource allocation practices and planning to improve schooling in our community.
- » **Setting stage:** Share your goals for bringing this data to this meeting/presentation. What do you hope to learn or gain from the conversation?
- » **Interpreting the data:** Share the data, walking participants through the elements of the visualizations to support participants in interpreting the data accurately. [Pause and give time for participants to look at the data.]

When sharing the spending vs. student outcomes display, acknowledge there are many ways to measure the success of a school. Student outcomes on state tests are one measure that is available by law and are what is used here.

Starting the Discussion

Spending by School

- » What, if anything, surprises you? [Check for understanding, clarify as needed.]
- » How does your school's spending compare to others in the district and to similar schools in the district?
- » Does the spending seem fair?
- » What, if anything, can you learn about how the district allocates resources to schools?

Spending vs. Outcomes

- » What, if anything, surprises you? [Check for understanding, clarify as needed.]
- » Do you know which (circle or plus sign) is your school? [if showing unlabeled scatterplot]
- » How do your school's outcomes compare to similar schools?
- » How can you use this information? What would you say to your teachers/parents?



Follow up Questions

- » How could this information be used to make decisions about how the district distributes money to its schools?
- » How, if at all, could this information help district and school leaders improve student outcomes?

District Leaders Sharing the Data with Other District Leaders and School Board

Depending on the data and district's strategic goals, the district may want to rethink its allocation strategy, or the data might spark discussion about resource types and how well they are used. District leaders can discuss resource equity, how resources are applied in schools, the role of teacher experience and salary, and what is and isn't working for students.

- » **Preparation:** Review your data displays, consider what questions or concerns your district colleagues or school board members may raise, and review communications training tools.
- » **Share background:** The data reflects the dollars spent, per student, on schools in our district (state the school year/timeframe) as well as student outcomes on the state test. The data do not tell the whole story on what is happening in each school or community but are a useful tool to inform our resource allocation practices and planning to improve schooling in our community.
- » **Setting stage:** Share your goals for bringing this data to this meeting/presentation. What do you hope to learn or gain from the conversation?
- » **Interpreting the data:** Share the data, walking participants through the elements of the visualizations to support participants in interpreting the data accurately. [Pause and give time for participants to look at the data.]

When sharing the spending vs. student outcomes display, acknowledge there are many ways to measure the success of a school. Student outcomes on state tests are one measure that is available by law and are what is used here.

Starting the Discussion

Spending by School

- » What, if anything, surprises you? [Check for understanding, clarify as needed.]
- » Does the spending seem fair? Does it seem aligned with the district's intentions and goals?
- » What, if anything, does this information tell you about how the district allocates resources to schools?
 - › How does school level (grade span) matter? What about school size?
 - › Does the district spend fairly across regions or school types?



- › Are uneven teacher salaries a concerning factor?
- › Do you think principals, teachers, or parents in our district would be surprised by this?

Spending vs. Outcomes

- » What, if anything, surprises you? [Check for understanding, clarify as needed.]
- » Does this information give you any ideas about how to manage our schools? [Are any schools “beating the odds” with the money they have? Are there any promising spending practices across types of schools?]
- » To what extent, if at all, could this information be used to make or change decisions about how money gets allocated to schools in our district?



District Leaders Sharing the Data with Parents and Community Members

Before the meeting:

- » **Preparation:** Review your data displays, consider what questions or concerns parents or community advocates may raise, and review communications training tools.

During the meeting:

- » **Share background:** The data reflects the dollars that were spent, per student, on schools in our district (2018-19) as well as student outcomes on the state test. The data do not tell the whole story on what is happening in each school or community but are a useful tool to inform our resource allocation practices and planning to improve schooling in our community.
- » **Setting stage:** Share your goals for bringing this data to this meeting/presentation. What do you hope to learn or gain from the conversation?
- » **Interpreting the data:** Share the data, walking participants through the elements of the visualizations to support participants in interpreting the data accurately. [Pause and give time for participants to look at the data.]

When sharing the spending vs. student outcomes display, acknowledge there are many ways to measure the success of a school. Student outcomes on state tests are one measure that is available by law and are what is used here.

Starting the Discussion

Spending by School

- » Check for understanding, clarify as needed.
- » What, if anything, surprises you?

Spending vs. Outcomes

- » What do you first notice? [Check for understanding, clarify as needed.]
- » What, if anything, surprises you?
- » What, if anything, would you want to ask the principal of a school in Quadrant I? Quadrant II? Quadrant III? Quadrant IV?

Follow up Questions

- » What questions do you have after seeing these data?
- » How could this information be used to make decisions about how the district distributes money to its schools?
- » How, if at all, could this information help district and school leaders improve student outcomes?

