

## **Abbott School Districts Among the Top Spenders**

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By Ford Fessenden

NEW JERSEY'S Abbott districts, the urban school systems that sued the state 26 years ago to gain equal footing with affluent districts, are now among the highest-spending school districts in the country, according to newly released data from the United States Census Bureau.

The districts spent more money per student than most rich districts in New Jersey in 2004-5, the census data show. Among the 30 kindergarten-to-12th-grade districts of 500 or more students that spent the most, 22 were Abbotts, including the top three -- Asbury Park, Hoboken and Newark. There are 31 Abbott districts.

Asbury Park spent \$23,572 per student, according to the census, while the highest-ranking non-Abbott district, Wildwood City, spent \$19,912. The state average was \$13,613, and the national average was \$8,315.

The census survey, the most recent national data available, demonstrates anew the high costs of public education in the region: Among the kindergarten-to-12th-grade districts with at least 500 students nationwide, 89 of the 100 top-spending districts per student are in the region, including 67 in the New York City suburbs and 14 in New Jersey.

But the survey also shows how New Jersey, after years of litigation, is approaching an ideal: Enough money in poor schools to provide not only the same basic educational program as the highest-achieving districts, but also programs to redress the special problems of poverty.

"There's no question that New Jersey, because of Abbott, has gone farther than any other state in ensuring equitable resources for children in high poverty and high minority districts," said David G. Sciarra, executive director of the Education Law Center, which filed the lawsuit known as *Abbott v. Burke* in 1981 on behalf of urban children. "If need is driving the decisions, and it should be, then the higher-poverty districts should be spending the most money."

Abbott schools received \$3.5 billion in state aid in the 10 years after a 1996 court ruling, and whether the Abbotts have been spending the money well has become an issue as the dollars have mounted. Audits of four Abbott districts released in February showed numerous spending excesses, and more audits will be released this summer.

A legislative committee is considering a new formula for state education aid that could substantially alter the court-imposed method.

"It is clear that the Abbott funding system hasn't worked -- we are spending some of the largest sums of money in the country in those schools, but we are not seeing the full effect of it," said State Representative Bill Baroni, a Republican from Hamilton in Mercer County. "In some districts we have seen real academic success, and in others we haven't."

Gov. Jon S. Corzine and the Legislature have also indicated a desire to slow spending growth in Abbott districts. This year, in legislation sending districts millions of new dollars in state education aid, the Abbott districts received only small increases.

But it is clear that New Jersey, under pressure after a series of rulings from the State Supreme Court dating back two decades, has moved a long way toward ameliorating the vast differences in wealth between cities and suburbs that result in unequal education spending in most states. The court ruled in 1990 that the state must give the Abbotts enough aid that they can spend the same per student on basic education programs as the richest districts. The districts largely achieved that parity by 1997, Mr. Sciarra said.

The court also ruled that the districts must receive additional money for remediating the needs of poor students, with programs like early childhood schooling. Those funds, which the state began to allocate in 2000, have taken the Abbott districts from parity with wealthy ones to their position now as the highest-spending districts.

"The state has, since 1990, shifted from a regressive (lower spending in higher poverty districts) to a flat system in the later 1990s, to a progressive one by 2005," Bruce D. Baker, an associate professor at the University of Kansas who has reviewed the census data, wrote in an e-mail message.

Courts in many states, including New York and Connecticut, have ordered legislatures to spend more in poor districts, but the New Jersey court has held that the standard for judging the amount spent is a very high one.

"The Abbott decision is unique in the country in that the decision calls for parity with the wealthiest districts in the state," said Lynne Strickland, executive director of the Garden State Coalition of Schools, which represents about 150 districts. "The court also said they are entitled to particularized-needs cost over and above that level, and the result is that some Abbott districts are spending \$2,500 more per student than wealthy suburban districts."

The census figures, which come from a yearly survey of local government finances, differ from state figures released in February. They include some spending that state calculations of per-pupil spending may not, like revenue from the federal government and transportation costs. The numbers do not include capital spending.

Census officials say the numbers are comparable across state lines.