



Arizona State Senate Issue Brief

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ARIZONA'S SCHOOL FINANCE SYSTEM

CURRENT SCHOOL FINANCE SYSTEM

Prior to 1980, Arizona's school finance system required school districts to rely heavily on local property tax revenues while receiving very little monetary support from state funds. This resulted in funding disparities among school districts, whereby school districts with high-property values could raise significant revenue with relatively low tax rates, while school districts with low-property values and higher tax rates could not generate the same amount of revenue. In the late 1970s, as a result of court cases in which similar systems in other states were found unconstitutional, Arizona began reforming its school finance system to address the potential unconstitutionality of its system and reestablish a "general and uniform" public school system.¹

The current K-12 school finance system is based on a statutory formula enacted in 1980² and substantially modified in 1985. The established formula aims to "equalize" per-pupil spending among school districts, taking into account student enrollment and property values. Under the current school finance formula, school districts receive approximately the same amount of funding per pupil. Spending is also capped, preventing high-property value school districts from generating local revenues in excess of the funding formula and creating inequities. Some school districts with a very strong local property tax base are able to generate their entire formula funding entitlement. However, most school districts require revenues in the form of Basic State Aid in order to receive full funding under the statutory formula. The school finance formula for school districts is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Equalization Base} - \text{Qualifying Tax Rate} &= \text{Equalization Assistance} \\ \text{Equalization Assistance} - \text{State Equalization Tax Rate} &= \text{Basic State Aid} \end{aligned}$$

¹ Article 11, Section 1 of the Arizona Constitution requires the legislature to establish a "general and uniform" public school system.

² Laws 1980, 2nd S.S., Ch. 9

EQUALIZATION BASE FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

The equalization base, or a school district's spending limit, is the sum of the following three elements: 1) Base Support Level (BSL); 2) Transportation Support Level (TSL); and 3) District Additional Assistance (DAA). The sum of the BSL and TSL are generally referred to as the Revenue Control Limit (RCL).

$$\text{Equalization Base} = \text{BSL} + \text{TSL} + \text{DAA}$$

Base Support Level – The BSL is the product of a school district's total Weighted Student Count (WSC) multiplied by the Base Level Amount (BLA) multiplied by the Teacher Experience Index (TEI).³

A school district's WSC is determined by applying different weights based on student enrollment. First, a school district's student count is weighted based on the size and location of the school district. Small and isolated school districts receive an added weight to account for economies of scale. Larger and non-isolated school districts do not receive a weight but are not penalized. Second, school districts receive weights that are applied to a school district's student count based on varying factors. "Group A" weights are applied based on the number of students taught in certain grade levels. "Group B" weights are applied using specific student characteristics and needs such as special education, English language learners and severe developmental disabilities. The WSC is then multiplied by the BLA, which is a statutorily set per pupil amount that has historically been adjusted for inflation.⁴ For most school districts, the BLA is also increased by 1.25 percent for "teacher compensation".⁵

³ A.R.S. § 15-943

⁴ In 2000, Proposition 301 authorized a 6/10th of a percent increase in sales tax to fund education programs. Proposition 301 included an inflation provision in the school finance formula that was challenged in *Cave Creek v. DeWit* and settled with the passage of Proposition 123 (see below) in 2016.

⁵ A.R.S. §15-952 allows districts to get approval from the State Board of Education. This increase applies to most districts.

Finally, the product generated from the previous steps is multiplied by the TEI. The TEI allocates more money to a school district whose combined years of teacher experience exceed the statewide teacher experience calculation. The TEI increases a school district's BSL by 2.25 percent for each year that the district's average teacher experience exceeds the state average. The intention of including the TEI in the formula was to account for teacher pay scales that increased with years of service.

$$\text{BSL} = \text{WSC} \times \text{BLA} \times 1.0125 \times \text{TEI}$$

FY 2018-2019 Base Level Amount = \$3,960.07

Transportation Support Level – The main funding component of the TSL is computed for the transportation of students to and from school by multiplying a statutorily set amount, adjusted annually for inflation, by a school district's approved daily route mileage per eligible student plus an amount spent for bus tokens and passes.⁶ There is an additional component of the TSL formula for academic education, career and technical education and athletic trips; however, the amounts generated by this portion of the formula are lower than the formula that generates funds to transport students to and from school.

The TSL differs from the Transportation Revenue Control Limit, a voluntary program, which allows school districts to assess an additional property tax levy to generate additional revenue for transportation costs above the TSL amount.

TSL = \$ Amount x Route Miles + Tokens/Passes

FY 2018-2019 TSL per Route Mile

<i>Approved Daily Route Mileage per Pupil</i>	<i>Dollar Amount</i>
0.5 or less	2.64
Between 0.5-1.0	2.16
More than 1.0	2.64

⁶ A.R.S. § 15-945

District Additional Assistance – In 2013, the Capital Outlay Revenue Control Limit and the Soft Capital Allocation funding formulas for school districts were consolidated into one funding formula. DAA is calculated by multiplying a statutorily set amount by a school district's unweighted student count for the particular grade ranges.⁷ The formula has six different per pupil amounts based on the number of pupils and grade levels taught. Smaller school districts and grades 9-12 have a heavier weight than large school districts and grades K-8. Although these monies are considered capital in nature, school districts have the ability to move funds generated through DAA into their maintenance and operations account. The DAA formula has not been fully funded since 2010. The FY 2019 budget includes \$100,000,000 from the state General Fund to restore both DAA and Charter Additional Assistance by reducing the DAA suspension to \$257,469,900 in FY 2019 and phasing out the remaining suspensions completely by FY 2023. School districts with a student count of fewer than 1,100 are exempt from DAA reductions.

QUALIFYING TAX RATE

The qualifying tax rate (QTR) is a statutory primary property tax rate used to determine the amount of revenue that will be generated from local taxpayers in support of the Basic State Aid formula.⁸ Proposition 301 set the maximum QTR that can be applied at \$2.1265 for elementary and high school districts and \$4.253 for unified school districts. The school district is not under any obligation to levy the QTR or any other tax rate in order to receive state aid; however, the QTR is presumed to be the local effort of the school district for the purposes of calculating the amount of state aid that a district will receive.

The QTR is subject to Truth in Taxation (TNT) laws. The Joint Legislative Budget Committee is required by February 15 of each

year to report TNT rates, which are then used to adjust the QTR annually. The effect of TNT is to offset the statewide appreciation of existing property with a commensurate reduction in the QTR, ensuring that tax liability for existing properties remain unchanged despite increased property valuation.

The actual overall primary property tax rate for a school district may be lower than the QTR, or higher if the district is allowed to budget for items outside of the school finance formula, which include: 1) Desegregation;⁹ 2) Adjacent Ways;¹⁰ 3) Small School Adjustment;¹¹ and 4) Liabilities in Excess.¹² The FY 2019 QTR is set at \$1.9679 for non-unified school districts and \$3.9358 for unified school districts.

In addition to the QTR, a state equalization tax rate (SETR) is assessed on property owners to collect revenues to also (along with the QTR) offset state costs. The SETR is determined through the TNT process and is assessed in each county. The FY 2019 SETR is set at \$0.4741.

Counties are required to levy a primary property tax rate that is 50 percent of the QTR for property that is located outside of school district boundaries. These monies are collected by the counties and deposited into the state General Fund.¹³

Each county is also required to levy an additional primary property tax in school districts that are ineligible for state equalization assistance ("non-state aid districts"). This additional tax rate, sometimes referred to as the minimum qualifying tax rate (MQTR), is determined based on the difference between the levy that would be produced by 50 percent of a non-state aid district's applicable QTR and its equalization base. If the levy produced by 50 percent of the district's applicable QTR is equal to or less than its equalization base, the MQTR will not be

⁷ A.R.S. § 15-961

⁸ A.R.S. § 41-1276

⁹ A.R.S. § 15-910

¹⁰ A.R.S. § 15-995

¹¹ A.R.S. § 15-949

¹² A.R.S. § 15-907

¹³ A.R.S. § 15-991.01

levied in the non-state aid district. Otherwise, the MQTR will be levied at a rate such that the additional tax generates an amount equal to the difference between 50 percent of the non-state aid district's QTR and its equalization base. The revenue generated from the MQTR is deposited into the state General Fund.

BASIC STATE AID

After a school district's equalization base is determined, the net assessed property value of the school district is multiplied by the QTR in order to determine the portion of its funding that is assumed to come from local QTR tax revenue. If the amount generated by the QTR exceeds the school district's equalization base, the school district is not entitled to equalization assistance and will be completely funded by the revenues generated by the QTR. If, however, the QTR revenues are not sufficient to cover the equalization base then the school district is eligible for equalization assistance.

Equalization assistance occurs in two ways: 1) revenues generated from the SETR; and 2) Basic State Aid. First, a school district that is eligible for equalization assistance will receive funds generated from the SETR in that particular county. The county school superintendent, in conjunction with the county treasurer, is responsible for administering this form of equalization assistance. If a school district still has a remaining equalization assistance entitlement generated from the formula, the district will receive funds in the form of Basic State Aid. Basic State Aid is funded through the state General Fund.

QTR > Eq. Base = No Eq. Assistance
Eq. Base > QTR = Eq. Assistance
Eq. Assistance > SETR = Basic State Aid

CHARTER SCHOOLS

State aid is also provided to charter schools, which are public schools that do not have geographic boundaries, operate under terms specified in a "charter" and do not have taxing authority.¹⁶ Formula costs for charter schools are completely funded by state aid from the state General Fund and do not have any other revenue sources from local taxpayers. Because the funding formula for charter schools is completely funded with state aid, there is no equalization that takes place between local property tax contributions and state aid. Instead, the charter school funding formula consists of two components: 1) BSL; and 2) Charter Additional Assistance (CAA). The BSL for charter schools is determined under the same computational formula prescribed for traditional school districts, although charter schools are not eligible for TEI increases or a 1.25 percent increase for "teacher compensation."

Charter School Funding = BSL + CAA

CAA funding amounts are established in statute and are roughly comparable to a traditional school district's DAA funding. CAA amounts are larger than DAA amounts, at least in part, due to charter schools being ineligible for the TSL and do not have access to other sources of revenue from a taxing jurisdiction (i.e. bonds and overrides).

CAA = unweighted count x per pupil amount

FY 2019 CAA per Pupil	
Grades K-8	\$1,807.00
Grades 9-12	\$2,106.03

ENDOWMENT EARNINGS

The Permanent State School Fund¹⁷ acts as an endowment account for all proceeds from state

¹⁴ A.R.S. § 15- 992

¹⁵ A.R.S. § 15- 971

¹⁶ A.R.S. § 15-185

¹⁷ A.R.S. § 37-521

trust lands whose beneficiaries have been designated as “common schools.” When designated state trust lands are sold, the sale proceeds are deposited into the Permanent State School Fund by the State Land Department and are invested by the State Treasurer. The monies deposited into the Permanent State School Fund from the sale of state trust lands are not considered expendable.

However expendable endowment earnings on state trust lands held in benefit of “common schools” are used to offset state General Fund costs of Basic State Aid. These earnings include: 1) Permanent State School Fund investment earnings; and 2) proceeds from the lease of state trust lands and interest paid by buyers who purchase state trust land on an installment basis.

Proposition 301 limited the amount of expendable endowment earnings available to the state at the FY 2001 level of \$72.3 million and dedicated any growth above that level to the Classroom Site Fund (CSF),¹⁸ established in conjunction with Proposition 301.

PROPOSITION 123

In 2010, several school districts filed a lawsuit alleging the state did not adequately fund for inflation in FY 2010 through FY 2013 as required by Proposition 301.¹⁹ After several rulings and appeals the Maricopa County Superior Court found in 2014 that the state should reset the base level to what it would have been if inflation had been fully funded. The state appealed the decision and the Court of Appeals asked the parties to enter mediation to reach a negotiated settlement. In the fall of 2015, the parties agreed on a settlement and legislation was passed in a special session. In May 2016, voters approved Proposition 123.

Proposition 123 increases the distribution from the State Land Trust from 2.5 percent to 6.9

percent through FY 2025 and allocates the increased revenues to Basic State Aid rather than the Classroom Site Fund. Additionally, Proposition 123 appropriates \$50 million annually from FY 2016 through FY 2020 and \$75 million annually from FY 2021 through FY 2025. Together, K-12 state aid is projected to increase by \$3.5 billion in the 10-year period through FY 2025.

In addition to increased state aid, Proposition 123 allows for reductions in state aid under certain economic conditions. These potential reductions are referred to as “triggers.”²⁰

ADDITIONAL STATE AID

The state provides Additional State Aid to school districts through an automatic homeowner’s rebate.²¹ The homeowner’s rebate requires the state to pay a portion of each homeowner’s school district primary property taxes, up to a maximum of \$600 per parcel. The homeowner’s rebate percentage can vary from year to year. For FY 2019, it is estimated to be approximately 47.19 percent.

Article IX, Section 18 of the Arizona Constitution caps primary property tax rates at no more than 1 percent of a home’s full cash value. The “1% cap” applies any time a homeowner’s net combined primary property tax rate for all taxing jurisdictions exceeds \$10 per \$100 of net assessed value, even after the homeowner’s rebate is applied. The Arizona Constitution does not specify a mechanism for enforcing the “1% cap.” Historically, the cap has been implemented by having the state General Fund backfill any primary property tax costs for homeowners that exceed the cap through the Additional State Aid program.

Beginning in FY 2016, Laws 2015, Chapter 15, limited the amount of Additional State Aid provided to school districts in excess of the cap

¹⁸ A.R.S. § 15-977

¹⁹ Cave Creek Unified School District v. DeWit, 233 Ariz. 1, (2013).

²⁰ For more information see “Ballot Proposition 123: Fiscal Impact Summary”

²¹ A.R.S. § 15-972

was limited to \$1 million per county. The Property Tax Oversight Committee (PTOC) is charged with evaluating each county with school districts who require more than the state-funded \$1 million limit to determine the proportion attributable to each taxing jurisdiction located within the affected school district. The PTOC determines the amount that each taxing jurisdiction is required to transfer to compensate the district for the pro rata share of the reduction in Additional State Aid.

The PTOC determined Pima County was liable for \$15.8 million, most of which was due to the Tucson Unified School District. Pima County sued the state and the PTOC arguing Laws 2015, Chapter 15, was an unconstitutional delegation of taxing authority to the PTOC as the power. In May 2016, the Maricopa County Superior Court issued a preliminary ruling in favor of Pima County.²²

RESULTS-BASED FUNDING

Laws 2017, Chapter 304 established the Results-Based Funding Fund that provides extra per-pupil funding to schools in FY 2018 as follows:

- \$225 per student count is distributed to schools that: 1) have fewer than 60 percent of pupils eligible for free or reduced-price lunches; and 2) performed in the top 10 percent of all schools statewide in the language arts and math portions of the statewide assessment during the Spring of 2016;
- \$400 per student count is distributed to schools that: 1) have 60 percent or more pupils eligible for free or reduced-price lunches; and 2) performed in the top 10 percent of all schools statewide where 60 percent or more pupils are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches in the language arts and math portions of the statewide assessment during the Spring of 2016.

- \$400 per student count to alternative high schools that are subject to a specialized rating system and that were assigned the equivalent to an A letter grade in 2014.

For FY 2019, the Results-Based Funding will be distributed in the same manner as FY 2018, based on Spring 2017 statewide assessment results. Going forward, the funds will be distributed to schools that are assigned an A letter grade based on the A-F accountability system, rather than based on students' assessment scores.²³

OTHER STATE AID PROGRAMS

Other state aid programs include: 1) Assistance to School Districts for Children of State Employees²⁴ (ASDCSE); 2) Certificates of Educational Convenience²⁵ (CEC); and 3) Special Education Fund.²⁶

The ASDCSE program supplements Basic State Aid for school districts that educate pupils whose parents are employed and domiciled at certain state institutions located within the school district's boundaries, such as correctional facilities. CECs allow students to attend school in a school district other than the one they live in if they are placed there by an authorized state or federal agency. CECs also apply to students who reside in unorganized areas. Finally, the Special Education Fund provides funding for special education costs of students at: 1) the Arizona Schools for the Deaf and the Blind; 2) the Arizona State Hospital; 3) developmentally disabled programs administered by the Department of Economic Security; and 4) private residential facilities when a student is placed there by a state agency.

²² *Pima County v. State of Arizona* (2016)

²³ A.R.S. § 15-249.08

²⁴ A.R.S. § 15-976

²⁵ A.R.S. § 15-825

²⁶ A.R.S. § 15-1182

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- “An Explanation of Arizona Property Taxes (2013 Edition)”, Arizona Tax Research Association, 2013
http://www.arizonatax.org/sites/default/files/publications/books_pamphlets/file/exp_property_tax_book_atra_2013pdf.pdf
- “Arizona School Finance,” Justin Olson, December 2009
http://www.arizonatax.org/sites/default/files/publications/books_pamphlets/file/ATRA-Arizona_School_Finance.pdf
- “Ballot Proposition 123: Fiscal Impact Summary,” Joint Legislative Budget Committee
<http://www.azleg.gov/jlbc/16tnratesltr.pdf>
- “Estimated Classroom Site Fund Per Pupil Amount for FY 2016,” prepared by the Joint Legislative Budget Committee, March 2015
<http://www.azleg.gov/jlbc/CSF-FY2016-033015.pdf>
- “Fiscal Year 2016 Appropriations Report: Department of Education,” prepared by the Joint Legislative Budget Committee, June 2014
<http://www.azleg.gov/jlbc/16AR/ade.pdf>
- “FY 2016 Baseline: Department of Education,” prepared by the Joint Legislative Budget Committee, January 2015
<http://www.azleg.gov/jlbc/16baseline/ade.pdf>
- “FY 2016 Truth in Taxation Notice,” Joint Legislative Budget Committee
<http://www.azleg.gov/jlbc/16tnratesltr.pdf>
- “K-12 Inflation Funding Lawsuit Update,” prepared by the Joint Legislative Budget Committee, July 2014
<http://www.azleg.gov/jlbc/K-12InflationFundingLawsuitUpdateR.pdf>
- Laws 2000, Fifth Special Session, Chapter 1 (Proposition 301)
<https://apps.azleg.gov/BillStatus/GetDocumentPdf/64679>
- Pima County v. State of Arizona (2016)
https://webcms.pima.gov/UserFiles/Servers/Server_6/File/Government/Administration/CHHmemosFor%20Web/July%202016/Final%20Judgment%20Pima%20County%20versus%20State%20of%20Arizona.pdf
- “Proposition 301 Publicity Pamphlet for November 7, 2000 General Election,” prepared by the Arizona Secretary of State
<http://apps.azsos.gov/election/2000/Info/pubpamphlet/english/prop301.pdf>
- “2014 Tax Handbook,” prepared by the Joint Legislative Budget Committee, September 2014
<http://www.azleg.gov/jlbc/14taxbook/14taxbk.pdf>