

Schenectady school district is getting poorer

Wealth ratio slides 7.5 percent over 5 years

By [Zachary Matson](#) January 21, 2016



Larry Spring, superintendent of the Schenectady City School District, speaks to the The Daily Gazette editorial board in 2014.

Schenectady City School District — one of the poorest in the state — continues to get even poorer compared to the rest of New York, according to a school district wealth measurement.

The district's combined wealth ratio, CWR, has slid 7.5 percent over the past five years, including a drop of nearly 3.8 percent from last year. Kimberly Lewis, the district's finance director, on Wednesday told school board members she expected the district's combined wealth ratio to be .357 for the coming budget cycle, the lowest level since 2011.

Yes, the district is getting poorer, Lewis and Superintendent Larry Spring told the board Wednesday. At least compared to the rest of the state.

Since the wealth ratio is relative to state averages, a district with a score of 1 is considered at the state average and districts above or below are increasingly wealthy or poor as they get higher and lower. Schenectady's wealth ratio last year — .37 — placed it among the state's 20 poorest districts.

The wealth ratio — a calculation of a district's property valuations and income levels relative to state averages — is used in determining annual state funding for districts, but those funding levels still fall well short of levels envisioned under a state school funding formula approved in 2007.

Rather than using the 2007 Foundation Aid Formula to dole out state funding, state aid levels are set by political negotiations each year between the governor and the Legislature in an attempt to balance district demands across the state.

"The [combined wealth ratio] generates what their Foundation Aid should be, but those numbers are not being implemented in their entirety," said Michael Borges, executive director of the State Association of School Business Officials. "That is why they are being shortchanged; that's why they are still owed."

Borges said Schenectady schools are owed nearly \$60 million under funding levels spelled out in the Foundation Aid Formula. Statewide districts remain more than \$4 billion short of funding levels called for under that funding formula.

Districts' CWR levels, and a myriad of other factors, are used to categorize districts for different levels of funding appropriations during annual budget cycles, but those uses vary from year to year.

In the 2013-2014 school year, Schenectady's CWR clocked in at .384. That same year, Saratoga Springs had a CWR of 1.28, and Schalmont and Niskayuna schools also came in above the state average.

But rural districts often find themselves well below the state wealth average. In 2013, all five Montgomery County school districts — Amsterdam, Fonda-Fultonville, Canajoharie, Fort Plain and Oppenheim-St. Johnsville — recorded CWRs less than .56.

Spring has been an outspoken critic of state education funding for poor districts like Schenectady. He has filed a civil rights complaint with the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice, arguing New York education funding had a discriminatory effect on

minority students. And he said the governor's budget proposal this year didn't convince him otherwise.

"It continues to reinforce the message for me that the governor's agenda is not one of equity," he said soon after Gov. Andrew Cuomo released his budget proposal last week. "The governor wants to make sure that people who have wealth and power and influence that they get theirs first."

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