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Statement by the Education Trust – West on California's Rankings in a Nationwide Study of Funding Gaps in America's Public Schools

Today, the Education Trust in Washington, DC released its annual study on nationwide funding gaps between high and low poverty and minority school districts throughout the country. The report, "*The Funding Gap 2005: Low-Income and Minority Students Shortchanged By Most States*" shows that on average, America's public schools spend about $900 less per pupil on students educated in the poorest school districts than those educated in the wealthiest. These numbers actually understate the problem because they don't take into account the extra costs of educating children in poverty. The Education Trust conducted further analyses using a widely accepted adjustment for the additional costs associated with educating low-income students, and the gaps are even bigger: about $1,400 per pupil, per year.

The report analyzed 2003 U.S. Census and Department of Education data and found wide variances among states on dollars spent on education. Some states like Illinois and New York spend far less in their highest-poverty districts – more than $2,500 less per pupil – than they spend in their wealthiest districts when the additional costs of educating low-income students are taken into account. Other states like Massachusetts and New Jersey spend hundreds of dollars more on their poor and minority students.

How does California compare?
California ranks near the middle of the pack when it comes to the size of our funding gaps between our highest and lowest poverty districts – 31st out of 49 states.

Though smaller than some states, California's funding gaps between districts are significant and have a large cumulative impact. In combined state and local funding, California spends $534 cost-adjusted dollars less per student in its high poverty districts than in its districts with the fewest number of low-income students. But even relatively small per-student differences really add up.

Consider, for example, the average comrehensive California high school serving 1,800 students. This means that with a $534 funding gap, a low-income high school gets $961,200 less every year than its counterpart serving higher-income students.

California's funding gap between its high- and low-minority districts is even greater: $684 cost-adjusted dollars per student, or $1,231,200 fewer dollars every year for the average high-minority high school.

"California stands out, not because its gaps are bigger than the national average, but because it's plain shameful that as the 6th largest economy in the world, and thirty years after the *Serrano* court decision declared that our finance system was unconstitutional and should be equalized, we still have any gaps at all," said Russlynn Ali, director of the Education Trust – West, the West Coast partner of the Education Trust.

Wide variances and staggering gaps.

As with student achievement data, looking at averages alone when analyzing school finance numbers can mask big inequities. A closer look at funding gaps between districts throughout our state illustrates just how significant per pupil disparities can be. Consider the cost-adjusted dollars spent per pupil in Taft Union High School District in Kern County and Strathmore Union High School District in Tulare County. Taft Union , where 22 percent of students are low-income and 26 percent are minority, spends $19,026 per pupil in state and local funds, while Strathmore Union, where 32 percent of students are low-income, and a full 79 percent are minority, spends only $9,306 per pupil.

Or take a look at West Fresno Elementary School District in Fresno County compared to Woodside Elementary School District in San Mateo County. West Fresno educates mostly minority and poor students (93 percent and 65 percent respectively) and receives only $4,276 in state and local funds. At the other extreme, Woodside Elementary School District educates far fewer students of color and low-income students (only 4 percent of Woodside's students are low-income and 17 percent are minority) and yet it spends far more: $14,259 per student.

"California needs to do more to ensure that it divides its education spending pie more equitably. If we're serious about closing achievement gaps, we don't have a choice. But we also must make sure that the pie is big enough to begin with," Ali said.

California spends a miniscule amount of what it could.

Earlier this year, Education Week's 2005 Quality Counts report showed that California ranks 44th among 50 states in per-pupil spending and spends only 3.5% of its total taxable resources on education. Next month, state officials will put forth a new state budget; budget predictions already show more revenue than anticipated. With so many California youngsters struggling academically, we'll need to invest more of our state resources in education. Moving forward, Californians will need both to spend more on their schools, and distribute what they do spend more fairly across different kinds of school districts. Period.

"Given its comparative wealth overall, California actually stands out for its stinginess," Ali said. "We have the money. The question is whether our policymakers have the will to prioritize the needs of our children and our future workforce, and the courage to make the rhetoric about goals for student achievement a reality," Ali concluded.