

A study claiming **Alaska** ranks second among states in adequately funding its public school system — cited by Gov. Mike Dunleavy when he vetoed a bill increasing education spending last week — has fundamental flaws that overlook factors such as the unique costs the state incurs to provide services, according to its authors.

"I'm definitely saying don't take it at face value," said Bruce Baker, a University of Miami professor who was among the study's four authors, in an interview Tuesday.

As a result, **Alaska** will be excluded from the annual report "The Adequacy and Fairness of State School Finance Systems" until "we can better account for the unique issues," according to an e-mail from Matthew Di Carlo, a senior research fellow at the Albert Shanker Institute and another co-author.

The disclaimer comes after Dunleavy referred to the study in a press conference Friday, resulting in some officials declaring it showed an increase K-12 funding wasn't necessary while prompting other state education leaders to question the study's authors.

Among the key challenges was the finding that "estimated adequate spending per pupil" for **Alaska** was \$13,655 (lower than 25 other states) and thus the actual spending of \$20,457 per pupil (fifth-highest among states) resulted in one of the highest "adequate funding gaps" in the study.

"I'm wondering how the \$13,655 amount you listed as adequate?" wrote Mike Bronson, of the NAACP Anchorage Education Committee, in an email Sunday to Di Carlo. "What assumptions and calculations did you use?"

"The table's report certainly flies in the face of some common assumptions here," the email notes. "For example, NAEP reports **Alaska** 4th and 8th graders scoring near the bottom rank nationally in math and reading. Classroom sizes have ballooned. As a result, some are calling for hundreds of millions of dollars more in annual public school budgets to retain teachers. Others are pointing to your study to show that **Alaska** schools should get less funding."

Di Carlo, in a response later during the day, stated "we've been in touch with several folks in **Alaska** about these same concerns."

"Ours is a national model and there are cost-relevant idiosyncrasies in many states (though probably none more so than in **Alaska**)," he added. "We always put forth very clear caveats about how to use our results, though we understand that some people will inevitably ignore them. That said, upon careful review of our estimates, we have decided not to publish adequacy estimates for **Alaska** in future releases, at least until we can better account for the unique issues."

Baker said the model the study uses "performs better for some states than others for a number of reasons. But it does seem to perform particularly poorly for **Alaska**."

"My guess is that (adequate spending amount) is just too low, in part because we aren't capturing the unique kind of costs of the remoteness and sparsity of **Alaska**...which may affect their labor costs, may affect any number of things, other operating costs of facilities just to kind of hit a baseline of operations," he said.

The study was for the 2020-21 school year, the most recent for which complete relevant federal data is available, although Baker said the three-year gap and COVID-19 pandemic would not likely alter current comparative figures and rankings significantly. The study excludes Vermont due to some data being unavailable.

A statement issued Tuesday by Grant Robinson, Dunleavy's deputy press secretary, criticized the study's authors for giving in to pressure from education establishment officials.

"It is disappointing, but not surprising that the educational industry establishment would attack the validity of data when it does not fit their narrative to the point where the researchers opt to exclude **Alaska** from future studies," the statement notes. "The cost factors of public education in **Alaska** are well documented and there is no reason for the authors to renege their work, unless it is to appease unrelenting attacks from the NEA and education industry lobbyists. Even if the authors do choose to exclude **Alaska**, the first policy recommendation in the overall study is 'better targeting of funding.' Better targeted funding is precisely what Governor Dunleavy has fought for and what the NEA has fought tooth and nail to prevent."

Questions about the study arose while lawmakers were considering a sweeping education bill that, among other provisions, included a \$680 increase next year in the \$5,960 Base Student Allocation, which has remained essentially flat since 2017 except for a one-time \$340 increase in effect this year. The Legislature on Monday failed by one vote, 39-20, to override Dunleavy's veto of the bill, setting the stage for a continuance of what's already been a long and contentious battle over education funding.

Dunleavy's highlighting of the study also comes as he continues to highlight another study released last November declaring **Alaska** ranks first in charter school performance among states included, furthering the governor's call for additional authority and funding for such schools in the state. But questions have been raised about nuances of the charter study by educators — and researchers acknowledged **Alaska** has unique elements that make a direct comparison to other states difficult.

Bronson, in an interview Tuesday, said the flaws exposed with the funding study are a further indicator of the governor selectively choosing data.

"We think that's an example of the governor's practice of using these limited East Coast national surveys and picking out what he wants to hear about **Alaska**, and stopping there without examining the assumptions and the data that lie behind those limited predictions about the state," he said.

The funding study is based on three categories:

"Fiscal effort" measuring how much of a state's total resources are spent directly on K-12 education. **Alaska** ranked second among states by spending 4.77% of its gross state product on K-12 public schools, compared to the national average of 3.53%, according to the study.

"Statewide adequacy" comparing actual per-pupil spending to estimated models of what would be required to achieve math and reading test scores at the national average. It was this category that raised the questions submitted by Bronson. **Alaska** ranked fifth among states in the study.

"Equal opportunity" measuring the adequacy funding differences above between the higher- and lower-poverty districts in each state. **Alaska** ranked 28th among 48 states evaluated in this category due to low-poverty districts getting considerably more funds according to the formula than high-poverty areas.

Baker said the national studies have been published since 2018, but **Alaska**'s ranking in them wasn't questioned in previous years. However, he said after the governor's public highlighting of this year's study, it's not possible to estimate how adjusting the acknowledged flaws would impact the results.

"It's hard to know if we were able to fully capture those where **Alaska** would stand," he said.

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