A National Report Card

By Nicole Allan | Graphics by Kiss Me I’m Polish

K-12 ACHIEVEMENT GRADE INDEX
As calculated by Education Week in its “Quality Counts 2012” report

SPENDING PER PUPIL
$15,000–$19,999
$10,000–$14,999
$5,000–$9,999

GOVERNOR’S POLITICAL PARTY
Governors can be key drivers of education reform.

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (2011)
U.S. (15.9%)

THE CASE OF NEW MEXICO
In 2011, researchers at the Center for American Progress calculated educational return on investment (ROI), district by district. They found wide variation within states, both in terms of most spent and results obtained.

MORE MONEY, MORE PROBLEMS?
Alaska, Wyoming, and the District of Columbia spend more money per pupil, on a regionally adjusted scale, than almost every other state, yet they get D’s or F’s in achievement. Seventy percent of the District’s students are poor, a factor that drives up its costs, whereas Alaska and Wyoming both struggle to distribute resources to a relatively small number of students spread across vast and isolating geography.

THE CITIES BOUNCE BACK
City schools—dogged by poverty and overcrowding—have traditionally lagged behind their counterparts elsewhere. Achievement in most American cities still trails the national average, but in recent years, urban districts have seen significantly more improvement.

CHANGES IN TEST SCORES
(2009–2011)

SMART SPENDING PAYS OFF
Atlanta’s reading gains and Boston’s math gains may be partly attributed to decade-long initiatives in literacy and math, respectively. Boston’s program may also have helped narrow its achievement gap in 2011, the district’s black, Hispanic, and poor students all outperformed their national peers in math.

New Mexico’s suburban Rio Rancho district had the best ROI in the state, spending just $6,688 per pupil for an achievement score of 63, which can calculated on a scale of 1 to 100. Just two districts away, rural Jemez Mountain had the worst ROI, spending $13,983 per pupil for an achievement score of 28.

Students in the Roswell and Silver City districts—both small, remote, and majority Hispanic—achieved at similar levels. Yet Roswell, despite having 81 percent low-income students compared with Silver City’s 53 percent, spent $2,589 less per pupil.

After Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana transferred most New Orleans schools to the authority of the state-run Recovery School District. With the teachers union effectively obsolete, reform has flourished—about 80 percent of New Orleans students now attend charter schools, the highest proportion in the U.S.—and the city’s historically rock-bottom test scores have shot up.

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