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<https://wallethub.com/edu/states-with-the-best-schools/5335/#lara-perez-felkner>



### **Does variation in per pupil spending explain most of the variation in school quality?**

School quality can be measured by assessing the characteristics of three components influencing student learning and achievement: teachers, classrooms, and the schools' social context. Even today, we still see incredible variation in U.S. schools' quality, across the nation but also within states and districts. Per pupil spending does have direct and indirect effects on school quality, but no, it does not explain most of the variation. Decades of research indicates the direct effect of spending on school quality is quite weak. Schools with large budgets are often those with positive outcomes, but the relationship is not causal. Public schools remain highly segregated by family income (the primary school spending budget resource) and race/ethnicity, even more so than in the 1960s. Educational stratification is a term commonly used by sociologists to describe the systematic variation in the students' access to and attainment of a quality education. In summary then, no, per pupil spending does not have a strong effect on school quality when controlling for important factors such as median family income. How schools and districts choose to invest their tax dollars in schools can make a difference however.

### **What can state and local policymakers do to improve their school systems without raising taxes?**

Recent research has emphasized educational effectiveness, a term related to school quality but emphasizing educational gains, for students as well as their schools on the whole. Your question asks about school "systems." Both within and across schools, evidence shows increasing equity of opportunity is inherently important to the issue of school improvement on the whole. Investing primarily in the quality of the strongest schools and students does not intrinsically improve school quality. Rather, it is important for state and local policymakers to invest in its less advantaged schools and students, where the return in investment tends to be greater.

### **In setting a child up for success, how important is the quality of the school relative to other factors (family, neighborhood, etc.)?**

While there has been extensive policy and research focus on increasing particular aspects of teacher quality, this approach seems too limited, in part because schools are complex social organizations and school quality is therefore not a simple measure. Teachers matter, but high-stakes teacher accountability policies have not been the universal solution some hoped it would be, according to recent research including a special issue last year in the major education journal *Educational Researcher*. Teachers are an important component of the school teaching and learning environment, but only one dimension.

School contexts and the relationships within them may be even more important, according to decades of research on the social context of schooling. A now classic study by Tony Bryk and Barbara Schneider indicates it is important to have social trust among teachers, parents, school leaders, and students, especially in less well-resourced schools. Also important for achieving quality without raising taxes, particularly in diverse schools and those serving high proportions of students from backgrounds underrepresented in higher education: fostering socio-emotional supports. Research out of the National Center on Scaling Up Effective Schools has found these supports are more commonly found in highly effective schools, and can enhance students' achievement. My research has found a similar pattern: economically disadvantaged students encounter various and often intersecting social, personal, and academic obstacles which can hinder their success; however, those students who perceive their peers' and teachers' regard for their educational potential are more likely to transition to four-year and selective colleges. Finally, equitable access to challenging academic courses – and cumulative preparation over time to succeed in these courses – is highly associated with student achievement and educational attainment.

### **In evaluating the best and worst school systems, what are the top 5 indicators?**

This is a question that has been debated for decades. At the aggregate level, family socioeconomic status seems to be the most important factor explaining children's chances for educational and career success, in particular, parents' educational attainment and family income. That said, and as explained above, for students from less advantaged families, quality schools and the resources they bring can certainly facilitate students' opportunities for upward mobility. Selecting out of one's assigned public school to another school — through residential moves, private schools, or public school choice — is a frequently cited mechanism for students in low-income schools to achieve greater opportunity. Because of academic tracking and various initiatives (e.g., IB programs, math and science centers) to retain talented students in district public schools however, there is often considerable within-school variation in educational opportunity among non-rural schools. For these reasons, school quality indicators are independent of but closely associated with non-school factors like neighborhood and family background.

Dr. Perez-Felkner's reference material was not included in the article but is available [here](#).

## 2016's States with the Best & Worst School Systems by [Richie Bernardo](#)



Expert Commentary by Dr. Lara Perez-Felkner, Assistant Professor of [Higher Education](#) and [Sociology](#) at [Florida State University](#), and Senior Research Associate in the [Center for Postsecondary Success](#).

This expert perspective focuses on educational policy and sociology of education. The following references were supplied in tandem with Dr. Perez-Felkner's comments published at the following link: <https://wallethub.com/edu/states-with-the-best-schools/5335/#lara-perez-felkner>

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