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In Connecticut, a Wealth Gap Divides Neighboring Schools

By ELIZABETH A. HARRIS and KRISTIN HUSSEY SEPT. 11, 2016

The two Connecticut school districts sit side by side along Long Island Sound. Both spend more than the national average on their students. They prepare their pupils for the same statewide tests. Their teachers, like virtually all the teachers in the state, earn the same high marks on evaluations.

That is where the similarities end: In Fairfield, a mostly white suburb where the median income is \$120,000, 94 percent of students graduate from high school on time. In Bridgeport, the state's most populous and one of its poorest cities, the graduation rate is 63 percent. Fifth graders in Bridgeport, where most people are black or Hispanic, often read at kindergarten level, one of their teachers recently testified during a trial over school funding inequities.

Seemingly intractable contrasts like those last week led Judge Thomas G. Moukawsher to tell the state that it had 180 days in which to rethink almost its entire system of education. Ruling in a case known as *Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding v. Rell*, Judge Moukawsher of State Superior Court in Hartford said the state was allowing children in poor districts to languish, while their wealthier neighbors soared.

Across the country, school funding cases have often resulted in more money being funneled into poorer districts to help offset the effects of poverty on their students. That may well be the end result in Connecticut.

But more than anything, Judge Moukawsher seemed offended by the irrationality of the state's education system: He said its funding of new school buildings was driven not by need, but rather by how much clout individual legislators might have; he criticized the teacher evaluation system and said the high school graduation standards were all but meaningless. He told the General Assembly it first had to determine how much money schools actually need to educate children and then must allocate the funds in a way that met that goal.

Philip Dwyer, the chairman of Fairfield's Board of Education, said on Friday he felt the judge's view of Connecticut's system lacked nuance.

"The problem I have is his writing almost encourages the legislature to boil this down to an urban versus suburban question," Mr. Dwyer said. "That would avoid the fundamental question of what is a more creative way to fund our constitutional obligation that every child deserves a free and appropriate education. This 'we' versus 'they' approach his decision sets us on is a path I think is a mistake."

But Bridgeport's interim superintendent of schools, Frances Rabinowitz, said much of the ruling sounded right. Ms. Rabinowitz started in Bridgeport as a teacher, then left the city 14 years ago for positions elsewhere, including a job as an associate commissioner for education for the state. When she returned to the district in 2014, she said, it was in even worse shape than when she left.

"The stripping of resources was amazing to me," she said.

Irrational spending

Requiring at least a substantially rational plan for education is a problem in this state because many of our most important policies are so befuddled or misdirected as to

be irrational. They lack real and visible links to things known to meet children's needs.

In the morning, school buses line the circular driveway of Fairfield Ludlowe High School, dispatching a stream of students into the sandy-brick building buffered by an expansive, tree-lined lawn.

At Bridgeport's Warren Harding High School, there is no line of buses. As Judge Moukawsher noted, the city cannot afford them for its high school students.

By the sixth day of his senior year at Warren Harding, Markus Simmons had his morning commute down cold: He wakes at 6 a.m. and walks to a city bus stop where he catches a ride to the Bridgeport bus terminal. There, he boards the No. 13 bus to school. The trip takes him about 40 minutes.

Mr. Simmons, 18, is in Harding's honors program and is eager to go to college, rattling off a list of schools he might apply to: Wesleyan University, the University of Connecticut, Clark University in Atlanta, Sacred Heart University in Fairfield.

But three of his friends, he said, had dropped out of high school.

"They just decided they didn't want to come anymore," Mr. Simmons said. "I'm not sure why, to be honest."

Empty promises

State graduation and advancement standards are so loose that in struggling cities the neediest are leaving schools with diplomas but without the education we promise them.

While Harding's graduation rate is a dismal 54 percent, Judge Moukawsher said the number masks a worse reality of students being passed along year after year without acquiring the skills they needed, starting in elementary school.

Some students arrive at Harding High School reading at a third-grade level, said Aresta Johnson, an assistant superintendent who oversees the district's high schools. And in many cases, she said, students simply have not attended school consistently enough to learn how to read fluently.

"We face a huge issue with chronic absenteeism," she said. Cuts to athletic programs, which are a big draw for some students, have only made the situation worse.

"And keep in mind, when our students come to high school in ninth grade we can pretty much get them in the door," Dr. Johnson continued. "Once they turn 16, they become eligible to work full-time jobs, and sometimes serve as the sole supporter for their families."

Passed Along

According to a 2012 study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, more than a quarter of children illiterate at the end of third grade never even graduate from high school, and in Connecticut we know just how easy that is to do.

Bridgeport has about 147,000 residents and an unemployment rate of about 12 percent, according to the judge's decision. At 21,000 students, its school district is roughly twice the size of Fairfield's.

Both districts spend more on each of their pupils than the national average, which was about \$10,800 per student, according to the most recent federal statistics.

In the 2014-15 school year, Bridgeport spent about \$14,000 per student while Fairfield spent nearly \$16,000. The difference between those numbers is not enough to explain the yawning disparities in results.

Egregious Gaps

Michael Podgursky, an economics professor at the University of Missouri, testified convincingly that there is no direct correlation between merely adding more money to failing districts and getting better results. This is hard to argue with, and the plaintiffs concede that only well-spent extra money could help. But if the egregious gaps between rich and poor school districts in this state don't require more overall state spending, they at least cry out for coherently calibrated state spending.

Because schools are heavily supported by local property taxes, as the judge pointed out, a property-poor town like Bridgeport has less money for its schools, even while taxing its residents at higher rates. And when funds fall short — for things as basic as paper, as they sometimes do — there is no way to make it up.

That is not true in Fairfield, Mr. Dwyer, the chairman of the board of education, said. While his is not the highest-spending district in the state — several districts spend more than \$25,000 per student — Fairfield parent associations raise money for field trips, white boards or boxes of school supplies.

And then there is what residents spend out of school. “A suburban family can get their kids to museums, they can travel, can get special tutors, they can get enrichment classes,” Mr. Dwyer said. “Poverty is a word, but what really separates the two districts is suburban children have more enrichment activities before they even start public school than the typical urban child, and that makes a difference.”

Teacher shortages

Shortage problems with only minimal shortage solutions hold true in many districts for math teachers, bilingual instructors, special education teachers, and, in general in poor districts where the working conditions make the jobs less attractive. The state sees itself as powerless here. It set up a system of local control in which school districts must agree on these things with teachers. But if the system was set up by the state then the state is responsible for the system. Any obstacle to a rational system the state has set up, the state can take down. The state is not powerless.

Harding High School, a once-grand red brick building now long past its

heyday, sits on Central Avenue in Bridgeport. Ground has been broken on a new \$106 million school nearby, on a site of a former General Electric plant.

But for now, the school's 1,100 students make do with crumbling walls, peeling paint and classrooms that on Friday were sweltering. By late morning, teachers and students mopped sweat from their faces as they marched through the building.

Finding and keeping qualified teachers, especially those certified to teach math and science, is a battle, administrators said. Dane Brown is in his seventh month as interim principal at Harding, and over the summer, he had 16 positions to fill. Special-education teachers are especially difficult to find, and roughly 20 percent of Harding students qualify for special-education services, he said.

Presented with the challenges of Bridgeport, many teachers look for jobs in neighboring Fairfield, Greenwich or Stratford, Dr. Johnson, the assistant superintendent, said. That creates a competitive disadvantage that is nearly impossible to overcome.

"They can go 10 minutes away," she said, "and make \$25,000 to \$30,000 more."

Indeed, the districts' proximity not only magnifies their differences, it makes matters worse, education experts say.

Erica Frankenberg, an education professor at Penn State who studies school segregation, said: "Over time, districts that are right next to each other become very much identified as on very different trajectories, and that has a range of impacts on the kinds of schooling kids get. There is an idea of what certain districts are, and they just diverge."

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