

Funding Committee Comes up Short for Georgia's Students

By Claire Suggs, Senior Education Policy Analyst

A new school funding formula Gov. Nathan Deal's [Education Reform Commission](#) is developing threatens to lock in deep cuts made under the existing formula if it becomes law. Most school districts get less money under the proposed formula this school year than if the General Assembly provided the full amount calculated by the existing one. That's according to [preliminary estimates](#) released at the Oct. 28, 2015 meeting of the commission's funding committee. A better appraisal of the impact of the proposed formula on districts is a contrast between the state funding each would receive in the 2017 fiscal year under the current formula and the new proposal but those figures are not available.

The General Assembly appropriated \$460 million less for districts this year than the existing school funding formula says it should. It also [underfunded school transportation grants by \\$180 million](#) and reduced sparsity grants by \$14.5 million. Sparsity grants help districts offset the higher costs of small schools. In total districts are underfunded by \$655 million. (The similarly underfunded state commission charter schools are not part of this analysis.)

Districts would receive an additional \$234 million more this year in the new formula, assuming the General Assembly approved it. These dollars would help close the gap, but that still leaves a \$421 million overall shortfall. Only two of Georgia's 180 districts get more state money to educate their students this year under the proposal than if the current formula and grants were funded at levels called for. (See district map on back page).

Even without counting reductions to transportation and sparsity, most districts fare worse in the proposed formula than the existing one. If the General Assembly fully funded today's formula, 137 districts would get more money than under the proposed formula. These 137 districts include the state's largest school systems and serve 97 percent of Georgia's public school students.

This effort to cement current cuts into a future funding formula is a road Georgia traveled before. Lawmakers [downsized the formula for the equalization program](#) in 2012 after years of underfunding it. This locked in cuts to the program, which supplements districts with low property wealth and limited ability to raise local revenue for schools.

The current 30-year-old funding formula is overdue for an update. However, a new formula should be based on a careful assessment of the cost of educating Georgia's students to the high standards the state has set for them. It should not be built on the premise that 14 years of budget cuts have been good for students. Those cumulative cuts pushed districts to raise class sizes, eliminate programs and go without up-to-date instructional materials. This approach will not lead to a robust economic future for students or the state. The stakes are too high to rush into a new way of education funding that could be more flawed than the one it replaces

■ New Formula Locks in Deep Education Cuts

All but two* of Georgia's 180 school districts get less money to educate students with new funding plan compared to current formula and grants.

