For more than 50 years, the United States has claimed to provide equal public education to all students, regardless of background or identity. But in fact, as income and wealth inequality have become more brutal and entrenched, low-income students, students of color, and students with disabilities have systematically and continuously been deprived of the resources that more privileged students take for granted. This fact sheet describes some of the sources of the underfunding of public schools, and policies that could finally achieve equity for our schools.

Federal Underfunding of Public Schools

In 1965, the federal government passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which sought to address the need for additional resources for schools in economically deprived communities. The legislation recommended that the federal government provide additional funding for low-income students, at a level up to 40% on top of average per-pupil state spending. That commitment, known as Title 1, has been underfunded every year.

If the federal Title 1 commitment had been met, Cincinnati would have had an additional $82 million to spend on low-income children in 2015 alone. Over the past 13 years — since this year’s high school graduates entered kindergarten — Cincinnati schools have been shortchanged $816 million in federal Title 1 funds.1

In 1975, Congress passed the law now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, which requires schools to provide students with disabilities with the supports they need in school. IDEA assumes that on average, the cost of educating a child with disabilities is twice the cost of educating a non-disabled student, and Congress pledged that the federal government would pay up to 40 percent of this cost. That commitment was also never been met.

If the federal IDEA commitment had been met, in 2015 alone, Cincinnati would have had an additional $13 million to spend on students with disabilities. Over the past 13 years — since this year’s high school graduates entered kindergarten — Cincinnati schools have been shortchanged $165 million in federal IDEA funds.2

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1 US Department of Education Budget Service and US Census Bureau, and National Education Association.
2 Ibid
Investment in Police and Prisons Instead of Schools

Over the past few decades, spending on police and prisons has skyrocketed, along with harsh criminal penalties for minor offenses, the criminalization of normal teenage behavior, and punitive school discipline policies. In addition to the unjust incarceration of millions of people, this expansion of the police and prison industry has reduced resources for public education.

In Cincinnati, between 2000 and 2015, government funds were not distributed equally across spending areas:

- Spending on police increased by 9%¹
- Per-pupil spending on instruction decreased by 5%⁴

Bad Actors

While Cincinnati public schools struggle, the wealthy and corporations have benefitted from tax subsidies and undermined public education through supporting school privatization.

- Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos owes the state of Ohio more than $5.3 million for election law violations, the group she led illegally funneled $870,000 in contributions from its Virginia political-action committee to its Ohio PAC.

- Charter school advocates have donated heavily to Ohio politicians:

  - David Brennan and Bill Lager donated combined $6.4 million to state legislators

- Ohio as given $1.76 billion to schools run by Brennan’s White Hat Management and Lager’s Electronic Classrooms of Tomorrow, accounting for one-quarter of all state charter funds⁵

Make the Rich and Corporations Pay Their Fair Share

This is the wealthiest nation in the world—and among the most unequal—with the greatest concentration of wealth in the hands of the fewest people. Every year, decisions are made by political leaders that strip public funding from public education and send that money to further increase private wealth. Cincinnati is no exception. But there are several policies that could generate millions of dollars to achieve equity in Cincinnati public schools.

- Closing the carried interest loophole would raise about $13 million a year for Ohio⁶
- Raising the income tax an additional 0.1% would generate $12 million
- Recent report by Hedge Clippers estimates that reducing fees paid by public pension funds to hedge funds, specifically Ohio public pension funds SERS, STRS and OPERS, could save $1.1 billion
- Revising the 1999 Tax Exemption Agreement. A current estimate is that there is about $1.2 Billion in abated real estate value in the City, including commercial and residential CRA’s and TIF properties. All these abatements short change our schools⁷

Our cities, states and federal government have the funds necessary to provide all students with an equitable and high-quality education, but they choose to spend resources on police and prisons, corporations and the wealthy. It is time to take those funds back and provide all children with the schools that they deserve.