

SICK OF HIGH PROPERTY TAXES IN CONNECTICUT?

Connecticut has the 3rd highest property taxes in the United States and they are wreaking havoc on our state's residents, young and old, not only those who are retired and on fixed incomes and have paid off their mortgages, but also young families buying their first home. It's a major reason why many young people leave our state, and their families, for tax-friendly jurisdictions.

Why are property taxes so high in Connecticut? It's a combination of the fact that we not only have the 5th highest teacher salaries in the country, but also among the lowest class sizes (reflected in the student-teacher ratio). This double whammy is the cause of these extraordinarily high property taxes. The problem also lies in the fact that below the national benchmark student-teacher ratio of 15.2:1, there are diminishing returns to student learning, something that many parents, who think reducing class sizes is going to benefit their children, don't understand. This is well documented by hundreds of studies by education economists. Eric Hanushek, one of the most cited of these economists who has studied this issue for over four decades, characterizes these gains as "meager and unconvincing" and "statistically insignificant." In fact, any supposed gains from lowering class sizes below 15.2:1 are dwarfed by such factors as: (1) teacher quality and effectiveness; (2) superior knowledge-rich curriculum (such as the **Core Knowledge Sequence**); (3) school culture; and (4) systematic phonics instruction.

But did you know that all but 5 Connecticut school districts **failed** to implement the **Science of Reading (phonics)** after it was proclaimed by the National Reading Panel in the year 2000? And that more than 160 school districts had to be forced to implement phonics-based reading instruction in 2021 by the General Assembly? Over those intervening 21 years, an estimated 150,000 students (between 12% and 18%), graduated from high school reading at a **below basic level**, the lowest level registered by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). This is a glaring example of the kind of critical interventions that school districts in CT failed to implement while instead lowering class sizes and testifies to gross administrative incompetence on the most important issue in K-12.

The attached spreadsheet identifies the extraordinary and unnecessary costs associated with these lower student-teacher ratios, and class sizes (not the same thing) for all cities and towns in CT. It provides: (1) The city or town; (2) the number of students enrolled; (3) the current student-teacher ratio; (4) the national average, or benchmark, below which education gains are minimal or statistically insignificant; (5) the number of extra teachers required for your town's specific student-teacher ratio who provide little or no added benefit to student learning; (6) the annual cost of these extra teachers (shown as a range due to the different salary levels of the district's FTEs); and (7) the SBAC scores in reading and math for your town.

Take Guilford, which was the origin of this study, which has now been expanded to provide critical information for taxpayers in all CT cities and towns. Guilford has a

student population of 2,974 and 272 FTE teachers (those who have an instructional role in the classroom according to the NCES)). This 272 figure includes both classroom teachers and certain support staff, and not paraprofessionals. When you divide the number of students by the number of FTEs, you get a ratio of 10.93:1. This figure is 28.1% lower than the national benchmark and it costs Guilford taxpayers dearly – between **\$8.4 MILLION and \$9.1 MILLION ANNUALLY**. And while our SBAC scores are decent by CT's low standards – 76% in reading and 69% in math – it still leaves 714 students NOT proficient in reading and 920 students NOT proficient in math. Part of this is explained by the legacy of the failure to embrace phonics earlier, but also other curricular failures.

To cite a few examples of potential savings: Avon: \$8.0M-\$9.0M; Bethel: \$6.7M-\$7.4M; Branford: \$7.0M-\$8.0M; Bridgeport: \$29M-\$32M; Cheshire: \$10M-\$11M; Danbury: \$19M-\$21M; Greenwich: \$23M-\$25M; Hartford: \$39M-\$43M; Manchester: \$11.5M-14.0M; New Haven: \$15.4M-\$18.5M; Newtown: \$8.3M-\$9.9M; Norwalk: \$12.5M-\$15.0M; Ridgefield: \$9.3M-\$11.2M; Stratford: \$11.0M-\$11.1M; Waterbury: \$24.7M-\$29.6M; and Wolcott: \$3.9M-\$4.7M. You get the idea.

Now, you know why our property taxes are so high.

The bottom line is that lowering the student-teacher ratio and class sizes is a misguided experiment that reflects decades of failure to engage in self-reflection and analysis by school districts across the state. They simply assumed that lowering class sizes would improve student learning without reevaluating the ROI. And they failed to embrace interventions that would help, like systematic phonics and Core Knowledge. And since 2015, they have flooded the state with Chromebooks that have been proven, by national and international studies, to be a negative influence on student learning (see the recent book by Jared Cooney Horvath **The Digital Delusion** that documents this failure). In fact, 70% of teachers now wish to get rid of them (even the AFT has come out against them). I have little doubt that the 20% now indifferent would change their view if they read the research or Horvath's book, and the 10% now supportive would do likewise.

Each city or town will have to decide how best to bring your student-teacher ratio up to the 15.2:1 benchmark. Know also that various analyses indicate that average class sizes would have to be increased by 3-4 students at most (appropriate exceptions can be made in the elementary grades to ensure that students are learning to read properly no later than 3rd grade, and for special education). This is a relatively small sacrifice for well-paid teachers to accept to profoundly ameliorate the financial futures of millions of their neighbors statewide. It may take several years to reach this goal by the process of attrition and incremental reductions. But the potential savings are significant and can dramatically alter the present trajectory of annual tax increases that are harming your residents and property taxpayers.

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