

Friction emerges as K-12 school funding commission weighs solutions

A national expert on school finance prompted pushback from Blue Ribbon Commission members wary of placing too much blame on local districts.

by [Theo Peck-Suzuki](#)

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Natalie Wagner, newly-appointed chairperson of Connecticut's Blue-Ribbon Commission on school funding, speaks at a press conference on Apr. 16, 2026. Credit: Theo Peck-Suzuki / CT Mirror

Gov. Ned Lamont's Blue Ribbon Commission on K-12 Education Funding and Affordability has a daunting task: Reinvent Connecticut's school funding system and produce a report with recommendations by the end of the calendar year.

Those recommendations are likely to play a major role in what the General Assembly does after it reconvenes in January, and they could reshape the state's public school system for decades.

As a first order of business, members of the commission set out to learn what other states are doing.

On Thursday, they heard from Marguerite Roza, director of the Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University and expert in the many problems now afflicting public schools across the country. Not everyone was thrilled at what she had to say.

Roza broke her presentation into four sections: uneven access to funds, poor financial management, rising costs and a weak return on investment for educational expenses.

She invited commissioners to interrupt with questions and comments, and interrupt they did, particularly during the first two sections. Organizers eventually told members to hold their input until the end to ensure the meeting didn't run over.

For some time now, advocates and leaders across Connecticut have had a strikingly consistent diagnosis for what ails the state's public schools: The state's funding formula hasn't been adjusted for inflation since 2013, and districts have lost hundreds of millions of dollars in unrealized revenue as a result. Spurred to action, the General Assembly approved [a roughly \\$180 million boost](#) for public schools earlier this year, but advocates say more is needed.

Roza did not dismiss or outright challenge that argument. In fact, one of the first slides in her presentation [illustrated](#) how inequitable Connecticut's system is: On average, schools in wealthy towns spend (and by implication receive) more money per pupil than poorer districts. In California, which directs state dollars more aggressively to lower-income districts, the pattern is reversed. California's wealthiest districts get about \$2,000 per pupil from state tax dollars; in Connecticut, that number is closer to \$4,000.

But Roza also observed that there are wide disparities in how districts with the same level of wealth perform. She said that suggests some schools are using their dollars more effectively than others and are worth learning from.

“That data is going to be really important when we start to say ... beyond just distributing money, what kinds of policies can work to make sure, when the money lands in the district, that it’s driving strong value for the kids in that district,” Roza said.

That drew pushback from commission member Lisa Hammersley, chief executive of the School and State Finance Project and one of Connecticut’s leading voices on education.

“I think it’s just more of a nuanced conversation than just looking at these spots on the graph, right?” Hammersley said.

Say there are two schools with the same level of student poverty, but one has a much higher number of multilingual learners. “The ability for those students to achieve at the same level is going to look different,” Hammersley said. That might be why outcomes are worse in one district even though it spends more money per pupil.

Roza acknowledged the importance of comparing like districts to one another. But she maintained that Hammersley’s example isn’t the norm.

“I wish that were the explanation for most of them. It’s generally not,” Roza told Hammersley.

Roza touched another nerve when she suggested there’s another reason schools are finding themselves strapped for cash — one that has nothing to do with the choices made in the state Capitol.

“A lot of times, people look heavily to choice programs or other variables to find out who’s to blame. But I am here to tell you that there is a villain, and it is young people. They’re not having enough kids,” Roza said.

That matters because most school funding is based on enrollment. Fewer kids means fewer students, which means less money. Roza said some districts aren’t reacting appropriately to that reality.

“Assuming this is going to flip in the next couple years, I think, is shortsighted. Districts are going to probably have to downsize and it’s going to be difficult. And some are going to drag their feet, and then they’re going to get themselves in financial trouble,” Roza said.

Roza offered a few examples of how states can push schools to manage their money more responsibly:

- Requiring districts hold minimum budget reserves
- Requiring standardized 5-year budget projections
- Force labor contract renegotiations if reserves drop below 5%
- Staged interventions based on financial triggers, from support and mandatory budget plans to full-blown state takeover of a district

“We didn’t see much in the way of financial crises in the last five years because so much federal came [through [the ESSER program](#)]. That’s gone,” Roza said. “And now a lot of districts ... they have a whole team that might be used to spending, not cutting.”

Windsor Board of Education Vice President Leonard Lockhart pushed back.

“ESSER funds actually highlighted the fact that the districts need more funding and support,” he said, adding, “I’m of the belief that local communities should not have to pay for something they truly have no control over.”

Lockhart expressed unease at putting more requirements and restrictions on schools at a time when so much attention is now on whether the state needs to do more.

“We have to be careful what the state is asking local districts to do, ‘cause all it’s going to do is complicate the situation and possibly make it worse,” Lockhart said.

New Haven Mayor Justin Elicker chimed in not long after. He told Roza that most financially distressed districts in Connecticut — including his — are in that position because of uneven state funding, not financial mismanagement.

“And the list of recommendations for districts in financial distress that you have are more related to districts that are not making the right decisions, rather than helping districts that are simply not able to raise money,” Elicker said.

Roza responded, “All over the country, we’re seeing a mix of districts fall into financial distress. So it’s not just high-poverty districts that do it.” And she reiterated that equitable funding is important.

“I think it can be both [inequity and poor management], but I think you want to keep your eye on it,” she said.

Elicker wasn’t entirely satisfied.

“I think we just should be careful not to assume that districts in financial distress are districts that are making bad decisions. In New Haven, we’ve closed four schools, we’ve reduced our staff when we actually should increase our staff because our students need more,” he said.

“Then you’re not one of the ones” in this category, Roza interjected.

On the topic of equitable funding, Roza offered a range of approaches all centered on one core problem: Funding schools with local wealth is inherently inequitable, but voters are much more likely to support raising local taxes over state ones. If the state limits local school funding, that could end up leaving money on the table, Roza said.

Sen. Jeff Gordon, R-Woodstock, questioned whether that’s still true.

“I can tell you in my part of the state ... there really isn’t any appetite to keep raising local taxes, including one town that just, for the fourth time, voted its board of ed budget down,” Gordon said.

Roza said her impression nationwide is that many districts are still voting the same way on local taxes as they always do, whether that’s in favor or against.

“The ones in the middle really want to know, incrementally, what any sort of increase is going to deliver locally,” Roza said.

Roza said states that want more equitable funding should adopt some kind of “tap and tame” approach — tapping into those local tax dollars voters will more regularly approve while taming the inequities that result. For example: The state sets an overall per-pupil spending target, then decides how much of that the local community should raise itself, based on the community’s wealth. The state pays the difference.

For example: The state decides a district should spend \$20,000 per pupil. If it determines the town can raise \$15,000 per pupil itself, then the state would provide the remaining \$5,000 per pupil.

That prompted a comment from Rep. Tina Courpas, R-Greenwich.

“These [strategies] ... assume a level of state familiarity and expertise with the particular needs and concerns of every municipal budget. Because it says things like, ‘You all can afford to put in \$15,000 per pupil,’” Courpas said.

“So can I just ask — what would distinguish different needs in one municipal budget versus another?” Roza interjected.

“I guess that’s my point. A million things that the state can’t possibly be privy to,” Courpas said.

After a brief back-and-forth, Roza explained that a typical tap-and-tame strategy “doesn’t assume that you have to know about each municipality’s budget. It assumes that each municipality has a range of things that are complicated for that community.”

In other words, Roza said, “You’re a local community, you guys have local priorities ... you have a level of local resources, you’ve gotta manage your local obligations locally.”

At the end of the day’s meeting, Elicker offered some pointed reflections to Roza.

“A lot of the recommendations you have are about, how do we force, require, mandate municipalities to get their acts together ... and that doesn’t feel very collaborative to me,” Elicker said. He asked if Roza had examples of states holding themselves accountable for their part in school funding, rather than being “condescending and accusatory.”

“I don’t think that I brought these ideas in the spirit of being accusatory. I think states are trying to figure out what levers they have and not wanting to overstep,” Roza replied.

She said there are examples of states like Louisiana and Mississippi that collaborate extensively with schools to improve academic outcomes.

“The point here is to say, well, if we’re putting this money in, and we’re not happy with this outcome that we’re getting, where do we — what levers do we have to create that focus again,” Roza said.

Rep. Toni Walker, a New Haven Democrat and co-chair of the Appropriations Committee, was also at the meeting, filling in for Sen. Gary Winfield. She pushed back on her mayor's remarks.

"I take a little back on the idea of its being accusatory, as opposed to, these are things that people have seen and want to work on," Walker said. "And I feel like all of us here have done that. Not in a political way, but in a very earnest way of trying to understand, how do we ... improve things that we see."

A survey for members of the public to share their thoughts with the Blue Ribbon Commission is open until the end of August and can be accessed [here](#). The next commission meeting is Sep. 17. Its final report is due Jan. 15.