

US Real Spending Per Student Over Time

Inflation-adjusted K-12 per-pupil expenditure, verified across nine independent sources

February 24, 2026 | Data through FY 2023

~3–4×

Real increase since 1960

\$20,322

Per student in 2023 (2023 \$)

+280%

Inflation-adjusted growth,
1960–2019

38%

Above OECD average (K–12)

Real spending per student in US public K–12 schools has risen dramatically over six decades. Nine independent data sources—spanning federal agencies, international organizations, and think tanks across the political spectrum—all confirm the same basic trajectory: a roughly three- to four-fold increase in constant dollars since 1960, with the sharpest growth in the 1960s, steady increases through the 2000s, a post-recession dip around 2012–13, and renewed increases through the present.

1. Per-Pupil Spending Over Time

The following figures are all inflation-adjusted. Because different sources use different base years for their constant dollars, the absolute amounts vary, but the growth rates are consistent across all of them.

Constant 2022–23 Dollars (NCES / Statista)

~1960

\$4,060

1990

\$12,206

2002

\$14,969

2010–11**2012–13**

\$13,952

2020–21

\$16,280

2023

\$20,322

The 2002 and 2023 figures are from Reason Foundation (in 2023 dollars); all others from NCES/Statista (in 2022–23 dollars). The 2012–13 bar (orange) marks the post-recession low. The 2023 figure includes total revenues per student (including COVID-era federal funds).

Real Growth by Decade

PERIOD	REAL GROWTH	SOURCE
1960s	~58%	EPI (Allan Odden)
1970s	~27%	EPI (Allan Odden)
1980s	~30%	EPI (Allan Odden)
1960–2019	~280%	Reason Foundation / NCES
2002–2023	35.8%	Reason Foundation 2025 Spotlight
2010–2021	13%	NCES Fast Facts #66

2. Who Pays: Local, State, and Federal Shares

All per-pupil figures above combine every funding source. The mix has shifted dramatically over the past century—from an almost entirely local system to a roughly even state/local split, with a small but volatile federal component.

	Local	State	Federal	
~1920			83%	17%
~1970		52%		40% 8%
~1980		43%		47% 10%
~1990		47%		47% 6%
~2000		45%		47% 8%
~2010		44%		44% 12%
~2020		44%		46% 11%
FY 2023	42%		45%	13%

Sources: NCES Digest Table 235.10, US Census Bureau, Congressional Research Service. The shift from local to state dominance in the 1970s–80s was driven by school finance equity lawsuits (*Serrano v. Priest*, 1971). Federal spikes in ~2010 and ~2020 reflect recession stimulus (ARRA) and COVID relief (ESSER), respectively.

FY 2022 in Absolute Dollars

\$383.9B

State (43.7%)

\$375.2B

Local (42.7%)

\$119.1B

Federal (13.6%)

3. Where the Money Goes

Between 2002 and 2023, the composition of spending shifted dramatically. The headline: **benefits, not salaries, drove cost growth.**

Employee benefits (pensions, health insurance): **+81.1%** — from \$2,221 to \$4,022 per student

Employee salaries: +7.7% — from \$8,449 to \$9,098 per student

For every \$1 added to salaries, **\$3.27** was added to benefits.

METRIC	2002	2022–23	CHANGE
Benefits per student	\$2,221	\$4,022	+81.1%
Salaries per student	\$8,449	\$9,098	+7.7%
Average teacher salary	\$75,152	\$70,548	-6.1%
Total staff count	—	—	+15.1%
Student enrollment	—	—	+4.1%
Non-teaching staff	—	—	+22.8%

All dollar figures inflation-adjusted. Source: Reason Foundation 2025 K–12 Spending Spotlight (Census Bureau / NCES data).

4. International Context

The United States is among the highest-spending nations on education at every level.

MEASURE	UNITED STATES	OECD AVERAGE	DIFFERENCE
K–12 per FTE student (2019)	\$15,500	\$11,300	+38%
Postsecondary per FTE student	\$37,400	\$18,400	+103%
Education as % of GDP	5.8%	4.7%	+1.1 pp

Source: OECD Education at a Glance 2025. Constant 2021 USD.

5. A Note on Methodology

Most sources use the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) to adjust for inflation. The Economic Policy Institute raises a valid concern: because ~80% of education spending is labor costs (salaries + benefits), and labor costs in education may rise faster than general consumer prices, the CPI-

U may *overstate* real spending growth. A services-specific deflator yields a lower—but still substantial—real increase (61% from 1967–1991 vs. the commonly cited “doubled”).

Regardless of deflator choice, the directional finding is robust: real per-pupil spending has increased enormously, and all nine sources agree on this.

6. Key Takeaways

- 1.** The trend is unambiguous: real per-pupil spending has risen roughly 3–4× since 1960 in constant dollars.
- 2.** Growth has slowed: the 1960s saw ~58% real growth; recent decades are in single digits.
- 3.** Benefits, not salaries, drive cost growth: pensions and health insurance absorbed the lion’s share since 2002.
- 4.** The US is a top global spender: 38% above the OECD average at K–12, double at postsecondary.
- 5.** Funding has shifted from local to state: property taxes once funded 83% of schools; now it’s a roughly even state/local split.
- 6.** Federal share is small but volatile: 6–14%, spiking during recessions and COVID.

7. Source Cross-Verification

The following independent sources were checked. All confirm the same directional trend, with figures that are mutually consistent after adjusting for base-year differences.

SOURCE	TYPE	COVERAGE
NCES Digest Table 236.55	Federal (Dept. of Education)	1919–2021
NCES Fast Facts #66	Federal (Dept. of Education)	2010–2021
NCES CCD Press Release 2024	Federal (Dept. of Education)	FY 2021–2022
US Census Bureau (via Reason)	Federal (Census)	2002–2023
GAO HEHS-95-235	Federal (GAO)	1970–1993
Reason Foundation 2025	Independent (libertarian)	2002–2023
OECD Education at a Glance	International organization	2005–2022
Economic Policy Institute	Independent (labor-affiliated)	1967–1991
Statista	Data aggregator	1990–2021

Sources

1. [NCES Digest Table 236.55 — Per-Pupil Expenditures \(1919–2021\)](#)
2. [NCES Fast Facts: Expenditures \(#66\)](#)
3. [NCES CCD Press Release, May 2024](#)
4. [Reason Foundation: 2025 K–12 Spending Spotlight](#)
5. [Reason Foundation: 280% Increase Since 1960](#)
6. [GAO: School Finance Trends \(HEHS-95-235\)](#)
7. [OECD: Education at a Glance 2025 — United States](#)
8. [NCES: Education Expenditures by Country \(COE\)](#)
9. [EPI: Where's the Money Gone?](#)
10. [Statista: Average Expenditures Per Pupil 1980–2021](#)

11. [Education Data Initiative: Public Education Spending Statistics](#)
12. [NCES: Public School Revenue Sources \(COE Indicator CMA\)](#)
13. [NCES Digest Table 235.10: Revenues by Source \(1919–2018\)](#)
14. [Urban Institute: How Has Education Funding Changed Over Time?](#)
15. [EdChoice: History of School Funding in the United States](#)
16. [CRS: State and Local Financing of Public Schools](#)
17. [Census Bureau: Public School Spending Per Pupil \(2024\)](#)