

Kids in poor counties deserve good schools

Unless the General Assembly can somehow bridge a financial chasm between the state's largest and smallest school systems, thousands of North Carolina students will continue to be deprived of basic educational opportunities.

A report released this week by the Public School Forum of North Carolina illustrates the difference among the state's 100 counties in their financial ability to support public schools through property taxes. On average, the state's 10 richest counties spend \$1,757 per pupil each year, while the 10 poorest spend less than a third of that — \$549.

"You can't look at these numbers and say North Carolina has an equitable way of funding its schools," Forum director John Dorman said. He's right.

Although the state constitution supposedly guarantees every child equal opportunity to public education, the poorer counties can't afford to provide the same education as their wealthier neighbors.

The problem is not that the poorer counties don't care. It's that they don't have the tax base to generate the necessary dollars.

Many poorer counties have tax rates far higher than those of richer counties. The average effective tax rate of the poorest

districts is 83 cents per \$100 of assessed property value — almost twice that of the 44-cent average tax rate of the richest counties.

Adding to their trouble, the poorer counties have to spread their funds among all their needs, including law enforcement and welfare costs.

Welfare alone, mandated by state and federal governments, eats up a disproportionate share of local tax dollars, leaving even less for education. Thirty-seven percent of Northampton County's budget goes for welfare mandates, for example. In affluent Wake County, welfare takes just 5 percent of the budget.

Only the General Assembly can help equalize funding across the state. For the past two years, legislators have set aside \$9 million to supplement local funding for poorer school districts, but that's not enough.

The Public School Forum estimates that as much as \$200 million is needed each year to ensure every child gets the same quality of education.

Whatever the figure, North Carolina is in danger of having its system of school funding declared unconstitutional. If the legislature doesn't figure out some way to equalize funding, the courts — as they have in other states — may impose their own solution.