Funding a common headache for schools

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Education funding has been a hot political topic in Oklahoma during recent years.

The state’s allocations to education have not fully recovered since cuts were imposed during the Great Recession, and many districts have sweated their finances for several years.

Cherokee County is more reliant on state funding than most, with 58.7 percent of education expenditures covered by state appropriations. The state average is 48 percent. The county’s need for greater state support could be due to the smaller districts with primary schools teaching prekindergarten through eighth grade.

“Local funding can be kind of difficult for rural and K-8 schools,” said Ed Kennedy, superintendent for Grand View School. “For a comparison, we have a bonding capacity that could allow us to build a building for $1.3 million or so. Broken Arrow has passed bonds worth hundreds of millions. So though the B.A. school district has about 30 times our student population, their bonding capacity is exponentially larger. That is because their tax base is business and industry and ours is rooftops and pasture.”

Dr. Marilyn Dewoody, superintendent of Hulbert Public Schools, said $1.3 million is also the estimated bond ceiling for her district.

“It can be hard to keep everything updated, like facilities or buses, and technology is a huge issue,” she said. “Our bonding capacity wouldn’t let us build a new cafeteria-safe house, and we had to get a FEMA grant so funding could be half and half.”

The education report states that school districts with average daily attendance of fewer than 1,000 receive more state and federal funding, averaging 52 and 13 percent, respectively. Adair County schools receive just 15 percent of education revenues from local sources, and also benefit from the highest percentage of federal help, with 23.4 percent.

Per pupil expenditure in Cherokee County was $8,981 during 2013-’14, slightly above the state average of $8,687.

Oklahoma’s average daily attendance in public schools was 668,054 during 2013-’14, and increase of
1 percent from the previous year. The state’s public school students attend 1,767 schools in 517 districts.

Statewide, 14 percent of students qualified for gifted programs, while 15 percent were in special education programs. High schools offered an average of 36 classes, or units, in the core subjects of English, mathematics, social studies, science, foreign language and fine arts.

During 2013-’14, there were 37,258 full-time teachers at public schools in Oklahoma, with a ratio of 18 students per teacher. The average salary for a teacher was $44,285.

There were 3,551 administrators who received an average salary of $76,983.

The largest portion of public school funding, 48 percent, comes from the state. Total state funding for the 2013-’14 school year was $2.76 billion. County and municipal funding contributed $2.31 billion, or 40 percent. Federal funding accounted for 11.7 percent, or $675 million. Total education expenditures totaled $5.8 billion, with 52.7 percent spent on instruction. The percentage spent on instruction has decreased six times in seven years, and was 58.6 percent of all expenditures in 1995-’96.

About 70 percent of districts have outstanding bond liabilities. Debt service was $542.9 million in 2014, up from $301.6 million in 2005, an 80 percent rise.

Average daily membership, or the number of students attending class on a typical day, is the primary variable when determining state allocations, but other factors are included. The “basic” formula for state aid is somewhat serpentine: determined by adding foundation aid, the teacher salary incentive allocation and the transportation allocation. ADM is weighted to account for students with special needs, and greater local revenue will reduce state funding. More students riding buses can increase transportation allocations.

“We have an average daily membership of about 600, but with our weights we are at about 1,100,” Kennedy said. “Those are based on our October child count, but we don’t get that difference in funding – our midterm adjustment – until January. So during October, November and December, we have a cash flow issue. As fast as we’ve grown, that has been a real struggle for us.”