

Understanding Florida's FEFP

How the formula works, what it gets right, where it is being challenged, and how it could be improved
A plain-English overview | October 2026

The basics are not that complicated

Florida legislators sometimes describe the Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP) as so complicated that nobody understands it. Its annual worksheets and many specialized allocations are certainly technical. Deciding what each category should receive is a difficult policy choice. But the basic mechanics are straightforward, and those mechanics are important enough that policymakers and citizens should understand them.

Florida counts students, adjusts for differences in their educational programs and district circumstances, determines each district's calculated funding, and divides responsibility between state and local sources.

What is the FEFP?

Created in 1973, the FEFP is Florida's principal system for calculating and distributing state and local operating funds for K–12 education. Its fundamental purpose is to provide substantially equal educational opportunities for children regardless of where they live. It recognizes that students do not all have identical needs and that districts differ greatly in taxable property wealth and operating conditions.

The formula in six steps

- 1. Count students.** Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) enrollment measures eligible instruction. A full-time student generally generates 1.0 FTE.
- 2. Weight certain programs.** Program cost factors recognize differences among grade levels and specified programs, including English-language instruction, career education, and intensive exceptional student education.
- 3. Calculate base funding.** Weighted FTE is multiplied by the Base Student Allocation (BSA), with applicable geographic and small-district adjustments.
- 4. Add supplemental allocations.** Separate calculations address transportation, exceptional student education, safety, mental health, academic acceleration, and other needs.
- 5. Identify the local and state shares.** Required Local Effort is the state-prescribed property-tax contribution; the state calculates the balance under the governing provisions.
- 6. Recalculate and distribute.** Enrollment and financial estimates are updated through the year. District-sponsored charter funding generally flows through sponsors; FES awards follow a different state-funded payment process.

For the 2026–27 First Calculation, the BSA was \$5,457.60. That is a formula multiplier, not the total per-student cost of education and not an unrestricted amount a school receives.

One distinction matters more than any other

Equity asks whether available resources are distributed fairly across students and districts. Adequacy asks whether the total resources provided are enough to meet educational expectations. The FEFP is chiefly a tool for equity. It does not independently establish the cost of a high-quality education or determine whether the Legislature has appropriated enough.

A funding formula can distribute resources equitably without necessarily providing adequate resources.

What the FEFP Gets Right

Despite its complexity and many statutory changes, the FEFP rests on several durable principles that have made statewide distribution more consistent across Florida's 67 districts.

It does not leave opportunity entirely to local property wealth

Counties differ enormously in taxable property value per student. The FEFP combines state and local resources so that a property-poor district is not limited to what its own tax base can generate. The required local contribution varies with the district's tax base, while the state share is calculated to help equalize funding.

This is one of the program's most important accomplishments: a statewide structure rather than 67 largely independent systems financed by local wealth.

It acknowledges differences among students

A student who needs intensive exceptional student services may require more resources than a student in a general education program. Program weights and supplemental allocations recognize some of these differences, rather than assuming every student costs exactly the same amount.

It acknowledges differences among districts

The Comparable Wage Factor adjusts applicable funding for differences in prevailing occupational wages. Other provisions recognize small-district circumstances, transportation responsibilities, and specialized needs. The wage factor is not a housing-affordability index, however: a district may struggle to recruit educators because of housing costs without a comparable funding adjustment.

It uses established calculations, not solely ad hoc appropriations

The formula creates a publicly describable framework for allocating much of the state's K–12 operating funding. It can be recalculated as enrollment and other information become available, and it gives school boards a basis for forecasting budgets and scrutinizing changes.

The achievement and the limitation

The FEFP has been an effective framework for distributing available education dollars more equitably among districts with different resources and needs. This does not mean every weight is correct or every district is fully funded. Determining the appropriate program weights and the total statewide appropriation remains a legislative responsibility.

Equity is a strength of the distribution framework. Adequacy is a separate question about how much Florida puts into it.

What the FEFP is NOT

It is not the entire education budget. School construction, many federal grants, voluntary prekindergarten, and some other programs use separate funding streams. Nor is a district's total FEFP entitlement the amount available for district-operated schools after charter distributions, scholarship adjustments, and other obligations.

Challenges Facing the FEFP

1. One formula increasingly serves different educational arrangements

The FEFP was designed around state and local financing of public-school districts. It now also counts Family Empowerment Scholarship (FES) recipients and uses selected FEFP components to calculate scholarship awards. District-operated public schools, district-sponsored charter schools, and FES recipients are not funded or governed in identical ways.

Recent legislative choices have brought more scholarship students and funding components into the calculation, including a state-funded equivalent of discretionary operating millage. That means a growing amount of state education funding is associated with vouchers. This is a documented structural change; it does not, by itself, establish lawmakers' motives.

2. Calculated entitlements and actual payments are easily confused

A district's gross calculated state FEFP share is not necessarily the amount ultimately available for district public school operations. Scholarship adjustments, charter distributions, and updated enrollment estimates can change the picture. Public reporting needs to distinguish those figures plainly.

3. Enrollment and reconciliation must be reliable

Florida's Auditor General documented significant FES funding and reconciliation concerns for 2024–25. The audit reported about \$397.8 million in FES expenditures beyond the initial budgeted amount and identified issues affecting the timing and accuracy of district state payments. These are reasons to improve verification and accounting, not merely to add another formula.

4. Restructuring can conceal substantive changes

In 2023–24, the Legislature consolidated several former categorical allocations into base FEFP funding. A higher BSA therefore did not necessarily mean an equivalent increase in flexible operating funds: some spending obligations continued. Program cost factors and academic acceleration funding also changed over time. Comparisons that cite only a BSA increase can be misleading.

5. The formula cannot solve an inadequate appropriation

Even if funding is distributed fairly, the available dollars may not cover competitive salaries, required supports, transportation, or the actual cost of serving students. The labor-market wage adjustment is especially different from a measure of what educators need to afford housing and basic expenses.

Why understanding it matters

When someone says the FEFP is too complicated to understand, the public may be discouraged from asking the essential questions: Who is counted? Which weights apply? What amount was appropriated? What share comes from local taxpayers? Which dollars are restricted? Where do the state funds actually go? These questions are understandable, even when their detailed calculations are technical.

How Florida Could Strengthen the FEFP

1. Separate scholarship financing from district operating calculations

Create a distinct, transparent appropriation and accounting structure for FES scholarships, with its own published enrollment, award calculations, and reconciliations. This would not, by itself, determine whether scholarships should exist or what they should receive. It would make the financing of public-school operations and scholarship programs easier to evaluate separately.

A separate FES funding stream was considered in 2026 legislation, and the Auditor General recommended structural and administrative improvements to support scholarship funding and reconciliation. Reform should make both systems more predictable without double-counting students.

2. Verify enrollment and reconcile payments promptly

Use coordinated enrollment verification, a clear cutoff and reconciliation calendar, timely identification of students funded through more than one arrangement, and published corrections. Avoid shifting unexpected scholarship funding discrepancies into late changes to district payments.

3. Publish a clear annual funding bridge

For each district, show the calculated gross FEFP entitlement, Required Local Effort, gross state share, scholarship-related adjustments, charter distributions, and the resulting state payments. Publish comparable statewide totals for district schools, public charter schools, and scholarships without double-counting funding.

4. Make every major formula change explainable

When legislators revise cost factors, consolidate categoricals, or change supplemental allocations, provide a before-and-after analysis showing the effects on funding per student, total district funding, and spending flexibility. A higher BSA should never be presented as a complete measure of funding growth.

5. Assess adequacy independently

Regularly examine the actual costs of meeting state educational requirements, including staffing, transportation, student support services, special education, and recruitment in expensive communities. That analysis should inform total appropriations rather than assuming the formula itself establishes sufficient funding.

The Bottom Line

Florida does not need to abandon the FEFP's core principles to improve it. Its long-standing commitment to statewide equalization remains valuable. The priority is to preserve that equity function while making each funding stream, adjustment, and legislative choice transparent.

The formula tells us how dollars are distributed. The Legislature must still answer whether there are enough dollars, and the public deserves to know exactly where they go.

Selected sources: §1011.62, Florida Statutes (2026); Florida DOE, FEFP 2026–27 First Calculation; Florida Auditor General, Report 2026-046 (Nov. 2025); SB 318 (2026), filed text.

Learn more about the FEFP see Understanding Florida's FEFP 2026.

Disclaimer: I am an experienced public education advocate and elected school board member, but not an education finance expert. This overview reflects my understanding of Florida's school funding system and is accurate to the best of my knowledge as of October 2026. Sue Woltanski M.D.