Over the next five years, the state of Kansas will invest an additional half-billion dollars in its K-12 schools as the result of legislation signed into law earlier this year. "The amount of money that we have committed to spend is, at least, approaching an appropriate level," says Kansas Rep. Melissa Rooker, noting that legislators already had increased state funding by $300 million during the 2017 session.

Finding that "appropriate level," not only in the eyes of the Legislature but also the state Supreme Court, has dominated discussion in Topeka for the past several years. Last October, following passage of legislation in 2017, the Kansas Supreme Court ruled that the state still had not proven the constitutionality of its finance system.

This school-funding case dates back to 2010 and centers on plaintiffs’ contention that funding for Kansas schools is neither adequate nor equitable. (Most states have “education clauses” in their constitutions; Kansas’ language says the Legislature “shall make suitable provision for finance of the educational interests of the state.”)

Under this year’s law (SB 423), per-pupil base state aid will gradually rise from $4,900 in 2018-19 to $5,545 in 2022-23; in subsequent years, that amount will be automatically adjusted based on inflationary changes. More money will be provided for special education, teacher mentoring and wrap-around services (based on a child’s health or family needs, for example), Rooker says, and the state will cover the costs for students to take the ACT and ACT WorkKeys assessments.

Also included in the new law is a more robust accountability system — for example, performance audits that make sure the additional state dollars are being spent wisely and that state funding levels are keeping up with the educational needs of students.

The next step for the state and its school districts is another ruling by the Kansas Supreme Court. (Justices already have issued five opinions in Gannon v. State.) Plaintiffs in the case (a group of school districts) say SB 423 does not go far enough, arguing in their May 7 brief with the court that base aid remains inadequate and that inequities are exacerbated by certain provisions in the new law. For example, local tax dollars raised by a school district must equal 15 percent of its total foundation aid.

The state of Kansas counters that the new funding levels are based on previous rulings and guidance by the court, as well as a peer-reviewed, evidence-based analysis of education costs and student outcomes.