



Alaska's education department gets an 'F-' for fiscal transparency

FAIRBANKS—The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development ranked dead last of all 50 states for spending transparency in a report released Monday by the Cato Institute.

The reports authors thought so poorly of Alaska's department that they gave it a grade so low it doesn't even exist on traditional school grading scales: F-.

The report looked at the websites run by state departments of education to determine how accessible each state made data on the full cost of education. It graded each state on a scale of 1 percent to 100 percent and then interpreted that grade into an A-F scale similar to that used in schools.

Jason Bedrick, one of the report's authors, said the idea behind the report was to see what education funding information each state makes available to the average citizen.

The authors rated states on four categories: per pupil expenditures, total expenditure data, average salary data and public accessibility. Alaska scored relatively well on the public accessibility portion for its relatively easy to navigate website and intuitive placement of information.

In the three other categories, however, the state flunked. The state took the biggest hit in the per pupil expenditure category, earning zero out of 45 points and a public shaming by the authors in the report's summary.

Alaska is the only state in the country to not report any per pupil expenditures, according to the report.

Department spokesman Eric Fry contended that Alaska actually does publish per pupil figures and that they are clearly marked under its school finance section. Bedrick was not convinced, though. He said that while the state publishes per pupil revenue, that number is not the same as per pupil expenditures.

Revenue sources per student do not necessarily equate to spending per student, Bedrick said. The spending can be higher or lower depending on how the state allocates the revenue, which Alaska's department does not show on its website. "It's (per pupil expenditure) the most important figure in developing the full picture," Bedrick said.

While Alaska received the lowest score, 26.75 out of 100, it was not the only state to receive such a low letter grade. A full one-fifth of the states received F- grades, and a total of 19 states failed — receiving grades of F or F-.

The major contributing factor to the failure for many of those states was the fact that the per pupil figures they report do not include capital spending, which Bedrick said is imperative to determining the full price of education.

Half of states report per pupil expenditures that include capital spending, and 24 report expenditures that do not. Alaska — the one outlier — reports neither, Bedrick said.

Fry said the department doesn't include capital spending in its per pupil breakdown because the funds aren't distributed per pupil.

"We don't break down capital funds per pupil because they aren't spent on each pupil," Fry said in an email. "Out of roughly 500 schools in Alaska, the state spends money to build or renovate only some of them."

Bedrick contends that capital spending is crucial in determining the actual cost of education. He said that if states simply discount overhead costs such as building projects then the public cannot see how much education is actually costing. Fry said Cato never asked where to find certain data, but Bedrick said they did — just not under their own name. They used a gmail account to request information from the department in order to see the response from the perspective of the average citizen.

"They might respond to somebody who might give them a bad grade," Bedrick said, "but they might not respond to somebody who's simply asking for data."

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