Fuzzy math infects Virginia governor's race

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There are two kinds of math in the world: regular math and the political kind.

In regular math, addition involves the increase of something: Johnny has three apples in a basket. Billy adds three more. Now there are six apples in the basket. Six is more than three. The number of apples has increased.

Political math is different. In political math, addition is often called subtraction. When the Trump administration proposed increasing Medicaid spending from $378 billion to $524 billion a decade from now, critics screamed at the top of their lungs that he was planning to "slash" Medicaid.

This is because baseline spending for Medicaid was slated to reach $688 billion. So because Trump wanted to raise Medicaid spending, but by less than other people wanted to raise it, he was accused of trying to cut it.

Virginians recently saw political math in action when the Virginia Education Association criticized Ed Gillespie's tax plan. The GOP candidate for governor has proposed cutting income tax rates by 10 percent. He also has made two stipulations.

The first is that the tax cuts will be financed through revenue growth. Analysts expect the state's budget to grow roughly $3.4 billion over the next four years. Gillespie would take $1.4 billion of that for tax cuts, leaving $2 billion to raise state spending.

The second is that the tax cuts are conditional: If state revenue grows too slowly, the tax cuts will not happen.

But the VEA tore into Gillespie's proposal, claiming it would "slash funding for Virginia public schools by $404 million." The group said such a funding cut would be a "major blow" to education. Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney predicted that it would be "a disaster—let me repeat—a disaster."

The VEA distributed a fact sheet contrasting current estimates for state spending on local schools in 2021 and estimates under Gillespie's tax plan. Sure enough, if you look at just those two numbers, Gillespie's plan could result in lower state support for local schools.

For instance, Richmond can expect $169.6 million in state aid for schools in 2021 under current estimates. Under Gillespie's plan—assuming the VEA has run the numbers correctly—Richmond can anticipate only $160.3 million. That's a $9 million cut!

But not really. Because this year, the state is giving Richmond $150.8 million in aid to schools. So aid to the city will grow, by either 12 percent or 6 percent. You might think state aid should grow more than 6 percent, but that doesn't make a 6 percent increase a cut.

It's the same for many localities: Aid to, say, Arlington would grow from $69.5 million to either $83.4 million or $78.9 million. Statewide, aid to localities would grow from $6.8 billion this fiscal year to either $7.4 billion or $6.9 billion.

True, some localities could lose money, using the VEA's figures. For instance: According to the VEA, Wythe County is getting $25 million in state aid this fiscal year. In 2021 it will get $26.3 million, or $24.9 million if Gillespie has his way. Note, however, this pertinent fact: Wythe's school population is expected to decline from 4,041 students to 3,945.

Team Gillespie insists the VEA is just plain wrong, and a Gillespie administration would not cut school spending one red cent.

But the whole debate might be beside the point.

That's because the whole debate is predicated on an unstated premise: More spending means better schools. And that premise is, at the least, flawed.

By coincidence, *The New York Times* ran an article on "Mayor Bill de Blasio's boldest education initiative." That is "his Renewal Schools program, which pledged hundreds of millions of dollars to turn around the city's most troubled schools."

After four years, the 78 schools in question have received $582 million. But, reports *The Times*, "researchers ... who have looked at the program's results so far say they ranged from mixed to disappointing."

When the newspaper "analyzed Renewal test scores by comparing their progress with growth of the city's scores over all," it found that "most schools failed to narrow the gap between their test scores and the city average." (That's coming from *The New York Times*, mind you. Not some right-wing propaganda organ.)

This should not be surprising. The link between spending and performance is so loose as to be nearly nonexistent. A Cato Institute study of spending and academic performance in the 50 states shows that while spending on schools has soared in recent decades, standardized test performance has scarcely budged.

The same holds true in state after state, and nationwide.

So maybe the real question isn't who would put the most into Virginia's schools. Maybe the real question is who could get more out of them.