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College dropouts cost taxpayers millions

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By: [Lisa Gartner](#)
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Taxpayers in the District, Maryland and Virginia spent \$286.6 million over five years on students who dropped out of college after their first year, according to a new national report.

The federal government shelled out an additional \$57.1 million to educate these first-year dropouts between 2003 and 2008, reported the American Institutes for Research, an independent nonprofit focuses on social and behavioral science.

Virginia taxpayers paid \$177.7 million despite claiming an 86.1 percent retention rate of first-year students, the highest in the country. Maryland taxpayers lost \$102.5 million to the 17.7 percent of freshmen who did not return, while District residents parted with \$6.4 million.

Virginia public colleges gave \$60.2 million in grants, and Maryland gave \$46.8 million to first-year dropouts.

Nationally, more than \$9 billion was funneled into the 30 percent of students who did not return for a sophomore year through federal grants and state grants and subsidies; about \$7.6 billion of that came from state taxpayers. Most students attend public schools, which the states subsidize at a cost of about \$10,000 per student each year.

Mark Schneider, the pioneering report's author and the former commissioner of the Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics, said he hopes state legislatures will pressure colleges to retain students.

"We all know kids who have tried college and failed. Without dismissing the heartbreak for the family, there are huge fiscal costs, and we need to get smarter about using scarce dollars to encourage student success," Schneider said.



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But Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, warned that funding based on completion has caveats.

"How do we know colleges won't just pass kids along to get them to graduate?" he said. "Then you would have spent taxpayer money on four years of education that didn't actually confer new knowledge."

Clifford Adelman, senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy -- and a former colleague of Schneider's at the Education Department -- pointed out that the report's use of "dropout" includes intermittent and transfer students who finish their degrees.

"That means President Obama is not counted as a college graduate because he transferred to Columbia University," Adelman said, noting that "dropout" also includes members of the military who are deployed while taking courses.

Although the data may be imperfect, it's an important conversation-starter, said Erin Dillon, senior policy analyst at Education Sector. "If we can start to put a dollar figure on the dropout problem, it could create some needed pushback against colleges for more accountability for students."

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