

The real cost of education – a rebuttal

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Adam Schaeffer, a Cato Institute policy analyst, recently wrote an op-ed (Daily Press, Sept. 22) regarding public education's cost — especially in Newport News. At best, much of what he wrote was misinformed. At worst, it is intentionally misleading.

Sadly, such anti-public education positions are not uncommon in conservative institutes. As teachers, however, it is our job not only to educate students but also to educate the community at large about the nature and scope of public education.

Let's get the facts corrected first.

Schaeffer asserts that Newport News Public Schools spent \$11,950 per student in 2009. In fact, the per-pupil expenditure was \$11,032. He asserts per-pupil spending in Virginia was more than \$13,000 when the actual figure was \$11,316. These figures are publically available from the Virginia Department of Education website's Superintendent's Annual Report.

Most egregiously, he asserts the typical private school tuition is under \$7,000. Averaging the K-12 tuition at Walsingham Academy, Williamsburg Christian, Hampton Roads Academy, Norfolk Academy, and Norfolk Collegiate places the typical private school tuition at \$15,014 — far exceeding Newport News and the Virginia average per-pupil expenditures and more than twice what Schaeffer reports.

Knowing that the Newport News and Virginia per-pupil expenditures are less than the "typical private school tuition," let's examine what services the public schools provide (and costs they incur) that may not exist in private schools.

First, Newport News educates 4,057 students with special needs, about 14 percent of the total number of students. The per-pupil cost of educating special education students can range between 10 percent and 500 percent greater than educating a non-special needs child. Additionally, public schools are obligated to offer special education services to private school students at the public schools' expense.

Second, Newport News works with 485 children aged 17 or younger who are involved in the court system and who may require education services. In addition, Newport News works with many 18 and 19 year old students in the court system requiring education services. All this comes at a cost most private schools do not experience.

At the same time, Newport News also provides programs for the talented and gifted, honors classes, Advanced Placement courses and a robust International Baccalaureate program. With this diversity of high-quality and rigorous programs, all Newport News Public Schools are fully accredited.

Another factor Schaeffer failed to disclose involves transportation. Newport News transports approximately 28,000 students each day — a cost that may not be included in many private school tuition costs but is reflected in the public schools' per-pupil expenditure calculations.

Schaeffer also contends that between 2002 and 2009, public education spending has increased 44 percent while the rate of inflation increased only 21 percent. In that time frame, according to the Virginia State Superintendent's Annual Report from 2002 and 2009, student average daily membership in Virginia increased by 48,507 students. Moreover, the No Child Left Behind legislation took effect in 2002, requiring significant staffing, curriculum, professional development and testing expenses for which private schools are not accountable.

Schaeffer concludes by saying we spend more than enough on K-12 education, and that the citizens deserve a better and more efficient education system. Making conclusions based on erroneous data simply to drive an agenda does not show respect for Daily Press readers.

Public education is not perfect. It does, however, welcome all comers, regardless of family background, ethnicity, religion or ability, serving the entire population spectrum at a cost that is far less than asserted by Schaeffer.

Personally, we wish to thank the educators in Newport News for the dedicated and successful services they provide to our community. They deserve encouragement and support — not disparaging, misguided opinion.

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