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## Budget cuts take toll on student spending

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Washington-area school districts have begun cutting their per-student spending after years of consistent increases reaching as much as \$20,000 per student.

Leaner budgets -- some slashed nearly \$100 million -- have prompted the drop in the cost per pupil, which measures factors such as enrollment, teacher hirings and salaries, textbooks, and art supplies to determine how much is spent per student.

"Districts usually start cutting as far away from the classroom as possible," said Robert Manwaring, senior policy analyst at independent think tank Education Sector. "If they're jacking up class sizes or cutting music or art, then you know the district doesn't have a lot of options left, and they've gone through the easy reductions."

In 2008, the District spent \$14,594 per student, according to U.S. Census data, whereas school officials projected the fiscal 2011 cost at less than \$9,000. Calls to D.C. Public Schools officials were not returned.

In the past two years, Fairfax County has reduced its per-student spending by about \$740, consistent with its moderate spending among local districts of \$12,597. Over the same two years, the school system's budget was reduced by \$52.5 million to \$2.2 billion, enrollment shot up by 7,000 students, and teacher's salaries were frozen. Students were hit with a \$100 sports fee and a \$75 charge per Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate exam.

By contrast, neighbor Arlington County has spent more money per pupil than any other district in Virginia or Maryland, topping out at about \$20,543 in fiscal 2009, according to the Virginia Department of Education. Arlington has cut each year since, and says it now spends \$17,322.

Alexandria City Schools also has cut its per-student costs by about \$2,000 to just shy of \$17,000, while



Leaner budgets for Washington-area school districts — some slashed nearly \$100 million — have prompted a drop in the spending per pupil after years of steady increases. (Amy Mullarky/Examiner file)

Prince William County cut \$1,000 from each student in the past two years, landing at \$9,577, the lowest in the region.

Montgomery County was the only area district to increase per-pupil spending from 2009 to 2010, but then faltered for the first time by about \$800 to \$13,862 in 2011. Worcester County on Maryland's Eastern Shore passed Montgomery for the first time since 2004 as Maryland's top spender.

Amid a \$97 million budget cut, Montgomery's biggest hits came as central office staff and teaching reductions; an average class size increase of one student per class; and the elimination of staff pay raises, spokesman Dana Tofig said in an e-mail.

Prince George's County has cut about \$900 since fiscal 2009 for an \$11,611 budget per student.

Adam Schaeffer, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, said the decrease in per-pupil spending shouldn't concern parents. "There's very little evidence in the research that increasing or decreasing in spending per student has a significant impact on performance."

Indeed, despite Montgomery's traditional status as Maryland's top spender, its performance on state exams and graduation rates places the district in the middle of the pack. And while Alexandria spends just behind Arlington, that may be an indicator of a less-affluent student base that requires more resources, said Daria Hall, director of K-12 policy for Education Trust, an organization focused on closing racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps.

"The problem we've seen far too often is that low-income kids and kids of color -- the kids who already have the least -- are being asked to bear the brunt of these tough choices," Hall said.

The best-case scenario, Schaeffer said, is "hopefully what will happen is the school system will cut some of the fat."

"I look at Fairfax schools, where they're very proud of the fact they have nine planetariums," Schaeffer said. "I wonder why you need nine planetariums."

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