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Taxpayer cost per student soars in region

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Educating a public school student in the Washington, D.C., region costs taxpayers about 45 percent more than it did in 2002, according to district budget figures, with that robust influx of dollars funding only modest gains in student performance.

The region's per-student expenditure was about \$14,240 in 2009, using comparable numbers from D.C. Public Schools, Montgomery and Prince George's county schools, and Fairfax, Arlington and Alexandria City schools. In 2002, it was about \$9,800.

In-state tuition at Maryland and Virginia's public universities was about \$8,100 and \$9,500, respectively, for the past school year, although out-of-state students subsidize the cost.



(photos.com)

Across the K-12 districts, overall achievement gains haven't kept pace.

"We're spending a lot more and getting a little more," said Michael Petrilli, of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation educational think tank.

In Montgomery, the 12th-grade graduation rate has been flat since 1997 at about 90 percent. The dropout rate has gone up slightly to nearly 3 percent and is much higher depending on the calculation.

In Arlington County, the percentage of third-graders scoring advanced on standardized math exams fell between 2006 and 2008, from 60 percent to 57 percent. The percentage of eighth-graders went up, but remained at 50 percent.

Nationwide, "inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending has more than doubled since 1970," said Andrew Coulson of the Cato Institute. "What's really amazing is that student achievement ... has been flat over the same period, and our graduation rate has actually declined slightly."

Coulson blamed in part a "dramatic rise in the number of public school employees per pupil." He calculated that taxpayers would save \$100 billion per year if districts employed the same number of people per student

as they did in 1970.

Additionally, salaries and benefits have demanded a larger share. In Fairfax, the average teacher salary grew to \$66,200 last year, up from \$51,600 in 2002. In Montgomery, it grew from \$52,700 to \$75,500 in that period.

Districts' spending booms during the past decade can also be attributed to the region's housing boom, Petrilli said.

As property values went up, so did local tax revenue. And despite increases in federal education spending since 2002, state and local funding still account for nearly 90 percent of most districts' budgets.

Adding to cash from the housing boom, the pre-recession years saw growing numbers of poor and limited-English families enroll in area districts, bringing with them more federal dollars allotted for needy students.

In Montgomery, students with limited English went from 7 percent of enrollment in 2002 to about 12 percent last year. In Prince George's, students receiving free or reduced price lunches rose from 44 percent to 48 percent.

Daria Hall, a K-12 analyst for Education Trust, said that it made sense that districts with large numbers of poor and minority students spend more per student, because research has shown that most of them require more resources to achieve.


The key is making sure the money actually benefits them and isn't used to bolster bureaucracies, she said.

"The evidence is quite clear that just giving more money per pupil to high-poverty districts -- or low-poverty for that matter -- does not necessarily mean they'll spend it on those things that will generate results," Hall said.

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