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# Education reformers push for school funding alternatives

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August 2, 2009

Putting the brakes on school spending without stripping students of quality will require revolutionizing how districts are funded, and some experts say the timing couldn't be better.

Local officials spent the past year wincing through painful cuts to schools. In Fairfax and Montgomery, home to about half of the metro area's students, staff and teachers will go without cost-of-living raises next year. In D.C., summer school slots will be cut in half in 2010 and about \$175 per student was sliced from the mayor's budget request for the schools.

Many reformers say greater local choice is key to making the most efficient use of dwindling dollars.

Daria Hall, a K-12 analyst at Education Trust, said that many states' funding frameworks harm the neediest schools by not requiring a relatively equal distribution of dollars per school.

She recommended that states and districts should take in account teacher salaries — an indicator of years of experience — when ensuring equal funding. Principals with fewer high-paid teachers should have more discretionary money to make up for that gap, she said, and to spend on things like professional development or smaller class size.

“All of the research makes clear that the single biggest factor is the quality of instruction going on in the classroom,” Hall said.

Think tanks like the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the Thomas Jefferson Institute support the idea of weighted student funding, in which each student would carry a set dollar amount to his or her school. Students with greater need, such as English-language learners, would carry more because they tend to require more resources.

“The idea is to make funding much more straightforward,” said Michael Petrilli, a vice president at Fordham. “Get the dollars to the school level, and keep them from getting captured at the district level in a lot of bureaucracy.”


Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, said that education needs

to be structured like other parts of the economy that provide consumers with competing providers.

“There are places where most parents directly pay some of the cost of their own kids’ education, and where educators are free from bureaucratic red tape, and schools compete for the privilege of serving each and every child,” Coulson said. “Those kinds of systems consistently outperform centrally planned, state-run systems like our own.”

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