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John Hood's Daily Journal



Tell Us The Total

By John Hood

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RALEIGH – One of the many reasons why so many North Carolinians opposed the [ObamaCare](#) legislation is that the process that yielded it was full of backroom deals, prevarication, and confusion. A republican form of government requires both clarity and transparency on the part of public officials, to whom voters have granted the coercive power of government only grudgingly, with important restrictions and reservations.

You may have seen a list of these restrictions and reservations. It's colloquially known as the United States Constitution.

Ensuring that the public receives timely, accurate, and comprehensive information about the conduct of their government, then, shouldn't just be an afterthought. It shouldn't be something that politicians deign to do once more-important tasks are accomplished. Transparency is a core responsibility of government at all levels.

That's why the John Locke Foundation initiated its Transparency Project more than a year ago, including [reports](#), [brochures](#), [articles](#), and the new website [NCTransparency.com](#). That's why JLF's newspaper, *Carolina Journal*, has editorialized in favor of open-government laws and on occasion filed lawsuits to pry public records out of the hands of reluctant public officials. That's why JLF staffers spend a significant amount of their time acquiring, assembling, and publishing data on the operations of state and local government. We believe it is important to, as Thomas Jefferson put it, "Educate and inform the whole mass of the people" for "they are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty."

One area of government where there has been a marked increase in transparency is in public education, which receives the largest investment of state and local taxes in North Carolina. Over 20 years of writing about education issues, I've seen state and local education officials become more responsive to requests and improve the quality and quantity of reports released to the public.

While the Department of Public Instruction has been responsible for [some of the biggest whoppers](#) in the history of North Carolina mendacity, it has also gone through hopeful periods of candor and inclusion. Among all the state agencies whose online transparency receives a grade at [NCTransparency.com](#), DPI gets the highest one – the only C (we don't grade on a curve).

Still, there's plenty of room for improvement in educational transparency. A good example would be the apparently simple matter of reporting annual taxpayer spending on schools.

Public schools get money from a variety of sources and programs. They also spend money on functions beyond classroom instruction. Moreover, the books of other government agencies bear some of the

annual costs of the public schools, such as debt service, public safety, legal representation, and holding school-board elections.

While North Carolinians are commonly told that their public schools cost about \$8,700 per student, the real number – just based on items disclosed in various public documents but not pulled together in a true summary – is closer to \$10,000 per student. Furthermore, as the [Cato Institute](#) just demonstrated in a study of school budgeting in several other states, there can be a big discrepancy between what states report as official expenditures in each school district and what those school districts report on their own books. The biggest gap Cato found was in the Los Angeles area, where local districts reported spending about \$10,000 a student but the real figure is nearly \$20,000.

If North Carolina really wanted to be a leader in education reform, rather than just being a leader in puffery, it could set a goal of reforming its fiscal reporting system to ensure that North Carolinians get a comprehensive, easy-to-understand annual tally of the cost of their public school system.

Surely no one can think of any reason why DPI wouldn't want North Carolina voters to receive this information. Right?

Hood is president of the John Locke Foundation