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# What did America's students learn in classrooms this year?

**By: P.J. O'Rourke**

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The school year is drawing to a close. Time to balance the educational accounts and see what's been learned.

The accounts I'm balancing are bank accounts. What's been learned is that it costs a fortune to send kids to school. Figures in the "Statistical Abstract of the United States" show that we are spending \$11,749 per pupil per year in U.S. public schools, grades pre-K through 12. That's an average. And you, like me, don't have average children. So we pay the \$11,749 in school taxes for the children who are average and then we pay private school tuition for our own outstanding children, or we move to a suburb we can't afford and pay even more property taxes for schools in the belief that this makes every child outstanding.

Parents of average students believe it too. According to an annual Gallup poll conducted from 2004 through 2007, Americans think insufficient funding is the top problem with the public schools in their communities. But if throwing money is what's needed, American school kids are getting smacked in the head with gobs of cash. That \$11,749 is a lot more than the \$7,848 private school pre-K through 12 national-spending norm. It's also a lot more than the \$7,171 median tuition at four-year public colleges. Plus, \$11,749 is much less than what's really being spent.

In March, the Cato Institute issued a report on the cost of public schools. Policy analyst Adam Schaeffer made a detailed examination of the budgets of 18 school districts in the five largest U.S. metro areas and Washington, D.C. He found that school districts were understating their per pupil spending by between 23 and 90 percent. The school districts cried poor by excluding various categories of spending — debt service, employee benefits, transportation costs, capital costs and, presumably, those cans of aerosol spray used to give all public schools that special smell.

Schaeffer calculated that Los Angeles, which claims \$19,000 in per pupil spending, actually spends \$25,000. The New York area admits to a per pupil average of \$18,700, but the true cost is about \$26,900. Washington's per pupil outlay is claimed to be \$17,542. The real number is an astonishing \$28,170, or 155 percent more than the average tuition at the famously pricey private academies of the capital region.

School districts also cheat by simple slowness in publishing their budgets. The \$11,749 is from 2007,

the most recent figure available. It's certainly grown. The "Digest of Educational Statistics" says inflation-adjusted per pupil spending increased 49 percent from 1984 to 2004 and more than 100 percent from 1970 to 2005.

Have kids been getting smarter? No. National Assessment of Educational Progress reading test scores remained essentially the same from 1970 to 2004. SAT scores in 1970 averaged 537 in reading and 512 in math, and 38 years later the scores were 502 and 515. American College Testing composite scores have increased only slightly from 20.6 (out of 36) in 1990 to 21.1 in 2008. And the extraordinary expense of the Washington, D.C., public school system produced a 2007 class of eighth-graders in which, according to the NAEP, 12 percent were at or above proficiency in reading and 8 percent were at or above proficiency in math.

Many of these young people are now entering the work force. Count your change!

*Best-selling humorist P.J. O'Rourke is a contributing editor to The Weekly Standard, from which this article is excerpted.*



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