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Public ed. costlier than you think

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We've been treated to hand-wringing all spring over the new school budgets for 2011, which are supposedly inadequate, underfunded and unacceptable.

School district officials and politicians claim it's curtains for high-quality public education in Virginia. However, what you think you know about K-12 education spending is wrong.

We're not spending too little, we're spending too much.

I'd like you to guess how much we spend per child in the city of Charlottesville public schools and then in the Commonwealth of Virginia overall.

Have the number in your head?

How does it match with the real numbers? In 2009, Charlottesville spent \$16,200 per student, or \$324,000 per classroom of 20 students, according to state data. And across Virginia we spent on average more than \$13,000 to educate one child for the school year.

Don't feel silly if you guessed far lower than the real figure. According to a December 2009 poll of Virginians by the Friedman Foundation, nearly half of the respondents thought we spend \$6,000 or less to educate a child each year. About one in five people thought we spend less than \$3,000.

Only 6 percent of the public guessed the correct spending range.

It's so simple as to seem trivial. To get control of a budget, you need to know how much you make, how much you spend, and what you're spending for.

We know that K-12 education is the biggest single cost to state and local governments. And yet, most citizens and politicians have little or no idea how much we are spending on education at a per-pupil level.

American taxpayers spend around \$600 billion per year on K-12 public education. A sobering 27 cents of every tax dollar collected at the state or local level is consumed by the government-run K-12 education system, compared to only 8 cents for Medicaid.

In Virginia, 29 cents out of every state or local tax dollar collected is spent on public K-12 education. In the seven years between 2002 and 2009, per-pupil spending in Virginia increased 44 percent according to state data. Even after correcting for inflation, it increased by 21 percent for that period.

Also, these figures leave out a large but completely unknown amount of capital expenses and debt payments that cities and counties spend on behalf of public schools but which never make it onto the school district's books or into the state's accounting.

Education spending is the single most serious burden on state and local budgets. And since runaway education spending is a major cause of our state and local budget problems, it's the best place to look for serious savings as the current fiscal crisis continues to unfold.

However, school district officials and many politicians aren't upfront about the kinds of resources we devote to education. And without a clear idea of spending levels in public and private schools, it's hard for the public and policymakers to know whether our current system is cost-effective or to assess the fiscal impact of expanding families' options with private school choice programs.

Based on federal data, we estimate the typical private school in Virginia charges just under \$7,000 per student per year, and many far less than that. Government schools, at \$13,000, spend a whop-ping 88 percent more.

Private school choice programs, in other words, aren't just a proven way to increase student achievement. They are a great way to save a huge amount of money.

In Florida, for instance, the state's education tax credit program that funds private school choice saves huge sums every year. The state gains \$1.49 in savings for every \$1 it loses in tax revenue according to a 2008 fiscal impact analysis by the government's Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability. That's one reason almost every Republican, 42 percent of Democrats and more than half of the black caucus voted for a dramatic expansion of the education tax credit program.

We spend more than enough on K-12 education in Virginia. It's just not being spent effectively. Virginia's children, families and taxpayers deserve a better, more efficient system of education.

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