



Public Schools: Spending skyrockets, student performance flat

By: Ann McAdams – December 3rd, 2012

NEW HANOVER COUNTY, NC (WECT) - The cost of education continues to go higher and higher. In the last forty years -- public school spending has skyrocketed.

In 1973, North Carolina spent about \$915 a year per child in grades K-12. Today, we spend \$8,436 per child, per year.

Despite all of that spending, local law makers say our public schools still leave a lot to be desired.

"Why in the world are parents having to volunteer to run the phones at schools, and why in the world are teachers having to pay for supplies, and why are they not getting paid on a national average?" State Senator Thom Goolsby asked, considering the schools \$12 billion annual budget.

Officials at the NC Department of Public Instruction explain that new programs the schools have implemented, and a huge surge in hiring over the last 40 years have driven up spending. But there's little evidence to indicate all of this added spending and hiring is translating to improved student performance at the end of high school.

North Carolina spends about \$5,400 a year educating an elementary student who doesn't have any unusual needs. But take a child in the same grade level, who doesn't speak English, has a learning disability, and comes from a poor family in a small, rural county. With all the additional employees and programs set up to help that student, the pupil's annual education cost soars to \$18,500.

Phillip Price, the Chief Financial Officer for the NC Department of Public Instruction, thinks the added spending is worthwhile.

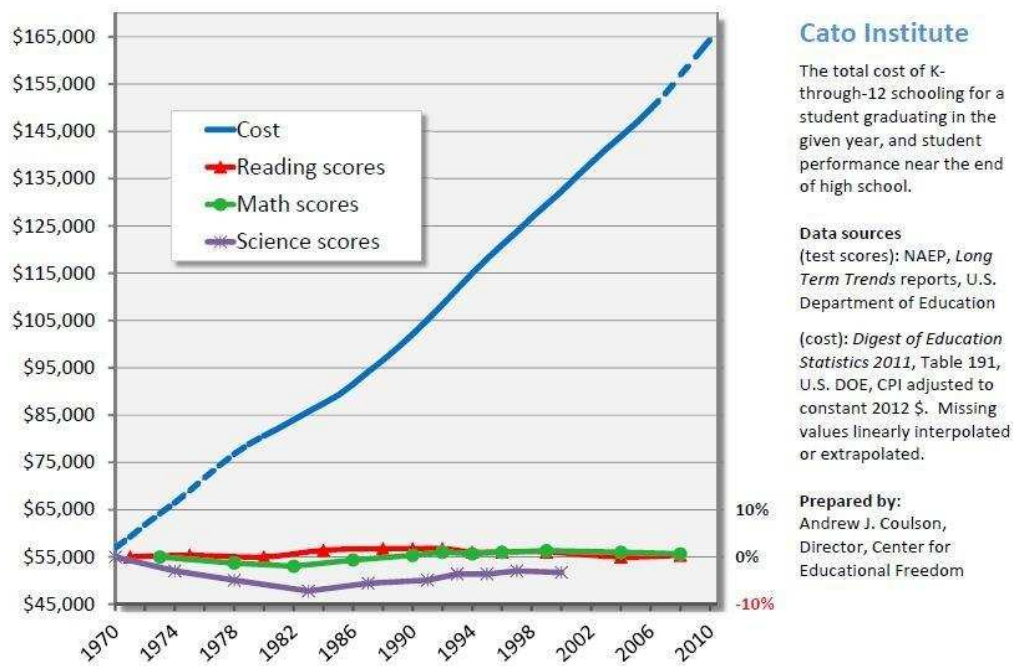
"I think what we find over time is valuable programs that can be added that have benefit to the students we're trying to reach," said Price.

But on the state level, there's no way to prove the added spending is translating to improved student performance. There hasn't been any kind of consistent testing done over the years in North Carolina to track long-term student progress.

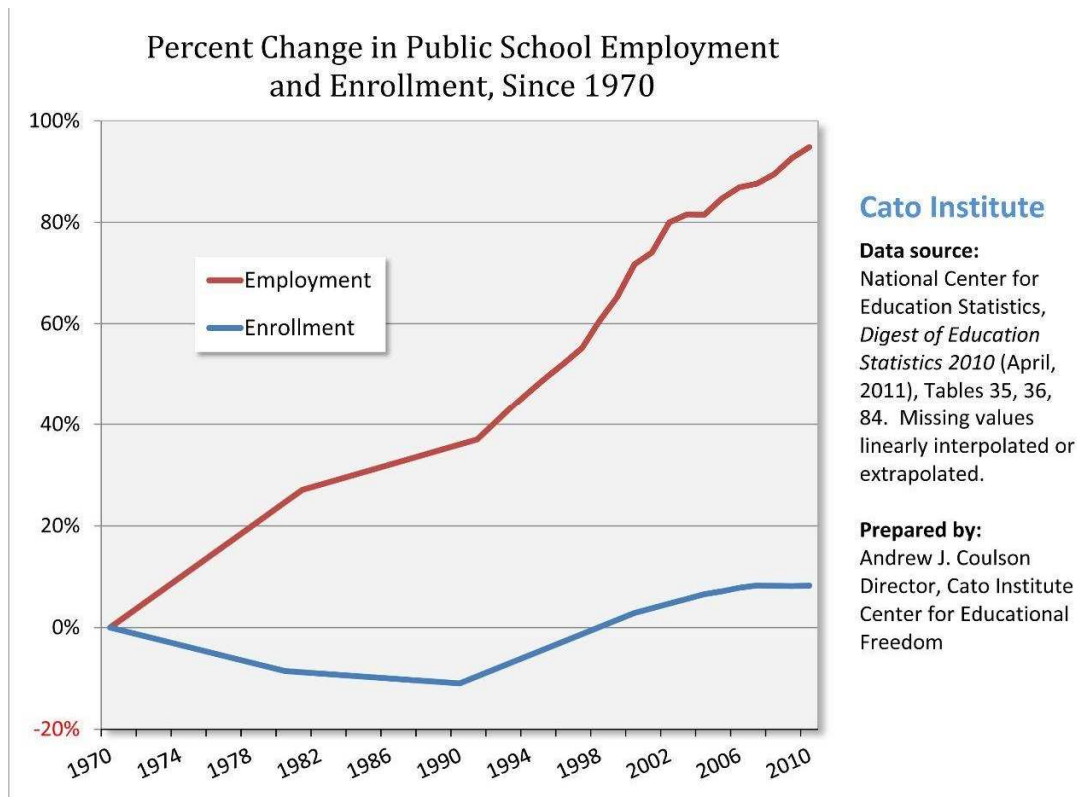
However, we can get some insight on a national level. Statistics from The Federal Department of Education show increased school spending across the country has not translated to significant academic progress.

Andrew Coulson is an education policy expert whose research is being used by North Carolina law makers focused on education reform. "If you look at the evidence over the last 40 years," Coulson explains, "what you see is students at the end of high school perform no better in reading and math than they did 40 years ago. In science, performance has actually gone down a little at the end of high school."

Inflation-Adjusted Cost of a Complete K-12 Public Education, and Percent Change in Achievement of 17-Year-Olds since 1970



Coulson recently wrote an op-ed piece for the Wall Street Journal, titled *America has Too Many Teachers*. He says the number of public school employees has almost doubled over the last 40 years, even though student enrollment has only increased by 8.5%.



Coulson says the problem is not how much individual teachers are getting paid, but instead - the sheer number of new hires we've added to the payrolls.

We asked Coulson why this information is rarely reported. "State and district officials have an incentive to understate how much is really spent per pupil, and to not mention if test scores have been stagnant at the end of high school for 40 years," he said. "It's not in their best interests to lay the facts out in all their grim reality, and as a result of reporters not covering this, the public just doesn't know about it."

So what's Coulson's proposed solution? He says Florida has adopted a tax credit scholarship program that's working well.

Private businesses there donate money for students to go to private school. Coulson says the decreased number of public school students reduces expenses for the state, and leads to improved performance in the public schools as they strive to compete with the private sector.

State Senator Phil Berger tried to launch a similar program in North Carolina this year, but his bill never became law.