

Gazette.Net

Officials: Low student spending can't stop a good education

by Guy Leonard

Staff Writer

Thursday, April 6, 2006; Prince George's Gazette

Prince George's County spends less on public school students than other large school districts in the region, but officials say that is no impediment to delivering a solid education.

In 2005 the county spent \$8,403 per student compared to Montgomery County's \$10,974 per pupil. Fairfax County, Va., spent \$11,022.

Baltimore City spent \$9,212 per student while the District spent the most at \$12,221.

Schools CEO John Deasy said that while more funding is always desirable, money is not the only factor in student achievement.

"If the money being spent is thoughtfully targeted, then you can achieve great results," Deasy said.

Education dollars should go toward professional development, early educational opportunities, math and reading fundamentals and help for struggling students.

"These will be priorities under my administration."

Money for students here is expected to increase this year. County Executive Jack B. Johnson (D) has approved the school board's request for a \$1.5 billion budget. It's the first time in 20 years that the school board has received its full budget request from the executive. The County Council is expected to act on the budget by the end of May.

Judy Mickens-Murray, school board member from Upper Marlboro, said that Prince George's received enough money to teach children effectively, but it must spend it more wisely.

“I’m not sure it’s all about how much money, but it’s how you spend it,” Mickens-Murray said. “We have a lot of programs that haven’t been as successful as others.”

She said the school system’s use of educational software to teach reading, for example, placed too much emphasis on technology. Putting money toward more teachers would be better, she said.

“Technology is good for reinforcement,” Mickens-Murray said. “I think children need a solid foundation before they get the technology, and you do that with a teacher.”

School Board Chair Beatrice Tignor said that the promise of a fully-funded schools budget means that students will see more resources.

“We certainly could do more to get more materials into the classroom,” Tignor said. “That’s where we need to put more of that money.”

One education advocate said the difference in expenditures shows up in several ways.

David Merkowitz, executive director of the Prince George’s County Business Education Alliance, said greater wealth and tax revenue allow Montgomery and Fairfax counties to pay teachers more as they seek higher levels of academic achievement.

Many pupils come into Prince George’s County schools poorly prepared for learning, forcing educators here to do more remedial education.

“We’re having to stretch our resources more than they are,” Merkowitz said

E-mail Guy Leonard at gleonard@gazette.net.