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Several steps to help improve county education

May 25, 2005
David Merkwitz

The FBI investigation into schools CEO Andre J. Hornsby's business dealings has brought another round of unwelcome publicity to Prince George's.

However this saga plays out, we must not lose sight of the goal on which every county resident should agree: Providing our children a quality education that lays the foundation for their success in life and for the county's economic future.

A new report by the Prince George's Business-Education Alliance shows just what's at stake.

"Investing in Our Future: Education and the Economy in Prince George's County" notes that by 2030, the county's economy could grow by 173 percent, almost double the rate for the entire region.

Prince George's may add 140,000 jobs, mainly in high-wage services; inflation-adjusted average wages would climb by over 50 percent, from \$46,460 to \$70,000.

However, the county can fulfill this promise only if it has the required infrastructure - especially a strong public school system.

Better teaching and greater parental involvement are crucial. Here are five other steps:

1. Fully fund Thornton

Under the Thornton bill, state aid to Prince George's schools will increase by \$350 million a year by 2008.

However, Governor Ehrlich's refusal to fund the bill's geographic cost-of-education index (GCEI), designed to compensate for higher prices in the suburbs, costs Prince George's about \$17 million annually.

Instead of allowing the GCEI to be held hostage in the slots debate, the Prince George's General Assembly delegation should get off its collective duff and pass legislation making the index mandatory.

2. Increase the county share of the schools budget

Our county government contributes only 44.5 percent of the school system's budget; excluding taxes designated by the state for the schools, that share drops to 29.7 percent.

Thus, it's hardly surprising that we spend less per pupil than adjoining counties, e.g., \$8,214 in fiscal 2004, compared with \$9,938 for Montgomery County.

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Thornton funds will erase some of that gap, but our neighbors are increasing spending on education - an example Prince George's should follow. County Executive Jack B. Johnson's 2006 budget represents some improvement but still falls short.

3. Expand the tax base

Adequately funding schools, police and other essential services requires additional tax revenue, but TRIM and the Homestead Tax Credit limit the county's options. New homes and businesses represent the best hope.

However, C.B. 89, adopted last year by the County Council, effectively declared a moratorium on new housing construction. It also threatens to cost the county millions of dollars in lost impact fees from new development and added sales, income, and property taxes.

We need a smart growth plan that preserves open space, encourages redevelopment of older communities and promotes both affordable housing and the high-end homes that will pay for better schools and services.

4. Fly first class

We say we want first-class services and facilities, but we're unwilling to pay for them. By not competing to hire and retain the best teachers and principals, we shortchange our children and their future.

We must demand excellence as well as accountability from our elected officials and public servants - and ourselves.

Spending more money may not always be the solution, but accepting less than the best will doom us to perpetual second-class status.

5. Stop the revolving door

Frequent turnover in school CEOs, senior management, and principals breeds complacency and sabotages reform. Whether Hornsby stays or goes, we must find ways to stabilize and strengthen leadership at all levels. Only then can we improve teacher and staff morale and build public confidence in school administration and educational programs.

Achieving excellence in public education requires that we overcome continuing power struggles, put aside competing agendas, and make needed investments.

It will take political maturity by Prince Georgians and concerted efforts by our elected officials. Our children and our county deserve no less.

David Merkwowitz is executive director of the Prince George's Business-Education Alliance.

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