

Florida Spends More, Not Less, on Education

By Greg Forster

Education is rarely out of the news in Florida, but the topic now looms larger than ever. Right after the Florida Supreme Court struck down the state's "Opportunity Scholarship" program, which offered vouchers to pupils trapped in chronically failing public schools, Gov. Jeb Bush reiterated his strong support for programs that promote parental choice.

As usual, the Governor's critics responded that what Florida's public schools really need is *not* vouchers but more money. Indeed, critics of school choice are constantly saying that Florida doesn't spend enough on its public schools and that the amount being spent is stagnant. Typical was a recent newspaper column by Florida Education Association President Andy Ford, who complained that Governor Bush has put a higher priority on tax breaks for the rich than on education.

However, a new study shows that Florida spends far more than most people think on its public schools – and that the amount has been growing, not stagnant or shrinking, as some critics contend. The study, co-sponsored by the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, the James Madison Institute, and the Collins Center for Public Policy, found that for each student in public schools, Florida spent more than \$8,700 – and that was in 2003-04, the most recent academic year for which the figures were available.

Do the math. For a class of, say, 20 students, that per-pupil rate of \$8,700 adds up to a whopping \$174,000. For that much money, one could hire a top-notch teacher for \$74,000 and still have \$100,000 to spend on overhead and other expenses.

Come to think of it, \$74,000 is a lot more than this writer makes each year. So if the state can't educate these kids for \$8,700 apiece, maybe it should send them on over. I'll do the job myself.

Critics almost always respond by pointing out that total spending includes not only the cost of operating the schools, but also the cost of building schools and covering the school system's debt. I've never understood the contention that those categories shouldn't count as educational spending. Try running a school system without building any schools. Better yet, see what happens if you borrow money and don't repay it!

Nonetheless, Florida has higher building and debt service costs than most other states. It's a high-growth state, and it's had to build a lot of schools fast. So let's see what Florida school spending looks like when we remove these factors.

The category of spending called "current expenditures" covers the costs of day-to-day school operations. Spending in that category was about \$7,000 per student in 2003-04. That works out to approximately \$140,000 for a class of 20 students. Subtract \$75,000 for a top-notch teacher, and you still have \$65,000 left to cover overhead and other

expenses. And this time you don't need to pay for a room to teach them in, since we excluded building costs. Again, I say: send them on over.

Another myth holds that current expenditures per pupil have been shrinking. Quite the contrary: The study finds that they rose a total of 9 percent over six years and that the growth accelerated after Governor Bush took office in 1999.

Unfortunately, the teacher union's rhetoric often gets a lot more attention than the facts. That undoubtedly explains why a new survey found that Floridians are badly misinformed about their state's actual level of spending for public education.

Half of Floridians think the state spends no more than \$4,000 on day-to-day school operating costs. Almost two thirds think it spends no more than \$6,000. When asked how much Florida ought to be spending, two thirds gave an amount that was equal to or less than the current amount Florida actually does spend.

Remember this the next time you hear that students wouldn't need vouchers if only Florida would quit shortchanging its public schools. If my employers shortchanged me the same way Florida shortchanges its public schools, I could retire early.

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