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U.Va. study shows inaccuracies in school census

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RICHMOND, Va.

Virginia's school divisions don't always get an accurate count of their school-age residents, resulting in misallocations of tax money--possibly by as much as \$17 million _ for public education, a University of Virginia study shows.

Researchers at the university's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service in Charlottesville compared their population estimates with the counts reported by 98 of the state's 132 school divisions and found that the way localities conduct their census varies widely, and often has resulted in undercounting or overcounting of Virginia residents age 5 through 19.

"The concern is unfair funding," Qian Cai, director of the center's demographics and workforce section, said Monday. "The pot of funding is fixed, so the concern is how to allocate, how to cut up the pie."

Under Virginia law, 1.125 percent of the state's sales tax goes to school divisions for public education. The money is distributed according to the number of school-age children reported by school divisions once every three years. The most recent triennial census was conducted in 2008; the next one is scheduled for 2011.

The study found that as much as \$17 million may have been misdirected to localities overreporting school-age children in 2007. "That same \$17 million theoretically should have gone to localities undercounting their population," the report said.

Sixty-seven school divisions underreported the number of school-age children in 2005, resulting in too little funding; 27 divisions reported too many children, resulting in too much funding, the report found. Only four school divisions--Grayson, James City, Nelson and Russell counties--counted accurately.

The study also found that the total triennial census in 2005 may have undercounted more than 41,000 children, or 4.2 percent of the overall total in the 98 localities.

Localities that are home to colleges and universities were excluded from this particular study because of differences in the way the school census and the Cooper Center count children who attend college away from home.

The problem is the Virginia Department of Education provides guidelines for conducting the census, but local school divisions are responsible for planning, paying for it and carrying it out. Often that responsibility is assigned to people who lack proper training or adequate time.

The state's largest school division, Fairfax County, for example, spent \$600,000 in 2005, according to the report.

"The triennial census presents a burden of time and resources on public school divisions, and unfortunately, does not result in accurate data," the report says.

Solutions suggested by the report include establishing a state-level triennial census with a standardized questionnaire and giving localities the option of using the Cooper Center's estimates of the school-age population to determine sales-tax distribution.

The report was presented recently to the education subcommittee of the Senate Finance Committee and is expected to be distributed to all General Assembly members.

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