

dailypress.com/news/opinion/dp-ed\_schoolfunding\_edit\_1202dec02,0,4477439.story

# dailypress.com

## Who's counting?

### In funding schools, Virginia wastes and misdirects money. There's a better way.

December 2, 2008

A census is such a huge undertaking that the federal government, with all its resources, only does it once a decade — and only with much agonizing and contention over the results.

Yet every locality in Virginia is required to do a census every three years. Without, in most cases, much in the way of expertise, resources or a handle on the thorny validity issues involved.

It's no academic exercise — or, to look at it another way, a very academic exercise. The results of the triennial census of school-age children are used to distribute more than \$700 million a year in state aid to local schools. That's the portion of the state sales tax — 1.125 percent out of the 5 percent — set aside for schools (in addition to aid from other state sources).

When it comes to counting, the experts in Virginia are the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia. Concerned about the validity of data used to make important decisions about two things important to Virginians — tax dollars and schools — the center recently took a look at the triennial census.

And concluded — no surprise here — that it isn't working.

Why would we expect it to? The state mandate to each school system is to count, in specified years (including 2008), the number of children within its borders age 5 through 19. The how is largely up to them. Some have resources, some don't. Some send out people door to door, some mail questionnaires to every home, some use the Internet. Some efforts are well designed and accurate, some aren't. Some residents cooperate, some just toss the form.

And — again, no surprise — some school systems over-count and some under-count. Error rates can be very high — as high as 24 percent in the Weldon Cooper Center's analysis.

The result: Some localities get more money than they would if the counts were accurate. Some get less. The center estimates that last year, localities that undercounted were shortchanged \$17 million. Among them was York County, to the tune of \$700,000. Localities that overcounted got more than their share; the center estimates that Isle of Wight and Gloucester counties each collected an extra \$360,000.



Break it down to the amount of money received per resident child, and the numbers are all over the place. Some localities got more than \$900, because they claim more children than the Weldon Cooper Center estimates they actually have. Some got less than \$600 per child, because they failed to count some children they should have.

Here's a better idea. Use a count that every school district already does — no muss, no fuss, no questionnaires, no surveyors. Every year, on the same day, every Virginia school system tallies the number of children enrolled. A lot rides on these counts, and schools know how to do them.

This method would give a more accurate count than the triennial census. And provide a more rational basis for doling out money. Since the sales tax money is sent to localities to support public schools, it ought to be based on the number of children *actually served* by those schools.

The current system gives localities money for everyone age 5 to 19 they claim on their triennial census, not just those who go to public schools, but also those who are home-schooled, institutionalized, in private schools. It ignores those enrolled in the schools' programs for 4-year-olds and includes some who have graduated or dropped out. It delivers a bounty to localities where a lot of children go to private schools — the public schools still get money for them — at the expense of those that do a great job of appealing to families with options.

The actual students-in-seats count method has another advantage: It would save the millions of dollars now spent on the flawed census. That money would be better used educating children than counting them badly.

It's time to rethink this wasteful, inaccurate, irrational method of allocating part of the state funding for education. With money tight for both schools and the state, this is the year to do it. The General Assembly can, when it convenes in January — and should.

Copyright © 2008, [Newport News, Va., Daily Press](#)