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Bad math skews school funding

York County might have lost about \$700,000 in state aid because of inaccurate student census numbers.

[By Jennifer L. Williams](#)

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Demographers at the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service found that some tax allocations to local school divisions might be unfair because they don't always count their school-age residents accurately.

York County and Poquoson were among those that might have missed out on funds in the recent past, according to the study.

Under state law, 1.125 percent of Virginia's annual sales tax receipts are returned to localities for public education. Funds are distributed according to the count of school-age children reported by school divisions once every three years in Virginia's triennial census.

Under- or over-counting results in unfair allocation of funds.

Study findings using the 2005 census included that methods for conducting the count vary widely between localities and that it's expensive — more than \$5 million when last calculated in 1995.

The census of school-age children counts students between 5 years old and 19. The study excluded Newport News, Hampton and Williamsburg because they were considered college towns with teenagers who are not permanent residents.

James City County's triennial count was accurate, and it was one of just four such cities and counties out of 98 included in the analysis.

York County undercounted by approximately 1,500 students, which meant it received about \$700,000 less in tax revenues, based on the Cooper Center's figuring. Poquoson undercounted by approximately 120 students.

The most recent triennial census was this year and there will be another one in 2011.

State Del. Phillip Hamilton, R-Newport News, who is coordinator for professional development for Newport News Public Schools, thinks the triennial census should be discussed further. He has had parents ask why



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unenrolled students are included, and why school divisions receive funds for them even though they don't teach them.

The count includes home-schooled children and those enrolled in private schools.

With state budget cuts looming, Hamilton said the data collection method should be re-evaluated.

"We need to be looking at the different things that we do, and we need to make some determinations if we need to keep doing them," he said. "The triennial census is one of the things we need to make part of the discussion."

Carl James, chief operations officer, oversees the triennial census for the York County School Division.

"It's a great starting point for us to take a look at a better way to make sure the numbers are accurate across the board," James said. "It's very difficult to know if you've done your job well when you don't know how many students you should find anyway. We're sort of going for a moving target out there because we don't know what it is."

This year York sent follow-up mailers to homes that didn't return census requests.

"The important thing to gather from this is we need a better approach," James said. For example, a school district's enrollment numbers would be a better starting point, he said.

Poquoson Schools Superintendent Jennifer Parish pointed out that the study found a higher student population for Poquoson, but the distribution of money based on it was lower. Her staff made some changes for the most recent census.

"It does require intense school division staff time to complete the census every three years," Parish said. "So we understand the point of view held by Cooper Center and many people throughout the state."

Population discrepancies

Actual 2005 triennial school census ages 5-19 versus 2005 Weldon Cooper Center population estimates:

Locality	School census	Cooper estimate
Gloucester County	7,700	7,536
Isle of Wight County	7,032	6,840
James City County	11,052	11,052
Mathews County	1,399	1,564
Poquoson	2,811	2,931
Suffolk	18,385	17,683
Surry	1,316	1,343
York	14,071	15,645

Source: Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia

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