

[Editorials](#) | [Letters](#) | [Columnists](#) | [Blogs](#)

Tuesday, November 25, 2008 |

[Orange, VA 45°](#) Feels Like: 41° Clear [View Warnings/Advisories](#)

## UVa study: Most Va. schools lack correct student data

*Text size: [small](#) | [medium](#) | [large](#)*

FROM STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

Published: November 25, 2008

Virginia's school divisions don't always get an accurate count of their school-age residents, resulting in misallocations of tax money for public education, a University of Virginia study shows.

At least one area school system, however, got the number right, the study showed.

Researchers at the university's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service 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.

Only four school divisions — Nelson, Grayson, James City and Russell counties — counted accurately, the report showed.

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.

### **Albemarle, city excluded**

That distinction excluded Albemarle County and the city of Charlottesville from the study, because of their proximity to UVa.

However, according to the report, seven other localities in the Charlottesville area were included in the survey — Buckingham, Fluvanna, Greene, Louisa, Madison, Nelson and Orange counties.

While Nelson's reporting was on-par with the Weldon Cooper estimate (Nelson underreported by one student), five of the other localities reported numbers that were at least 50 students further under Weldon

Cooper's projections.

Among those, Fluvanna County underreported the highest number of students, 707. Rounding out the field, Greene underreported by 482, Orange by 379, Madison by 269 and Louisa by 61.

The only Charlottesville-area locality to overreport was Buckingham County, which missed the Weldon Cooper mark by 26 students.

In all, those seven localities underreported by 1,873 students, according to Weldon Cooper.

In several cases the underreporting cut into the amount of funding the school systems have received.

In Fluvanna, the report shows the school system's underreported 2005 numbers entitled it to nearly \$400,000 more in state money, while in Greene County the underreporting took away close to \$250,000.

The underreporting estimate in Louisa actually gave \$135,000 more in state money to the county's schools than if it had reported a number closer to Weldon Cooper's.

That's because, statewide, the pot of money allocated for all schools remained the same, but according to the higher Weldon Cooper numbers it had to stretch further.

In Louisa's case, when Weldon Cooper adjusted the student population up by 61, the county was then competing for money with other schools whose numbers were re-estimated higher than Louisa's, giving the schools with higher re-estimated numbers more money.

There was a similar situation in Nelson where the report said the school system only underreported by one student. However, when Weldon Cooper re-adjusted the state money allocation, Nelson appeared to be overbudgeted by \$87,000.

### **Over and underreporting**

The report also showed Buckingham County should have received roughly \$110,000 less after over-reporting by 26 students, while Madison and Orange counties each missed out on more than \$100,000 in state money for their underreporting, the report said.

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 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."

The study found that as much as \$17 million may have been misdirected to localities over-reporting

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.

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.

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

### **‘Burden’ on school divisions**

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

Solutions suggested by the report include establishing a state-level triennial census with a standardized questionnaire and giving localities the option of using the Weldon 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.