

Schools Our Students Deserve: Per Pupil Spending is Everything

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We've all heard the saying: "Don't tell me what you value, show me your budget, and I'll tell you what you value."

The Wake County Board of Education and Wake Superintendent Dr. Jim Merrill passed a budget this year that reflects how much they value our students and their learning.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for our state's public school budget.

During the 2008-2009 school year, North Carolina educated more than 1.4 million students through the public school system. Dedicating about **\$5,900** (\$5,896) per student put us right in the middle of the nation for state funding for public schools. Today, in 2016, we educate **61,000** (61,077) more students but we actually spend **\$152** less per student than we did 8 years ago.

Our legislators swear up and down that they are putting more money into education, and while the total amount may have gone up slightly, it has clearly not kept up with our student population growth. Being a teacher in the public school system, the fact that they can't divide the total budget by the student population to see that is insulting. We have fifth and sixth graders here in Wake County that can show our legislators how to work that problem, and they can probably show them using a variety of methods.

No matter the method for solving, the fact is that our students are being valued less each year by the General Assembly.

Some members of our community may not completely understand what per pupil expenditure means or why it is important. Most people know we need money for textbooks, technology, and teacher assistants. What I hope folks begin to understand is that our state's per pupil expenditure directly impacts our Wake County Schools budget. The amount of money the state gives Wake County per child directly affects how many teachers and teacher assistants are in each school. It impacts how many students are in each classroom and the services each school can reasonably provide.

Per pupil spending is everything.

And when our county and our schools are given less funding per student than 8 years ago, we need to make it clear that this is not acceptable. Our Wake delegation cannot tell our county that they have to keep finding ways to supplement state funding because Hyde County can't do that for their school system and Robeson can't do that. In fact, there are very few counties in North Carolina who can help supplement the reduction in state funding over the years like Wake County has.

Our students deserve to be valued by the state, and that should be reflected in the budget. Our school district should not have to take a scalpel to the budget to find new ways to do more with less, nor should any other school district. If there is money to fund vouchers to private schools, then there is money to fund the Schools Our Students Deserve.

It is my sincere hope that school boards from across the state will speak and support increased per pupil spending from the legislature this year. Wake County's school board and superintendent have fearlessly set out to acquire funding and support for their students when less than enough was provided by the state. Our community -- the citizens of Wake County and our Wake County Commissioners -- has been courageous in its local funding increases to support our public schools. But taking action is about more than just Wake County. We need all school boards and the citizens they serve to stand together for the Schools Our Students Deserve for every child in North Carolina.

And, let's be honest, writing a budget would be a lot easier with a pen instead of a scalpel.