

ATTA Suggests Source of Education Spending Efficiencies

Comparable counties do better for less; their best practices could benefit Albemarle schools

Private industry constantly searches for ways to do more with less. Producing more and higher quality products and services with fewer resources and at less cost is a perennial goal of businesses. There is no reason why governments should not have the same attitude.

But does Albemarle County?

Other school districts in Virginia appear to be doing more with less when compared to Albemarle County. An analysis of 2009-2010 data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics, Schooldigger.com and 2007-2010 data provided by Education.com reveals some eye-opening information.

Is there potential for Albemarle County Schools to learn from other school districts how to spend taxpayers' dollars more effectively and efficiently?

SOL Performance Ranking

ATTA examined the best performing school districts in Virginia as ranked by SOL Mathematics and SOL English. While standardized testing is not the only measure of performance, it is the measure generally accepted by the Virginia Department of Education. Therefore, it provides a good basis for comparison regarding the overall quality of education provided within the school district.

The table below lists the top 20 school districts including Albemarle, which is ranked 19th. For each school district, it shows the total number of schools and students at all levels, spending per student, student-teacher ratio, and the high school dropout rate percentage.

School District	Rank of 130	# Schools	# Students	\$ per student	Stdnt/Tchr Ratio	% Drop Out 9-12
Falls Church City	1	6	1,967	\$16,923	15:1	1%
Scott County	2	13	3,963	\$8,812	16:1	1%
Botetourt County	3	11	4,947	\$8,805	18:1	1%
Hanover County	4	22	18,970	\$8,422	18:1	1%
Patrick County	5	5	2,642	\$8,618	17:1	2%
West Point	6	3	773	\$9,880	18:1	0%
Franklin County	7	15	8,729	\$11,102	17:1	3%
Williamsburg-James City	8	14	10,539	\$9,996	15:1	4%
Radford City	9	3	1,497	\$8,577	15:1	2%
Norton City	10	2	805	\$7,861	23:1	1%
Goochland County	11	5	2,422	\$9,499	17:1	1%
Salem City	12	6	3,930	\$9,381	16:1	2%
Roanoke County	13	26	14,937	\$8,522	19:1	2%

York County	14	18	12,893	\$8,715	18:1	1%
Highland County	15	3	273	\$12,954	14:1	0%
Russell County	16	14	4,326	\$8,391	17:1	2%
Lexington City	17	2	491	\$8,717	14:1	(no HS)
Poquoson City	18	4	2,491	\$8,351	17:1	1%
Albemarle County	19	25	12,815	\$11,025	16:1	3%
Mecklenburg County	20	10	4,837	\$8,562	15:1	4%
Average:		10.4	5,712	\$9,656	16.8:1	1.7%

Albemarle's Performance

We are often led to believe that the more we spend per student, the better our students will perform. While a performance rank of 19 out of 130 school districts is certainly a laudable achievement, the data reveals that only two systems in the top 20 spend more per student than Albemarle. One spends the same, and the remaining 16 (80% of the top 20) spend less. Spending more per student is not necessarily a guarantee for student achievement.

Other notable observations include:

- Of the top 20 systems, only two have higher (i.e., worse) high school drop out rates than Albemarle, one is the same, and 15 have lower (better) drop out rates. (One system has no high school.) It is important to note that dropout rates for all districts vary widely by year and even by high school. In Albemarle County, the dropout rate has varied from 1% to 4% over the last eight years.
- Albemarle has a lower (better) student/teacher ratio than 11 systems, is comparable with two, and is higher (worse) than the remaining six.

Based on these two measures, Albemarle's performance is -- *at best* -- average among the highest performing schools

Potential Cost Savings

There are several factors that affect per student spending, resulting from the size (number of schools and students) of a school district. Therefore, as a basis for valid cost savings comparison and analysis, we selected the top 20 school districts comparable in size to Albemarle.

Including only those school districts with at least half the number of schools as Albemarle and at least 75% of Albemarle's student population, the following school districts result for comparison purposes:

School District	Rank of 130	# Schools	# Students	\$ per student	Stdnt/Tchr Ratio	% Drop Out 9-12
Hanover County	4	23	19,100	\$8,422	18:1	1%
Williamsburg-James County	8	14	10,410	\$9,996	15:1	4%

Roanoke County	13	27	14,937	\$8,522	19:1	2%
York County	14	19	12,893	\$8,715	18:1	1%
<i>Average:</i>		<i>20.8</i>	<i>14,335</i>	<i>\$8,914</i>	<i>17.5:1</i>	<i>2%</i>
Albemarle	19	25	12,815	\$11,025	16:1	3%

These comparable four (and better performing) school districts have an average per student cost of \$8,914, compared to Albemarle’s \$11,025 (Albemarle’s cost is 23.7% higher). **If Albemarle per student spending were consistent with the average of the other four systems, Albemarle could save over \$27 million per year.**

On a budget of approximately \$150 million, this figure represents an 18% savings.

Analysis

The key question is: how are other school districts in Virginia achieving higher performance at less cost?

While there are likely legitimate factors that prevent Albemarle from achieving all of the implicit savings, even half the savings suggested above would represent more than an eight-cent reduction on the current real estate tax rate (from 74.2 cents per \$100 assessed value to 65.7 cents).

What efforts is the Albemarle County School District currently taking to learn from these peer counties? What outreach programs exist? What efforts are we making to share best practices?

Certainly, there is much we can learn. And there is potentially much other systems can learn from Albemarle.

Conclusion

Higher per student spending does not always equate to better student performance. While Albemarle’s student performance (by one measure) is good, other counties spend considerably less and enjoy somewhat higher achievement. There is probably much we can learn from those school districts--the only question is if we have the desire to do so.

If county government is truly committed to being good stewards of our tax money, it will make every effort to learn from other higher-performing school districts how to spend our money more effectively and efficiently.

Data was obtained from the following sources

- <http://www.schooldigger.com/go/VA/schoolrank.aspx> (2009-2010 school year) Schooldigger is a data warehouse for National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Dept of Education, and Virginia Department of Education data.
- <http://www.education.com/schoolfinder/us/virginia/districts/> was used to obtain spending, student-teacher ratio, and drop-out data. Data on education.com ranges from 2007 to 2010 .