

Hitting the 'Reset Button' on School Spending

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The Montgomery County Council, led by Council President Valerie Ervin, voted unanimously this week to hit the "reset button" on education spending. This could be one of the Council's most politically courageous acts in decades. So how did this happen?

In Montgomery County, education is a huge priority, and rightly so. For years we could afford to throw money into school budgets without thinking of their long-term affordability, and we have a fine school system to show for it. This worked when the economy was strong, but there was always a downside: State "maintenance of effort" laws require spending per pupil to be held constant or increase every year (even in jurisdictions like ours that spent far more than required in previous years). So when a severe recession hit, those state mandates remained, but the revenues to meet them simply were not there any more.

Anyone following the budget closely has seen this day coming since the great recession hit in 2008. It was inevitable that a major adjustment had to be made. Yet, conventional wisdom had it that local leaders would try to duck the issue again this year by hiding behind more short-term budget gimmicks. This week, the council surprised many observers by showing the two traits most lacking in elected officials today: backbone and leadership.

Adequate school funding is critical, and will be maintained. But when other county departments faced furloughs in recent years, and asked their employees to shoulder a more reasonable share of their benefit costs, school system employees didn't have to share the pain. Now, if the county council stays the course, perhaps the school board will finally be forced to clamp down on soaring employee costs, so we don't continue to pile on even more cuts on our firefighters, police and other County employees. Maybe now they will get the message and stop pretending the recession never happened.

In politics, no good deed goes unpunished, but this is the job they applied for when they ran for public office. In practical terms, the county will likely face a \$29 million fine next year for not reaching the maintenance of effort funding levels, but that is a small price to pay. Taking this one-time hit in order to put school spending back on a more sound financial footing will save hundreds of millions over the years to come and, quite frankly, it had to be done.

Education is and should remain a top priority in this County, but it cannot be treated as the only priority. We elect leaders to lead, and that is just what they have done this week. Now, if only Congress could get the message...

