

# Examiner Local Editorial: Montgomery schools get 'sacred cow' status

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By any measure, education is a top budget priority in Montgomery County. It spends \$15,582 per student on its award-winning public school system -- the second-highest per pupil expenditure in the nation. But a newly revised state education funding law is punishing Montgomery taxpayers for their generosity.

In April, Gov. Martin O'Malley signed a bill to eliminate "loopholes" in Maryland's Maintenance of Effort Law. The law is now forcing county officials to give their perfectly well-funded school system an additional \$30 million in fiscal 2014, regardless of the need. The County Council's Government Operations and Fiscal Policy Committee reports that with a \$71 million budget deficit looming for 2014, \$30 million will have to come at the expense of other county services.

The Maintenance of Effort Law is designed to prevent counties from slashing local education spending when state money comes in. But as written, it gives school districts no incentives to economize. It also threatens to squeeze out all other priorities for the sake of education, even in localities where education is more than adequately funded. The law illustrates why education funding decisions are best made at the local level and not in Annapolis.

In the case of MCPS, the school board has taken full advantage of the fact that the county now has no real control over its education budget by committing \$65 million to give school employees not one, but two cost-of-living raises. In a May 23rd letter, County Executive Ike Leggett, D, and County Council President Roger Berliner, D, questioned the "fiscal sustainability" of the two raises, pointedly noting county employees didn't get any raises. Thanks to the new law, the matter is entirely out of their hands.

Nobody can seriously argue that the quality of Montgomery County schools would be compromised if teachers got only one raise this year -- or even none. But the law ties the hands of council members and the county executive. When funding for parks, libraries, emergency responders and other services are slashed again next year, Montgomery taxpayers should direct their wrath to their state legislators. With the notable exception of Sen. Brian Frosh, D-District 16, all of them voted to give the schools a sacred cow status at the expense of everybody else.