

For Schools: Spend More or Spend More Wisely?

By J. Robert McClure and Dr. Susan Aud

The Miami-Dade School Board just approved a record budget for 2006-2007. It's a whopping 13.5 percent higher than the past year's budget, but even this steep increase wasn't enough to satisfy the teachers union, the school bureaucrats, or – evidently -- the *Herald* newsroom.

According to *The Herald*, the union's president complained that "this budget makes funding for qualified teachers a leftover," Superintendent Rudy Crew earlier had griped that the "The pot remains too thin to do the work of a major school system," and on Sunday, *Herald* Capital Bureau writer Gary Fineout opined, "The nation's fourth largest state still pays for education on the cheap."

Take a look at the numbers, however. Apparently, the minimum cost to serve Miami-Dade's 350,000 or so students next year is \$6.1 billion, including \$2.5 billion for school facilities and \$221 million for interest on debt – much of that debt incurred during a previous school-construction binge that a *Herald* investigation revealed was rife with waste, cronyism, and corruption.

If you just look at the total budget and divide it by the enrollment, Miami-Dade will spend more than \$17,000 per pupil. That is surely higher than the tuition at most of South Florida's better private schools.

But let's leave aside the spending for facilities and interest. Next year's operating expenses – mostly salaries -- will amount to nearly \$9,700 per pupil. Moreover, Miami-Dade's \$3.5 billion in operational expenses is more than 30 of the 50 states spent in 2002 for public education operational expenses for their entire state.

According to a recent study released jointly by the Collins Center for Public Policy, the James Madison Institute, and the Friedman Foundation, Miami-Dade's budget of \$9,700 per pupil in the coming school year is 29.3 percent more per pupil than three years ago and 20.6 percent more than a mere two years ago.

The final per-pupil data for 2005-06 are not yet available, but clearly the district's spending is moving up quickly. This would be fine if the additional spending were accompanied by equally large jumps in achievement.

Unfortunately, however, the 2006 FCAT scores indicate that only 27 percent of Miami-Dade's 10th graders can read at a proficient level or above. In other words, 73 percent of the 10th graders lack basic literacy skills.

Using failure to argue for more money is not unusual in public education's budget process, but at some point there needs to be evidence that the money is being spent efficiently and getting results.

Is the money being used efficiently? Many suggest that it is unfair, or simply wrong, to bring up efficiency in a discussion of education. After all, children aren't widgets.

But let's ask ourselves whether the only viable approach to a district budget discussion like the one in Miami-Dade is to simply ask for more, more, more. Isn't it possible that we are already spending enough but we just aren't spending it very wisely?

J. Robert McClure is President of The James Madison Institute, a non-partisan policy center based in Tallahassee. Dr. Susan Aud is Senior Fellow at the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, a national organization supporting parental choice in education.