

Opinion: Local Editorial

Local Editorial: Fairfax County Public Schools need outside audit

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More than half of all Fairfax County's expenditures will be spent on its public school system next year, but even that apparently is not enough. School Board members learned earlier this month that there's a \$30 million budget gap for fiscal 2014, which will widen to \$130 million in 2015. County Executive Ed Long has recommended a 5 percent property tax hike next year to make up the difference.



More than half of all Fairfax County's expenditures will be spent on its public school system next year, but there is still a \$30 million budget gap for fiscal 2014, which will widen to \$130 million in 2015. (Photo: Thinkstock)

But Fairfax County Public Schools Superintendent Jack Dale is hoarding a surplus estimated at more than \$100 million, including about \$25 million in "unassigned" funds and \$80 million "assigned, not committed" funds — which the School Board has not voted to spend. His third-quarter review also turned up an additional \$20 million in extra money. Add that all up, and the entire budget gap for 2014 — and most of the shortfall for 2015 — disappears.

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And if Dale is pinching every penny, why was he willing to leave \$6.3 million in state incentive compensation on the table?

Nobody outside Dale's staff knows for sure if any more money is squirreled away in his \$2.5 billion budget because the School Board does not employ an independent outside auditor to look over his books. None of the three School Board members who sit on the Audit Committee have the necessary professional and financial expertise to even know where to look.

Over the past few years, The Washington Examiner, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and the Fairfax County Federation of Citizens Associations have all been calling for an independent outside auditor of FCPS. A November 2012 resolution by the McLean Citizens Association noted that the current auditor that the School Board relies upon "is not independent of management because she reports to an Audit Committee that includes the Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent, and CFO" who hired her and continue to evaluate her performance. In other words, FCPS is basically auditing itself.

This arrangement is not only at odds with industry best practices, it ignores a recommendation by the Government Finance Officers Association that all audit committees have at least one independent financial expert who has knowledge of generally accepted accounting standards and principles and experience with internal audit controls. The School Board's Audit Committee flunks that basic test.

Without a truly independent outside audit of FCPS, supervisors should be extremely skeptical of any claims that property taxes must be raised again to keep the county's public school system afloat.

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