



## Public education spending dwarfs private school costs

**Analysts: Bureaucracies poach classroom funds**

**BY NATASHA LINDSTROM  
STAFF WRITER**

**Sunday, March 8, 2009/ Daily Press**

Editor's note: This is part one in a two-part series on education spending. Read more in Monday's Daily Press.

California public schools will cost taxpayers more than \$11,000 per student this year, according to state budget estimates.

But by the time money trickles down to Victor Valley school districts, that number drops to about \$8,000, Education Data Partnership records show.

**“The question should be asked by parents: Where is the rest of the money going?” said Rick Piercy, who has worked at local private and public schools for 30 years. “There is so much bureaucracy, so many laws, so many special interest groups, that people don’t realize that when it finally gets down to the districts and in the classrooms, it’s much less than what people think.”**

As school districts brace for hefty midyear cuts, some policy analysts argue that California's public education system is still overfunded and spends too much away from the classroom, while private school parents may be getting more bang for their buck.

“The fundamental difference is private schools have to be efficient to survive, whereas public schools have no incentive to be efficient but are getting funded no matter what they do,” said Neal McCluskey, associate director for the CATO Institute's Center for Educational Freedom. “You don't have a choice but to pay your taxes.”

At private schools, per pupil spending is often half as much as public schools. The average national tuition for private schools is about \$4,400, McCluskey said.

The biggest difference in private and public school spending may be teacher salaries.

About 85 percent of the state's \$66 billion in K-12 education expenditures is devoted to personnel, including more than 300,000 teacher salaries and benefits. The average teacher salary in the Victor Valley is about \$63,000.

At Victor Valley Christian School, Principal David Schnurstein said his teachers are “lucky” to make about 60 percent of what public school teachers are making.

Schnurstein said private schools also keep costs down by not paying for transportation — all Victor Valley private schools require parents to provide transportation to and from

school. Also, most of the private schools do not have programs for special education, which can get expensive, he said.

Some private schools also hold out on the latest classroom upgrades to trim budgets.

“Public schools insist they’ve got to have this new building with all these amenities, they have to have live studios and planetariums and greenhouses and things like that,” McCluskey said. “And really those are just bells and whistles that are trying to impress the public.”

Schnurstein said he doesn’t think his students are getting a discount education, just that the focus is on learning and not the latest technologies. VVCS may be small, at about 160 to 200 students, but in the past two years, not a single student has dropped out, Schnurstein said. More than 2,400 students dropped out of Victor Valley public schools last year.

Aside from local costs, public schools face much higher administrative and bureaucratic costs than private schools. The state spends hundreds of millions on bond repayments, administrative expenses and countywide programs.

California’s 6.3 million students are governed by 1,050 school districts, 58 county school offices and a state office in Sacramento.

“The state legislature cannot resist the temptation to play school board at the state level,” said Steven Frates, senior fellow at the Rose Institute for State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College. “The resources that would otherwise go to students go to these bureaucracies.”

The San Bernardino County Office of Education has a \$350 million operating budget.

**Piercy, who runs the Academy for Academic Excellence K-12 charter school in Apple Valley, said he values many of the state and county’s services, which range from health and welfare programs to work-force development. But more could be cut from higher-level agencies to get more money directly to the classroom, he said.**



JAMES QUIGG, DAILY PRESS

**GATHERING HOMEWORK:** Kelly Jung, Woojae Kang and Adrian Plascencia gather homework papers for biology class at Victor Valley Christian School. Administrators say parent involvement is the main reason private school students perform better.