



An Imprecise Tool to Fix Maintenance Costs for DC Schools

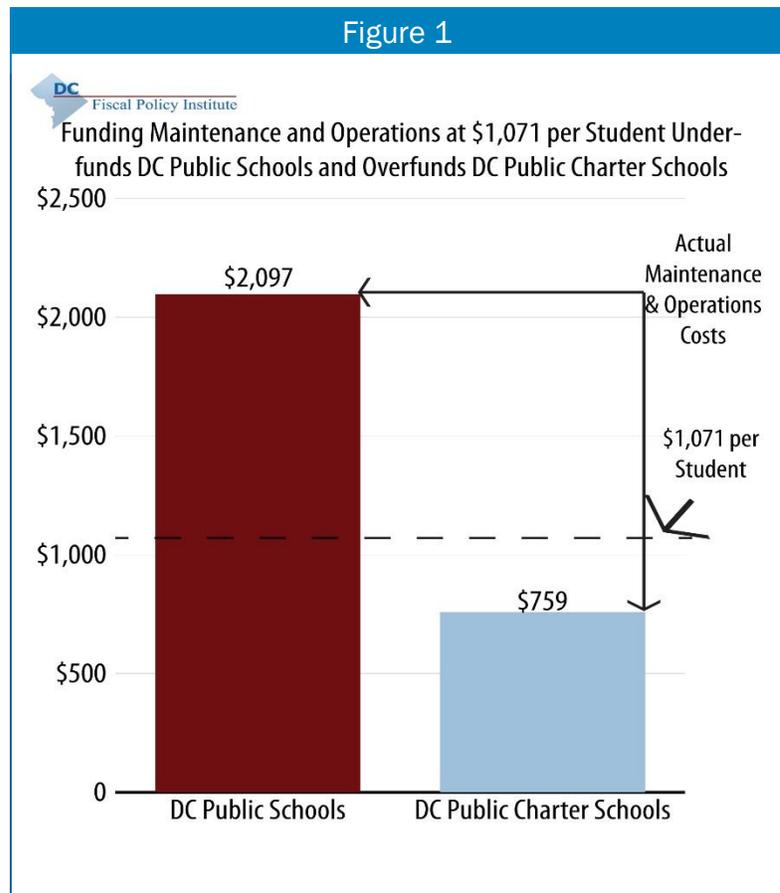
By Soumya Bhat

One of the biggest takeaways from the long-awaited public education adequacy [study released last week](#) was its recommendation for DC to spend more per-pupil to meet the instructional needs of our students, weighting the funding formula more heavily for poverty. DCFPI wholeheartedly supports this approach.

However, another major recommendation -- to use the per-pupil formula to budget maintenance costs for both traditional DC public schools and charter schools -- is quite problematic. It would leave DC Public Schools with less than what it needs for maintenance while giving public charter schools more than needed, on average.

The adequacy study suggests allocating maintenance funds on a per-pupil basis to both DCPS and charters, yet the facility needs are very different given the age and size of buildings in the two systems. DCPS operates older buildings that have deteriorating infrastructure, resulting in higher maintenance costs than many charter schools. DCPS also has a decent amount of unused space due to the shift in student population from traditional DCPS to charters, even though nearly 40 DCPS schools have closed in recent years. On the other hand, charter schools are often in spaces that are at student capacity.

This means that maintenance costs, when measured per student, are lower for the typical charter school than for DCPS.



Think about it this way: An empty-nest couple living in a large, older home needs to spend a lot more for maintenance than a family of four living in a newly constructed home. Yet under the study's funding structure, giving a flat amount per person for maintenance, the couple in an older home would get half of what the family in the newer home would get.

In other words, it doesn't make sense to fund maintenance on a per-pupil basis given large differences across schools in maintenance needs. An alternative and more sensible approach is to fund maintenance based on actual need. The study collected available cost data for both school sectors and while better data is still needed the current average facilities maintenance and operations costs by sector are¹:

- DC Public Schools – \$96.6 million or \$2,097 per student
- DC Public Charter Schools – \$21.8 million or \$759 per student

The recommendation of how much all publicly-funded DC schools should get on a per-student basis for their facilities maintenance and operations costs was \$1,071 per student, leaving DCPS with \$47.3 million less than they require to meet their actual costs – while giving charter schools \$9 million more.

The adequacy study suggested that the Department of General Services will make up the difference for DCPS expenses through a supplemental appropriation, but there are concerns that this is not guaranteed and that DCPS may have to use instructional dollars to meet these costs. Some say this change would provide DC's charter school sector with funding to improve their facilities and have more space. But the solution to charter school facility needs is not to give them more operational funds than they need, which may not necessarily go towards improving facilities.

Finally, the study acknowledges that the city doesn't have good data on actual spending on maintenance for both sectors. Complete charter cost data was not available to the study team, so they used the DCPS average cost per weighted square foot as the basis for the average charter costs. DCFPI agrees there is a need to gather accurate, complete data and match resources to actual need.

The education adequacy study shows that what we don't spend enough to meet the needs of our students. There are lots of ways the mayor could change the funding formula to help schools, but funding maintenance costs within the per-pupil formula should not be one of them.

¹ Table ES2: Total Facilities Maintenance and Operations Costs for District of Columbia Public Schools and Public Charter Schools (Fiscal 2013 and Fiscal 2014 Budgeted Amounts), "Cost of Student Achievement: Report of the DC Education Adequacy Study," January 2014.