

# **ELECTED OR APPOINTED SCHOOL BOARDS: IS ONE MORE ACCOUNTABLE THAN THE OTHER?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The election of school boards is relatively new to Virginia citizens. Only within the last 16 years have they been able to determine who will direct the education process of local school districts. Has this “say” made a difference? This study compares the expenditures for elected and appointed school boards in Virginia. After controlling for size, results suggest that the levels of expenditures were similar for both elected and appointed school boards. It does not appear that the presence of elected school boards has made a difference in school spending.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The education of children is a huge responsibility—one that oftentimes leads to considerable debate among parents, educators, politicians and more. While a state government is important in the education process, local school boards serve as the primary policy-makers within a school district. These boards have the power to create local policies, rules and regulations for the daily operations of the school district. Consequently, school boards often are at the center of every education debate that takes place within a locality. This paper analyzes whether the method of school board member selection, appointment or election, makes a difference in a school district’s operations. The first section briefly describes Virginia’s school system and the interrelationship of school districts and localities while the second part describes the proposed research method and results of the preliminary study. The third section discusses future research opportunities.

## **VIRGINIA’S SCHOOL SYSTEM**

According to the Constitution of Virginia, responsibility for the education of elementary and secondary school-age children in the Commonwealth rests with the General Assembly. These responsibilities include determining how local school boards should be chosen. Until 1992, school boards in Virginia were appointed by the governing board of each locality or by a special school board selection commission tasked with these appointments. The General Assembly “resisted efforts to change the method for choosing school board members because of the belief that the schools should be insulated from politics.” [3] However, in 1992, Virginia’s General Assembly passed legislation allowing localities to place a referendum on their ballot. This referendum provided citizens with the opportunity to vote on whether or

not their local school board should be elected or continue to be appointed. In the 16 years since this legislation passed and Virginia voters began to choose, 82 percent of the local school boards now have elected members. Some localities, such as Hanover County and the City of Norfolk, placed the referendum on the ballot; however, the citizens did not approve the change. Those localities continue to utilize appointed school boards.

Why did so many localities choose to elect their local school board members? For many, much of the debate prior to a referendum focused on the need for a school board that was more responsive to the needs of the citizens and more accountable to the public. After the citizens of Charlottesville passed the referendum in November 2005, University of Virginia Professor Jeffrey Rossman, one of the individuals spearheading the city's referendum, commented that the school board should now be able to move "in the direction of greater accountability and greater diversity." [2]

While local school boards are responsible for the daily operations of a school district, it is important to realize that Virginia's school systems are unique in that they are financially dependent upon the local county or city government system. The local county or city governing board must provide funding for school operations since school districts have no taxing power. This "dichotomy of responsibility for budgetary and policy decisions at the local level may provide a balance of power for education while creating an inherent conflict between the local governing bodies and the local school boards in Virginia." [3]

Has the election of local school boards actually resulted in more accountability? Or has it resulted in governing bodies that want to stay in office and are willing to do whatever it takes to do so? The ability to elect school boards has not led to a utopian educational system. New problems have arisen while old problems continue to exist. Citizens of some localities, such as Virginia Beach and Fairfax County, have questioned the success of elected school boards. The purpose of this analysis is to evaluate whether elected school boards are more accountable to the citizen than their counterparts, appointed school boards.

## **METHOD**

Evaluating the hypotheses required several sets of data including the school districts from the Commonwealth of Virginia and an identification of their status as either elected or appointed. Of the 135 school boards in the Commonwealth, 111 are elected and 24 are appointed. The school districts are represented at the town, city, and county levels and of the elected boards, 2 are towns, 23 are cities, and 86 are counties. Of the appointed boards, 1 is a town, 14 are cities, and 9 are counties. The Auditor of Public Accounts for Virginia provided information on the population, enrollment, total local government expenditures, and the expenditures on instruction by school district.

This study examines the expenditures made by the nine county school boards in comparison with a random selection of nine elected boards. The first nine counties represented by elected school boards were selected from an alphabetized listing. Data reported by the Auditor of Public accounts for the State of Virginia included the 2003-2006 reporting years. These annual data included the total local (county) governmental expenditures, the county population, enrollment in grades K-12, and the district's expenditures on instruction.

This study presumes the levels of accountability for both elected and appointed school boards to be equal, therefore the null hypothesis is assumed for all conditions. In particular, no differences are expected when comparing the average total local governmental expenditures across the four years between the two board leadership approaches. Similarly, no difference is expected when comparing appointed versus elected board per-student instructional expenditures. Finally, comparisons of the proportions of instructional expenditures to total local government expenditures is expected to reveal no differences.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Average values for each demographic were calculated across the years 2003-2006 for each school district and conditioned to generate the variable of interest. For example, the average annual total local government expenditure for Accomack County was divided by the average annual total county population to yield its average per capita total local government expenditure. A similar approach was used to generate the average per-student instructional expenditure and the proportion of instruction-to-total local government expenditures. The annual and average amounts for the appointed and elected school boards are shown in Appendices A and B, respectively. No enrollment data were available for 2006, noted as N/A in these tables.

Table I reports t-test results on the three hypotheses evaluating appointed versus elected school boards. Across the sample, there was no difference in the total of local government expenditures on a per capita basis ( $t = -0.3978$ ,  $p = 0.6960$ ). Similarly, there was no difference in the per-student expenditure on instruction ( $t = -1.1410$ ,  $p = 0.2707$ ), noting this covers the lesser period 2003-2005. Finally no difference was detected for the proportion of total local government expenditures spent on instruction ( $t = -0.7435$ ,  $p = 0.4679$ ).

**TABLE III:** Tests of Differences of Appointed and Elected School Districts

Condition	t-statistic	p-value
Appointed vs. Elected Total Local Government Expenditures, 2003-2006 ( $H_0=0$ )	-0.3978	0.6960
Appointed vs. Elected Average Per-Student Instructional Expenditures, 2003-2005 ( $H_0 = 0$ )	-1.1410	0.2707
Appointed vs. Elected Proportions of Average Instructional Expenditures to Total Local Government Expenditures, 2003-2006 ( $H_0 = 0$ )	-0.7435	0.4679

## CONCLUSION

The election of school boards is relatively new to Virginia citizens. Only within the last 16 years have they been able to determine who will direct the education process of local school districts. Has this “say” made a difference? The results of this study suggest that no significant differences exist in spending levels between the elected and appointed school boards. After controlling for size, levels of expenditures were similar for both elected and appointed school boards. It does not appear that the presence of elected school boards has made a difference in school spending.

Since this was a preliminary study, additional research will need to be conducted. In particular, the same statistical tests completed on the population of county school districts should be repeated on the city school districts. It is anticipated that no differences will exist but tests should be performed to confirm this hypothesis. The effects of other variables, such as political party or school board size, should be analyzed also. In addition, the impact of taxing powers should be explored. Since Virginia school districts have no ability to tax its citizens, tests should be conducted that compare them against similar school districts in other states that do have taxing powers. The absence of any significant differences in Virginia elected and appointed school board members may be a function of their inability to control both the revenue and expenditure process. In fact, Feuerstein suggests that “tension between school boards and local governments may one day lead to school boards with the power of taxation.” [1]

**APPENDIX A: Appointed School Districts. Total Government Expenditures, Per Student Instruction Expenditures, and Instruction as a Percentage of Total Government Expenditures, 2003-2006.**

	<b>School District</b>	<b>Total Local Government Expenditure (per capita)</b>	<b>Per Student Instruction Expenditure</b>	<b>Instruction as % of Total Gov't Expenditure</b>
2006	Accomack	\$ 2,131.10	N/A	43.67%
	Alleghany	\$ 2,601.54	N/A	43.34%
	Amherst	\$ 886.87	N/A	48.14%
	Greensville	\$ 1,776.91	N/A	22.01%
	Hanover	\$ 2,438.99	N/A	47.67%
	Northampton	\$ 2,817.42	N/A	47.08%
	Prince Edward	\$ 1,906.78	N/A	46.66%
	Richmond County	\$ 1,947.54	N/A	41.98%
	Southampton	\$ 2,251.11	N/A	45.34%
2005	Accomack	\$ 1,979.66	\$ 6,563.00	45.91%
	Alleghany	\$ 2,543.44	\$ 6,328.50	42.36%
	Amherst	\$ 1,758.69	\$ 5,989.92	50.77%
	Greensville	\$ 1,552.50	\$ 1,351.28	18.78%
	Hanover	\$ 2,299.55	\$ 5,619.16	47.91%
	Northampton	\$ 2,578.50	\$ 8,020.34	45.83%
	Prince Edward	\$ 1,851.91	\$ 6,472.48	46.96%
	Richmond County	\$ 1,896.63	\$ 6,204.86	42.25%
	Southampton	\$ 2,148.49	\$ 6,069.06	45.00%
2004	Accomack	\$ 1,843.78	\$ 6,249.29	46.30%
	Alleghany	\$ 2,446.30	\$ 5,863.29	42.00%
	Amherst	\$ 1,667.88	\$ 5,596.28	49.71%
	Greensville	\$ 1,494.49	\$ 1,281.03	19.74%
	Hanover	\$ 2,096.42	\$ 5,111.58	47.03%
	Northampton	\$ 2,424.92	\$ 7,245.15	44.90%
	Prince Edward	\$ 1,698.44	\$ 5,662.47	45.73%
	Richmond County	\$ 1,796.92	\$ 5,859.42	43.60%
	Southampton	\$ 2,170.10	\$ 5,760.42	42.34%
2003	Accomack	\$ 1,757.77	\$ 5,018.64	47.24%
	Alleghany	\$ 2,311.49	\$ 5,314.44	44.18%
	Amherst	\$ 1,535.35	\$ 5,421.25	50.16%
	Greensville	\$ 1,705.41	\$ 1,571.04	23.34%
	Hanover	\$ 1,967.90	\$ 4,689.21	47.28%
	Northampton	\$ 2,357.31	\$ 5,820.61	46.70%
	Prince Edward	\$ 1,539.91	\$ 4,761.40	47.00%
	Richmond County	\$ 1,752.59	\$ 4,736.76	42.38%
	Southampton	\$ 1,948.19	\$ 4,790.43	45.50%
Averages	Accomack	\$ 1,928.08	\$ 5,943.64	45.78%
	Alleghany	\$ 2,475.69	\$ 5,835.41	42.97%
	Amherst	\$ 1,462.20	\$ 5,669.15	49.70%
	Greensville	\$ 1,632.33	\$ 1,401.11	20.97%
	Hanover	\$ 2,200.71	\$ 5,139.98	47.47%
	Northampton	\$ 2,544.54	\$ 7,028.70	46.12%
	Prince Edward	\$ 1,749.26	\$ 5,632.12	46.59%
	Richmond County	\$ 1,848.42	\$ 5,600.35	42.55%
	Southampton	\$ 2,129.47	\$ 5,539.97	44.54%

**APPENDIX B: Elected School Districts. Total Government Expenditures, Per Student Instruction Expenditures, and Instruction as a Percentage of Total Government Expenditures, 2003-2006.**

	<b>School District</b>	<b>Total Local Government Expenditure (per capita)</b>	<b>Per Student Instruction Expenditure</b>	<b>Instruction as % of Total Gov't Expenditure</b>
2006	Albemarle	\$ 312.72	N/A	48%
	Amelia	\$ 1,970.14	N/A	44%
	Appomattox	\$ 2,013.66	N/A	48%
	Arlington	\$ 3,936.28	N/A	33%
	Augusta	\$ 1,947.34	N/A	53%
	Bath	\$ 3,568.16	N/A	40%
	Bedford	\$ 1,947.77	N/A	48%
	Bland	\$ 1,873.47	N/A	40%
	Botetourt	\$ 1,937.33	N/A	52%
2005	Albemarle	\$ 620.63	\$ 2,231.09	51%
	Amelia	\$ 1,881.43	\$ 5,867.44	46%
	Appomattox	\$ 1,895.33	\$ 5,768.14	51%
	Arlington	\$ 3,689.92	\$ 12,913.72	33%
	Augusta	\$ 1,818.29	\$ 6,232.89	55%
	Bath	\$ 3,337.06	\$ 8,501.12	41%
	Bedford	\$ 1,879.47	\$ 5,107.34	47%
	Bland	\$ 2,003.04	\$ 6,207.30	39%
	Botetourt	\$ 1,866.28	\$ 6,170.10	51%
2004	Albemarle	\$ 2,254.49	\$ 7,247.44	45%
	Amelia	\$ 1,785.52	\$ 5,436.80	45%
	Appomattox	\$ 1,689.50	\$ 5,236.43	52%
	Arlington	\$ 3,643.97	\$ 11,883.44	33%
	Augusta	\$ 1,675.68	\$ 5,835.66	55%
	Bath	\$ 3,026.11	\$ 8,116.40	42%
	Bedford	\$ 1,692.15	\$ 4,484.73	46%
	Bland	\$ 1,862.72	\$ 5,762.67	39%
	Botetourt	\$ 1,737.00	\$ 5,895.04	52%
2003	Albemarle	\$ 2,089.97	\$ 5,973.31	45%
	Amelia	\$ 1,686.34	\$ 4,537.64	46%
	Appomattox	\$ 1,679.53	\$ 4,390.82	50%
	Arlington	\$ 3,473.98	\$ 9,738.84	32%
	Augusta	\$ 1,616.40	\$ 5,068.63	56%
	Bath	\$ 2,704.06	\$ 7,516.72	44%
	Bedford	\$ 1,628.60	\$ 4,224.96	47%
	Bland	\$ 1,576.70	\$ 4,994.00	44%
	Botetourt	\$ 1,646.51	\$ 5,459.10	53%
Averages	Albemarle	\$ 1,319.45	\$ 5,150.61	47%
	Amelia	\$ 1,830.86	\$ 5,280.63	45%
	Appomattox	\$ 1,819.50	\$ 5,131.79	50%
	Arlington	\$ 3,686.04	\$ 11,512.00	33%
	Augusta	\$ 1,764.43	\$ 5,712.39	55%
	Bath	\$ 3,158.85	\$ 8,044.75	42%
	Bedford	\$ 1,787.00	\$ 4,605.67	47%
	Bland	\$ 1,828.98	\$ 5,654.66	41%
	Botetourt	\$ 1,796.78	\$ 5,841.41	52%

## REFERENCES

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