

Talbot County Taxpayers Association, Inc.

P.O. Box 438
Easton, Maryland 21601-8907

February 21, 2011

Ms. Hilary Spence
Editor
Talbot County Public Schools 2010 Annual Report
12 Magnolia St.,
Easton, MD 21601

Dear Ms. Spence:

We commend you and all involved for the production of this year's **Annual Report**. It is a high-quality document that gives Talbot County citizens valuable insights into the performance and value of their public school system. It was particularly pleasing to hear from Dr. Karen Salmon during her recent presentation to the County Council that the Report was paid for completely by advertisers and no taxpayer funds were required.

It was very gratifying to see that our school system is one of the top performers in the State -- in a state where schools are ranked among the best in the country. The Fact Book for 2009-2010 put out by the Maryland State Department of Education lists many important instances where the State's public schools are number one in the country.

The **Annual Report** shows Talbot County's public schools performing at or better than state averages on the Maryland State Assessment tests. The number of Advanced Placement Scholars is high and growing each year. One source noted in the Report cites Easton and St. Michaels High Schools as two of the nation's top high schools with challenging programs.

Given these performance results, we are not sure how to interpret the way you present the bar chart showing per-pupil revenues for each of the counties. You show Talbot County schools near the bottom of the chart with the third from the lowest revenue per pupil. You highlight that Talbot County public school per-pupil revenues are \$2,063 "below the state average."

We are perplexed that you are not touting this as a major accomplishment. Would it not be fair to interpret this information as showing the efficiency and effectiveness of our public school system? The system is producing above-average results with revenues almost 15% lower than average. This is a testament to the outstanding performance of the system's superintendent, administrators and teachers.

Leveraging performance of highly qualified teachers through technology is almost certainly one of the important factors in the system's efficiency and effectiveness. The Report shows that the TCPS well exceeds the state average in its percentage of "Highly Qualified Teachers." The recently completed Johns Hopkins University study confirms the value of the high school one-to-one laptop program. Dr. Salmon in her presentation to the County Council talked of other technology improvements in the classrooms.

We suggest the bar chart of per-pupil revenues be reversed to put the county amounts in ascending, rather than descending, order. You should not talk about "below average," but describe our County's revenue per pupil as "better than the state average."

In her presentation to the County Council, Dr. Salmon presented a bar chart showing Talbot County ranked fifth highest in the state for local funding per-pupil. The Fact Book for 2009-2010 reports that Talbot County receives the lowest amount among all the counties of combined federal and state support per-pupil. We believe this is important information that provides a better context in which citizens can evaluate the amount of Talbot County's educational spending. This information should be included in future annual reports.

The bar graph presented in the report that compares our average teacher salaries to the other counties is quite misleading. It seems the report is implying that teachers in our school system are the lowest paid in the State. This is not the case.

The data from which this chart was produced evidently come from The Fact Book. It appears the amounts presented in The Fact Book have not been controlled for two key variables -- the average longevity/experience and average educational levels of each county's group of teachers.

The Professional Salary Schedules for Maryland Public Schools published by the Maryland State Department of Education present the salary schedules for each public school system in the State. Advancement of a teacher within these salary schedules is a function of education level and years of teaching in the system. For the school year 2009-2010, Talbot County teachers at step 5 with bachelor's degrees are the sixth highest paid in the State. These are the newer teachers who now have enough experience to become valuable assets of the system. This group of teachers is paid the highest among the Maryland counties on the Eastern Shore.

The salary for Talbot County teachers, at step 10 with master's degrees, ranks 14th -- very near the middle -- among the State's 24 county school systems. Their salary ranks third among the nine Maryland counties on the Eastern Shore.

In fact, at no salary step level do Talbot County teachers rank last in the State, or even close to it. Therefore, it is seriously misleading to present, as you do in the **Annual Report**, a bar chart that implies teachers in Talbot County are the lowest paid in the State.

We have made some calculations from available data to control for the variables of longevity and experience. We cannot be precise because we lack the actual salary steps for all public school teachers in Maryland. However, we believe our calculations are accurate enough to provide reasonably accurate comparisons. Our calculations show that the adjusted average pay for Talbot County teachers is tied with Cecil and Worcester Counties for the 12th position, not last, among the State's 24 county public school

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systems. Our teachers' average salary level is tied for first place on the Eastern Shore, also with Cecil and Worcester Counties.

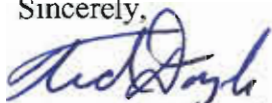
While it goes somewhat beyond the scope of the teachers' salary chart, it is important to note that benefits are an important part of total compensation. Because teachers did not get their contractual salary increase, their contract stipulates that the school system pay 98% of their health-care benefits, rather than the usual 85%. We have not taken the time to evaluate the amount other counties pay for health benefits, but we are pretty sure 98% lies well outside of the norm. Factoring in the value of healthcare benefits could further improve Talbot County's teacher compensation ranking, possibly up to 9th out of 24.

With our comments on relative teacher salaries among all the counties, we do not intend to judge whether the teachers in Talbot County are over or under paid. That is a judgment for others to make, who have better knowledge about all the relevant factors that should be considered in setting pay levels. We simply wish to put Talbot County teachers' salary levels in a context in which they can be better evaluated. Discussions and negotiations regarding teachers' salary levels should always, in our view, take place in an environment in which accurate comparative data are available to all.

It's a small point, but in evaluating the comparative financial information presented in the annual report, we found that data from 2008-2009 were used. We realize county comparative data for 2009-2010 were not available from the State at the time you went to press. But since these data are mixed in with other information for 2009-2010, we suggest in the future you identify information that is drawn from years other than those for the one covered by the report

We appreciate having this opportunity to comment on the **Annual Report**. Should you wish to reply or discuss any of these comments, you may reach me at tdoyle2000@aol.com or at 410-745-3077.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Doyle, President
Talbot County Taxpayers Association, Inc.

CC: Dr. Karen Salmon, Superintendent, Talbot County Public Schools
Mr. Andrew Burke, President, Talbot County Education Association
Talbot County Board of Education
Talbot County Council