



Fees put a price on 'free' public education, report says

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Virginia students can pay hefty sums for free public education, a new report finds.

A single mother of three from Roanoke County paid nearly \$200 in school-related fees for materials, science and technology classes, gym uniforms, lockers and other items.

To pay for those fees on top of her other expenses, the mother took out a loan against the title of her car, which she is still paying seven months later, according to a report released today by JustChildren, a legal group that aids low-income families.

Angela Cioffi, an attorney with the group, presented her findings to the state Board of Education today. She urged members to revise their regulations to prohibit mandatory fees for instruction and coursework.

Until then, she wants Billy K. Cannaday Jr., state superintendent of public instruction, to issue a memorandum to school districts clarifying their obligations under state law.

"In bringing this to your attention, it is not our intent to deprive public schools of much-needed revenue," she told the board. "We are troubled, however, when we see schools passing on costs to students, and hope you will join us in our efforts to eliminate these fees."

Board members did not immediately respond to Cioffi but Department of Education spokesman Charles Pyle said the board may want to consider including a greater level of specificity about the fees in the state law. It appears that section was last revised in 1980.

School districts charge dues and fees for a plethora of supplies and courses. For many parents it's a rite of fall to pay for school expenses -- on lists that sometimes extend over multiple pages.

JustChildren, a program of Legal Aid Justice Center, requested fee lists, school-board policies pertaining to fees and waiver information from 26 of the state's 132 school districts. Almost every district reported charging some kind of fee, the report states. Several said they try to accommodate families who cannot pay.

Goochland County schools were highlighted in the report for a \$20 instructional charge at the middle school, among other fees. Tom DeWeerd, director of secondary education for Goochland public schools, said the division charges fees for anything "over and above the basics."

He said they have never had a problem with students paying the fees, adding that the school division works with families who cannot afford to pay. "We try very hard to reduce our fees to kids."

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Staff writer Holly Prestidge contributed to this report.

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