

❖ my turn

Get rid of school fees

By Richard Eckstrom
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AUG. 30, 2013 -- For families with school-age children, the end of summer marks a transition from warm weather relaxation to the excitement of starting a new school year filled with new knowledge to gain, new friends to meet, and extracurricular activities to pursue.

And, lest families without school-age children forget – school fees to pay.

Actually, although it's been many years since my K-12 days, I can't remember my parents ever being assessed the kinds of school fees I'm hearing about these days. And I don't remember them when my children were in school either.



Simply put, many people strongly feel that public school fees are out of control.

The examples are endless, and NBC News documented some of them in a recent report:

- An irate mother in a suburban Chicago school district posted a photo on Gawker.com of the mandatory fees for her 10th-grade daughter that included a \$300 laptop.
- Schools in Huber Heights, Ohio, charge \$428 to participate in athletics – per student, per sport.
- A mother in Ann Arbor, Mich., said she must pay \$20 yearly class fees for her two high schoolers; and if the total for each isn't paid by their final year, the students can't take part in their senior class trip.

Some public school districts, according to NBC News, are going so far as to send unpaid fees to collection firms. Some are forbidding students from participating in activities until their fees are covered.

While the article did not mention any South Carolina instances, public school fees are rampant, pricey and on the rise in our state as well.

You don't have to be a parent with a child in school to know that this is pushing the limit. I mean, all of us already are funding our public schools through the taxes we pay. What's more, these fees impose real

hardship on a typical household, which must make real sacrifices to carve the money out of its monthly budget.

Just as bad, if not worse, the fees foster some real inequality problems when it comes to students whose parents can somehow afford them – thus enabling their children to participate in these normal school-based activities – and those who cannot.



I'll say again that student fees – certainly on this level anyway – simply didn't exist for most parents when we were in school.

So, what gives?

I don't have all the answers and probably no one does. But a few explanations spring to mind right away, and believe me I see plenty of these things in my role as the state's chief accountant operating a

centralized transparency website for South Carolina school districts' spending.

I think there's entirely too much money being spent on travel, conferences, food and, most of all, very high administrative salaries for lots of non-teaching positions.

No one disputes that we need high-quality leadership in our public schools, but why is it that we pay superintendents, for example, exorbitant six-figure salaries? When you add car allowances and other perks that superintendents often receive, it's as if we've created a gold-plated class of school district CEOs.

Could that be why more and more parents are abandoning public schools?

I don't mean to vent here; it just seems like something's gone very wrong and we've really gotten away from the selfless mission on which our public education system was founded.

In any case, the General Assembly could and probably should cap, if not eliminate, student fees. Meanwhile, challenge administrators at your local school to trim non-essential spending enough to significantly cut or eliminate fees for students.

Now that would be leading by example if they listen to you.

Richard Eckstrom is the comptroller general of South Carolina.

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