

Lies, Damned Lies, and Distorted Financial Statistics

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Introduction

- A critical examination of:
Schaeffer, Adam B. "They Spend WHAT? The Real Cost of Public Schools." The Cato Institute. March 10, 2010. Retrieved 29 March 2010
http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=11432
- This presentation is in part an expansion of remarks in a review published in May, 2010:
Altemus, Vaughn. (2010, May 5). Review of "They Spend WHAT? The Real Cost of Public Schools."
Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved May 5, 2010
<http://epicpolicy.org/thinktank/review-they-spend-what>

Epiphany!

Per-Pupil Spending in the Los Angeles, California, Metro Area (Cato, p. 8)

District	Real Public	Stated Public	NCES	Estimated Private	Higher than Stated	Higher than NCES	Higher than Private
Los Angeles (city district)	\$25,208	\$10,053	\$13,341	\$8,378	151%	89%	201%

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Introduction, continued

- The opinions expressed here are entirely those of the presenters, not their respective Departments of Education
- We call this article to your attention because it illustrates a problem we all face chronically: the use of the financial data we report to build a political argument, *which is entirely appropriate*
 - But in the process, deliberately or more often unintentionally, the data are sometimes distorted

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Presentation objectives

In this irreverent session the presenters will:

- Share their experiences deconstructing the Cato report figures in order to rebut its apparent presumption that purveyors of education financial figures are out to mislead the public
- Consider the valid reasons for differences between measurements of educational spending
- Contemplate whether apples are inherently superior to oranges
- Reflect on the seemingly direct relationship between complaints about education spending on administration, and demands for data that require expensive increases in education administration

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Overview

- The policy point Dr. Schaeffer is attempting to make is that people consistently underestimate the cost of education
 - Because the figures presented to them by local boards of education, state departments of education, and the NCES systematically exclude substantial costs of education
- And that this lack of accurate information makes informed decisions on education spending impossible
 - If voters knew the real cost of education, they would demand that education spending be lowered

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Overview

- Our argument is that this is a case of someone starting with a conclusion and building a set of numbers to support it
- And that Schaeffer's "real" cost of education is grossly overstated by an error in his calculation
 - He includes both capital expenditures and the cost of the debt service that financed those expenditures
- And that the "best" data set for discussing the appropriate cost of education isn't obvious
 - And may vary by jurisdiction

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Overview

- Schaeffer gives no guidance for determining what the cost of education should be
 - And no acknowledgement that the cost of educating students will vary dramatically among districts
- We feel some obligation to defend our colleagues and ourselves from the implication that those who produce, distribute and analyze education finance numbers are misleading voters through duplicity or their own ignorance

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Schaeffer's Case: The "Real" Cost of Education



- Dr. Schaeffer presents poll data indicating that when asked the cost of education per pupil, people overwhelmingly give answers significantly lower than NCES figures
 - He concludes that voters and policymakers are unable to make informed decisions about education spending

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Schaeffer's Case: The "Real" Cost of Education



- The report's primary finding is that the most widely available measures of per-pupil spending systematically understate spending within school districts

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Schaeffer's Case: The "Real" Cost of Education



- Dr. Schaeffer compares two publicly available figures for each district:
 - A standard NCES per-pupil spending number
 - "Stated public" spending per pupil
- With two figures of his own calculation:
 - "Real" public school spending per-pupil
 - Estimated private-school spending per pupil

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Schaeffer's Case: The "Real" Cost of Education



- The primary comparison is between the "Publicly stated" figures, and Schaeffer's "real" figure
 - In every case he finds his "real" figure to be higher, generally much higher
 - Differences range from:
 - ⇒ 151% in the infamous LAUSD
 - ⇒ To an atypically low 3% in North Chicago

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The “Real” Cost of Education, revisited



- We'll take a look at the two publicly available figures, presented in their appropriate context
 - And the two produced by Schaeffer's calculations

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The “Real” Cost of Education, revisited



- NCES Expenditures per-Pupil figures
 - Many to choose from
 - <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/bat/glossary.asp?letter=T>.
 - None include all spending – and none pretend to
 - All are designed for comparability
 - ⇒ Across states or districts
 - ⇒ And across time

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The “Real” Cost of Education, revisited



- Stated Public Spending per-Pupil
 - Varies substantially among jurisdictions
 - All spending per pupil is unlikely to be included in any one number
 - ⇒ For very good reasons
 - ⇒ Sometimes, the only “spending” the public wants to know about is the spending over which they have any measure of control

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The “Real” Cost of Education, revisited



- Schaeffer’s “Real” Spending per Pupil
 - As big a number as he can make
 - ⇒ Current expenditures
 - ⇒ Equipment
 - ⇒ Debt Service
 - ⇒ Capital Construction
 - These categories introduce duplication
 - ⇒ The last 3 cannot be linked to pupils in a given year

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The “Real” Cost of Education, revisited



- Estimated Private Spending per Pupil
 - NCES Survey: National Median Highest Tuition Paid in Private Schools, FY 04
 - ⇒ Inflated to FY 09 dollars
 - ⇒ Adjusted upward by 25% to allow for costs not covered by tuition
 - ⇒ Adjusted by regional per capita income data
 - Figure bears no relation to the cost of any specific private school

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The “Real” Cost of Education, revisited



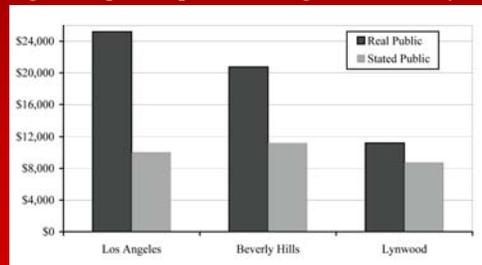
- In a comparison to be expanded upon later, Schaeffer compares the biggest apples he can grow to sets of oranges, precisely defined for specific purposes
 - And finds the oranges lacking

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Deconstructing Flawed Figures

- The most egregious example of the difference between “public stated” and “Real” spending was the Los Angeles Unified School District - Cato cites a difference of 151% (!)

Real Spending Per Pupil Compared with Figure Provided by Public Schools (Cato p. 7)



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Deconstructing Flawed Figures

Per-Pupil Spending in the Los Angeles, California, Metro Area (Cato, p. 8)

District	Real Public	Stated Public	NCES	Estimated Private	Higher than Stated	Higher than NCES	Higher than Private
Los Angeles (city district)	\$25,208	\$10,053	\$13,341	\$8,378	151%	89%	201%
Beverly Hills (high-income district)	\$20,751	\$11,205	\$18,394	\$8,378	85%	13%	148%
Lynwood (low-income district)	\$11,215	\$8,761	\$10,816	\$8,378	28%	4%	34%

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Deconstructing Flawed Figures



- We reverse-engineered the Cato figures to quite close - within \$6 (our analysis in handout)
 - ⇒ *“Your coming within \$6 amazes me. I don’t even try to get that close with my checkbook.” ~V.A.*
- As predicted, the biggest differences between the “public stated” spending and the author’s “real spending” were the inclusion of capital construction costs and debt service costs
- But there were a few other flaws...

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Deconstructing Flawed Figures



- A few of the other flaws:
 - Mismatched fiscal years
 - ⇒ \$25,208 “real” figure is from 2008-09
 - ⇒ \$10,053 “stated” figure is from 2007-08
 - ⇒ \$13,341 NCES figure is from 2005-06
 - To his credit, the author discloses this
 - But it could be significant - capital construction costs, by their nature, vary considerably from year to year

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Deconstructing Flawed Figures



- Other flaws, continued:
 - Mismatched sources
 - ⇒ \$25,208 “real” figure is a budgeted amount
 - ⇒ \$10,053 “stated” and \$13,341 “NCES” figures are actual amounts
 - Definitely significant - it ignores inevitable “slippage” between budget and actual
 - ⇒ There is a time and a place for comparison of budget to actual (during budget development for example) - but this report wasn’t that time or place
 - ⇒ And this gets worse – more shortly

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Deconstructing Flawed Figures



- Other flaws, continued:
 - Mismatched bases of accounting
 - ⇒ Public schools follow governmental GAAP (modified accrual basis of accounting - capital construction costs are recognized in the year of expenditure)
 - ⇒ Most private schools follow private-sector GAAP (accrual basis of accounting - capital construction costs are recognized via depreciation expense, over the capital asset’s estimated useful life)
 - ⇒ Potentially very significant - capital construction costs are huge in the year of construction, but depreciation costs are relatively small & “smoothed” over time

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Deconstructing Flawed Figures



- Other flaws, continued:
 - Dr. Schaeffer compares public education costs to private school costs
 - ⇒ Questionable comparison – should the instructional needs of the populations served (and therefore the costs incurred in serving those populations) be expected to be the same?

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Deconstructing Flawed Figures



- Other flaws, continued - back to his use of budgeted figures:
 - As far as we can tell, Dr. Schaeffer used the “Authorized Amounts” column of LAUSD’s document (in handout) for his “real cost”
 - ⇒ The “Estimated Amounts” column would have been a more accurate measure
 - ⇒ This alone would account for ~\$6,000 of the difference between “stated public” and “real” costs

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Deconstructing Flawed Figures



- Other flaws, continued:
 - Aside from ignoring slippage, the choice of the “Authorized Amounts” column is flawed because it contains:
 - ⇒ Total amounts authorized for capital construction costs that LAUSD *knows in advance* will span multiple years (!)
 - ⇒ Capital construction and debt service costs for Adult Ed and other programs, that the author intended to eliminate from his calculations

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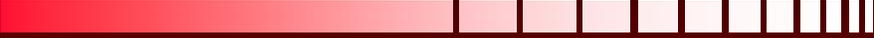
Deconstructing Flawed Figures



- Other flaws, continued:
 - To confirm our analysis, we spoke with budget staff from LAUSD
 - No one there had spoken with Dr. Schaeffer
 - No one there was aware of the article
 - They validated our concerns, and added a few of their own

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Deconstructing Flawed Logic



- In scrutinizing the figures in the report, we couldn't help but notice a few discrepancies in the logic.

“It is not so great a trick to win the crowd,” Soren Kierkegaard once observed. “All that is needed is some talent, a certain dose of falsehood, and a little acquaintance with human passions.”

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Deconstructing Flawed Logic



The Cato article's argument seems to go something like this:

1. The author asserts that apples are superior to oranges
2. He then attacks oranges because they are not apples
3. He publishes an exposé asserting that producers of oranges deliberately mislead consumers of oranges – despite the fact that:
 - Producers of oranges disclose that they produce oranges
 - They disclose that oranges are not apples
 - They disclose *why* they produce oranges (without discrediting those who produce apples!)

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Deconstructing Flawed Logic



Some direct quotes from Dr. Schaeffer:

“It’s impossible to have an honest debate about education policy if the public schools can’t be straightforward about their spending.”

“In many cases it seems schools don’t want you to see the real price tag.”

“[XYZ] School District offers a pretty straightforward example of how school districts obscure spending from parents and taxpayers.”

“Unfortunately, most school districts do their best to hide that information.”

“This kind of dishonest accounting is a nationwide problem.”

(Source: video at http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=11432)

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Deconstructing Flawed Logic



- There are legitimate reasons for why education expenditures might be measured differently for different purposes
- But it is unfortunate for an author to discredit those who report in a manner differently from his
 - Without acknowledging that the reports are designed to answer different questions

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Deconstructing Flawed Logic



- So we had some fun spotting logical fallacies (remember Logic 101 in college?)
 - Fallacies are statements that might sound reasonable or superficially true, but are actually flawed or dishonest
 - “Personal Attack” (*argumentum ad hominem*, literally, “argument toward the man”) is one such fallacy; aka “Poisoning the Well”

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Deconstructing Flawed Logic



- Logical fallacies and ironies
 - Some unsupported and prejudicial “facts”...
 - ⇒ Example: “...runaway education spending is a major cause of current and future budget problems...” (Cato, p. 2).
 - ⇒ Observation: Note the unsupported characterization of “runaway.” Education spending has grown over time, but probably much of that growth is planned. Remember “A Nation at Risk?”

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Deconstructing Flawed Logic

- Logical fallacies and ironies, continued:
 - More unsupported and prejudicial “facts”
 - ⇒ Example: “We know that K-12 education is the biggest single cost to state and local governments, *eating up* close to a third of their revenues” (Cato, p.3) (emphasis added)
 - ⇒ Observation: This implies that the share of budgets “eaten up” by Education is too large. What size share would be appropriate? How is this established?

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Deconstructing Flawed Logic

- Logical fallacies and ironies, continued:
 - More unsupported and prejudicial “facts”
 - ⇒ Example: “If a district is spending \$30,000 per child, surely that is enough to ensure a high-quality education” (Cato, p.4)
 - ⇒ Observation: Much research exists on adequate education funding. This report doesn’t cite any research to support why “surely” \$30,000 is enough.

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Deconstructing Flawed Logic

- Logical fallacies and ironies, continued
 - Appeals to emotion...
 - ⇒ “Citizens are losing their jobs and their homes, government services are being cut, and taxes are being raised. This is no time to lose track of how more than one-quarter of all state and local tax dollars are being spent” (Cato, p. 14)
 - ⇒ Schaeffer’s argument should persuade based on logic, not on emotion relating to uncertainty about the economy and the painful fact that some people are losing jobs.

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Deconstructing Flawed Logic

- Logical fallacies and ironies, continued
 - False authority...
 - ⇒ “Most citizens don’t have any idea how much is spent per child in public schools” (Cato p.3).
 - ⇒ “...support for increased education spending dropped ... for respondents who were told what their district’s per-pupil spending figure was” (Cato p.5).
 - ⇒ Observation: Should an individual who has no idea what is spent per child in public schools then be considered an authority on whether educational spending is sufficient?

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Deconstructing Flawed Logic



- And the final irony:
 - An institute known for its small-government stance has as its final recommendation... a new law!

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Deconstructing Flawed Logic



Thanks are due to many sources for information on logical fallacies

A few that were fun & helpful in preparing this presentation:

<http://www.philosophicalsociety.com/Logical%20Fallacies.htm>

<http://www.theskepticsguide.org/resources/logicalfallacies.aspx>

<http://www.nizkor.org/features/fallacies/>

http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/fallacies_list.html

<http://www.csun.edu/~dgw61315/fallacies.html>

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Comments in closing

- We all know that education finance figures can be arranged in a multitude of ways
 - Doing it right means thinking about the arrangement that answers your question
 - Helps to start with a question rather than an answer
- We believe that apples have their place, but that oranges do too
- And we believe that experts in education finance are not out to mislead!

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Questions or stories of your own
before we adjourn?

Thank you for attending!

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Note: The written works cited on Slide 1 are an integral part of this presentation and were included in the original handout with the permission of the publishers. Rather than including these documents in the posted version of the presentation, we are providing the following links to both works online:

http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=11432

<http://epicpolicy.org/thinktank/review-they-spend-what>

(click on Full Text)

SUPERINTENDENT'S 2008-09 FINAL BUDGET
Unconsolidated Summary of Expenditures by Fund



Amounts in \$millions

	2004-05 Actual Amounts	2005-06 Actual Amounts	2006-07 Actual Amounts	2007-08 Authorized Final Bud	2007-08 Estimated Final Bud	2007-08 3d Interim Estimated	2008-09 Authorized Amounts	2008-09 Estimated Amounts
<i>Operating Funds</i>								
General Fund - Regular Program (000R/010)	\$5,365.6	\$5,363.3	\$5,767.1	\$6,270.5	\$5,919.4	\$6,012.8	\$6,205.9	\$5,866.4
General Fund - Specially Funded (000S/010)	\$1,057.1	\$1,117.2	\$960.0	\$1,313.5	\$1,288.3	\$1,099.0	\$1,061.8	\$1,035.3
Adult Education Fund - Regular (029/110)	\$138.8	\$145.1	\$161.4	\$211.9	\$189.0	\$197.8	\$224.5	\$198.7
Adult Education Fund - SFP (029/110)	\$34.2	\$30.6	\$28.0	\$55.8	\$55.8	\$28.2	\$40.7	\$40.7
Child Development Fund - Regular (011/120)	\$87.5	\$92.4	\$100.3	\$117.8	\$106.4	\$108.5	\$111.0	\$108.1
Child Development Fund - SFP (011/120)	\$20.1	\$17.1	\$18.6	\$46.4	\$46.4	\$22.2	\$30.6	\$30.6
Cafeteria Fund (030/130)	\$247.9	\$245.7	\$258.7	\$334.5	\$334.5	\$300.2	\$364.8	\$334.8
Deferred Maintenance Fund (027/140)	\$18.7	\$9.8	\$24.5	\$200.3	\$50.2	\$62.3	\$159.3	\$95.3
<i>Total Operating Funds</i>	\$6,969.9	\$7,021.2	\$7,318.7	\$8,550.7	\$7,990.0	\$7,831.0	\$8,198.5	\$7,709.9
<i>Capital Funds</i>								
Building Fund - Proposition BB (045/211)	\$242.0	\$58.9	\$95.6	\$124.9	\$94.6	\$26.7	\$118.2	\$88.2
Building Fund - Measure K (044/213)	\$661.0	\$691.7	\$682.8	\$1,094.5	\$929.5	\$332.6	\$806.4	\$566.4
Building Fund - Measure R (043/210)	\$379.0	\$402.8	\$400.3	\$2,905.5	\$1,183.5	\$479.7	\$2,081.1	\$1,081.1
Building Fund - Measure Y (042/214)	\$0.0	\$235.8	\$65.0	\$1,516.0	\$505.6	\$109.4	\$1,372.7	\$572.7
County Sch Facilities Fund - Prop 1D (068/35)	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$0.1	\$703.2	\$358.0	\$16.4	\$524.9	\$324.9
County Sch Facilities Fund - Prop 55 (067/352)	\$18.3	\$161.2	\$250.7	\$1,337.9	\$667.9	\$318.1	\$1,393.5	\$793.5
County Sch Facilities Fund - Prop 47 (066/351)	\$71.5	\$18.4	\$70.1	\$710.4	\$260.4	\$127.1	\$209.0	\$149.0
County Sch Facilities Fund - Prop 1A (065/35)	\$169.0	\$118.8	\$20.1	\$28.9	\$28.9	\$13.2	\$40.1	\$40.1
Special Reserve Fund (015/401)	\$115.3	\$151.6	\$118.8	\$258.3	\$190.5	\$194.2	\$484.3	\$384.3
Special Reserve Fund - CRA (017/400)	\$0.0	\$0.8	\$0.9	\$19.5	\$2.5	\$4.4	\$25.3	\$15.3
Special Reserve Fund - FEMA (022/402)	(\$2.6)	\$5.8	\$2.7	\$9.9	\$5.9	\$1.9	\$7.1	\$7.1
Special Resv Fund - FEMA - Haz Mit (062/40)	\$8.6	\$2.4	\$0.0	\$2.8	\$2.8	\$0.0	\$2.0	\$2.0
Capital Facilities Acct Fund (073/250)	\$46.0	\$48.1	\$133.7	\$233.3	\$183.3	\$73.8	\$218.9	\$108.9
State Sch Bldg Lease/Purch Fund (074/300)	\$2.4	\$7.4	(\$0.7)	\$8.0	\$7.0	\$5.6	\$1.7	\$1.7
Building Fund (070/212)	\$0.1	\$0.0	\$0.1	\$2.2	\$1.2	\$0.1	\$2.4	\$0.8
<i>Total Capital Funds</i>	\$1,710.7	\$1,903.6	\$1,840.1	\$8,955.4	\$4,421.8	\$1,703.2	\$7,287.7	\$4,136.1
<i>Debt Service Funds</i>								
Bond Interest & Redemption Fund (004/510)	\$265.6	\$962.8	\$400.5	\$542.2	\$542.2	\$497.3	\$987.9	\$587.9
Capital Services Fund (071/560)	\$428.9	\$204.6	\$33.4	\$39.7	\$39.7	\$34.3	\$165.4	\$165.4
Tax Override Fund (005/530)	\$0.4	\$0.4	\$0.3	\$0.1	\$0.1	\$0.3	\$0.3	\$0.3
<i>Total Debt Service Funds</i>	\$694.9	\$1,167.8	\$434.2	\$582.0	\$582.0	\$532.0	\$1,153.6	\$753.6
<i>Internal Service Funds</i>								
Health & Welfare Benefits Fund (021/670)	\$678.9	\$715.8	\$744.1	\$849.1	\$849.1	\$845.1	\$918.2	\$918.2
Worker's Compensation Fund (013/671)	\$294.7	\$97.6	(\$55.4)	\$125.6	\$125.6	\$73.9	\$105.2	\$105.2
Liability Self-Insurance Fund (016/672)	\$17.2	\$13.5	\$16.1	\$17.0	\$17.0	\$26.1	\$21.9	\$21.9
Job Cost Fund (009/)	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$0.0
<i>Total Internal Service Funds</i>	\$990.8	\$827.0	\$704.8	\$991.7	\$991.7	\$945.1	\$1,045.3	\$1,045.3
<i>Fiduciary Funds</i>								
Annuity Reserve Fund (023/711)	\$0.2	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$0.0	\$0.0
Attendance Incentive Reserve Fund (046/710)	\$0.1	\$0.1	\$0.1	\$0.1	\$0.1	\$0.0	\$0.8	\$0.8
<i>Total Fiduciary Funds</i>	\$0.3	\$0.1	\$0.1	\$0.1	\$0.1	\$0.0	\$0.8	\$0.8
Total All Funds	\$10,366.6	\$10,919.7	\$10,297.7	\$19,080.0	\$13,985.6	\$11,011.2	\$17,685.9	\$13,645.7

CDE's attempts to back into Cato Institute's PPE of \$25,208
 Data sources: LAUSD budget document pp I-44, VII-13, and VII-210
 Scenario #6 is the closest, but we still can't be certain we did exactly what he did

Scenario	(in millions)	
1	2008-09 "Total authorized" column, total all funds	\$ 17,685.9
	Adult Ed Regular	(224.5)
	Adult Ed SFP	(40.7)
	Adjusted Total	<u>\$ 17,420.7</u>
	Divided by ADA: Total excluding Adult Ed	648,726
	Per-pupil expenditure	\$ 26,854
	Difference from Cato Institute's \$25,208	\$ 1,646
2	2008-09 "Total authorized" column, total all funds	\$ 17,685.9
	Adult Ed Regular	(224.5)
	Adult Ed SFP	(40.7)
	Adjusted Total	<u>\$ 17,420.7</u>
	Divided by ADA: Total (not excluding Adult Ed)	741,797
	Per-pupil expenditure	\$ 23,484
	Difference from Cato Institute's \$25,208	\$ (1,724)
3	2008-09 "Total authorized" column, total all funds	\$ 17,685.9
	Adult Ed Regular	(224.5)
	Adult Ed SFP	(40.7)
	Internal Service Funds	(1,045.3)
	Fiduciary Funds	(0.8)
	Adjusted Total	<u>\$ 16,374.6</u>
	Divided by ADA: Total excluding Adult Ed	648,726
	Per-pupil expenditure	\$ 25,241
	Difference from Cato Institute's \$25,208	\$ 33

CDE's attempts to back into Cato Institute's PPE of \$25,208
 Data sources: LAUSD budget document pp I-44, VII-13, and VII-210
 Scenario #6 is the closest, but we still can't be certain we did exactly what he did

Scenario	(in millions)	
4	2008-09 "Total authorized" column, total all funds	\$ 17,685.9
	Adult Ed Regular	(224.5)
	Adult Ed SFP	(40.7)
	Child Development Regular	(111.0)
	Child Development SFP	(30.6)
	Internal Service Funds	(1,045.3)
	Fiduciary Funds	(0.8)
	Adjusted Total	<u>\$ 16,233.0</u>
	Divided by ADA: Total excluding Adult Ed	648,726
	Per-pupil expenditure	\$ 25,023
	Difference from Cato Institute's \$25,208	\$ (185)
5	2008-09 "Total authorized" column, total all funds	\$ 17,685.9
	Adult Ed Regular	(224.5)
	Adult Ed SFP	(40.7)
	Internal Service Funds	(1,045.3)
	Fiduciary Funds	(0.8)
	Interfund Adjustments	(1.3)
	Adjusted Total	<u>\$ 16,373.3</u>
	Divided by ADA: Total excluding Adult Ed	648,726
	Per-pupil expenditure	\$ 25,239
	Difference from Cato Institute's \$25,208	\$ 31
6	2008-09 "Total authorized" column, total all funds	\$ 17,685.9
	Adult Ed Regular	(224.5)
	Adult Ed SFP	(40.7)
	Internal Service Funds	(1,045.3)
	Fiduciary Funds	(0.8)
	Interfund Adjustments	(1.3)
	Community Services (est)	(24.0)
	Adjusted Total	<u>\$ 16,349.3</u>
	Divided by ADA: Total excluding Adult Ed	648,726
	Per-pupil expenditure	\$ 25,202
	Difference from Cato Institute's \$25,208	\$ (6)