

In public education (like most everything else), you get what you pay for

By [Baltimore Sun Editorial Board](#)

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New Teacher Orientation for Baltimore County Public Schools held at Perry Hall High School was held earlier this year. Teacher turnover in Baltimore County and other area school districts is increasing but the Kirwan Commission has a plan to increase the rigor of teacher education classes, pay teachers more and elevate the profession. (Lloyd Fox/The Baltimore Sun)

Filet mignon costs twice as much as top round because people prize its tenderness and flavor. You want a suit tailored to fit you perfectly? Don't expect to pay Walmart prices. Master craftsmen don't come cheap. And while there are certainly examples of disconnect between price and quality (the terms, "billionaire" and "Donald Trump" ought to be forever footnoted by "rich father" to explain that unlikely pairing), they are more the exception than the rule. You want quality? You usually have to pay for it.



Kirwan commission chairman William E. "Britt" Kirwan speaks at a press conference in Annapolis earlier this year. The commission's recommendations come with a \$3.8 billion price tag. (Joshua McKerrow / Capital Gazette /)

That rule of thumb ought to be kept in mind as Maryland moves forward with the reforms recommended by the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education, more commonly known as the Kirwan Commission after its chairman, former University System of Maryland Chancellor William E. "Britt" Kirwan. After three years of investigation and deliberations, the august group has recommended some fundamental changes aimed at raising classroom performance to international standards. Its blueprint for better schools covers a wide range of topics, including addressing race and class disparities in educational outcomes, and raising the standards of teachers. The proposed reforms are evidence-backed and hold accountable students and educators alike. It might be the most important document that this state has produced in decades.

But here's the "but" that seems to be threatening education reforms just as they've barely begun. There's unquestionably a cost associated with upgrading schools. The commission has pegged the number at \$3.8 billion over a decade. That's no small chunk of change. It amounts to perhaps 30% more than the state was already planning to spend on K-12 schools over that period. And Gov. Larry Hogan has made it clear that he is not a fan and sees it mostly as a tax increase. One can already anticipate the rallying cry: "Kirwan is a handout to the teachers union." Add a political action committee to tout the kind of misleading claims we heard previously about a Maryland "rain tax" from the same quarter, and we know what comes next.

Here's the question that all of this raises: What if a large percentage of that increased Kirwan spending *does* actually translate into higher teacher pay? There's only one word to describe such a circumstance: Good. Oh, no, wait, here's another: Fantastic. If Maryland is going to demand more from its teachers, then shouldn't it be willing to pay more for excellence? If the Orioles want an all-star pitcher, they don't dial up the cheapest guy on Single-A, they go for a world-class talent and expect to pay the salary that goes along with that choice. As much as it may pain Republicans that teachers are represented at the bargaining table (and often align themselves politically with Democrats), higher teacher salaries are intrinsic to higher classroom performance.

Anyone who needs convincing of the power of higher wages ought to take a look at what's been going on in Baltimore County Public Schools, where there has been a severe shortage of bus drivers. As recently [detailed in The Sun](#), it's gotten so bad that students routinely sit on the floor or four to a seat on overcrowded buses. Drivers are quitting and retiring as fast as the school system can hire. Buses sit empty in county parking lots. Why? Because the county pays certified drivers \$16.20 an hour and substitute drivers even less. You think a significant raise would make a difference? How could it not?

[Goucher College poll: 70 percent of Marylanders think the state spends too little on public education. »](#)

It's a shame that Kirwan Commission findings will be cast as a tax increase by commission foes. And, frankly, it's a shame that members of the commission's latest offshoot, the Blueprint for Maryland's Future Funding Formula Workgroup, are so fearful of adverse public reaction that they [felt obliged to meet behind closed doors](#). But it's hardly shocking, given how politicized education funding has already become. Apparently, the fact that Marylanders want better schools and are willing to pay for them, as reflected in the latest [Goucher College poll](#), is too easily overlooked.

Maryland has a unique opportunity to have great public schools and not just good ones. Under a recent survey by the personal finance website [WalletHub](#), Maryland is currently rated only a so-so 22nd for "teacher friendliness." And where does the state fall short? Teacher salaries (and starting salaries as well as pensions) compared to cost-of-living is not a bright spot. That needs to change.

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This piece is written by the Baltimore Sun Editorial Board. Editorials are the opinion of the Board, which is separate from the newsroom. If you would like to submit a letter to the editor, please send it to talkback@baltimoresun.com.