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A black mark for education officials

EDITORIAL

"It's classified information . . . a matter of national security." That's what the CIA and FBI say when they take a thick black marker to a page of data to blot out what they don't want the public to see.

At the New Jersey Education Department, "You can't have it; it's ours" is explanation enough. That's what the department told an advocacy group, the Education Law Center, when it asked for a three-year-old report on how much money is really needed to educate a child in various New Jersey school districts.

What the center got was 300 pages of memos, e-mails and documents redacted to the point of the ridiculous. All the data were blacked out. The CIA would have left more uncovered just for show.

We doubt that anything covered by the black marks is a threat to democracy. Rather, in a state that is grappling with hard choices about education funding, it is information that the democratic process demands.

The Education Law Center has filed a suit to pry the report — a readable version — out of the department's hands. The center's representatives were among a wide range of interested parties that the Education Department convened to determine out how to figure education costs. According to the suit, the state paid at least \$105,000 to a consultant to develop the report. Public money spent? Public involved in the process? The report should be public.

Those involved in preparing the data say the study shows that funding for the Abbott districts, 30 school systems that are receiving special state aid under a court order, is close to what it should be.

Whether truth is bound in a neat volume or in untidy pages, let's have it. If there are nuances and caveats to interpreting the data, the state can make that known in the appendix.

In 2003, when the work was done, Jon Corzine was not governor and Lucille Davy was not the education commissioner. But they are in charge now.

They should not make taxpayers pay for a legal defense against the public's right to information that public money purchased. Call off the lawyers, cap the black marker — if there's any ink left — and set that study free.