

Dear Esteemed WA State Legislators:

We appreciate your ongoing support of PK-12 public education and your efforts to address the needs of our students, staff, and schools. We know there are competing priorities across the state, and we are grateful for legislation that has been passed over the last several years to support public education. Unfortunately, despite these efforts, school districts across the state are facing a huge financial crisis that requires urgent attention.

Some examples of budget deficits faced by school districts this past spring include estimates for Seattle -- \$131M; Northshore -- \$21M; Spokane -- \$16M; Edmonds -- \$15M; Tacoma -- \$10M, to name a few. Districts have worked hard to balance budgets for this year, and as a result, class sizes have increased, courses and programs cut, jobs at all levels lost, and schools closed. We aim to continue to work within our means, but we need help to ensure the students of Washington State have access to a quality public education, no matter where they live.

We are leaders of School Boards and Educator Associations from 17 WA districts, very small to very large, serving over 30% of WA state students. However, we write to you in support of all WA state students, to describe the adverse impacts of the current school funding situation as simply as possible, and to suggest two solutions – one long-term and one short-term.

BACKGROUND

Several factors are driving recent budget shortfalls, including:

- decreased student enrollment,
- the sunset of federal and state pandemic-era funding, despite the lingering impacts,
- unfunded state and federal mandates, most notably in special education,
- significantly increased operational costs, and more.

Without state legislation designed to meet today's needs, these shortfalls will continue. Even after districts have adjusted their budgets for the 2023-24 school year, most of us are facing continuing shortfalls in future years, such as 2024-25 estimates for Seattle at \$104M, Spokane at \$27M, and Edmonds at \$11M, based on early projections. And more districts will be going into Binding Conditions, a status akin to bankruptcy for school districts.

Many people think the 2018 McCleary decision “fixed” state funding. It did increase teachers’ salaries, which was sorely needed. But the legislation also created new budget challenges. For example, the new law limits local levy tax revenues. In many of our districts, this means that our taxpayers have approved us to collect more taxes than we are allowed to by the state. Our constituents are understandably upset when we have difficulty meeting all our students’ needs, but our hands are tied by state law.

And, even if student enrollment increases, we will continue to face budget challenges due to the funding formulas currently used to apportion money to districts, increased costs of services, and higher needs of students recovering from impacts of the pandemic.

The current funding formula, known as the “prototypical school model,” defines the number of students in a district needed for the state to fund one full-time equivalent (FTE) staff person. While this model has been tweaked over the years since it was first introduced in 1995, it in no way represents students’ current needs. For example, the model allows state funding for one FTE paraeducator (teaching assistant) for 427 of our general education elementary students. This is less than one paraeducator to serve an entire average elementary school! Given the increasing class sizes we currently face, in addition to the importance of supporting individual and small group learning, this staffing ratio is absurdly unrealistic. The numbers for secondary schools, and for other staff across the grade bands, are similarly out of touch with our students’ current needs.

IMPACT

How does this situation affect a district’s ability to meet student needs? We all pay more for certificated, classified, and administrative staff than the state provides. Last year in the Edmonds School District alone, serving about 19,000 students, we funded 120 more classified staff (e.g., paraeducators) than the state funds. We covered the cost of twice as many certificated Education Staff Associates (e.g., counselors, physical and occupational therapists, speech/language pathologists, nurses) than the state provides. The list goes on and on.

Our state is clearly not meeting its paramount duty to amply fund basic education. And as reported in a 2022 [study](#) by the Education Law Center, compared to other states’ funding, WA state earned a grade of C for funding level, a D for funding distribution, and an F for funding effort.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

How can the state solve this mess? We offer two reasonable solutions.

Long-term:

The long-term solution is for the state to step back from the current funding model, study how other states approach funding schools, and build a funding formula that meets the needs of today's students, recognizing that one size does not fit all. **We request that the Legislature create a two-year Task Force to determine current needs in public schools across the state**, in conjunction with costs, revenue options, and funding strategies, and develop recommendations for a revised funding model to amply meet the needs of our schools and students, now and into the future.

Short-term:

The short-term solution is based on two important data points:

- Currently 44% of the state budget goes to public education.
- The [2024 budget forecast](#) for the state indicates an estimated surplus of \$1.2B.

Given these two data points, **we respectfully ask that at least 44% of the \$1.2B surplus go directly to school districts to help us bridge the gap to amply, sustainably fund public education**, and continue with this level of investment until the recommendations of the Task Force have been implemented.

How should this be distributed to districts? We all have different needs, just as students have different needs in our classrooms. The distribution should be done as simply and equitably as possible, centered on meeting student need as determined by each district. Currently the state uses student enrollment as the funding driver through the prototypical school model. With that in mind, we propose using student enrollment for this short-term solution.

With 44% of \$1.2B equaling about \$528M, and with about 1,074,000 public school students in the state, the \$528M equates to about \$500 per student. The simple solution is to distribute these funds to each district based on district student enrollment. For the Edmonds School District as an example, that equates to about \$9.5M, an amount close to our estimated shortfall for next year.

While this short-term solution doesn't yet get us where we need to be, it goes a long way to get us back on track. And with continued positive forecasts, this supplemental revenue each year until the state fixes the current apportionment formula could help us all begin to build back effective support for our students.

We respectfully ask for your support to:

1. Sponsor and/or support a bill in the upcoming session **to implement a Task Force** addressing the long-term solution.
2. Support **at least 44% of the state surplus to be distributed to public school districts** across the state as part of the state supplemental budget.

The time is now for WA state to become a beacon for exemplary public education. Our future depends on it.

In solidarity supporting the students of WA state:

Organizers:

Nancy Katims, Ph.D., Edmonds School Board President

Co-Signers – Presidents/Chairs of their Organizations:

Jamie Anderson, Vancouver Education Association

Jeb Binns, Highline Education Association

Elizabeth Bonbright, Tacoma School Board

Janet Caldwell, Bethel Education Association

Leah Choi, Lake Washington School Board

Penny Cramer, Tacoma Education Association

Julianna Dauble & Shyla Butler, Renton Education

Association & Support Professionals

Larry Garcia, Mt. Adams School Board

John Henry, Port Angeles Education Association

Elaine Hogg, Auburn Education Association

Andi Nofziger, Edmonds Education Association President

Jennifer Matter, Seattle Education Association

Howard Mawhinney, Lake Washington Education Assoc.

Jacqueline McGourty, Ph.D., Northshore School Board

Eric Pickens, Sequim School Board

Saralyn Pozernick, Sequim Education Association

Robbi Reed, Northshore Education Association

Matt Reiman, Shoreline Education Association

Judy Schwab, Mukilteo School Board

Jeremy Shay, Spokane Education Association

Derona Uzzle, Issaquah Education Association

Sandra Zavala-Ortega, Vancouver School Board