Opinion

WA lawmakers will claim wins, but education funding isn't one of them

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A student runs into his classroom at Sanislo Elementary School in West Seattle. The author writes that he wishes more policymakers could spend time in schools to see what educators see every day, including teachers and staff creating environments where curiosity, resilience and confidence take root. (Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times, 2025)

By Jeff Snell

Special to The Seattle Times

Another legislative session has come and gone. In the postmortems that follow, lawmakers will tout their individual wins. Fully funding K-12 education, the state's "paramount duty" under the Washington Constitution, will not be among them. The hard truth is it has not been for some time.

That is difficult to reconcile with the public education system Washington has built over generations. Our schools provide the foundation families rely on every day. They send out young people who shape our communities, workforce and future.

But systems like this do not sustain themselves. They require consistent investment and political will. Right now, both are slipping. Washington ranks 40th in the nation in the share of its economy invested in K-12 education.

And data from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction shows that investments in public education are decreasing, not improving. The share of state funding for public education has fallen from 51.6% in 2019, the year after the Supreme Court's McCleary decision, to about 42% today — nearly 10% even as costs to take care of students and schools are steeply on the rise.

For a state whose constitution calls education its paramount duty, that statistic should stop us in our tracks.

This year's legislative session did little to change our state trajectory. Despite unified requests from school leaders, educators and families across the state, lawmakers failed to address the cost pressures school districts face.

Those requests were straightforward. Schools asked lawmakers to address three areas where costs continue to outpace funding: special education, student transportation and operational costs (also often referred to as materials, supplies and operating costs, or MSOC).

Instead, the Legislature reduced or delayed funding in several programs families and students rely on, including Transition to Kindergarten, school transportation and Local Effort Assistance, the program meant to help property-poor communities generate comparable local funding for their schools.

Taken individually, these may appear to be technical budget adjustments. Together they signal something more concerning.

Across our country, we are watching public education weaken piece by piece. The questions Washington voters should be asking is simple: "Are we allowing the same thing to happen here?" In the coming weeks, school districts across Washington will release preliminary budgets for the next school year. Many will include reductions to staff, programs and services simply to remain financially solvent.

Those decisions will affect students directly, from classroom supports to the programs that keep young people engaged in school.

I wish more policymakers could spend time in our schools to see what educators see every day.

They would see teachers and staff creating environments where curiosity, resilience and confidence take root. They would see schools feeding children, supporting families and connecting communities in ways that extend far beyond academics.

Within that mission are countless moments when a concept finally clicks, when a struggling reader gains confidence or when a student feels supported enough to keep trying. Those moments happen because

educators and school staff commit themselves every day to helping students discover who they can become. This work is extraordinary. And it requires resources and investments.

Expectations for public schools continue to grow. Schools are expected to prepare students for a complex global economy and support students facing increasingly complex social and emotional challenges.

But expectations must be matched with resources. Right now, they are not.

When investments in public education slowly decline even as needs increase, the system does not collapse overnight. It erodes gradually. Programs shrink. Class sizes grow. Opportunities narrow.

Eventually the consequences extend far beyond school walls. Underfunded schools create long term economic and social costs that ripple throughout the state.

Half the state Senate and the entire House of Representatives will stand for election this fall.

Washington voters should ask a simple question of every candidate: How are you fulfilling the state's paramount duty to educate our children? Because the future of Washington depends on the students sitting in our classrooms today.

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