

Washington Association of School Administrators Response to Washington Learns: The Final Report

We have waited (not so) patiently for over a quarter of a century for the executive and legislative branches of our government to fulfill their constitutional obligation to amply fund the paramount duty of Washington State – the common schools.

The 1977 and 1981 Doran decisions on School Funding I and II established a number of important funding principles for the state.

1. Education is the “paramount duty” of the state and takes precedence over all other state financial obligations.
2. The legislature must define basic education and provide adequate funding for those programs.
3. Programs considered basic education are regular apportionment including vocational education, special education, pupil transportation, transitional bilingual instruction and learning assistance.
4. Local school operations levies may be allowed as long as they enrich programs outside of the legislative definition of basic education and are not used directly or indirectly to reduce the state’s obligation to fund basic education.
5. Once the legislature has established what is considered 100 percent funding of basic education needs, it cannot reduce that funding level due to state revenue problems.
6. The funding formula is not “cast in concrete.” It is the continuing obligation of the legislature to review the formula as the education system evolves and changes.

The Ample School Funding Project <http://www.wasa-oly.org/asfp.htm> documents the massive underfunding of Washington State’s K-12 system. The Picus and Odden adequacy report commissioned by Washington Learns documents the additional funding that will be necessary to bring all students to standards www.washingtonlearns.wa.gov In addition to underfunding basic education as defined by the legislature (RCW 28A.150.210) and by the courts, every level of government has imposed layers and layers of unfunded mandates on the common schools and, instead of removing mandates as performance criteria are established, the mandates have been increased with each succeeding year. <http://www.wasa-oly.org/governmt.htm>. School districts have only survived financially by relying on local levies – a practice prohibited by the courts.

The state’s underfunding of basic education and the over-reliance on local levies to pay for basic education coupled with the unfunded mandate of requiring districts to bring all students to state standards have created a fiscal crisis in public education that is unprecedented in our state’s history. Districts across the state have had to raise class sizes, eliminate student programs and lay off school employees in order to make ends meet. Projected bow waves of financial obligations actually threaten the solvency of some of our districts.

The facts speak for themselves. Washington is 42nd in the nation in average funding of its schools. The percentage of the state’s general budget going to K-12 has been reduced from 47.6% in 1993-94 to 43.5% in 2001-03. The average dollar amount per student when adjusted for inflation has been reduced by \$548 since 1992. Local levy funds used to pay

salaries of school employees to carry out functions of basic education have increased dramatically in the past few years. The percentage of school district total revenues provided by local levies has increased from 11.64% in 1990-91 to 15.99% in 2004-05.

For the past ten years, we have formally asked our elected officials to carry out the duties prescribed to them by the courts – which they are morally, ethically and legally required to do.

The 2005 Legislature responded by passing Senate Substitute Bill 5441. Imbedded in the omnibus education act was the requirement that a task force, answering directly to the Governor, carry out a comprehensive study of K-12 finance. The legislation mandated that the study cover – at a minimum – the following eight criteria.

1. The constitutional and legal requirements underlying the current finance system and how those requirements are affected by the goal under education reform to provide all students with the opportunity to achieve the state standards;
2. The strengths and weaknesses of the current state and local finance formulas and how those formulas are used by local school districts to meet state requirements and student learning goals;
3. Information regarding remediation particularly in the subject areas of mathematics, science and language arts;
4. Potential changes to the current finance system including the methods of allocating funds, levels of funding and how student achievement is affected;
5. Reviewing the funding systems in at least five other states;
6. Specific issues facing schools: Ensuring program accountability; improving effectiveness in state-level governance; identifying efficiencies in district spending practices; providing programs that assist students in meeting standards; helping students stay in school; impacts of the certification requirements for teachers; improving the effectiveness of English language learner instruction; and appropriate preparation requirements for paraeducators;
7. Local and regional funding challenges faced by individual school districts throughout the state; and
8. Potential changes to the current salary system that would be more closely related to professional development and enhancement of student performance.

The final report of Washington Learns addresses some, but not all of these criteria and fails completely to address the fiscal crisis in our schools. In particular, the report does not address the first, second and fourth criteria on SSB 5441 concerning funding. Instead, the Washington Learns report recommends continuation of the committee and dealing with these matters by December 2008 and thereafter to phase in funding over ten years. That means that more than one million students per year will be short changed until 2020 when supposedly full funding of basic education would finally be achieved. It appears that a sense of urgency is decidedly lacking on the funding side, however it is not lacking on the accountability side regarding the necessity to improve student performance beyond the current standards. Clearly, there is a mismatch between the committee's expectation of the K-12 system and its students on the one hand, and the state's responsibility to fully fund that system as required by the state's constitution on the other hand.

In spite of the student achievement and financial challenges that every district faces, school district employees, by working together, have managed to increase achievement scores and reduce the drop out rate while working with over one million students. Achievement scores have increased for all grade levels, in every demographic category, in every area of our state. www.k12.wa.us About 74% of our students graduated in 2005, an increase of four percentage points over the previous year. The “extended” graduation rate (graduating in more than four years) was 79%. Teachers, administrators, classified staff and elected school directors – whether they are just beginning their first year or completing 30 or 40 years of service – are dedicated to providing a system of schools where each child has the opportunity to become a successful, contributing member in our democratic society. The expertise, experiences, knowledge and skills these people bring to their jobs – everyday – and the commitment they have to our children and to their future and the future of our state are more often than not, disregarded, discounted or simply ignored.

The task force’s response to public sentiment “there’s plenty of money it just isn’t spent correctly” could add even more reporting, auditing and micromanaging requirements.

The government already requires school districts to do the following:

- two hundred thirty-seven reports to OSPI
- six hundred and sixty-five pages in the OSPI Accounting Manual for public schools
- annual release of WASL scores (also NAEP, PSAT, ACT and numerous district, school and classroom assessments like DIBBLES)
- IEPs for special education students and individual student plans for all students in grades five through twelve who have failed at least one WASL.
- state audits (also district initiated audits)
- looming performance audits
- school improvement and district improvement plans
- federal ESEA/NCLB, AYP and special education reports
- annual report cards
- compliance with the open public records laws
- regularly scheduled open public meetings of elected school board members (including the approval of the annual budget)
- open public meetings for I-728
- JLARC and WSIPP surveys, studies and audits
- citizens’ committees for levies and bonds, curriculum adoptions, policy adoptions etc.
- M&O and bond public elections

Added to this is the pervasive presence of the media. How much more transparency and accountability is necessary? Our government must be held accountable to use the information it already has--effectively and efficiently--before requiring more paperwork, reporting and unfunded mandates.

We have asked our elected officials to work with us to create a new AMPLY funded finance system for public schools – one that is fair and sustainable. That can ONLY be accomplished by involving the people who WORK IN THE SYSTEM in the decisions about the changes that will be needed to create such a system.

The goals and strategies in the final report are laudable and our members support most of them. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand how these goals address the heart of the matter – the fact that we do not have enough funding to meet the needs of kids currently in our system, a system identified by our constitution as this state’s paramount duty. The kids and the system are not going to go away while political agendas are ironed out over the next fifteen years. We believe we have exhausted our avenues to address these issues and we feel we have no recourse but to turn to the 2007 legislature and/or, regrettably, the judicial system for relief.

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