

LEAGUE OF EDUCATION VOTERS FOUNDATION

UNDERFUNDED AND UNSUSTAINABLE:

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE SCHOOL FUNDING
CRISIS IN WASHINGTON AND ITS IMPACT ON
SCHOOL COMMUNITIES



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In response to the growing financial challenges districts have been experiencing, especially in the last four years since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the League of Education Voters Foundation (LEV) embarked on a research project to (1) gain a deeper understanding of the challenging financial realities our school districts are currently facing, (2) evaluate these realities for their broader implications on students (especially those who are most marginalized in education), and (3) identify a path toward a funding approach that better meets the goals and needs we have as a state.

This report shares findings from the quantitative and qualitative research we conducted, as well as a set of recommendations that the League of Education Voters Foundation believes are necessary steps to understand and improve our K–12 resourcing approach so that it aligns with the diverse needs of Washington’s students.

Methods

We sought out the insights of district superintendents and finance professionals, whose expertise and familiarity with the technical aspects of school resourcing offered an important perspective on what is working with our funding system, what is lacking, and why. Specifically, we wanted to understand their perspectives on which aspects of the funding system contribute most to these harsh financial realities and how these issues impact their ability to meet students' needs.

During the 2023–2024 school year, we talked to superintendents from 28 school districts across Washington who were selected to represent the diversity of school districts across the state. (See [Appendix B](#).) Districts were selected based on racial diversity, enrollment of English language learners, district enrollment, geographic location, and percentage of students receiving special education services.



Findings

Regardless of demographic or geographic differences, interviewees often identified many of the same financial realities and broken system components that they believe are causing challenges. The findings largely fell into the following three areas:

Staffing & Labor Market Challenges

Districts consistently reported that they struggle to manage rising staffing costs, attract qualified personnel, manage the limitations of our education funding formulas, and navigate a competitive labor market. They shared that K–12 education funding formulas don't provide the level of staffing allocations that they need, nor a salary that enables them to compete in the labor market. In addition, the state's positioning of regionalization factor as the main driver for K–12 education funding creates major challenges for various districts as they try to balance financial stability and student need.

Other Funding & System Shortfalls

The complex and complicated funding formulas Washington has created to fund K–12 education have created many points of misalignment between what is provided and what districts are spending to support their students. Specifically, participants called out the level of funding the state provides for special education and school operating costs as insufficient, and they cited the overreliance on levy funding as a core component of our system that amplifies inequity because it is based on district property wealth.

Changing Roles & Needs at School

Finally, we heard that districts feel under-resourced and under-supported as they have taken on a larger role in supporting the mental health needs of students and seen their scope of work expand to support a broader range of student needs. But as districts have tried to adjust to meet these needs, they have found there is



a big gap between what the state provides and the depth of what students need. Behavioral health support was particularly top of mind because many will no longer be able to afford key staff people, like counselors, social workers, and mental health specialists after one-time federal funding runs out. More broadly, many noted that the lack of clearly defined responsibilities districts are expected to fulfill in addressing the youth mental health crisis creates inconsistent access to student mental health support across the state.

Recommendations

In learning from these conversations and connections with districts, LEV is offering some key takeaways that encapsulate what we consider to be some critical lessons and recommendations for our state.

1

As a state, we need to determine what our goals, values, and expectations are for K–12 education and ensure there is alignment between these priorities and how we resource our schools.

2

We need to acknowledge how the role of schools has changed in our communities and formalize these changes in our state approach to resourcing and supporting schools.

3

The funding shortfalls districts are experiencing and the resulting reduction in behavioral and mental health support for students have the potential to grow the school-to-prison pipeline and cause more trauma among students and staff. State-level action is needed to provide districts with additional resources to prevent the harmful impact the elimination of these critical supports will have on students, especially students from historically marginalized communities.

INTRODUCTION



Introduction

As the spring of 2023 approached last year, many school districts in Washington faced the daunting prospect of consequential budget cuts for the 2023–2024 school year. These anticipated cuts sparked widespread concerns about which services schools would and would not be able to provide to their students, educators, and families.

For years, Washington’s school funding system has been under scrutiny for its ability to meet the diverse needs of students across the state. The most recent budget concerns and consequences, however, have left many districts in especially untenable financial situations.

In response to the growing financial challenges districts are experiencing, League of Education Voters (LEV) embarked on a research project to **(1)** gain a deeper understanding of the challenging financial realities our school districts are currently facing, **(2)** evaluate these realities for broader implications on students (especially those who are most marginalized in education), and **(3)** identify a path toward a funding approach that can better meet the goals and needs we have as a state.

This report shares findings from the quantitative and qualitative research we conducted, as well as a set of recommendations that LEV believes are necessary to establish a K–12 resourcing approach that meets the diverse needs of Washington school districts.

Background: A Look inside District Spending and Budgeting

Over the last two years, districts throughout Washington state have had to contend with particularly significant budget shortfalls. While many of the problems causing these shortfalls have been longstanding issues with our



education funding system, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crises that followed have both exposed and significantly worsened the financial situation of our schools. The current educational and economic landscape facing our schools is being shaped by several factors, including inflation, our state resourcing approach, and the changing depth and range of student needs.

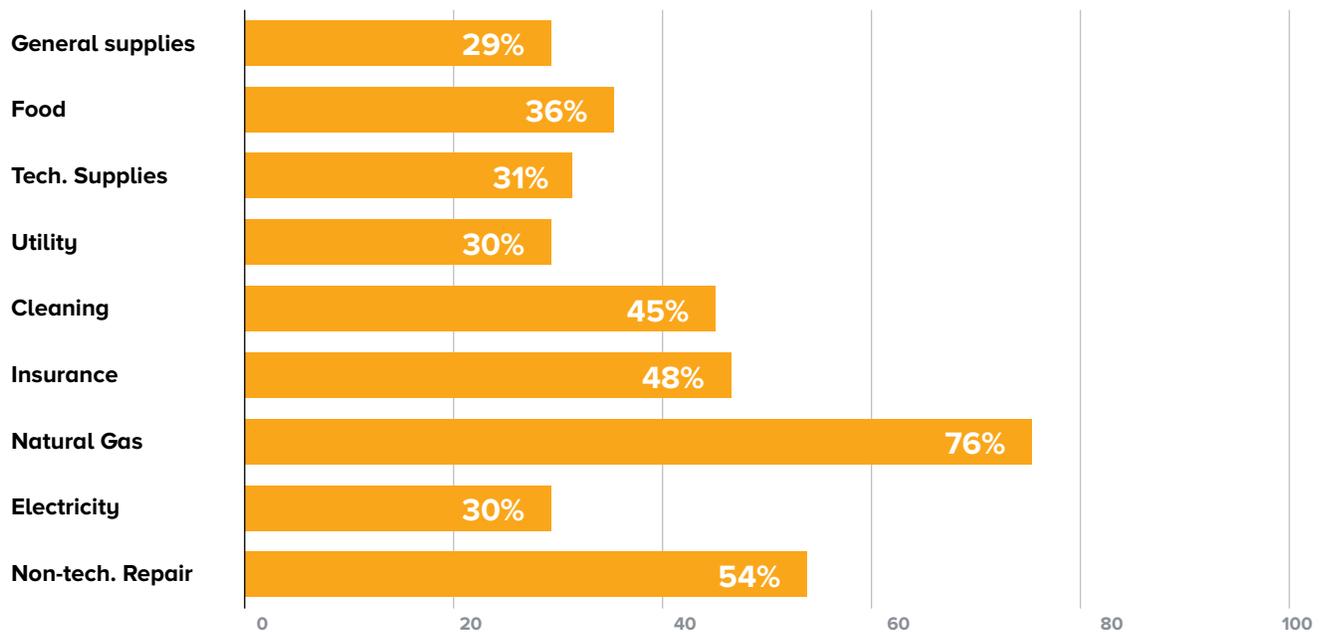
The cost of living across the country—which has been steadily increasing, especially since the pandemic began—has significantly impacted staffing costs for schools, making it increasingly difficult to attract and retain qualified educators. Employee salary and benefit costs make up over 80% of district budgets.¹ This percentage includes not just salaries paid to school staff, but payroll taxes, staff pensions, and other benefits. The amount of money Washington districts have

spent on employees has steadily increased over the last few years. Between the 2019–20 and 2022–23 school years, school districts have increased spending on staffing costs by 19.7%.² This increase in spending was driven by a combination of the increased cost of hiring and increased staffing levels in schools. Relatedly, the state has made inflationary increases to state-funded K–12 salaries of 9.3% during this period to address the rising challenges of inflation.³ Despite the nearly 20% increase in district staffing costs from 2019–20 to 2022–23, districts now spend a smaller portion of their actual budgets on staff because the cost of other essentials has also increased due to inflation.⁴

School district budgets are affected by inflation in many of the same ways households have been over the last couple of years. As the price of food, fuel, utilities, and maintenance has gone up for everyone, they have similarly surged for school districts. With rising costs, districts simply have less money to spend on the things they need.

The table below shows the percent increase over the last few years in what districts are spending in areas that are critical to keeping schools operating effectively.

INCREASE IN DISTRICT SPENDING FROM 2019–20 to 2022–23



Source: OSPI General Fund Expenditures by NCES Code

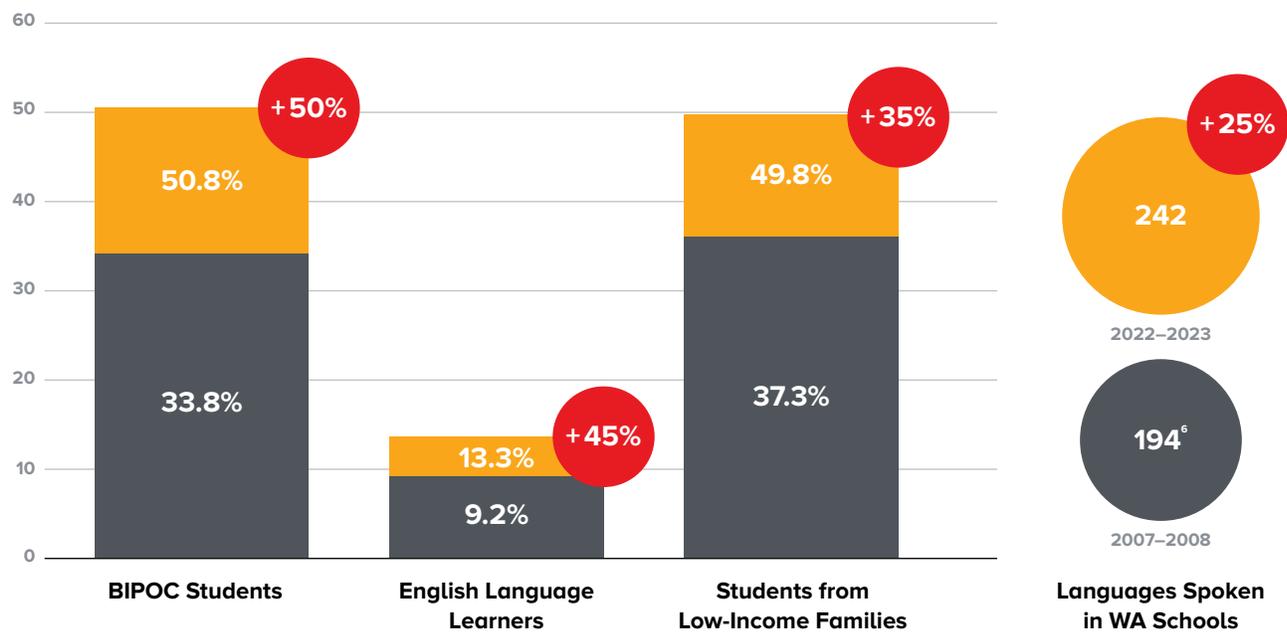
In the 2022–23 school year, districts spent \$1.4 billion on the essentials highlighted in the above table, which constitutes almost 10% of state K–12 education funding, and costs continue to rise, making budgeting increasingly challenging for districts.⁵

Finally, over the past two decades, and particularly since the pandemic, there has been a notable shift in the depth and diversity of student needs.

The prototypical school funding model was first used to fund Washington schools nearly 15 years ago, in the 2011–12 school year. The staffing ratios and positions included in the prototypical school funding model were based on how a subset of districts deployed resources in a specific school year: 2007–08.

In the years since this model was introduced, Washington’s K–12 schools have undergone significant demographic shifts. Schools look quite different now than they did in 2007–08:

DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS IN WASHINGTON K-12 SCHOOLS FROM 2007–08 to 2022–23



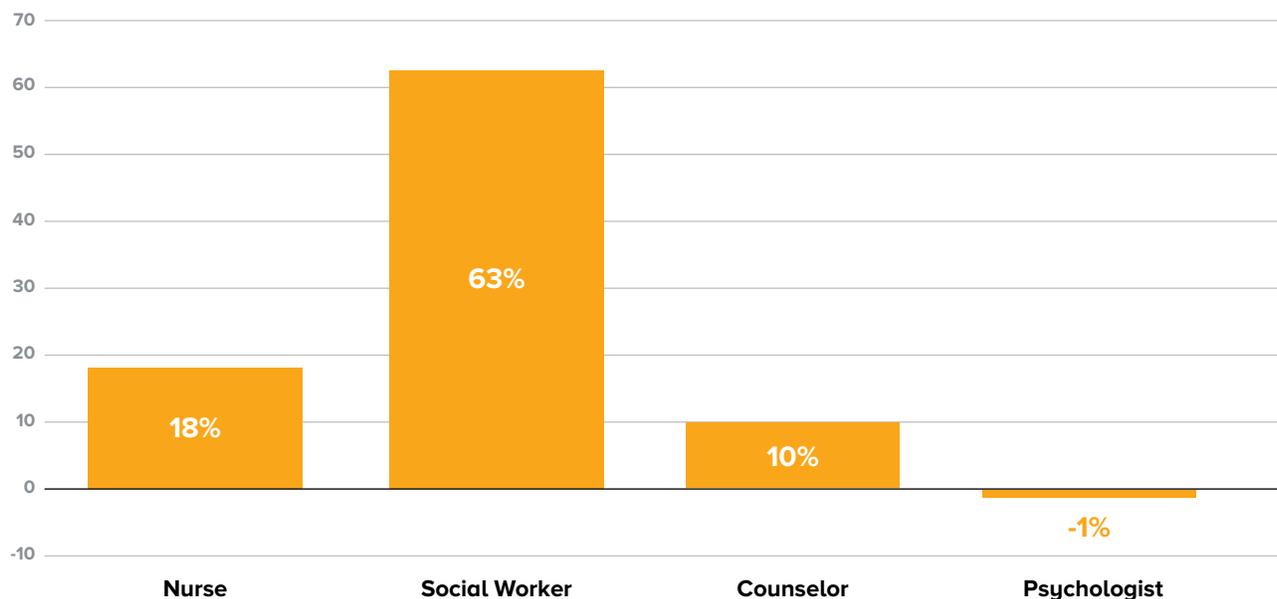
The diversity of Washington’s student body has expanded significantly in recent years and is expected to continue growing. This demographic evolution impacts school costs primarily through the need for more tailored and inclusive educational resources, support services, and staffing configurations. Schools are challenged to accommodate diverse language needs, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic disparities among students, necessitating additional investments in personnel, specialized programs, and community engagement initiatives.

In addition, districts have had to dedicate more resources to support student behavioral and mental health in recent years. While mental health has been a growing crisis among young people, the profound impacts of the pandemic have made it more critical. Extended periods of isolation, disruptions to routine, and heightened

stress levels have significantly contributed to worsened mental health among students, often necessitating increased intervention and support from schools.

We compared reported hiring data for mental health support staff from the 2019–20 school year to the 2022–23 school year to see how it has shifted as districts have responded to the escalation in student needs. Districts have consistently prioritized adding additional staff to support the well-being of students.

PERCENTAGE INCREASE IN HIRED STAFF FROM 2019–20 to 2022–23



Note: Despite there being slightly fewer school psychologists in schools over this period districts hired 13 times more psychologists in 2022-2023 than they were funded for through the prototypical school funding model.

The increases in mental and behavioral health staff have been fueled by Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding, which is federal stimulus dollars paid to support schools during the height of the pandemic. This funding will be almost entirely spent by the end of the 2023–24 school year, leaving many schools facing a financial “cliff” when they will experience a sudden drop in available funding. Without these additional funds, districts will struggle to maintain the level of staffing and support they have been able to provide in recent years. While the state legislature increased funding for social workers, psychologists, counselors, and nurses in 2022 (House Bill 1664), districts are finding they need to hire more staff for all of those positions than they were funded for by the state.

There are undoubtedly severe strains on our educational system that have taken a particular hold in recent years. This report aims to grow our understanding of district staff perspectives on what it’s like to navigate our funding systems and shed light on longstanding system challenges that often become most evident during times of crisis.

Methods & Approach

Driven by the urgency of these conditions, LEV designed an investigatory research project to thoroughly understand the current financial realities districts are experiencing from their perspectives and assess how these challenges impact their ability to meet student needs now and in the future.

We sought the insights of district superintendents and finance professionals, whose expertise and familiarity with the technical aspects of school resourcing would offer a particularly detailed view of what is successful with our funding system, what is lacking, and why. Specifically, we wanted to understand their perspectives on

(1) the current financial conditions and staffing challenges in their districts, **(2)** the main factors they saw contributing to these issues, and **(3)** how these financial realities are affecting the district's ability to meet students' needs.



During the 2023–24 school year, we talked to superintendents from 28 school districts from across Washington that were selected to represent the diversity of school districts across the state. (See Appendix A.) Districts were selected based on racial diversity, enrollment of English Language Learners, district enrollment, geographic location, and percentage of students receiving special education services.

We asked districts the same set of questions that were focused on funding formulas, budgetary challenges, and the evolution of student needs over the last five years. Interviews typically lasted between 30 minutes and 60 minutes. We asked follow-up questions to clarify responses and provide additional context for responses.

Through this process, we grew our understanding of how the funding system is functioning for districts across Washington. On the whole, participants identified myriad challenges while also identifying a lack of alignment between our resourcing approach and what is asked of districts. Next, we distill our findings.

FINDINGS



In this section, we present the key takeaways from our interviews with district staff.

Regardless of demographic or geographic differences, interviewees often identified many of the same financial realities, funding challenges, and broken system

components that they believe make running a school challenging in our current climate.

Based on these conversations, we grouped the findings into three main categories, which we will present in more depth in this section.

Findings: District Perspectives on Our Funding System

Based on these conversations, we grouped the findings into three main categories, which we will present in more depth in this section.

- ▶ **Staffing & Labor Market Challenges** delves into the difficulties districts said they are facing in managing rising staff salaries, attracting qualified personnel, navigating constraints with the state funding formula, and navigating a competitive labor market.
- ▶ **Other Funding & System Shortfalls** addresses a plethora of other structural gaps routinely identified by districts, including special education funding, Materials, Supplies & Operating Costs (MSOC) funding, the levy system, and more.
- ▶ **Changing Roles & Needs at School** examines the broader reflections that were communicated by districts regarding how students' needs have radically evolved in recent years, the lack of clarity regarding the roles and expectations of districts, and the challenges for districts in supporting the mental and behavioral well-being of students.

Staffing & Labor Market Challenges

It is no surprise that the costs of hiring and retaining school staff consistently came up in conversations with districts. Staffing costs account for more than four out of every five dollars spent by districts. There are 295 school districts across Washington, ranging from ten students to more than 50,000 students, and factors like poverty rate, English language learner enrollment, and cost of living vary significantly across them all. Staffing is a significant component of a district's budget, and staffing decisions provide a window into how districts envision how to best support the needs of students. Below are three challenges with staffing and labor markets that emerged most commonly with districts.

Difficulty Providing Competitive Staff Salaries

Despite not being asked about K–12 staff salaries, interviewees frequently cited challenges they face in determining a salary level that allows them to attract and retain their staff. This challenge is particularly acute for classified staff, which includes paraeducators, bus drivers, and other school support staff who are needed to sustain the day-to-day operations of school buildings.

The average classified staff person was paid the equivalent of \$65,649 for the 2022–23 school year if they were employed every week during the year.⁸ However, classified staff are hourly workers and most classified staff do not work over the summer, so their actual salaries are generally much less. Many districts shared that classified staff have difficulties living in the district they are employed in because they often cannot afford the high cost of housing in some districts.

“COST OF LIVING, KEEPING UP WITH SALARIES, AND BEING ABLE TO RECRUIT PEOPLE WHO WILL LIVE CLOSE ENOUGH TO WORK HERE IS ONE OF OUR BIGGEST PROBLEMS.”

— URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

Superintendents in both urban and rural districts identified their inability to provide a living wage to classified staff as a significant challenge in attracting and retaining high-quality staff, especially for paraeducators. A superintendent in a rural school district shared, “I would love to pay my classified staff a living wage ... But I don’t have the money.” A superintendent from an urban district expressed a similar sentiment, explaining, “Cost of living, keeping up with salaries, and being able to recruit people who will live close enough to work here is one of our biggest problems.” Superintendents repeatedly identified the increasing challenges in attracting staff as current staff seek professional alternatives that provide more consistent income and a more competitive salary.

Challenges Created by Regionalization Factors

In addition to difficulties with classified staff salaries, we also heard that setting educator salaries has been a remarkable challenge for many districts. Interviewees identified several factors that impact how they set a competitive wage, including cost of living, difficulty of assignment, and challenges in attracting and retaining staff in rural areas.

Washington’s current approach to determining salary allocation for districts relies almost entirely on regionalization factors, a numerical value used to provide additional state-funded staff salary to account for regional, cost-of-living differences across school districts. The value is determined according to the relative housing values within a district, so districts with higher housing values receive more state K–12 funding than districts with lower housing values. In addition, a subset of districts receives an enhancement for employing educators with higher levels of experience and education than the statewide average.

The districts we talked to highlighted a range of factors that affect how much salary they can offer to educators. In particular, they shared that the regionalization factor’s singular focus on property wealth disregards other important factors that they believed should be considered in setting the salaries districts can offer to attract and retain staff. Below, we highlight three of the challenges the regionalization factor system can create for districts.

► **Lack of Alignment between Labor Markets and District Boundaries**

Districts shared the reality that labor markets operate regionally and are not impacted by the boundaries of school districts. Under the Regionalization Factor system, a district may receive 6% less funding to hire school staff than its neighboring district. Districts that border one another are often in the same labor market, so when one district offers a lower salary than its neighbor, it will impact how attractive the job opening is for prospective applicants. Districts with lower salary allocations have two options: they can either allocate levy dollars to offer an educator salary comparable to their higher-resourced neighboring district, or they can hope that their current educators and potential labor pool will accept getting paid a lower salary to teach in their district instead of a neighboring district.

► **Difficulty of Assignment**

Another challenge of attracting and retaining staff shared by districts is competing for labor when neighboring districts have meaningful differences in the percentage of students from low-income families they serve. Superintendents who serve higher rates of students from low-income families than their neighboring districts need to offer higher salaries than their more affluent neighbors to have as robust an applicant pool for open positions, even if neighboring districts have the same Regionalization Factor. Educator positions in higher-poverty districts are seen as more challenging, so districts believe they need to offer a higher salary to be able to attract and retain a high-quality educator workforce. As one superintendent explained: “We have a higher

level [of poverty] than surrounding districts. You have to compete [with your neighbors]. You're paying the same for a more strenuous job in many respects, so how do you manage that?" This is borne out in the research that shows high-poverty schools have higher rates of teacher attrition than lower-poverty districts, a result of the more challenging working conditions that are often found in higher-poverty schools.⁹

► Challenges of Attracting Staff in Rural Communities

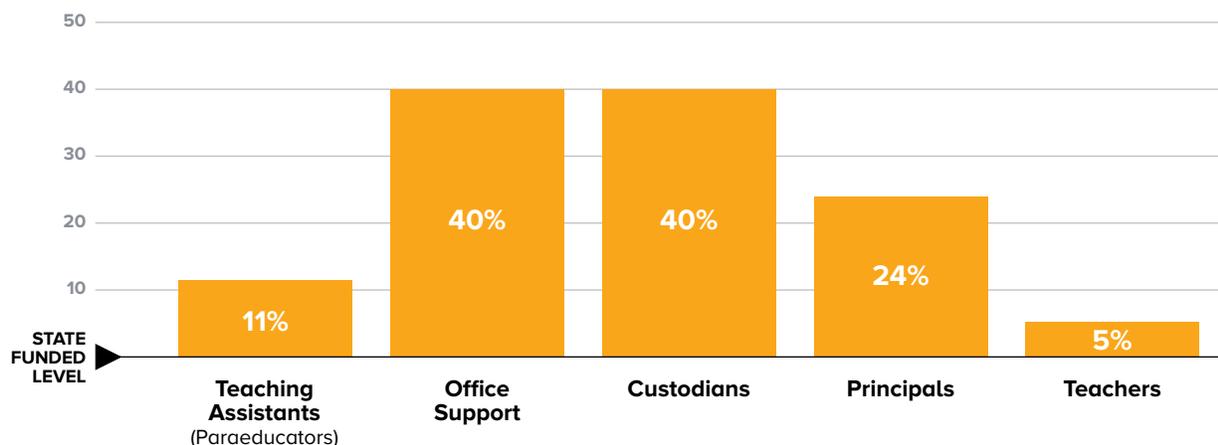
Rural superintendents expressed particular challenges in attracting specialized positions such as counselors or mental health specialists. One rural superintendent stated, "We currently have two mental health therapist positions that are unfilled in the district. We just can't find them." When districts have challenges in filling open positions, it may mean positions may remain unfilled for large portions of the school year or districts contract out with private-sector options to fill openings, which may significantly increase their costs.

An additional complexity for rural districts is the experience of serving as a "feeder" district. Several rural superintendents shared that they often feel as though they are acting as part of the educator pipeline for more urban districts, with one rural superintendent expressing the feeling that "We [feel like] a feeder system for some of the bigger school districts around." Rural districts hire beginning teachers who gain experience in their district, but once younger teachers get an opportunity in a more urban area, they take that opportunity and the rural district hires a new beginning teacher to replace them. Rural districts feel they invest in supporting beginning teachers, but urban districts benefit when those same teachers leave rural districts for more urban areas after gaining professional experience.



Challenges with Prototypical Formula's Staffing Ratios

For nearly all staffing categories, including paraeducators, custodians, and office support, the superintendents we interviewed said that they routinely have to hire more staff than they are afforded through state funding formulas. We found that this is a consistent trend across Washington; districts on the whole are hiring more staff than they are funded via the prototypical school funding model. The table below shows how many more school-based staff districts are hiring above what they are allocated in state funding formulas.

Percent of Staff Hired above State-Funded Levels in 2022–23¹⁰

Source: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, District Allocation of State Resources Portal, 2022-23

To enable these increased staffing levels, districts are dedicating local levy resources to pay for enhanced staffing ratios that better meet their needs but are above what the state provides in state funding formulas. A suburban superintendent shared a sentiment echoed by many districts: “You’re expected to do all these things to make sure our kids have what they need and that they’re supported, but yet you don’t have the resources, whether it’s in funding or staffing to provide them what they need.”

“WE’RE USING AN OUTDATED PROTOTYPICAL SCHOOL FUNDING MODEL TO TRY TO TAKE CARE OF KIDS IN 2024; THEY JUST DON’T MATCH UP. WE WON’T GET YOU THE RESULTS THAT YOU NEED TO GET. IT’S LIKE TRYING TO USE A GEOMETRY EQUATION TO SOLVE A CALCULUS PROBLEM. THEY DON’T MATCH.”

— RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

Other Funding & System Shortfalls

In addition to the difficulties related to staffing, districts mentioned several other inadequacies of our current funding system. Without prompting, superintendents called out specific areas within our funding structures that have proven especially difficult to manage. While the issues are varied, they illustrate broader shortcomings of

our funding system that are increasingly difficult for district superintendents and staff to navigate. Below, we outline some of the components that were brought up most frequently.

When discussing state funding formulas, superintendents shared consistently similar critiques of our current approach. This sentiment was summarized by a reflection from a rural superintendent who shared their belief that “We’re using an outdated prototypical school funding model to try to take care of kids in 2024; they [the funding system and student needs] just don’t match up. We won’t get you the results that you need to get. It’s like trying to use a geometry equation to solve a calculus problem. They don’t match.”

Reliance on Local Levies to Provide a Basic Education

Whether to fund special education services, hire enough staff to meet student needs, pay a competitive wage, or provide additional resourcing for many other areas, all districts highlighted the outsized role of local levies in making up for shortfalls in state education funding. Without access to local levies, districts would be unable to provide the level of basic education services they currently offer. Districts of all sizes rely on local levies; one rural superintendent shared that they are “desperately underfunded and that’s where we’re using these levies, to try to backfill this [the underfunding of basic education].”

There is also greatly varied access to local levy resources across Washington that is influenced by local property wealth, impacting a district’s ability to provide special education services for students, offer a competitive wage to K–12 staff, and more. In 2023, 10 of 295 school districts were not able to raise any levy revenues, and for the districts who did raise levies, district levy funding varied by more than \$1,000 per student.¹¹ This process creates a system where the amount of levy resources a district can access is most heavily influenced by property wealth.

Many superintendents were explicit in their analysis of inequity in relying on levy funding to fund key components of education. As one urban superintendent bluntly stated, “The financing of schools is completely built on the wealth of the district. People say it’s built on enrollment. BS. It’s built on wealth.”

While there is debate over what constitutes “basic education” in our state, the Washington State Supreme Court has clearly determined special education and a competitive wage for K–12 staff is part of “basic education.”¹² Despite this, many districts use local levy funding to pay staff salaries and to fund special education services for students. Many superintendents shared that they believe the conditions that led to the McCleary court ruling have been recreated with how districts rely on local levies.



Limits of the Special Education Funding Formulas

Over 60% of districts identified inadequate state funding for special education as a significant and growing challenge.



This was true of districts whether or not they were above or below the special education funded enrollment cap. The special education enrollment cap limits how many students receiving special education services will generate state funding for their district to support special education. A district that is over the cap gets less funding per student than a comparable district under the cap. A rural district under the special education enrollment cap shared, “I don’t think our special ed funding makes any sense. And for us, it’s wonderful that they raised the cap, but that doesn’t impact us because we’re below. But yet we still spend our levy money on special education each year.”

“WE INVEST [LEVY RESOURCES] IN OUR STUDENTS AND OUR FAMILIES BECAUSE WE BELIEVE THAT SPECIAL EDUCATION IS PART OF BASIC EDUCATION AND THEY DESERVE TO HAVE THEIR NEEDS MET, AND SO WE MAKE THAT INVESTMENT.”

— URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

State special education funding does not account for the actual costs incurred by districts to provide these services.¹³ As a result, when a student receiving special education services requires specialized support, it can cost a district much more than what it receives from the state to provide those services.

Over half of the districts interviewed mentioned their dependence on local levies to resource special education services and support their students’ needs. These districts need to spend more to provide special education services to students than they receive in state funding to provide those services. A superintendent from an urban district explained, “We invest [levy resources] in our students and our families because we believe that special education is part of basic education and they deserve to have their needs met, and so we make that investment.”

Insufficient MSOC Funding

Materials, Supplies, and Operating costs (MSOC) are an often-overlooked yet important aspect of our funding system that account for the majority of non-personnel costs for school districts. This includes when a district buys a new curriculum, pays its utility bill, or has to make a liability insurance payment to be able to keep

school buildings open on a day-to-day basis, among many other items. The non-personnel cost of keeping schools running is skyrocketing ([see table on page 8](#)), and districts are having a harder and harder time keeping up with cost increases. Every school district we interviewed talked about the challenges they have keeping up with the operating costs of schools and identified the growing share of the budget districts are spending on operating costs. A superintendent of one midsize district expressed an all-too-common reality for many districts when they stated, “Our MSOC costs are eating into our levy because we are not getting paid nearly enough for that.”

Fallouts after ESSER Funding

The impact of ESSER funding emerged prominently in our discussions as a source of both appreciation for the relief it provided and looming concern over its eventual depletion and expiration, particularly as it relates to sustaining student mental health support.

As districts decided how to use ESSER funding to support and reengage students in learning, they had to balance how to best meet the immediate needs of students with the reality that this funding stream would run out and could not be sustained long-term. Hiring staff with these funds would create difficult budget choices when the federal funding ran out because state funding allocations would not cover the costs of additional staff such as counselors, social workers, mental health specialists, or academic support staff. However, failing to hire additional staff to meet the growing needs of students could be seen as neglecting to address the challenges and traumas affecting the school community. Districts were put in a difficult situation, and each made choices they felt were best for their communities.



Many districts that responded to the crisis with expanding student support are experiencing a common reality going into 2023–24, with a rural superintendent reflecting, “The financial support we have for social workers and counselors was short-lived. So now we have a bunch of students who need additional support, and we don’t have the funding to support them.”

As students begin the 2024–25 school year, many districts will have less staff in buildings to help meet their needs. Districts shared that many of the staff positions they have added in recent years, including mental health specialists, social workers, family engagement staff, graduation success coaches, staff that implement restorative justice practices, and academic support specialists, will not be retained next year as the funds that enabled districts to hire them have been spent.

Broader Perspectives: Changing Roles & Needs at School

In addition to calling out specific elements of our funding system that are not working well for them, many district superintendents reflected more broadly on how radically students' needs have changed in the past few years, along with the role that school plays in their lives. Despite acute awareness of these shifts and needs, many districts feel they are unable to adequately respond without more realistic state resources.

Evolution of Student Need

Throughout the interviews, superintendents routinely came back to a recurring theme: how much students' needs have grown, changed, and expanded over time. The growing diversity within schools and the resources necessitated by effectively supporting all kids were particularly top of mind. For example, many spoke to the difficulty of meeting students where they are now as it relates to basic needs and support. The pandemic exacerbated existing inequities in our school system, disproportionately affecting Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) students, students from low-income families, and students with disabilities. Truly addressing the impacts and the needs of these students has proven to be particularly challenging. Many districts feel they lack the necessary resources to provide equitable support. One exurban superintendent explained, “[We] are a working-class district and we can’t keep up with the need ...I can’t imagine how districts with higher poverty can address their needs.”

“WE KNOW THAT THEY [OUR STUDENTS] ARE KIDS FIRST. WE KNOW THAT YOU GOTTA TAKE CARE OF HEALTH AND SAFETY AND SHELTER AND ALL THOSE THINGS FIRST OR YOU DON’T GET TO LEARNING. THAT’S WHY IT’S ALL ABOUT THE KID AND THE HUMANITY OF THAT KID AND RECOGNIZING THAT.”

— RURAL SUPERINTENDENT

Housing instability, food insecurity, and other challenges in meeting basic needs directly impact a student’s ability to engage in learning, and these issues have impacted BIPOC communities and low-income communities the most. As societal inequities manifest in K–12 settings, it creates additional challenges for districts, yet student need is not a significant factor in determining how the state funds education. Several superintendents shared that this creates a more challenging environment for districts to be able to focus on

student learning, including a rural superintendent who emphasized, “We know that they [our students] are kids first. We know that you gotta take care of health and safety and shelter and all those things first or you don’t get to learning. That’s why it’s all about the kid and the humanity of that kid and recognizing that.”

Another common observation expressed by most superintendents was how difficult it has been more broadly to reengage students and respond to behavioral challenges after remote learning. The social, behavioral, and academic challenges that stemmed from remote learning have left a lasting impact on young people, and



FIFTY PERCENT OF DISTRICTS MENTIONED ONGOING CHALLENGES WITH STUDENT BEHAVIOR AS A SIGNIFICANT DIFFICULTY.

many districts feel that they are still struggling to properly address that issue. Social skill development—and socialization more broadly, especially for younger learners and learners at key developmental points—is something many superintendents feel has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels and has direct impacts on learning and discipline issues.

Fifty percent of districts, unprompted, mentioned ongoing challenges with student behavior as a significant difficulty. They talked about the additional staff time and resources they spend on student behavior, and many superintendents noted that some staff spend most of their time on discipline issues. One urban superintendent explained, “The need for behavior support has grown. [We need] more time to help our teachers deepen their understanding of behaviors and their responses to behaviors and how they have to structure their classrooms because what used to work isn’t working any longer structurally, behaviorally, and academically.”



Superintendents are seeing a growing need for behavioral support, but feel under-resourced and under-supported. They are trying to develop a response that can help a student feel safe, supported, and able to engage in learning while providing staff with the training and resources to implement, with fidelity, the changes

to practice to meet students where they are. One rural superintendent candidly reflected on how this impacts students, saying, “The need is still there, but with less staff we probably have kids falling through the cracks in some places.”

When students do not have access to behavioral support, they are less equipped to regulate their emotions and engage in learning. Unfortunately, when these needs aren't met, as many districts acknowledged, it can lead to increased incidents of suspension, expulsion, or other barriers to students engaging in learning.

Shifting Role for Educators

As student needs have evolved, there have also been impacts on how the role of educators has changed as a result. There were varied perspectives from superintendents around how the expectations and asks of educators have shifted over the last few years, revealing a more nuanced look at the teaching profession.

Some feel what is asked of teachers now is not significantly different from what was asked of teachers pre-pandemic, but they do believe that more students need a higher level of support from educators, requiring more time and mental energy than before. These superintendents believe the increased need for support is creating a less sustainable workload for educators as they work harder to provide the engagement students need to be ready to learn.

Other superintendents were clear in their belief that educators are being tasked with more responsibilities and have had to depart fully from traditional methods of connecting and engaging with students. These shifts demand innovative approaches from educators to maintain the same levels of instruction and support. While contemplating this challenge, one urban superintendent observed, “Our staff are having to kind of rethink their craft . . . they're not just instructors; they're providing support. They are that relationship builder. They are providing that support for the mental health of students, and relationships [with students] are at the forefront.”

Superintendents expressed concerns about the potential burnout of educators because they believed more was being asked of them now than in previous years. Educators may feel more responsibility to meet the range and depth of needs that are presented in the classroom day-to-day and are supporting kids through the traumas they experience. It can be mentally exhausting and create an unsustainable workload, which creates more challenges to retain educators.

Role of Schools in Supporting Student Mental Health

The radically changing needs of students have greatly influenced how schools view their role in supporting youth mental health in our state. A majority of superintendents commented that the current youth mental health crisis was exacerbated by the pandemic, but it has been a much longer-standing challenge for school districts to navigate.

Districts have had to cobble together a system of mental health support to address the increasing demand for services among students because of the limited resources provided by the state. The pandemic has shone a temporary light on student mental health, but many district staff felt the attention and sense of urgency has dissipated, though the need for more support for students is as strong as ever. One superintendent lamented, “We have the healthy youth survey that comes out and talks about students with suicidal ideation or all these different things, so we capture the data to say that kids need help, and then we don’t do anything about that.”

Funding for social workers, counselors, and psychologists constitutes the only guaranteed funding districts receive through the prototypical school funding model to explicitly support the behavioral and mental health of students. Many superintendents expressed their belief that the current level of funding is not coming close to meeting the needs of their students. One Eastside superintendent shared an all-too-common feeling, “[the] prototypical funding model is just so insufficient in terms of nurses and social workers and mental health supports. It’s our communities, through levy dollars, filling all those gaps.”

For broader context, the table below shows the student-to-staff ratios for each of the staff positions mentioned by superintendents across three different grade spans, including increases planned for the 2024-2025 school year. The prototypical school funding model provides different levels of student-to-staff ratios depending on whether a student is in elementary school (K–6), middle school (7–8), or high school (9–12).

Student to Staff Ratios for Staff to Support Student Well-Being¹⁴

Staff Position	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Nurse	684:1	450:1	485:1
Social Worker	1,286:1	4,545:1	3,150:1
Counselor	403:1	233:1	131:1
Psychologist	3,846:1	16,667:1	8,163:1

State funding levels for social workers, psychologists, and nurses make it challenging for many districts to meet the student need across these areas of support. The state has prioritized increasing funding for counselors in recent years and it reflects in the student to staff ratios, but counselors often serve a variety of roles which can include academic advising, financial aid support, or mental support. The overwhelming majority of districts shared that they feel it is up to them to develop, implement, and fund their response to the youth mental health crisis because state funding levels don't meet student need, but they have varying abilities to make up for these limited funds. As a result, districts explained that they regularly have to seek

out grants and partnerships and leverage local levy resources to help address the mental health and social-emotional well-being of students. Superintendents were keenly aware of how access to local levies impacts how districts are able to meet student needs, with one suburban superintendent acknowledging, “We’re fortunate that we have the funding to make that happen [hire mental health specialists], but I recognize if I were from a system perspective looking at a lens of equity, why is it that my community can afford to have mental health therapists, I get to have that resource, but the school district down the street doesn’t because their community can’t afford it?”

“WE DON’T HAVE CLINICAL THERAPISTS PER SE AS COUNSELORS TO THE DEGREE THAT WE NEED. KIDS ARE FACING ADVANCED TRAUMAS THAT NEED ONGOING THERAPEUTIC SERVICES. ”

— URBAN SUPERINTENDENT

Districts also communicated that because of the lack of a broader system or structure in place to support the mental health of youth, K–12 schools become the default providers of these services because we have no other systemic answer to the question: how do students get the mental health support they need? One urban superintendent proposed that, as a state, we need to provide support in “a more effective and efficient manner. We don’t have clinical therapists per se as counselors to the degree that we need. Kids are facing advanced traumas that need ongoing therapeutic services. There isn’t a vehicle and mechanism to do that effectively and efficiently with schools as partners.”

This sentiment was echoed by districts across the state, including another urban superintendent who shared they don’t feel like they are “trained to diagnose children in mental health and yet we’re being asked to diagnose children and to provide services for things that we’re not designed to provide.” Most superintendents admitted that they are prioritizing resources to address the mental health crisis, but just don’t feel the support or infrastructure to meet students’ mental and behavioral health needs is in place. This can make districts feel like they are alone in working to support student mental health.

Though some superintendents expressed that they don’t believe it is the role of the K–12 system to provide mental health support to students, most said that they believe there should be a role for the K–12 system to play.

RECOMMENDATIONS





ur discussions with districts provide a comprehensive understanding of the unsteady financial terrain that schools are standing on, as well as a more intimate look at the challenges superintendents have to face while trying to meet the needs of their students. In learning from these conversations and connections with districts, we at LEV would like to offer some key takeaways that encapsulate what we consider to be some critical lessons and recommendations for our state.



As a state, we need to determine what our goals, values, and expectations are for K–12 education and ensure there is alignment between these priorities and how we resource our schools.

Whether it is the impacts of the Regionalization Factor, staffing ratios in the prototypical school funding model, salary amounts provided by the state, how student needs are reflected in state funding formulas, or inequitable access to levy resources that have become necessary to provide basic education, our current resourcing system is not meeting the needs of students, families, educators, or communities.

How we fund districts demonstrates what we as a state value within education. Looking at the prototypical school funding model, one of the only discernible values is that the cost of housing is critical in determining how much resourcing students need to access their education. The other layer of our funding system, our local levy system, further reinforces the prioritization of property wealth by providing wealthy districts an opportunity to access more levy resources at a lower tax rate than their peers in less-affluent communities.

Other aspects of our state funding formulas do account for student needs, such as the Learning Assistance Program (LAP), which is intended to support those struggling academically, and the Transitional Bilingual Instructional Program (TBIP), which supports students gaining English proficiency. However, these programs combined account for less than 8% of state K–12 funding, while the base funding formula that applies to every student, independent of student characteristics, accounts for over 60% of funding.¹⁵ The needs of students impact the amount of resources and support they need to access their education, but student need plays a small role in how Washington state allocates education funding to districts.

Our current approach is not providing the experiences or outcomes we strive toward for many students and staff in our K–12 system. Looking at the values and goals we have defined in state statute for our education system, we can only manage to abstract some broad goals about what kind of “citizen” schools should



produce, or about the importance of contributing to your “community.” These goals fall short in providing clarity for districts on what role the K–12 system is supposed to fulfill in our communities or the lives of students. This lack of clarity in state law leads to resourcing strategies that do not match the realities and needs of schools..

Our collective understanding and recognition of student need has grown, along with our understanding of the range of services and support students need to be able to access their education. However, our education funding systems do not yet reflect this growth. Before we take steps to address the shortcomings of our current approach to funding, we need to determine—collectively—what our values and expectations are for K–12 schools to effectively address the fragmented realities of our school funding situation.

The existing approach to K–12 funding unintentionally marginalizes students due to its inherent biases. Historically, laws and policies have been created by and for the dominant white, middle-to-upper-class culture, often at the expense of the needs and perspectives of other, diverse communities. As we work to create a resourcing system that better meets the needs of all students, it is crucial for students and families historically marginalized by the education system at the center of this process. To avoid perpetuating racist, ableist, or classist structures, we must be intentional about centering these communities to ensure we do not repeat the same process and policy outcomes that created our current inequities.



We need to acknowledge how the role of schools has changed in our communities and formalize these changes in our state approach to resourcing and supporting schools.

Superintendents expressed frustration over the reality that schools are being asked to fulfill many roles and responsibilities in their communities that go beyond their historical role of providing an education to students, despite not being resourced to support those needs. Through local partnerships and local staffing decisions,

districts have roles in providing for behavioral health and mental health, supporting the basic needs of students, improving access to healthcare, and other activities that are aimed at more holistic care for young people.

Superintendents work hard to leverage limited funding streams and grant opportunities, while also navigating state and federal bureaucracies, to cobble together a patchwork of support to help their students.

WASHINGTON NEEDS A COMPREHENSIVE RESPONSE TO THE YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS THAT INVOLVES CLEAR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR THE K–12 SYSTEM AND OTHER RELEVANT STATE AGENCIES.

Over the last decade, the state has affirmed there is a role for the K–12 system in supporting the mental health of students, most recently in 2022, when it increased funding to support student mental health. However, the state has never been explicit regarding the specific roles or expectations of the K–12 system for supporting youth mental health and how it should fit within a broader system and response to the youth mental health crisis.

Districts are not required to support the mental health needs of students, but many do patch together levy funding and other resources to try to address needs. They have learned that without supporting the mental health needs of students, learning becomes incredibly challenging. Superintendents noted that students and their families have seen benefits from the expanded role schools have taken in mental health, and it has become part of what many families expect schools to provide.

Washington needs a comprehensive response to the youth mental health crisis that involves clear roles and responsibilities for the K–12 system and other relevant state agencies. Only then can we consistently ensure districts have the support, resources, and partnerships they need to address the youth mental health crisis in a meaningful way. Many superintendents expressed their belief that the K–12 system has a role to play in combating this crisis, but they also mentioned feeling under-prepared and under-resourced to fulfill the role students and families are asking of them. We need to provide districts with clarity on their role in supporting student mental health and provide the resources for districts to fulfill their responsibilities so student access to mental health resources doesn't change from district to district.

3

The funding shortfalls districts are experiencing and the resulting reduction in behavioral and mental health support for students have the potential to grow the school-to-prison pipeline and cause more trauma among students and staff. State-level action is needed to provide districts with additional resources to prevent the harmful impact the elimination of these critical supports will have on students, especially for students from historically marginalized communities.

Many districts have made some difficult decisions in recent months to cut key staff positions to adjust to budget challenges. Students will have less access to counselors, mental health specialists, psychologists, social workers, family engagement staff, and other key staff positions in the next school year. These staffing reductions will have harmful consequences for many students, families, and K–12 staff.

Although we did not ask specifically about student behavior, over half of the superintendents interviewed shared that they are struggling to meet the behavioral health needs of students and are experiencing increasing challenges with managing student behavior. They feel they are limited in how they can respond to behavioral needs, both in terms of longer-term, preventative interventions as well as more immediate, responsive, de-escalation interventions. Districts are already feeling under-supported and under-resourced in meeting the mental, social-emotional, and behavioral health needs of students, and the challenges will only become more pronounced as districts are faced with more cuts in the coming years.



When a student's behavioral health needs aren't met, it may result in suspension, expulsion, or removal from the learning environment. Historically, BIPOC students, students receiving special education services, and students from low-income families suffer disproportionate impacts from student discipline practices.¹⁶ The reduced support for the behavioral health needs many districts will experience next year will likely result in more instances of student discipline and increased barriers to engaging students in learning as district staff have less time and resources to invest in supporting the behavioral health needs of students. We are creating a situation for communities across Washington that will likely have all-too-predictable consequences, including

THERE IS GROWING CONSENSUS THAT WASHINGTON'S APPROACH TO RESOURCING EDUCATION IS NOT WORKING FOR MANY DISTRICTS AND STUDENTS ACROSS THE STATE, AND ACTION IS NEEDED TO STEM THE GROWING CRISIS STUDENTS, FAMILIES, AND DISTRICTS ARE EXPERIENCING.

more instances of student discipline, student exclusion from learning, and the expansion of the school-to-prison pipeline for BIPOC students, students receiving special education services, and students from low-income families.

As a state, we need to provide additional resources for students to ensure we are not creating systemic conditions across Washington to cause mass harm to students, especially the students who have been most harmed throughout the history of our education system.

Conclusion

Washington's K–12 system accounts for almost half of our state's operating budget (43%) and plays a significant role in shaping communities across the state. There is growing consensus that Washington's approach to resourcing education is not working for many districts and students across the state, and action is needed to stem the growing crisis students, families, and districts are experiencing. The recommendations identified in this report address the immediate needs communities are experiencing, while we take steps to create a sustainable, equitable resourcing approach designed to support the range of needs young people experience as they engage in learning. As a state, we must act with intentionality, transparency, and urgency as we work toward establishing a resourcing approach that better supports and positions our youth as they work toward their educational and postsecondary goals. ■



APPENDIX A



Interview Questions

▶ **Looking back to the beginning of the 2019-20 school year, before the beginning of the pandemic, what has changed or become more apparent in terms of student needs and what is being asked of districts?**

- How have BIPOC students, Students receiving special education services, students from low-income families, and other marginalized students been impacted differently over that time frame? How has that influenced your response?
 - What staff roles have been impacted the most by shifts in how you approach meeting student needs?
-

▶ **For your district what costs have seen the most significant increases compared to before the start of the pandemic?**

▶ **What are some difficult budget choices you have had to make in recent months? And how do you ensure students of color, students receiving special education services, students from low-income families, and other marginalized groups aren't disproportionately impacted?**

- Do you see these challenges persisting or growing over the next few years?
 - What academic or student support areas would you dedicate additional resources to if you had access to greater resources?
-

▶ **Is Washington state's current resourcing approach positioning your district to meet the goals and expectations of our K-12 system?**

- In which ways could our state funding formulas change to better meet the needs of students? Especially to better serve marginalized communities?
-

▶ **What are the primary goals you have set for your district and how is that reflected in how you resource student programming or support?**

APPENDIX B



Demographics of Districts Interviewed

District Student Enrollment

	Under 2,000	2,000 to 5,000	5,000 to 10,000	10,000 to 20,000	Above 20,000
Number of Districts	6	7	5	6	4

Enrollment of Students from Low-Income Families

	Under 40%	40% to 60%	Above 60%
Number of Districts	7	13	8

State Average 50%
Sample Average: 49%

Enrollment of BIPOC students

	Under 30%	30% to 50%	Above 50%
Number of Districts	7	12	9

State Average 51%
Sample Average: 45%

Students Receiving Special Education Services

	Under 10%	10% to 14.9%	15% and Over
Number of Districts	1	17	10

State Average 14%
Sample Average: 14%

Demographics of Districts Interviewed, continued

Students Gaining English Proficiency

Number of Districts	Under 10%	10% to 14.9%	15% and Over
	13	8	7

State Average 14.3%
Sample Average: 13.8%

End Notes

- ¹ Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2023) Statewide Average Financial Tables and Charts.
- ² Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2020 & 2023) General Fund Expenditures by NCEC Code.
- ³ Statewide Minimum Salary Allocations for 2019-20 & 2022-23 from State Operating Budget (House Bill 1109) and (House Bill 5693).
- ⁴ Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2020 & 2023) General Fund Expenditures by NCEC Code.
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- ⁶ Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2008) Educating English Language Learners in Washington State, 200708.
- ⁷ Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2020 & 2023) School District Personnel Summary Profiles.
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- ¹⁰ Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, District Allocation of State Resources Portal, 2022-23.
- ¹¹ Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2023) School District Property Tax Levies Report 1061.
- ¹² McCleary v. State, 173 Wn.2d 477, 269 P.3d 227, 2012 Wash. LEXIS 3, 173 Wn.2d 477, 269 P.3d 227, 2012 Wash. LEXIS 3
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- ¹⁴ RCW 28A.150.260.
- ¹⁵ Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Final School Apportionment Report 2022-23.
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