

# Underfunded and Unsustainable: Findings and Recommendations

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**Working to ensure that every student in Washington state has access to an excellent public education that provides equitable opportunities for success.**



# Agenda

- Methodology
- Background
- Findings
- Recommendations



# Methodology

- Interviewed 28 school district superintendents across Washington
  - Districts were asked the same set of questions
  - Interviews were conducted during the 2023-24 school year
  - Districts were identified to reflect the demographic and geographic diversity of WA



# Background

## School demographics are continuing to shift

	2007-2008	2022-23	Percent Change
BIPOC Students	34%	51%	50%
English Language Learners	9.2%	13.3%	45%
Languages Spoken in WA Schools	194	242	25%
Students from Low-Income Families	37%	50%	34%



# Background

Districts are hiring more staff to support student social-emotional and behavioral health

Staff Position	Increase in statewide hiring (2019-2020 thru 2022-2023)
Nurse	18%
Social Worker	63%
Counselor	10%
Psychologist	-1%



# Background

## Everything is more expensive

Operating Costs	Percent increase in district spending from 2019–2020 to 2022–23
General Supplies	29%
Food	36%
Technology Supplies	32%
Utility	30%
Cleaning	45%
Insurance	48%
Natural Gas	76%
Electricity	30%
Non-technology Repair	54%



# Findings:

## Staffing & Labor Market Challenges

- Challenges in providing competitive salaries
  - Especially for classified staff, such as paraeducators

*“I would love to pay my classified staff a living wage ... But I don't have the money.” – Rural Superintendent*

- Regionalization Factor doesn't reflect labor market realities





# Findings:

## Staffing & Labor Market Challenges

- Insufficient staffing ratios in the prototypical school funding model

*“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.” – Suburban Superintendent*



# Findings:

## Funding and System Shortfalls

- Reliance on local levies
- Insufficient special education funding

*"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." - Rural Superintendent*



# Findings:

## Funding and System Shortfalls

- *School operating costs are increasing at an unsustainable rate*
- *The spending down of Federal Stimulus Funding (ESSER) is creating challenges*

*“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.”*  
– Rural Superintendent



# Findings:

## Changing Roles and Needs at Schools

- The available resources to support student needs don't meet the demand

*"[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." - Mid-size district*

- Half of the districts expressed challenges in meeting the behavioral needs of students

*"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."*



# Findings:

## Changing Roles and Needs at Schools

- Evolving role of educators
  - Educators are spending more of the school day working to prepare students to engage in learning

*“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.”*



# Findings:

## Changing Roles and Needs at Schools

- **Districts are being asked to take a bigger role in supporting student mental health, but don't believe they have the expertise or resources**

*“We’re not 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.”*



# Findings:

## Changing Roles and Needs at Schools

### Student to staff ratios 2024-2025

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



# Recommendation #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.**





# Recommendation #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.**



# Recommendation: 3

- **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.**

# QUESTIONS?



If you have any follow-up questions please email me at: [Jake@educationvoters.org](mailto:Jake@educationvoters.org)