



What to Expect in the 2026 Washington state Legislative Session

January 8, 2026 AI Summary

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On January 8, 2026, the League of Education Voters (LEV) convened a diverse panel of advocates, policy experts, and student leaders for a webinar that unpacked the challenges and opportunities in Washington's upcoming legislative session. With a \$2.3 billion budget shortfall and federal uncertainty looming, the conversation centered on how to protect educational equity across the entire continuum—from early learning to higher education—while navigating fiscal austerity.

Opening Remarks: Education as a Tool for Justice

Arik Korman, CEO of LEV, opened by sharing his personal motivation: “I advocate because of my son, so that every student can get what they need, when they need it, and how they need it.” He reminded attendees that education is not just about academics—it is a lever for justice. LEV’s mission is to dismantle systems that perpetuate racial and disability inequities and to build schools that honor the humanity of every student.

Korman framed the urgency: “Budget deficits and uncertainty of federal funding could devastate programs critical to student well-being—mental health resources, special education services, and post-secondary opportunities.” He emphasized that students who identify as BIPOC, students with disabilities, students who are multilingual learners, and those experiencing homelessness will bear the deepest burdens if cuts proceed unchecked.

Legislative Landscape: A Reality Check

Carey Morris, LEV’s government relations consultant, delivered a candid overview of the session:

- 60-Day Supplemental Budget Year: Lawmakers face a compressed timeline to address both policy and budget priorities.
- Governor's Blueprint: Released December 23, the proposal includes a \$1 billion transfer from reserves but still leaves a \$2.3 billion gap.
- Wealth Tax Proposal: While Governor Ferguson supports a millionaire's tax, Morris clarified: "Even if passed, this will not affect this year's deficit."
- Political Dynamics: Democrats control both chambers, but campaign pressures will influence decisions. "This is the first time many legislators have had to make reductions," Morris noted, urging advocates to stress the long-term costs of short-term cuts: "If you reduce funding now, you'll pay for it later."

Youth Voice: Policy Priorities from LYAC

Student leaders Paree Raval and Ananya Swaminathan from the Washington Legislative Youth Advisory Council (LYAC) highlighted their priorities:

- AI Privacy in Schools: Protecting students from harm caused by artificial intelligence systems.
- CTE Credit for Student Translators: Recognizing bilingual students' contributions as workforce-ready skills.
- Voter Registration Access: Moving registration to September to align with National Voter Registration Day and integrate civic engagement into curricula.
- Student Representation on School Boards: "Policies should reflect the voices of those most affected," Swaminathan said.
- Survivor-Centered Policies: Supporting bills to strengthen protections against sexual harassment and assault.

When asked about cell phone bans, Raval clarified: "LYAC is not explicitly supporting any cell phone ban legislation this year, though personally, I think cell phones impact mental health."

Protecting Students Experiencing Homelessness

Aaron Yared of Building Changes spotlighted a critical vulnerability: Washington lacks independent state protections for homeless students, relying entirely on the federal

McKinney-Vento Act—now under threat. Yared warned: “If McKinney-Vento is defunded or moved to the Department of Labor, Washington students could lose all protections.”

Building Changes is working with Rep. Sharon Tomiko Santos on a bill to codify these rights in state law and restore funding for the Homeless Student Stability Program, which was slashed from \$5 million to \$1.2 million last year. “Governor Ferguson included renewed funding in his budget—a huge first step—but the fight’s not over,” Yared stressed.

Disability Rights: Ending Harmful Practices

Andrea Kadlec of Disability Rights Washington focused on dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline by eliminating restraint and isolation in schools. “We’re retraumatizing our most traumatized students,” she said, noting that these practices disproportionately affect students with disabilities, students of color, and those in poverty.

Kadlec outlined a cost-neutral bill to ban chemical and mechanical restraints and prohibit holds that interfere with breathing—measures that have caused student deaths. She also linked this work to broader efforts to end solitary confinement in prisons, underscoring the continuum of harm from school to adulthood.

Higher Education: Equity Under Siege

Fernando Mejia Ledesma of **Communities for Our Colleges** emphasized the role of community colleges in closing equity gaps. His coalition is advancing:

- Revenue Solutions: House Bill 2098 proposes lifting the cap on B&O tax surcharges to fund workforce education.
- Immigrant Student Protections: House Bill 2132 and Senate Bill 5906 aim to safeguard personal data and restrict ICE access to schools.
- Parenting Student Support: Advocating for data collection and childcare investments for the 1 in 5 college students who are parents.

Ruben Flores of **the Council of Presidents** raised alarms about Washington’s paradox: “We have the nation’s best financial aid, yet rank near the bottom in college-going rates.” He called for restoring cuts and promoting a college-going culture, noting that tuition is more affordable than in a decade when factoring in aid.

Dr. Terri Standish-Kuon of Independent Colleges of Washington highlighted inequitable cuts to the Washington College Grant and College Bound Scholarship—reductions that disproportionately harm students of color, women, and first-generation college-goers. Senate Bill 5828 seeks to restore these funds, and she urged collective advocacy: “This is a broken promise to Washington students.”

Early Learning: Disproportionate Cuts

Dr. Soleil Boyd of the Children’s Alliance delivered a stark warning: “Of the \$800 million in proposed cuts, almost a third are in early learning—disproportionate for a population that’s only 7% of our state.” Cuts to childcare subsidies could impact 7,000 families and 10,000 children, while reductions in provider reimbursement rates threaten quality and workforce stability.

Boyd also championed Senate Bill 5708 and House Bill 1834, which target addictive online platforms harming youth mental health, and urged support for the Washington Thriving Strategic Plan to address behavioral health systemically. “Washington ranks 48th in the nation for youth well-being. We need coordinated action,” she said.

LEV’s Closing Message: Protect the Continuum

Jacob Vela, LEV’s Chief Policy Officer, closed with a powerful reminder: “Education is one system, not three. Cuts to early learning ripple into K–12 and higher education. If we care about education, we have to protect the whole continuum.”

Student Reflection

Ananya Swaminathan offered a poignant closing thought: “Mental health and disability supports cannot be treated as optional. For many students, school-based counselors are their only access to care. How do we ensure these services are protected?”

Key Themes

- Budget Reality: \$2.3 billion shortfall, supplemental year, deep cuts across education.
- Equity at Risk: Marginalized students face disproportionate harm.

- Advocacy Priorities: Mental health, homeless student protections, restraint elimination, childcare subsidies, financial aid restoration.
- Systemic View: Education is a continuum—disinvestment in one area affects all others.

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