



2026 Legislative Session Recap: What Washington Students Got and Next Steps

March 20, 2026 AI Summary

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Against the backdrop of a difficult budget year, federal uncertainty, and intense partisan dynamics, Washington’s 2026 legislative session delivered a mix of painful cuts, hard-won protections, and historic progress. For students, families, and advocates across the state, the session underscored both how much is at stake—and how powerful sustained advocacy can be.

In this League of Education Voters (LEV) Lunchtime LEVinar, advocates, youth leaders, policy experts, and lobbyists came together to assess what the session produced for Washington students and to chart a path forward.

A Session Defined by Constraint—and Persistence

The 2026 session unfolded under extraordinary pressure. A projected budget deficit forced lawmakers into difficult choices, while national political instability added uncertainty to long-standing federal partnerships. At the same time, procedural tactics—particularly in the House—slowed progress and stretched already long days in Olympia.

Despite these headwinds, the Legislature passed all three required supplemental budgets and enacted several consequential policy changes. While losses were spread across nearly every sector, advocates emphasized that the session’s outcomes reflected intense behind-the-scenes work—often focused on preventing deeper harm.

A Historic Revenue Breakthrough: The Millionaires Tax

The most consequential outcome of the session was the passage of Washington’s Millionaires Tax ([Senate Bill 6346](#))—a landmark revenue reform long viewed as politically unattainable.

Beginning in 2029, the tax will apply a 9.9% levy on household income above \$1 million annually. Fewer than one percent of Washington households—approximately 20,000 of

the wealthiest residents—will pay the tax, while the state is projected to raise more than \$3 billion per year in new revenue.

Crucially, this revenue is tied directly to investments that benefit students, families, and communities:

- **Historic expansion of the Working Families Tax Credit**, increasing eligibility to align with the State Needs Standard, removing arbitrary age restrictions, and providing an annual cash benefit of up to \$1,300 to roughly **810,000 Washingtonians**.
- **Dedicated funding for Fair Start for Kids**, with 5% of revenue supporting early learning, child care, and family economic stability.
- **Sales tax exemptions** on essential household goods such as diapers, hygiene products, and over-the-counter medications.
- **Universal free school meals** beginning in 2029.
- **Major relief for small businesses**, including a doubled B&O tax credit and full exemption for businesses with under \$250,000 in gross receipts.

Advocates framed the tax as both a breakthrough and a beginning—a first step toward addressing Washington’s upside-down tax system that places the greatest burden on low- and middle-income families.

Early Learning: Deep Cuts, Strategic Defense

Early learning endured some of the harshest impacts of the budget shortfall, with more than \$180 million in proposed reductions. Advocates focused much of their energy on *preventing irreversible damage*.

Key protections included:

- **Preserving access to Working Connections Child Care**, averting enrollment caps that would have pushed thousands of families off the program.
- **Protecting Early Supports for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT)**, safeguarding vital early intervention services for children with developmental delays and disabilities.
- **Creating the Pre-K Promise Account**, enabling Washington to accept up to \$1 billion over ten years in private funding to expand the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP).

While reimbursement rates for providers remain a major concern, advocates emphasized that maintaining access—and securing future revenue through the Millionaires Tax—kept the state from sliding backward.

High School Success and Postsecondary Access

In the K–12 space, the session reflected both progress and fragility.

Advocates secured **\$1.5 million to sustain the Ninth Grade Success Initiative**, which has helped participating schools improve ninth grade on-track rates by 13 percentage points—more than four times the statewide average increase. The funding, while only half of previous levels, preserves a proven strategy for improving graduation and closing equity gaps.

The Legislature also allocated **\$1.8 million to continue the statewide High School & Beyond Plan platform**, ensuring districts can support meaningful graduation planning and postsecondary transitions.

At the same time, **Running Start funding was partially reduced**, limiting summer credit options for students. However, lawmakers included language tying the restoration of funding levels to passage of the Millionaires Tax—creating a clear runway for recovery.

Students Experiencing Foster Care and Homelessness

For students navigating foster care and housing instability, the session delivered both relief and warning signs.

Treehouse advocates successfully secured **\$3.5 million in one-time funding to restore Graduation Success services**, following a devastating elimination of funding the prior year that forced immediate service reductions for hundreds of students. While the investment prevented further harm, advocates stressed the urgency of converting one-time dollars into sustainable funding.

Legislators also passed **House Bill 2594**, codifying state protections for unhoused students and ensuring equitable access to education regardless of federal action. Combined with new funding for the Homeless Student Stability Program, the measure strengthened Washington’s commitment to students facing instability.

Youth Voice at the Center

Members of the Washington state Legislative Youth Advisory Council (LYAC) highlighted the growing—but still fragile—role of youth voice in policymaking.

While several youth-led bills did not advance in a tight fiscal year, LYAC celebrated important wins, including:

- **Strengthened protections against AI-generated sexual depictions of minors**
- **Legislation expanding culturally responsive school safety and behavioral health supports**

Just as importantly, LYAC engaged more than 120 students from across the state in advocacy day programming, reinforcing civic engagement as both a value and a practice.

Behavioral Health: Building the Structure for Change

A major step forward came with the adoption of the **Washington Thriving Strategic Plan**, a comprehensive, youth-centered roadmap to transform behavioral health care from prenatal stages through young adulthood.

Legislation this session (**House Bill 2429**) established governance and accountability structures, designated statewide leadership, and embedded tribal and family representation in implementation. While funding remains a future fight, advocates emphasized that building the infrastructure was essential groundwork for lasting change.

Complementary legislation (**House Bill 1634**) strengthened school-based behavioral health coordination, setting the stage for better prevention, earlier intervention, and reduced crisis response.

Ending Harmful Practices: Restraint and Isolation

In one of the session's most profound equity wins, lawmakers passed legislation (**House Bill 1795**) that:

- **Bans chemical and mechanical restraints in schools**
- **Prohibits restraint that interferes with breathing or blood flow**
- **Ends construction of new isolation rooms**
- Commits the state to **ending student isolation entirely by 2031**

Advocates underscored that restraint and isolation disproportionately harm students with disabilities, students of color, foster youth, and unhoused students—and that this legislation marks a decisive shift toward trauma-informed, evidence-based supports.

Looking Ahead to 2027

The 2026 session left advocates both exhausted and hopeful. Many victories were defensive. Some wins were incremental. One—the Millionaires Tax—reshaped what is politically possible.

Across issue areas, the message was consistent: **interim advocacy matters**. Sustained engagement, coalition work, youth leadership, and community storytelling will shape what lawmakers can deliver next.

As one youth leader concluded, even in a hard year, the work showed that Washington continues to move—sometimes unevenly, but unmistakably—toward a more just and responsive system for students and families.

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