



Impacts of the 2026 Washington state Ballot Initiatives

October 15, 2026 AI Summary

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This LEVinar brought together a diverse panel. Student leaders from across Washington joined education advocates, teachers, lobbyists, and community leaders. Their shared purpose was to analyze three statewide initiatives: Initiative 001, Initiative 638, and Initiative 645. According to the panelists, each proposal carried significant implications for public education and vulnerable student populations.

Washington's Political and Budget Landscape

Before addressing the initiatives themselves, lobbyist Carey Morris provided an overview of the political environment in Olympia. She described a state government preparing for a difficult budget cycle. Washington is entering a major budget-writing year, but revenue projections are flat, while anticipated federal funding reductions threaten additional fiscal pressures. Numerous legislative seats are changing hands due to retirements and elections, creating uncertainty as lawmakers prepare the next biennial budget.

Morris emphasized that while basic education enjoys constitutional protection, many supports students rely upon fall outside that narrow definition. Mental health services, transportation assistance, and various supplemental programs could become vulnerable if lawmakers are forced to make substantial cuts. Responding to questions from student leaders, Morris acknowledged that students may face increased risks if state finances deteriorate further.

This budget backdrop became an important theme throughout the webinar. Panelists repeatedly returned to concerns that the ballot initiatives would either divert attention from educational needs, undermine student protections, or worsen financial challenges already confronting public schools.

Initiative 001: Student Rights, Privacy, and School Safety

The first major discussion focused on Initiative 001. Shannon McCann, a middle school special education teacher in Federal Way Public Schools and a union member, argued

that the proposal represents a significant threat to student protections and educational equity.

McCann began by describing existing pressures facing Washington schools. Public education's share of the state budget, she argued, has declined over time, while schools continue to face rising costs and increasing student needs. Against this backdrop, she portrayed Initiative 001 as an effort that would further destabilize schools rather than strengthen them.

According to McCann, many of the rights promoted by the initiative already exist for parents. She questioned the necessity of the measure and warned that it would create unintended consequences by requiring faster disclosure of student records, including potentially sensitive information. Particular concern centered on provisions that could expose LGBTQ+ students' confidential communications and mental health records to parents or guardians, even in situations where students may not feel safe at home.

The discussion highlighted the issue of youth mental health. McCann noted that Washington students age 13 and older can currently seek mental health support independently. She warned that Initiative 001 could undermine this confidentiality and discourage vulnerable young people from seeking help. For LGBTQ+ youth and students experiencing family conflict, panelists suggested the consequences could be particularly severe.

Student advocate Donovan Jojola reinforced these concerns. Speaking from a youth perspective, he described schools and counselors as essential safe spaces for students facing challenges at home. He argued that removing privacy protections would be frightening for many young people and could make already struggling students feel even more isolated. He connected the initiative to broader national debates in which youth rights and LGBTQ+ rights have increasingly become targets of political conflict.

When student participant Madden Williams asked whether the initiative contained any positive elements, McCann responded bluntly that she did not see benefits outweighing what she viewed as its harms. Other panelists suggested that the measure emerged from broader political campaigns centered on transgender issues and parental rights debates, but argued that its effects would extend far beyond those concerns.

Morris added historical context, explaining that similar measures in Washington and other states have often focused on transgender students. She argued that while parents already possess significant rights and access within schools, the initiative could inadvertently place more students at risk by weakening legal safeguards that currently protect children from abuse and harm.

Initiative 638: Gender Verification and School Sports

The webinar's second major discussion centered on Initiative 638. Jackie Vaughn, Executive Director of Black Women Empowerment for Life and Liberation, approached the issue through the lenses of race, gender, civil rights, and youth well-being.

Vaughn argued that the proposal would require girls participating in school athletics to undergo various forms of sex verification. In her assessment, the initiative would place burdens solely on girls, requiring medical certification and potentially invasive examinations while imposing no comparable requirements on boys. She described the proposal as discriminatory and harmful.

Much of Vaughn's presentation focused on historical and social context. She maintained that Black women and girls have long faced scrutiny, hyper-sexualization, and challenges to their femininity. Drawing connections to prominent female athletes whose gender has been publicly questioned, she argued that policies centered on proving sex or gender inevitably affect more than just transgender athletes. Such policies, she suggested, often place all girls under suspicion while disproportionately affecting Black girls and women.

The conversation moved beyond sports and into broader questions about bodily autonomy and privacy. Vaughn asserted that requiring children to undergo invasive examinations in order to participate in athletics would create new barriers to sports participation and create opportunities for humiliation and exclusion. She emphasized the positive educational and mental health benefits associated with sports and argued that those opportunities should remain accessible.

Student participants expressed strong reactions. Donovan noted that students from various political viewpoints at his school had voiced discomfort with the proposal. He questioned why youth had become targets of such intense political debate and asked where such efforts originated.

The response evolved into a broader discussion about history, discrimination, and political strategy. Vaughn linked such policies to longstanding patterns of controlling marginalized bodies, while Morris argued that political campaigns often rely on fear and the creation of "others" to mobilize voters. She suggested transgender people have increasingly become a focus of such strategies because many voters have limited direct familiarity with their experiences.

Student participant Zayllens Tambwe raised a pointed question: if the concern truly involved transgender athletes, why did the proposal focus almost exclusively on transgender girls rather than transgender boys? His question prompted further

discussion about sexism, racism, transphobia, and how various forms of discrimination intersect in public policy debates.

Throughout the discussion, panelists repeatedly characterized Initiative 638 as one of the most restrictive measures of its kind and argued that its effects would extend far beyond the small number of transgender student athletes currently participating in Washington school sports.

Initiative 645: Taxes, Public Services, and Education Funding

The final initiative discussed was Initiative 645. Erin Lee, coalition manager for the No on 645 campaign, focused on the proposal's potential fiscal consequences.

Lee described Initiative 645 as an effort to repeal Washington's recently adopted "Millionaire's Tax." Under current law, she explained, a 9.9% tax applies only to income exceeding \$1 million annually. She emphasized that the tax affects a very small percentage of Washington residents and does not apply to home sales, retirement income, or sales of small family businesses.

According to Lee, repealing the tax would create an estimated \$13 billion hole in the state budget. She argued that lawmakers would then face difficult decisions about how to replace that lost revenue, potentially forcing cuts to schools, healthcare, childcare, higher education, and other essential services.

She also contended that Washington's tax structure is already among the most regressive in the nation, with lower- and middle-income households paying a larger share of their income in taxes than the wealthiest residents. In her view, Initiative 645 would worsen those inequities by eliminating revenue sources that support public services while benefiting the state's highest earners.

The student panel again helped ground policy in lived experience. Zayllens connected the discussion to lessons from a high school economics class and asked why Washington's tax system remains so unequal. Lee explained that the state's heavy reliance on sales taxes contributes significantly to its regressive structure and noted that recent reforms, including the Millionaire's Tax and Working Families Tax Credit, were intended to improve fairness. Initiative 645, she argued, would reverse those gains.

The Role of Youth Voices

One of the most striking aspects of the webinar was the central role played by students. Rather than serving merely as audience members, they actively questioned assumptions, challenged speakers, and connected policy discussions to their daily experiences.

Donovan repeatedly emphasized that the youth most affected by education policies often cannot vote themselves. He urged adults to recognize that ballot decisions will shape students' futures long after election season ends. He described students in lower-income schools already experiencing resource shortages and expressed concern that funding cuts could make those challenges even more severe.

Zayllens focused on education, civic engagement, and allyship. Speaking as both a young person of color and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, he stressed the importance of listening, supporting marginalized youth, and building community across differences.

Madden offered perhaps the simplest conclusion. After listening to discussions about all three initiatives, he remarked that he struggled to identify meaningful benefits and encouraged voters to research the measures carefully before casting their ballots.

Conclusion

The webinar concluded with a unified message from the panelists: the initiatives should be evaluated not only through political rhetoric but through their practical effects on students, families, schools, and public services. Speakers consistently framed the election as a choice about educational opportunity, student safety, civil rights, and public investment. They encouraged participants to study the measures, engage with their communities, and vote.

Underlying the entire discussion was a larger theme: the belief that public education serves as a cornerstone of equity and opportunity. Whether discussing student privacy, participation in athletics, or tax policy, panelists returned repeatedly to the question of what kind of future Washington wants to create for its young people. For the students participating in the webinar, that future was not an abstract policy debate. It was deeply personal and immediate.