

The Washington Policy Center Education Reform Plan

Eight practical ways to reverse the decline of public schools

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December 2008

Recommendations

1. Put the principal in charge
2. Give parents choice among public schools
3. Let teachers teach
4. Double teacher pay
5. Replace the WASL
6. Create no-excuses schools
7. Transparency - put school budgets and teacher qualifications online
8. Make the Superintendent of Public Instruction an appointed office

Introduction

Public education is in decline. Nearly one-third of Washington public school students fail to graduate, and another third graduate without the skills necessary for college or the workplace. Over half (52%) of public school students entering community colleges must take remedial courses in math, English or reading to catch up. Eighty-four percent of employers say public schools are not doing a good job of preparing students to succeed in the workplace.

Today, Washington ranks 37th in the nation in graduation rates. Student failure rates are so high the legislature and the governor have cancelled the math portion of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning test (WASL) for the next five years.

Public educators' failure to educate children is the worrisome finding of two recent government research reports:

“Our older population is better educated than our younger population, a trend that is clearly moving in the wrong direction.” Source: Washington Learns

“Washington’s baby boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964) are the most highly educated generation in our history. Younger adults in our state have, on average, *less* education than boomers.” Source: Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, emphasis in original

For the first time in history, public school officials are producing a generation of students who have less formal education than their parents.

More Money is Not the Answer

Despite claims by political advocates that public schools have been “cut,” the state legislature has increased education funding steadily over time, even as the number of school-age children has fallen as a proportion of the total population. In fact, per-pupil spending is higher than ever, and school officials have more money than in the past to educate a given number of students.

By every reasonable measure, Washington public schools receive ample funding, and the amount spent on education increases each year. Directing

more dollars to an entrenched and dysfunctional system will not improve student learning.

More money is not the answer. Schools need innovative changes, made within the current rate of budget increases, to improve the performance of public schools.

Eight Ways to Improve Public Schools

1. Put the principal in charge

Under the current system, principals have almost no control over the budget, staffing or daily management of their own schools. Today's principals act more as building managers than education leaders.

Principals should be able to hire the best person to teach in the classroom, like private schools do, even if the most qualified person does not happen to have a teaching certificate or has not been sent by the central office.

The position of principal should not be limited to applicants who hold a teaching certificate. Principals must be skilled at leading and motivating adults and students. Anyone with demonstrated skills gained from private businesses, non-profits or the military should be allowed to enter a principal training program. Principals who cannot manage a budget and oversee a staff of teaching professionals should be replaced with ones who can.

2. Give parents choice among public schools

Public school parents often find their opinions are not respected by school administrators. Many times parents find the really important decisions regarding their child's education, such as what teacher he gets or what school he attends, are all made by set policies and pre-determined formulas.

For parents to be involved in a real way, they must be given control over how and when their children receive an education. Washington policymakers should adopt a policy of open enrollment among public schools. Parents would choose the public school that best fits the needs of their children, and the money would follow the child, about \$9,500 per student, to the school of the parents' choice.

To secure the approval of parents, and the funding that would follow, school officials would engage in healthy competition for student enrollment. Satisfying parents would then become the central value of every teacher, principal and school district administrator, thus fostering a culture of excellence in public education.

Accountability under this system is built in. Low enrollment would provide an early warning to the superintendent, the school board and to parents that the principal of the failing school needs to change direction or be replaced.

3. Let teachers teach

Research shows that placing an effective teacher in the classroom is more important than any other single factor, including smaller class size, in raising student achievement. Students taught by a high-quality teacher three years in a row score 50 percentile points higher on standard tests than students of ineffective teachers.

Research shows that a teaching certificate does not indicate a good teacher. A Harvard Graduate School of Education study shows that a teaching credential “matters little” in raising student achievement. Far more important than a teaching credential is the academic skill of the teacher.

School principals should be permitted to hire and promote teachers who show they can actually raise student learning, especially for hard-to-teach populations. Teachers should be hired based on a deep knowledge and sense of excitement about their subject area.

State legislators have created an exemption that allows education leaders at private schools to hire any qualified teacher they like. They should allow public schools the same broad benefit.

Weak public school teachers should be asked to seek work opportunities in another field. A primary reason private schools excel is they seldom allow a non-performing teacher to remain in the classroom and waste students’ learning time.

4. Double teacher pay

Public school teachers do not earn enough money. The best teachers, and principals, should earn well over \$100,000 per year. As members of a well-paid, full-time profession, teachers should be available year-round, not just for nine months, to educate students.

All teacher salaries should be set without restriction by the leader who knows the teachers best: the principal. Teachers should have access to an appeals process to insure a truly independent review of their performance. Principals who abuse the system to reward their friends should be disciplined or dismissed.

An added advantage of higher pay is it would end recurring teacher strikes, which routinely shut students out of classrooms around the state.

5. Replace the WASL

Washington leaders should replace the WASL with a test based on high-quality academic standards, like those developed by other states. A test aligned to a standard like National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) would ensure that Washington children are receiving the quality education they need and deserve.

In addition, the school system should offer more practical career classes for high school students who choose to enter the workforce instead of going to college.

6. Create no-excuses schools

The paramount duty of the state is to provide for the education of every child within its borders, but when officials fail to educate a child, who is at fault? Lines of responsibility are so muddled it is impossible for parents and taxpayers to know who is responsible for failures in public education, and who should get credit for its successes. When a school fails or a student drops out, it is virtually unheard of for anyone in an official position to stand up and say, “It was my fault.”

To solve this problem, policymakers should improve school governance by establishing a clear hierarchy of responsibility. Clear lines of responsibility should work like this:

- Voters select local school board members

- School boards hire superintendents
- Superintendents hire principals
- Principals hire teachers
- Teachers educate students

When a school has a bad teacher, parents would know the principal is responsible, since he hired the teacher. When a school is failing, parents would know the superintendent is responsible, since he hired the principal. Similarly, school boards would be responsible for superintendents.

Seniority rules should be changed so weak teachers, principals and superintendents can be removed by the officials with responsibility over them. The state's paramount duty is directed toward educating children, not providing comfortable livings for people with public sector jobs.

7. Transparency - put school budgets and teacher qualifications online

Currently it is impossible for policymakers or the public to make informed decisions about education spending, because the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction does not report how spending relates to student learning, or even how education dollars are spent. Aggregate funding for each public school should be reported online, so parents and education leaders can see whether a particular school is attracting students and funding over time.

8. Make the Superintendent of Public Instruction an appointed office

The work of the Superintendent of Public Instruction is similar to that of most other state agencies, and there is no reason this department should be headed by an elected official. Most Washingtonians are not even aware of the name of the official holding that office. In practice, electing the Superintendent of Public Instruction creates *less* accountability, because the office attracts so little attention it is easily influenced by organized special interests that benefit from public spending.

The state constitution should be amended to change the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction from an elected to an appointed position. If problems arise with public education, voters would know that the solution lies with the governor, who could change the top managers at any time.

Conclusion

Every child's education is handcrafted. The learning process cannot be mechanized, industrialized or centralized. A child learns when a caring adult speaks to him directly, calls him by name and conveys knowledge from one mind to another.

Knowledge is best conveyed to children by a good teacher. The most effective way to secure good teachers is to allow an education leader, the principal, to hire them. Similarly, a principal who is an education leader will remove teachers who are wasting the learning time of students.

Educating children is the paramount constitutional duty of lawmakers. Olympia cannot educate each child from afar through ever-increasing programs, initiatives and regulations. Lawmakers should give qualified principals the authority they need to manage and improve local schools. Putting principals in charge is the key to providing the one element essential to student learning: placing an effective teacher in every classroom.

To read the comprehensive Washington Policy Center Education Reform Plan, visit washingtonpolicy.org.

Liv Finne is director of the Center for Education at Washington Policy Center, a non-partisan independent policy research organization in Seattle and Olympia. Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body.