

Trends in spending and learning in Washington's schools, 2006-2016

Large increases in public education spending have not resulted in better learning outcomes for Washington school children

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January 2017

Key Findings

1. The legislature has increased education spending by 34 percent (\$4.6 billion) in four years, to the highest spending level ever.
2. Public school funding is at the all-time high of \$12,652 per student, more than the tuition at many private schools.
3. Yet higher spending has resulted in no measurable improvement in student learning in math and reading.
4. The primary obstacle to improvements for students is the political influence of executives at the WEA union.
5. The experience of other states indicates that Washington school children would benefit from greater access to educational choice.

Introduction

In the ongoing debate over education spending in Washington state, some special interest groups continue to argue that schools are underfunded. These special interests never define the dollar amount they think the people of Washington should spend on schools. The proposed number constantly shifts and changes, always in the upward direction and by billions of dollars. No matter how much the people of Washington provide for public schools, according to these political activists, it is never enough.

To outside observers, these special interest groups appear narrow-minded and insensitive. Activists give no credit to hardworking taxpayers who each budget cycle provide \$4.5 billion in local levy funds to public schools, plus another \$2.1 billion in federal funds.

Political demands for more money also regularly omit mention of the current state budget, which now supplies \$18.2 billion to K-12 schools, the highest amount in state history. These demands belittle historic spending increases enacted by state lawmakers of both parties, particularly the \$4.6 billion increase in state spending supplied by taxpayers in the last four years, a 34 percent permanent expansion to the state program of basic education.¹

1 "Washington State Historical Spending Trends," Washington State Fiscal Information, at fiscal.wa.gov/, and Senator Andy Hill's Paramount Duty Series, footnote 29, at andyhill.src.wastateleg.org/the-paramount-duty-series-2/.

Average school funding from all sources is now at the all-time high of \$12,652 per student, more than the tuition charged by many private schools.²

More spending has not led to better learning

One commonly-held assumption is that more school spending will inevitably lead to better learning outcomes for students. Recent experience, however, shows that this has not been the case.

Ten years of data show that more spending has not led to better learning outcomes for students. Despite large increases in spending, student learning on average has not changed, but instead remains flat. The promises that more money would result in gains in student learning have not materialized.

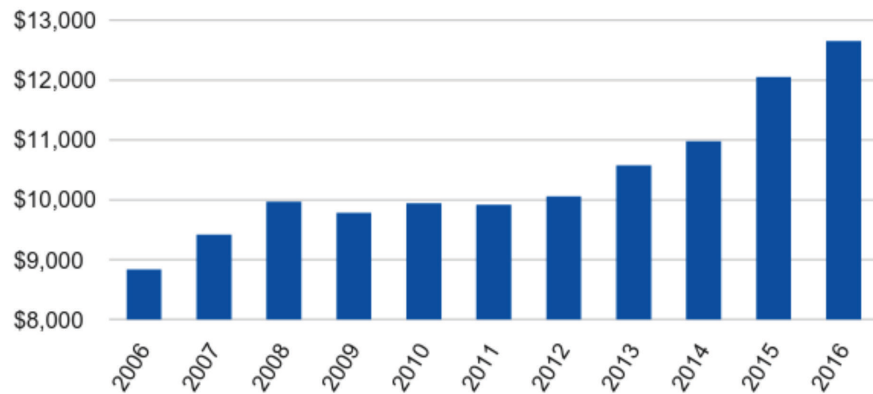
Overview of spending in Washington public schools

Following is a brief overview of recent spending trends in Washington public schools, to show how much spending has increased, and to put current political demands for more money into accurate perspective. All figures are reported from official government sources.

Average total spending, from all resources, has grown 43 percent, from \$8,836 per student in 2006 to \$12,652 per student in 2016.³ For ten years, per student education spending in Washington has grown at twice the rate of inflation.⁴ In real terms, taxpayers have increased public education spending by \$2,153 per student.

The rising trend in education spending is illustrated by the chart below:

**Washington State K-12 Schools
Total spending per student 2006-2016**



Washington state K-12 education spending has grown by 43 percent since 2006, and is now at the highest level in the history of the state.

2 “Washington Private Schools,” Private School Review, 2016-17, at www.privateschoolreview.com/washington.

3 “Statewide and school district enrollment, staffing and finance data,” Washington State, K-12 Finance Data, Office of Financial Management, at fiscal.wa.gov, and Senator Andy Hill’s Paramount Duty Series, footnote 29, at <http://andyhill.src.wastateleg.org/the-paramount-duty-series-2/>, and “Organization and Financing of Schools,” Figure 39, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

4 Consumer Price Index Calculator, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, at www.mpls.frb.org/.

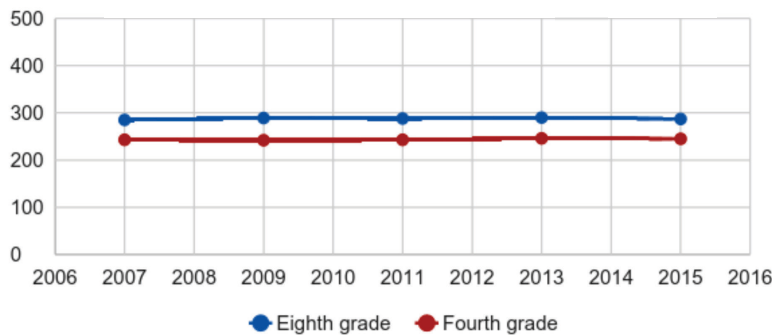
As education spending has grown, student learning has remained flat

Between 2006 and 2016, state officials have used three sets of tests to measure student learning. In 2007, the legislature, led by Governor Gregoire, repealed the WASL test and replaced it with the Measurement of Student Progress, High School Proficiency Exam, and End-of-Course exams. Then, in 2014-15, the state legislature, bowing to pressure from the federal government, began phasing out these state tests and replacing them with the national Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium test.

Therefore, the only consistent assessment which reports trends in student learning in Washington state over the last ten years is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This test is given every other year to a statistically representative sample of Washington's fourth grade and eighth grade students in reading, math, and science. The NAEP is the most respected, reliable and consistent measure of academic progress.

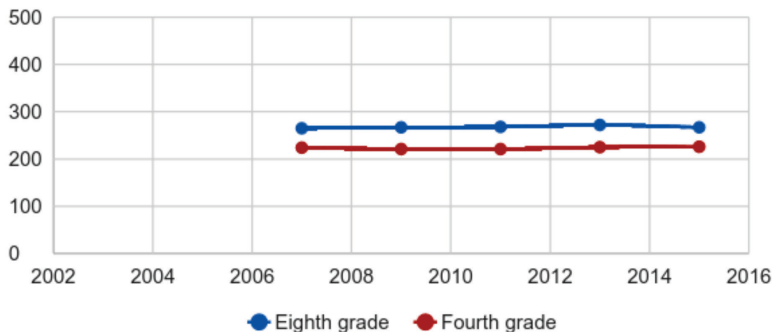
Trends in learning by Washington public school students as measured by NAEP are shown below.⁵

**Eighth and Fourth Grade Mathematics Scores
Washington State
National Assessment of Educational Progress**



Washington eighth and fourth grade student test scores in math remained unchanged in the period 2007 to 2015.⁶

**Eighth and Fourth Grade Reading Scores
Washington State
National Assessment of Educational Progress**



Washington eighth and fourth grade student test scores in reading remained unchanged in the period 2007 to 2015.

5 "Summary of NAEP results for Washington," National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, at nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/.

6 Average scale scores, Washington state, 2006-2016, Mathematics, at nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/.

Despite rising funding, public school monopolies resist change

The numbers show that the policy of directing ever-increasing amounts of public money to education in Washington state has not led to better learning outcomes for public school students.

Experience shows that Washington's public school monopolies have a strong financial incentive to promise lawmakers and the public that the next round of funding increase will improve learning for students.

The real-world findings indicate, however, that school bureaucracies, with guaranteed employment and funding, have little or no incentive to increase the time or quality of instruction provided in public school classrooms. Over time the school system is costing the public more money and providing less benefit, consistent with the results economists say are to be expected from monopoly systems.

Conclusion: the need to allow family choice in education

The primary obstacle to reform within the education system is the political influence of executives at the WEA union. The main shortcoming preventing parents from gaining better learning opportunities for children is Washington's lack of family choice in education. In contrast, officials in 24 states now offer parents a total of 51 school choice programs to help students and families get access to better schools.

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schools. Over 300,000 students now benefit from these family-based education programs.

Parents, especially parents in low-performing urban districts, want access to school choice programs for their children. These programs are the best way to help individual children get a better education, and improve their chances of earning their own success in life. These programs also provide incentive for monopoly school systems to improve, in response to the input of parents and the varied learning needs of children.

Washington state's experience shows that large increases in spending in an unreformed district-based education system has not resulted in better learning outcomes for students, while the experience of other states indicates that Washington's children would benefit from greater access to educational choice.

These family choice programs create powerful incentives for school administrators to improve the quality of the programs they run, knowing that their own public funding is no longer guaranteed. With their focus on families, lawmakers in these states have expanded access to charter schools, offered family Education Savings Accounts, and created tax credit scholarships for private