

IMPROVING EDUCATION





CHAPTER V



IMPROVING EDUCATION

1. Recognize that the problem with public schools is not lack of funding
2. Increased spending has not improved student learning; reforms are needed to create great public schools
3. Expand access to charter schools
4. Allow families access to universal school choice
5. Allow access to state-funded Education Savings Accounts for special needs, foster children, military families, Native Americans and children assigned to failing public schools
6. Ignore the false claims made against school choice programs
7. Avoid repeating failed reforms of the past – increasing spending has not improved learning outcomes
8. Repeal life-time tenure rules and certification limits that keep the best teachers out of public schools
9. Repeal harmful CRT ideology that teaches children to hate their country

Policy Recommendation:

1. RECOGNIZE THAT THE PROBLEM WITH PUBLIC SCHOOLS IS NOT LACK OF FUNDING

Defenders of the traditional monopoly public school system often say that the reason so many schools fail to educate children adequately is because they do not receive enough funding.

An objective review of state and local education spending, however, shows that this claim is not true. For example, in 2017, state lawmakers of

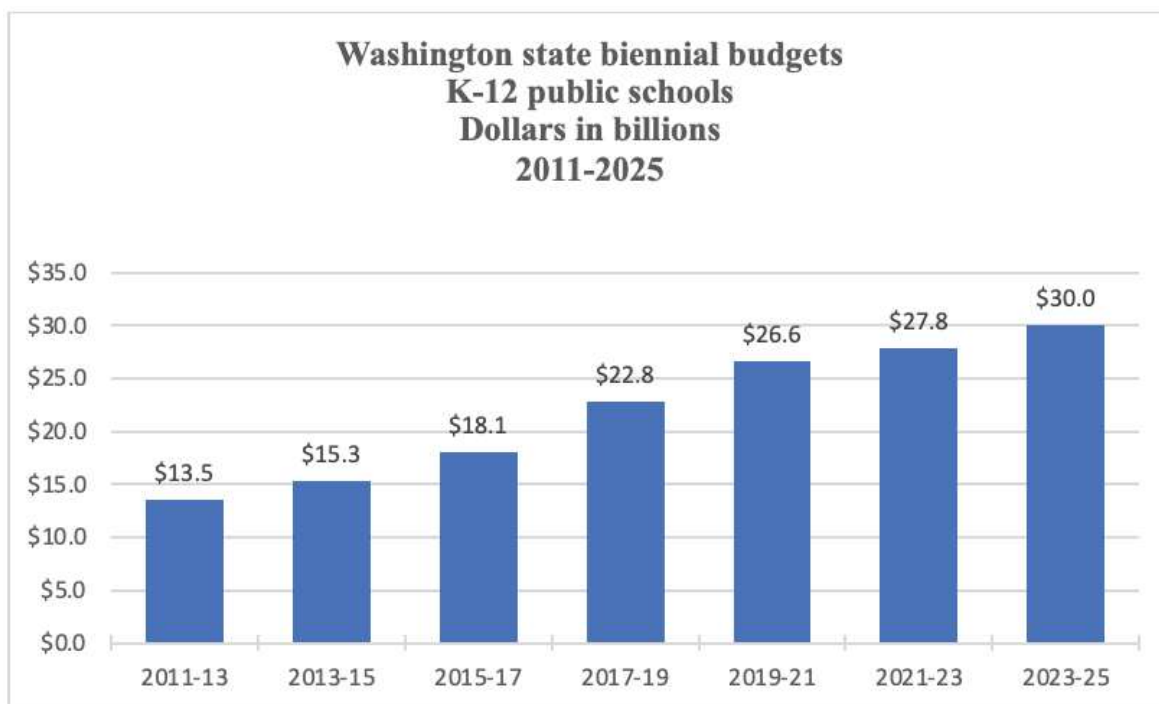
both parties joined together and passed a massive funding bill to provide schools with the largest increase in Washington state history.

The bill, HB 2242, was the Legislature’s response to the state supreme court’s 2012 ruling in the McCleary school funding case.¹ The bill imposed higher property taxes statewide and added billions of dollars to the budgets of all 295 school districts in the state.

In June 2018, the state supreme court signaled its approval and ended the McCleary case, certifying that the Legislature had met the court’s definition of “ample funding” for education.² Today, every public school in Washington receives more money than ever before.

Public education funding has doubled in twelve years

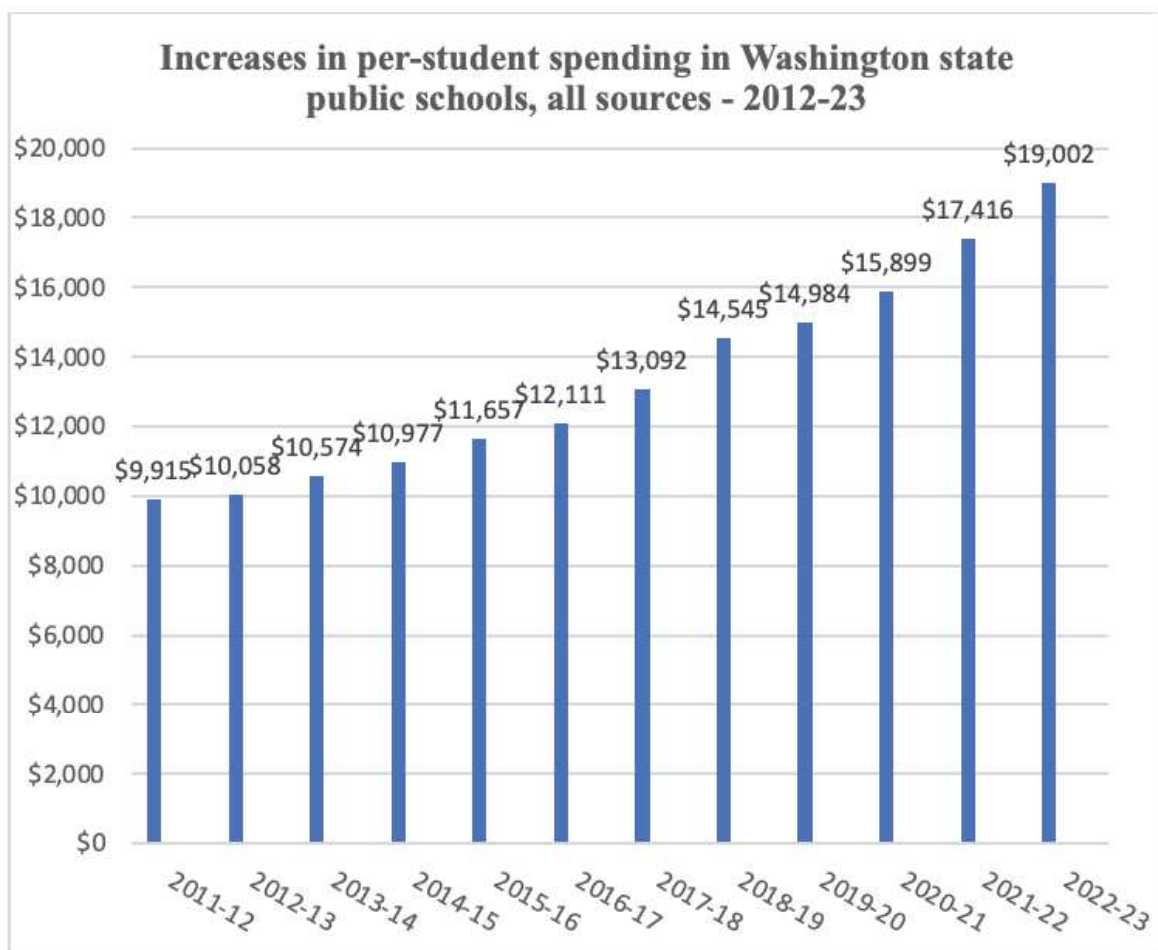
For the 2023-25 budget, lawmakers added a further \$3.1 billion to public school funding, increasing spending from \$25.9 billion to \$29 billion. This is an increase of 12% in just one budget cycle or more than twice the rate of inflation. Overall, spending on public education has doubled, rising from \$13.5 billion in 2013 to \$29 billion for the budget ending in 2025.³



Spending on Washington public schools has more than doubled in twelve years.

Officials at Washington’s public schools now spend a statewide average of \$19,000 for the education of each student, a dramatic increase over the pre-McCleary level of \$10,000 per student. Public school employees are now among the highest-paid workers in the state. By comparison, average private school tuition is \$12,400 for elementary schools and \$14,000 for high schools.⁴ Teachers’ salaries and benefit levels at private schools are consistently lower than those of their peers paid by public schools.

The comparable numbers for Seattle are even higher. The 2022-23 budget for Seattle Public Schools is \$1.14 billion, or \$23,001 per student for just under 50,000 students.⁵ Seattle Public Schools operates 109 public schools, to which children are primarily assigned based on zip code.



Per student spending has increased sharply since the start of the 2012 *McCleary* case.

Conclusion

Policymakers should publicly recognize that Washington schools now receive ample funding and express gratitude to the hardworking taxpayers

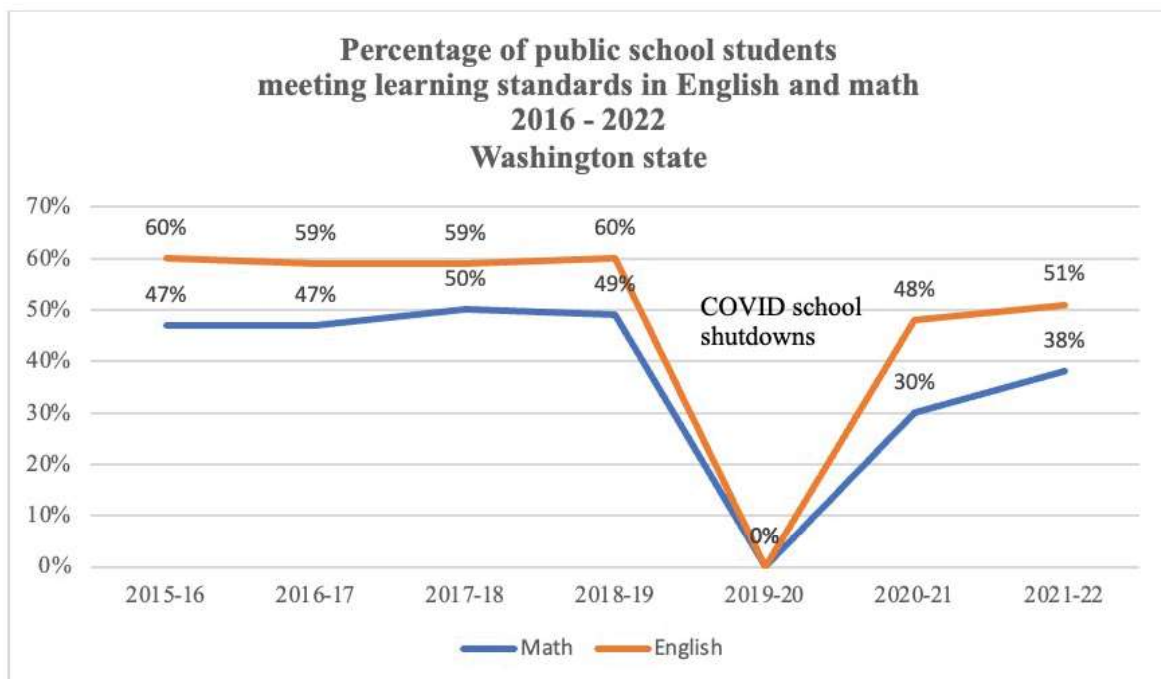
of the state. Once they recognize that funding is not the problem, lawmakers should focus on practical reforms, like providing parents with greater choice in education alternatives, to improve the quality of learning that children receive.

Policy Recommendation:

2. INCREASED SPENDING HAS NOT IMPROVED STUDENT LEARNING; REFORMS ARE NEEDED TO CREATE GREAT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In the 1990s, following a national trend, lawmakers in Washington state adopted testing standards in an effort to ensure that every child had access to a good public education.

The effort failed. Rather than improving outcomes for children, state leaders responded to union pressure and almost immediately began lowering the testing standards, particularly in math and reading. Since then, state officials have steadily weakened the state tests for measuring student learning in order to, as they claimed, help students graduate. Yet results remain mediocre, as shown by the following chart.⁶



Meanwhile, an objective federal standard, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), referred to as the “Nation’s Report Card,” has been administered consistently to a statistically representative sample

of Washington fourth and eighth-grade students in reading, math, and science.

NAEP results show academic learning by public school students in Washington state has not improved over the past ten years. In spite of large spending increases, student learning levels remained largely flat and then dropped markedly due to Governor Inslee's COVID-related order to close public schools in 2020-21.⁷

More spending has not improved student learning

The poor learning results for children raise an important question: Why hasn't the large increase in spending produced the learning improvements that its promoters promised?

One answer is that adding large increases in public funding to a bureaucratic and unwieldy education system prevents innovation, flexibility, and professional creativity in the way students are taught. This finding is supported by experience, which shows that when the Legislature increases funding for public schools, powerful political interests focus first on policies that benefit themselves and make improving learning for children the second, third, or even lower priority.

Since public education functions as a monopoly, there is little accountability and no career consequences for administrators or union executives due to failing test scores, a widening achievement gap, and low graduation rates. As a result, the education system easily absorbs money to the benefit of established interests while ineffective instructional programs continue unchanged.

Examples of the rigid policy limits that prevent school districts from using money effectively include:

- Mis-allocated personnel – only about half of school district employees are classroom teachers;⁸
- Low professional incentives – school administrators are barred by unions from offering performance bonuses or retention awards to the best teachers;
- Abuse and non-performance – union-imposed restrictions make it difficult to fire lazy, ineffective, or abusive teachers;
- Restricted teacher recruitment – public schools may only hire applicants who have a special license, while private schools may hire

any qualified applicant;

- Union financing – Unions make public school teachers pay dues, while union membership for private and public charter school teachers is voluntary;
- Ban on school choice – students are assigned to public schools mostly based on zip code, while families in school-choice states can select the best school for their children.
- Critical Race Theory (CRT), Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), and other harmful political ideologies rob students of instruction time and impose a negative view of their own country.

Conclusion

For these reasons, lawmakers should enact structural reforms in public education that increase choice for parents and treat teachers like respected professionals while recognizing that adding more money to an unreformed, union-dominated system does not help children.

Policy Recommendation:

3. EXPAND ACCESS TO CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter schools are public schools that operate free from many of the restrictions placed on other public schools. With this local autonomy, teachers and principals in charter schools are able to create customized educational programs that better meet the learning needs of children, especially those living in underserved communities.

Children are not assigned to charter schools based on zip code. Parents voluntarily enroll their children in a charter school, while most public school children are assigned by the central office, with little choice or input from parents.

Charter schools are popular with parents

The innovative nature of public charter schools makes them popular with parents. Today, there are 7,800 charter schools across the country.⁹ Over the past ten years, charter school enrollment has increased from 2.5 million students in 2013-14 to nearly 3.7 million in 2020-21.¹⁰

Research shows children attending charter schools are more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college.¹¹ Stanford University researchers found that learning gains in urban charter schools are dramatic. Urban charter schools add the equivalent of 28 days of additional learning in reading and math compared to traditional public schools.¹²

For students with four or more years in charter schools, their academic gains are equal to an additional 43 days of learning in reading and 50 additional days of learning in math each year.¹³ A recent Vanderbilt University study shows students attending charter high schools are more likely to stay in college and to earn higher salaries in the workforce.¹⁴

Washington voters approve charter schools

In 2012, Washington became the first state to legalize charter schools by passing a popular citizens' measure, Initiative 1240.¹⁵ Unions immediately attacked the new law, gaining a ruling from the state supreme court that sought to shut down every charter school in the state.¹⁶

However, the Legislature passed a bi-partisan bill in 2016 that funds charter schools from the Opportunity Pathways Account.¹⁷ Governor Jay Inslee, who opposes charter schools, reluctantly agreed to let the popular bill become law without his signature.

The 2016 charter school law limits the number of charter schools to 40 schools, in a system of more than 2,000 schools. It also imposed a time limit of five years on approving new charter schools.

Washington has sixteen charter schools, located in Seattle, West Seattle, South Seattle, Highline, Des Moines, Spokane, Tukwila, Tacoma, Bremerton, Wenatchee, and Pullman. Sixty percent of the 4,800 students attending these schools come from low-income, minority families. Many parents in Washington, particularly in underserved communities, regard charter schools as the best option for their children compared to their local public schools.

Two more charter schools opened, one in Renton and one in Vancouver, in Fall 2023.

In 2021, the teachers' union and district special interests blocked the reauthorization of the charter school law despite the clear successes of

Washington's charter schools in educating children. As a result the state Charter School Commission is no longer permitted to approve new charter school applications.

Allow new charter schools to open, and repeal the cap

The Legislature has failed to extend the five-year authorization of new charter schools provided for by the 2016 law. Lawmakers should reauthorize this voter-passed law and repeal the artificial limit on the number of public charter schools. Expanding family access to charter schools is part of fulfilling the state's paramount constitutional duty to make ample provision for the education of all children living within the state.¹⁸

Provide equal funding for charter school families

Charter schools receive state and federal funding, but they are denied access to local levy funding. Local levy funding amounts to about \$2,200 per student on average, about 16% of operating revenue for most public schools. In Seattle, local taxpayers supplement the public schools with \$3,000 per student in local levy funds, money charter school families do not get.

Officials have also denied funding to charter schools for classrooms, buildings, and other facilities so that charter public schools actually have to pay rent. Fairness and equity require giving Washington charter schools the same local levy and capital funding other public schools receive. No one wants a public education system that gives minority children less money than other children receive.

Conclusion

The experience of Washington and of other states shows that parents like charter schools because administrators at these schools tend to listen to the voices of parents above those of special interests.

Charter school funding depends on keeping families satisfied, so these schools are responsive to parents and the learning needs of children. Charter schools are so popular that many of them maintain waiting lists of children seeking admission. For these reasons, lawmakers should allow

charter schools to flourish as an available option within an innovative and responsive public education system.

Policy Recommendation:

4. ALLOW FAMILIES ACCESS TO UNIVERSAL SCHOOL CHOICE

In 2020 and 2021 Governor Inslee and other state leaders closed public schools in an overreaction to the arrival of COVID-19. At the same time they passed laws to impose harmful Critical Race Theory (CRT) ideology in the public schools.¹⁹ Critical Race Theory teaches that white students are oppressors and students of color are victims, regardless of the individual qualities or actions of the students themselves.

In response, many Washington parents lost confidence in public education and began to seek alternatives. This trend reflected the response of many parents in other states.

While lawmakers in Washington did not listen to parent concerns, lawmakers in many states have passed laws to give families learning alternatives, on a voluntary basis, to their traditional public schools.²⁰ These innovative state laws offer families access to public dollars to pay educational costs, including private school tuition, and serve as a model for moving education policy forward in Washington state.

The growing popularity of universal school choice

“Nine states now offer universal school choice to all children living within their borders. In all, 10.3 million students, or 22% of the nation’s public school population, now have access to school choice.”²¹ (The total number of public school students in 2021, the most recent year available, was 48.1 million.)²²

Following is a summary of these forward-looking state programs.

West Virginia. Enacted in March 2021, the Hope Scholarship program provides \$4,300 per child in an individual Education Savings Account (ESA).²³ The teachers’ union sought to ban the

program, but it was upheld in state court.²⁴ The program benefits 263,000 children.

Arizona. Enacted in July 2022, the Empowerment Scholarship Program provides \$6,400 per student in an ESA. The program benefits 1.1 million children, with priority given to families living in poverty.²⁵

Arkansas. Enacted in March 2023, the Arkansas Learns Act provides \$6,600 per student in an ESA. Full implementation is scheduled for 2025 and will benefit 480,000 children.²⁶

Iowa. Enacted in January 2023, the Students First Act provides \$7,600 in an ESA. The program benefits 517,000 children.²⁷

Utah. Enacted in January 2023, the Utah Fits All Scholarship Program provides scholarships averaging \$8,000.²⁸ The program benefits 607,000 children.

Florida. Enacted in March 2023, the Family Empowerment Scholarship provides an average of \$7,600 per student.²⁹ The program benefits 2.8 million children, with priority given to families living in poverty.

Oklahoma. Enacted in May 2023, the Oklahoma Parental Choice Tax Credit Act provides up to \$7,500 per student.³⁰ The program benefits 658,000 children.

Ohio. Enacted in 2023, the expansion of the state's existing scholarship program provides up to \$8,400 per student.³¹ The program benefits 1.58 million children.

Indiana. Enacted in May 2023, the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program provides scholarships averaging \$5,400 per student. The program benefits 97 percent of Indiana's 997,870 students.³²

Family choice in education is common in other states

Family choice programs are now common across the country. Thirty-four states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico operate 81 family choice learning programs that fund the education of more than 687,000 students.³³

Under these programs families direct their public education funding to the private school of their choice. Families can direct the funding to public schools as well – the key is that parents, not bureaucrats, make the decision. Parent choice improves public schools by encouraging administrators to serve families first, ahead of entrenched political interests in the system.

Family choice creates public accountability

Past efforts to hold schools accountable have not worked. Accountability measures are routinely manipulated to hide failures from the public. For example, in August 2015, the Washington State Board of Education lowered the standard for passing state tests in English and math.³⁴ The weakened standard was largely ignored by the news media and went unnoticed by the general public.

Another example is how the state Superintendent of Public Instruction permits districts to artificially inflate graduation rates by not counting students who are most likely to drop out.³⁵

In contrast, family choice creates real accountability. Parent decisions cannot be gamed or manipulated by school officials. School choice allows parents to send their children to a school or online program that best meets their child’s learning needs.

Choice programs improve public education. Empirical studies have found that school choice policies benefit traditional schools.³⁶ Research shows administrators respond to competition by improving their services in an effort to attract and retain families.³⁷

How school shutdowns harmed student learning

On March 13, 2020, Governor Inslee closed Washington’s schools to in-person instruction in response to the COVID-19 health emergency. A few months later, in September 2020, private schools and public charter schools were allowed to reopen to in-person instruction with safety measures in place. At the time, Larry Delaney, president of the WEA union, refused to allow teachers to return to school, saying:

“We shouldn’t worry about how schools are harming children, because they will all fall behind together.”³⁸

When Washington's public schools finally reopened a year later (Washington was one of the last states to reopen public schools), students were automatically promoted to the next grade regardless of their true level of education. Even the governor admitted he had hurt the academic and mental standing of vulnerable children.³⁹

The federal Centers for Disease Control reported on the harm isolated teenagers experience due to two years of public school closures:

“In May 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Emergency Department visits for suspected suicide attempts began to increase among adolescents aged 12-17 years, especially girls. During February 21 – March 20, 2021, suspected suicide attempt Emergency Department visits were 50.6 percent higher among girls aged 12-17 years than during the same period in 2019; among boys aged 12-17 years, suspected suicide attempt Emergency Department visits increased 3.7 percent.”⁴⁰

The psychological and academic damage resulted in 52% of Washington state students failing to learn adequately in English and 70% failing to learn adequately in math, according to the state's standardized School Report Card test.⁴¹

In January 2021, two Yale economists published a study for the National Bureau of Economic Research. The study found:

“...One year of school closures will cost ninth graders in the poorest communities a 25 percent decrease in their post-educational earning potential, even if it is followed by three years of normal schooling...”⁴²

Economist Eric Hanushek examined the drop in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores between 2019 and 2022, predicting this cohort of students will see a drop of 2% to 9% in lower lifetime income. He predicts Washington state will see a reduction of 2.3% in GDP, a loss of \$400 billion in revenue over the 21st century.⁴³

Researchers at Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and Georgetown have all presented evidence the COVID school shutdowns caused significant learning losses to all children, especially in math. Special needs, minority, and low-income children were hurt the most by the COVID school shutdowns.⁴⁴

Professor Thomas Kane of Harvard University says children are far behind in their learning. He predicts that this group of students will lose \$2 trillion in lifetime earnings.”⁴⁵

School choice is popular with parents

Given the endemic failures of many traditional public school systems, it is not surprising that school choice is increasingly popular with parents. A June 2019 nationwide survey found that 73% of voters said they support school choice programs that give “parents the right to use tax dollars... to send children to the public or private school which best serves their needs.”⁴⁶ Polls taken since 2019 consistently show that at least 70% of voters support school choice.⁴⁷

The range of people who support school choice is bipartisan and diverse, with majority support from Latinos (73%) African-Americans (67%), and the Millennial generation (75%).⁴⁸ Support for private school scholarships grows to 83% for families with special needs children.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Parents direct all other aspects of their children’s daily lives, including their health care, their nutrition, their social activities and the sports they play. Yet the current structure of public education denies parents the right to decide even basic questions about the education of their children.

School choice increases parents’ ability to educate their own children, and decide which schools their children will attend. By allowing families wider access to school choice lawmakers can ensure they are meeting their paramount duty to provide for the education of every child living in the state.

Policy Recommendation:

5. ALLOW ACCESS TO EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNTS FOR SPECIAL NEEDS, FOSTER CHILDREN, MILITARY FAMILIES, NATIVE AMERICANS AND CHILDREN ASSIGNED TO FAILING PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

Lawmakers should provide \$15,000 a year in direct aid to children with the greatest needs to fund access to private education services. Under this

policy, parents would receive a tax-funded Education Savings Account (ESA) to cover education-related costs, like textbooks, school supplies, tutoring services, and private school tuition.

Students with the greatest needs include special needs children, children in foster care, children in military families who move frequently, Native American children, and children whom administrators assign to failing public schools.

Learning opportunities for Native American children

Washington state has 19,046 American Indian and Alaska Native students who attend public schools.⁵⁰ The state has 29 federally recognized tribes.⁵¹ The drop-out rate for Native American students is 21%, twice the drop-out rate for black students. For comparison, the drop-out rate for Hispanic students is 12.5%, for white students 9.7%, and for Asian students 3.5%.⁵²

Native American students also have the lowest rate of school attendance of any group.⁵³ Their scores on the state assessment test are lower than all other student groups. In 2022, public schools failed to educate 75% of American Indian and Alaska Native students adequately in English and failed to educate 85% of them adequately in math.⁵⁴ These numbers show that traditional public schools are denying Native American students access to a good education and to the skills needed to succeed in life.

In 2013 the state Legislature passed SB 1134, creating State-Tribal Education Compact schools.⁵⁵ This law allows tribal governments to operate their own independent Tribal Compact Schools, free from interference by a district bureaucracy or by union executives.

Washington has eight Tribal Compact Schools. These are operated by the Suquamish Tribe, the Lummi Nation, the Muckleshoot Tribe, the Puyallup Tribe, the Quileute Tribe, the Wa He Lut Tribe, and the Yakama Nation Tribe, serving fewer than 2,000 students.⁵⁶ These schools offer some Native American families greater say in the governance of their children's education.

Yet Tribal Compact Schools must still obtain permission from the state to operate, are still subject to regulatory obstacles, and are not fully free of state interference and regulation. Tribal Compact Schools do not appear substantially different from their traditional public school counterparts and do not have the same freedom a private school enjoys.

State lawmakers can help correct this problem by providing an Education Scholarship Account (ESA) of \$15,000 to each Native American student. Such a policy would empower families by allowing them to select the best school for their children, whether that is a traditional public school, a Tribal Compact School, a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school, a public charter school, or a private school.

Helping special needs children

Lawmakers should provide a minimum of \$25,000 a year in direct aid to families with special needs children to pay for private education services. The funds would be deposited in an ESA devoted to covering learning expenses. Parents would use the money to pay for specialized services from private tutors and private schools for the children.

Helping special needs children through choice has already proven successful in Arizona, Indiana, Florida, Mississippi, New Hampshire, West Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina.⁵⁷ In all, sixteen states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico all give special needs families direct assistance to attend private schools, and South Carolina and many other states provide both a tax credit scholarship and a direct tax credit to help special needs families.⁵⁸

By contrast, Washington's special education system is centralized, wasteful, bureaucratic, and unpopular. Parents often complain about a district's reluctance to evaluate a child for an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and about the mediocre quality of evaluations that are conducted. If a child is granted an IEP, parents say it often contains vague goals and objectives and that their children do not receive a good public education.

Administrators of the public schools always say the solution is for them to receive more money. Adding more money, however, does not help children stymied by outdated teaching methods, insensitive bureaucracies, and restrictive union rules. More money will not solve the problem of imposing a standardized system on the unique learning needs of vulnerable children.

Lawmakers should provide fully-funded ESAs so that families with special needs receive the best services immediately. This approach would not only benefit children, it would show that lawmakers care more about helping special needs children than about funding a bureaucratic legacy system.

Providing learning services for foster children

Children are placed in foster care because a judge has found a particular home setting dangerous and that separating the child from parents is in the child's best interest. Dangerous home settings are characterized by involvement in crime, drug and alcohol abuse, low rates of marriage, disruptive and chaotic daily routines, and abuse of children through direct harm or neglect.⁵⁹

Washington has about 10,900 children living in foster care.⁶⁰ Some 1,840 children have no family to return to and await adoption by a permanent family.⁶¹ Only 53 percent of students who are forced to grow up in foster care graduate from high school on time.⁶²

Foster children face particular problems within the current rigid system of education. Problems include changing schools during the school year; late enrollment after a change of residence; lost, missing, or incomplete school records; assignment to a low-performing school; increased social and emotional stress; and high drop-out rates.⁶³

The problem is made worse because state lawmakers generally ban foster children from attending private schools. A bill introduced in 2019, HB 1969, would have ended this inequity by making foster children eligible for school choice scholarships. Choice scholarships would allow, with the approval of a state caseworker, the option of attending a private school.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The bill did not pass, but it provides a model for future legislation that would target funds to allow foster children access to the best education possible. Another positive model is Arizona's Lexi's Law, a tax credit scholarship program that benefits disabled students and children who have been placed in foster care.⁶⁵ The progress made by other states shows how school choice is benefitting special needs children, foster children, and other students who need it most.

Policy Recommendation:

6. IGNORE THE FALSE CLAIMS MADE AGAINST SCHOOL CHOICE PROGRAMS

Opponents of school choice want to deny children access to a good, publicly-funded education. School choice deniers usually represent entrenched interests, like the WEA union, that benefit financially and politically from a monopoly system. To justify their opposition to letting families have access to educational choices, they make a number of false claims about choice programs. Yet in other policy areas, such as health care and housing, directing public dollars to private organizations is common practice and faces no legal or controversial objections at all.

Following is a summary of the main attacks school choice opponents make against helping children, followed by responses that show why these claims are false.

1. Claim: Public dollars should not go to private schools

Response: Directing tax dollars to private organizations to achieve a public purpose is a common, popular and non-controversial policy. Examples include Pell Grants, the GI Bill and other veterans' benefits, Head Start, the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program, Medicare, Medicaid, Section 8 Housing Vouchers, and Social Security payments.

2. Claim: School choice programs "drain" money from traditional public schools

Response: Budget data shows school choice programs do not reduce funding for traditional public schools. In Pennsylvania, 66,000 students participate in choice programs, while school budgets increased over ten years.⁶⁶ In Ohio, 62,000 students benefit from school choice, while the overall education budget increased.⁶⁷ The District of Columbia has had a popular Opportunity Scholarship program for years, yet the public school budget has increased every year.⁶⁸

In Washington state over 4,700 children attend charter schools, a form of school choice. At the same time, the education budget rose from \$9.9 billion in 2012, when charter schools started, to \$18.7 billion in 2022. Over

the same period per student funding in public schools more than doubled from \$9,915 to \$19,000.⁶⁹

School choice has not cut school district jobs either. In 2022-23, Washington's 295 school districts employ 124,821 people, a record high. Only 63,062 of these, or just 51%, are classroom teachers. The remaining 61,759 employees are administrators and non-teaching staff.

3. Claim: Tax money should not go to religious schools

Response: In June 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court ended anti-religious bias by ruling in *Carson v. Makin* that religious schools are eligible for all generally available tuition assistance programs. The court ruled that funding choices made by parents are constitutional and do not constitute an establishment of religion.⁷⁰

4. Claim: School choice will hurt homeschooling

Response: This claim is not true. Homeschooling in states with school choice programs has not been limited in any way. A 2022 review of 76 school choice programs found they did not restrict homeschooling and that choice programs tended to expand learning choices for everyone.⁷¹

School choice programs provide the best possible safeguard of any public program because participation is voluntary. No families are required to participate, and none are penalized if they do not participate. School choice programs are based on parents' free decisions about what is best for their children.⁷²

5. Claim: Parents can't make good education decisions for their children

Response: Opponents of school choice often say parents can't make good decisions about education, yet parents make key decisions about their children's schooling every year.

Nationwide, in 2021, the families of 1.5 million students, or 3% of total enrollment, removed their children from the public system.⁷³ In Washington state some 46,000 students have withdrawn, a loss to the public system of over 4%, one of the highest transfer-out rates in the nation.⁷⁴

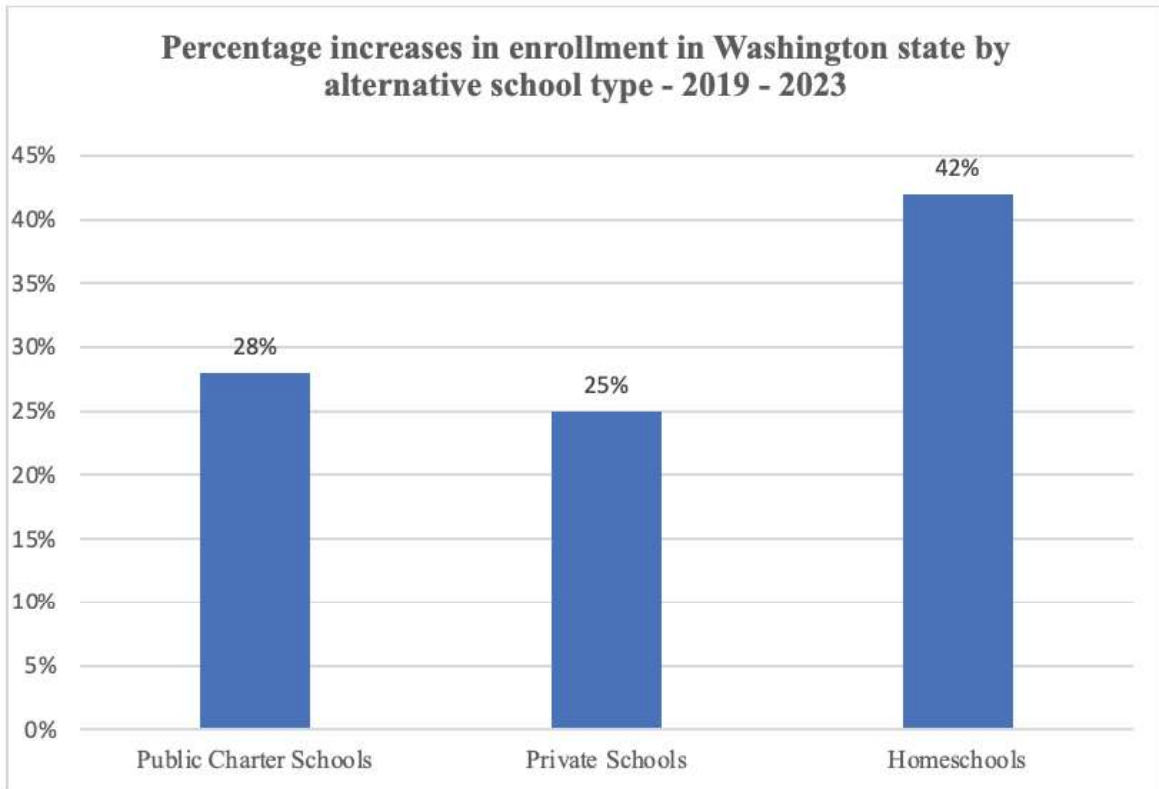
Many parents find the attitude of choice opponents narrow-minded and insulting. Parents make all other life decisions for their children, regarding health, nutrition, hygiene, shelter, social activities, sports and personal safety. Parents also make the decision about whether a child will enroll in a public school in the first place, so they are certainly capable of deciding which school or educational program is best for their child.

Conclusion

The superior attitude of choice opponents is off-putting to parents, further undermining support for the public system. A 2022 Gallup poll found that Americans' confidence in public education has fallen to 28%, close to the all-time low of 26% measured in 2014.⁷⁵

At the same time, homeschooling, private school and public charter school attendance has increased, based on parent choices. The number of reported homeschool students in Washington increased by 42%, from 20,800 in 2019-20 to nearly 30,000 in 2022-23.⁷⁶ Private school enrollment increased by 25%, rising from 65,200 in 2019-20 to 81,400 in 2022-23.⁷⁷ It is clear that parents are capable of directing the education of their children, whether school choice opponents approve of it or not.

Enrollment in Washington's 16 public charter schools jumped by 28 percent, increasing from 3,041 students in 2019-20 to 4,715 students in 2021-22.⁷⁸ Charter public schools serve primarily low-income, minority families in urban areas.



Sources: Washington State Board of Education and Center for Reinventing Government

School choice programs are effective, popular with parents and the general public, and, most importantly, offer the best way to provide children with access to a good education.

Policy Recommendation:

7. AVOID REPEATING FAILED REFORMS OF THE PAST; INCREASING SPENDING HAS NOT IMPROVED LEARNING OUTCOMES

For more than a decade, Washington lawmakers have pursued a policy of increasing spending on public schools in the belief that more money would improve learning outcomes. Experience has now shown this idea to be false. Increased spending has not improved learning levels for students.

Following is a list of education “reform” programs and other spending initiatives that were enacted with great excitement and fanfare over the last 25 years. All have failed to deliver the benefits that lawmakers promised.

Examples of failed public education reforms

- Critical Race Theory Ideology (CRT), which claims to bring “diversity, equity, and inclusion, and eliminate institutional racism” in public education;
- Adding mental health counselors at public schools;
- Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund provided \$2.8 billion in additional funding;
- State supreme court “McCleary” school funding ruling – which increased property taxes and doubled state education spending from 2013 to 2023;
- Increased teacher pay and benefits intended to increase student learning;
- Federal Common Core Learning Standards;
- State Smarter Balance Assessment test in English and math;
- Initiative 728, funding for smaller class sizes intended to increase student learning;
- Initiative 732, large teacher pay and benefit increases intended to increase student learning;
- Teacher and Principal Evaluation Program (TPEP);
- The Washington Learns initiative;
- All-Day Kindergarten Phase-In;
- Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) test;
- Obama Administration Race to the Top Act “...to improve learning in America’s schools”;
- Bush Administration No Child Left Behind Act “..to provide standards-based education reform”;
- Clinton Administration Goals 2000 Act, “By the year 2000 all children in America will start school ready to learn...”

All of these loudly-touted initiative failed to provide the learning results politicians, school administrators and union activists promised.

The top-down “reform” funding model serves the interests of the union because it requires the hiring of a certain number of staff, regardless of whether this spending helps students. Student learning has remained flat,

even as district payrolls have swelled with increased staff, specialists and paid union executives.

Case study: WEA union diverted class size reduction money to higher pay for staff

Lawmakers approved more than \$500 million in the 2017-19 state budget for reduced class sizes.⁷⁹ They promised class sizes of 17 students in grades K-3, 27 students in grades 4-6, and 28 students in grades 7-12.⁸⁰

This pattern is repeated again and again. The WEA union loudly promotes a popular program that will supposedly help students in order to demand more money for schools. A few months after more money is approved, WEA executives threaten illegal strikes to close schools if the money is not diverted to provide pay raises. Out of fear of continued controversy and bullying, school administrators usually give in, and children are deprived of promised services.

Case study: The failure of high-stakes testing

In 1993, policymakers passed legislation to require students to take the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) in the belief that high-stakes testing would create incentives for the schools to improve. Testing was supposed to be the state's way of providing accountability in public education.

Twenty years later Governor Gregoire repealed the WASL requirement. Then, in 2014, Governor Inslee adopted the weaker Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium test, and in 2019, he ended all requirements that students pass a high-stakes test to earn a high school diploma.

Routine testing is an important tool for educators to assess where students stand and to identify areas where they need extra help. Mandated high-stakes testing, however, failed to create accountability for teachers and administrators in the system. The WEA union vigorously resisted public accountability and urged parents to boycott the tests.

Conclusion

The political experience in Olympia shows that mandated high-stakes testing and other costly top-down reforms don't work and that real

accountability is only achieved when parents have access to broad school choice. That fact explains why school choice has become so popular, as parents become impatient with the latest round of fashionable reforms. For that reason, officials should drop the “high-stakes reform” approach and allow parents access to wider choices so they can move their children to where they will receive the best-quality learning.

Policy Recommendation:

8. REPEAL LIFE-TIME TENURE RULES AND CERTIFICATION LIMITS THAT KEEP THE BEST TEACHERS OUT OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Washington state law bars anyone from teaching in a public school who does not have an approved certificate. This ban does not apply, however, to private schools. This is one reason private schools are consistently better than public ones. A Harvard study found that a formal teaching certificate “matters little” in raising student classroom achievement.⁸¹

Teaching certificates do not assure teacher quality

Harvard researchers found that a teacher’s mastery of subject matter is far more important to student learning than a state-issued certificate. In theory, an official certificate is supposed to assure teacher quality. In the real world, however, there is a marked difference between paper certificate requirements and performance as a good classroom teacher.

The Legislature has granted private schools the advantage of hiring based on quality and experience rather than paper credentials. Many private schools hire quality faculty who hold doctorate degrees or are experienced business professionals, but do not hold formal teaching certificates.

These are not elite private schools. They are often located in low-income neighborhoods, and their teachers take on the noble work of educating the hardest-to-teach students. Lawmakers should allow public schools to recruit the best classroom talent available on an equal basis as their private sector counterparts.

Effective teachers raise student achievement

Teacher tenure laws grant automatic lifetime employment to public school teachers after three years, making it nearly impossible to fire a bad teacher in a public school. Private schools, in contrast, hire and fire teachers at will, allowing private schools to dismiss poor performers and continuously improve teacher quality.

Research shows that an effective teacher in the classroom is more important than any other factor, including smaller class size, in raising student achievement.⁸² A good teacher can make as much as a full year's difference in the learning growth of students.⁸³ Students taught by a high-quality teacher three years in a row score 50 percentile points higher on standardized tests than students of weak teachers.⁸⁴ The research also shows that students taught by a weak teacher two years in a row may never catch up.

The research indicates the best teachers have the following qualities:⁸⁵

- Mastery of the subject matter;
- Five years or more of teaching experience;
- Training in content knowledge and high levels of classroom competency;
- Strong academic skills, curiosity and excitement about learning for its own sake.

Improving teacher quality is more cost-effective than reducing class size. Research shows that compared to having an effective teacher, smaller class-size benefits are minor. Lawmakers should enact policies that improve teacher quality, which is a far more cost-effective strategy than reducing class sizes and is much better for students.⁸⁶

Creating renewed respect for teachers

Teachers should be hired based on knowledge and a sense of excitement about the subject they will present to students. Teachers who show results, regardless of certification status, should be rewarded and encouraged. Teachers who do not should be dismissed, regardless of artificial certification and tenure rules.

Conclusion

Lawmakers can level the playing field by repealing lifetime tenure rules and ending the limits on teacher hiring to allow public schools to hire the best teachers while drawing new talent into the profession. The result would be renewed respect for teachers and, most importantly, a better learning environment for public school students.

Policy Recommendation:

9. REPEAL HARMFUL CRT IDEOLOGY THAT TEACHES CHILDREN TO HATE THEIR COUNTRY

In May 2021, Governor Inslee signed SB 5044, a bill to require the teaching of harmful Critical Race Theory (CRT) in public education.⁸⁷ Critical Race Theory holds that America was founded to protect and promote the institution of slavery and that modern-day America is systemically racist.⁸⁸ CRT teaches children to hate the country by undermining the concept of historical progress toward greater freedom for all.

Under CRT students are judged by their appearance rather than their intrinsic worth as human persons. CRT says that if students are identified as white, Jewish, or Asian they are oppressors. If they are perceived as black, Hispanic, or part of another group, they are oppressed.

Critical Race Theory violates the legal responsibility of teachers to promote the development of honest citizens. State law requires teachers to “endeavor to impress on the minds of their pupils the principles of morality, truth, justice, temperance, humanity and patriotism...”⁸⁹

CRT promotes ideas of race identity and power

In October 2021, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) published regulations to implement the CRT race-based program called for under SB 5044. OSPI’s official graphic, shown below, illustrates that this approach is not intended to convey facts, truth, or knowledge to students.⁹⁰



The Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee created the Washington State Ethnic Studies Framework to provide districts and educators a clear entry point for engaging in Ethnic Studies. The Framework is intended for use across grade levels and disciplines. It is not intended to be a lesson or unit plan; rather it draws on the best practices for placing student wellbeing at the center of classroom instruction. The Framework contains four domains: Power, History, Identity, and Civic Action through which students and educators incorporate Ethnic Studies. It should be noted that

OSPI’s Ethnic Studies Framework places the focus on the “dismantling of white supremacy,” requiring teachers and students to “...critique racial oppression at the institutional, interpersonal, and internalized levels while also showing how each level influences the other.”⁹¹

The U.S. History/Ethnic Studies curriculum standards used by the Seattle Public Schools include statements like this:

“Power and oppression, as defined by ethnic studies, are the ways in which the United States government was founded on racist intellectual premises and economic practices that institutionalized oppression of people of color that continues to the present day.”⁹²

The CRT approach to civics not only induces students to despise their own country and discourage participation in democracy, but it also directs student time away from knowledge content to focus on issues of contemporary politics.

National education experts have found that many of the teaching theories used in Washington public schools are harmful to student learning. One study found:

“...a great many pedagogies actively inhibit student learning, including action civics, so called ‘anti-racism,’ civic engagement, critical race theory, current events learning, inquiry-based learning, media literacy, project-based learning, social-emotional learning, and virtually any pedagogy that claims to promote ‘diversity, equity and inclusion’ or ‘social justice.’”⁹³

These teaching ideologies block student access to content knowledge and instead promote distrust and division within communities. Producing ill-informed, isolated and disaffected citizens is not the purpose of a high-quality public education system.

CRT bills violate civil rights laws

These bills also violate international, national and state-level civil rights protections.⁹⁴ For example, the Washington Civil Rights Act passed by voters in 1998 says that public officials may not grant preferences or deny equal opportunities to any Washington state resident on the basis of race, ethnicity or national origin.⁹⁵

All individuals have the right to a safe working and learning environment free of unfair treatment, racial discrimination, or fear of official consequences that may result in loss of employment, professional sanctions, or lost learning opportunities.

CRT attacks science standards and the search for objective truth

In December 2022 the state Department of Health (DOH) announced a CRT-based initiative that undermines standards of science and the intellectual search for truth.”⁹⁶ Educators with high standards like Vanessa Ramsey, Washington’s Science Teacher of the Year, have identified this initiative as an effort to use Critical Race Theory to undermine scientific logic and reasoning.⁹⁷

The DOH’s announced “learning materials” include population mapping software, yet include no warning that population maps cannot be used to prove cause and effect. Not all factors affecting health outcomes are the result of race and geography. Even so, the materials seek to push students to reach the pre-determined conclusions that state officials prefer.

The materials attack science. They declare, “Science has a long history of sexism,” and tell students to “recognize the long history of racism and sexism in American science, medicine and politics,” which “still happens today.”⁹⁸ For example, page 16 of the Module 4 PowerPoint includes this graphic:

Intersections of Science, Race, Law, and Education

Past and current issues affect people of color.

YES...these categories of racism still exist, but we can act:

- Acknowledge and confront racism in Science.
- Use Science to reveal and confront injustice.
- Structure equitable classroom engagement.

Science/STEM: a long, racist history. What does this look like then & now?

- Labeling people of color as inferior
- Harming without consent
- Insufficient medical treatment
- Biased hiring, promotion in Science careers
- Biased interactions in STEM classrooms
- Denying harms and/or the intent to harm

These materials restrict students to a narrow, anti-science point of view, which takes complicated subjects and reduces them to simplistic solutions. They do not provide students with the objective knowledge and mental tools they need to become independent, lifetime learners.

Gifted programs are being cancelled on the basis of race

Since the passage of CRT laws, school districts in Seattle, Vancouver, and Northshore have canceled popular and successful programs for gifted students.⁹⁹ School administrators used racial statistics to cancel the programs, saying they are not acceptable under CRT's definition of "equity."

The cancellations deny many children access to challenging academic work, which makes the most of their natural abilities. In addition, by refusing to provide advanced learning opportunities, these schools deny students the chance to achieve their full potential and undermine the development of future talent for the benefit of the community.

The U.S. Armed Forces face a recruitment crisis

The Army, Navy and Air Force face a recruitment crisis. In 2022, for example, the U.S. Army missed its goal by 25 percent.¹⁰⁰ This problem continues and also affects Navy and Air Force recruiters.¹⁰¹ While there are many reasons for this problem, a contributing factor is the failure of public schools to teach students to respect the founding ideals of their country. When students are told their nation is founded on promoting slavery and

is systematically racist, they are unlikely to devote themselves to serving their country's defense.

By discouraging recruitment CRT puts the national policy of an all-volunteer military force at risk. Polling indicates that in 2022 only 9% of young Americans said they would consider military service.¹⁰²

Conclusion

The introduction of CRT into the public schools of Washington is inflicting damage on the system of education and is hurting the student learning environment. Repealing the harmful CRT legislation passed in 2021 would help restore public confidence in the education system. Ending hurtful CRT policies would encourage students to view each other as friends and equals rather than as members of various victim and oppressor groups.

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