

POLICY NOTE

Key Findings

1. Total school funding in the current budget (2020-21) is \$17.5 billion, the highest ever.
2. Average per-student funding is \$16,800, the highest ever and more than the tuition at most private schools.
3. Average teacher pay and benefits in Washington public schools are just under \$119,000 a year.
4. For comparison, the average wage in Washington state in 2019 (the latest year available) was a little over \$56,600.
5. Washington's taxpayers provided teachers an overall increase in compensation of 29.5 percent between 2015 and 2021.
6. 38 of Washington's 295 school districts pay an annual average of \$125,000 or more in teacher salary and benefits.
7. The often-cited political claim that public education is underfunded is not true.
8. Academic outcomes for students are flat or declining.
9. Adding more money to the current public education system will not improve learning outcomes for students.

Public education spending – Where does the money go?

Trends in teacher salary and benefits costs in Washington public schools, 2015-2021

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

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Introduction

Public schools in Washington state now receive record levels of funding. Total school funding in the current budget (2020-21) is \$17.5 billion, the highest ever.¹ Average per-student funding is \$16,800, the highest ever and more than the tuition at most private schools.² At the same time, academic outcomes for students are flat or declining, nearly one-third of public school students drop out before completing high school, and the racial achievement gap among students is wider than ever. None of the promises made to gain political support for public education funding have come true, leading many parents to ask, Where is all the money going?

This study answers that question in part by reporting recent spending trends in the single largest item in all public education budgets; teacher salaries and benefits. The study covers the salary and benefit increases taxpayers provided to Washington's teachers over a six-year period, or three two-year state budget cycles, from 2015-16 to 2020-21.

All budget figures and other data included in this study come from official state and local government sources.

Growth in average teacher salary and benefits

Eighty-three percent of spending in the public schools is devoted to funding the pay and benefits of school employees. In recent state budgets, Washington lawmakers have directed billions of dollars in increased funding to the K-12 schools. Teachers and other salaried employees have been the primary beneficiaries of this increased funding.

Meanwhile, state data shows little or no changes in regard to academic learning for students, high school graduation rates or efforts to close the achievement gap.

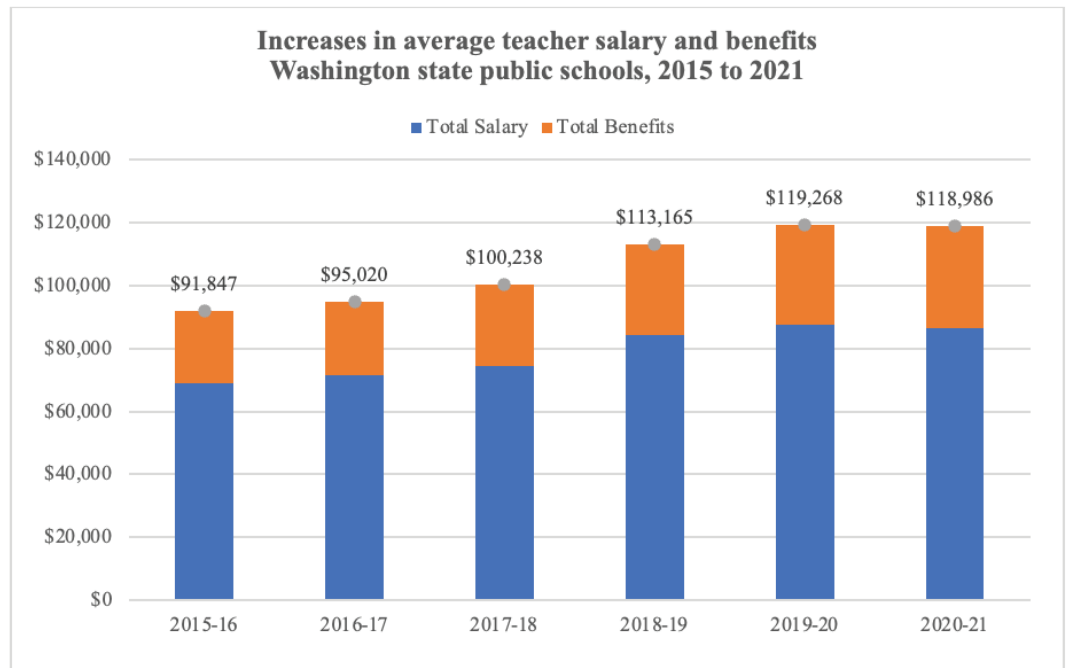
The following chart shows the recent growth in salaries and benefits provided to teachers across Washington state. These numbers are statewide averages from all 295 school districts in the state. Average teacher pay and benefits in Washington public schools are just under

1 "Workload/Staffing/Finance, K-12 School District Finance Data, Statewide Report, 2020-21," by Washington State Fiscal Information, at <http://fiscal.wa.gov/K12.aspx>.

2 Ibid.

\$119,000 a year. For comparison, the average wage in Washington state in 2019 (the latest year available) was a little over \$56,600.³

Over this year period, Washington’s taxpayers have provided teachers an overall increase in compensation of 29.5 percent.⁴ For comparison, consumer inflation over the same period rose by 18 percent.⁵



Case study – Seattle Public Schools

With a current school year budget of \$1.12 billion, Seattle Public Schools is the largest and wealthiest school district in the state, at \$21,300 per student per year in operating spending.⁶ For comparison, this is just slightly below the yearly tuition of \$22,750 charged by one of the city’s most exclusive private high schools, Seattle Preparatory School.⁷

The chart below shows the rise in average salary and benefits paid to teachers in Seattle public schools, an increase of 27 percent in six years. Average teacher pay and benefits in Seattle public schools are just under \$125,000 a year.

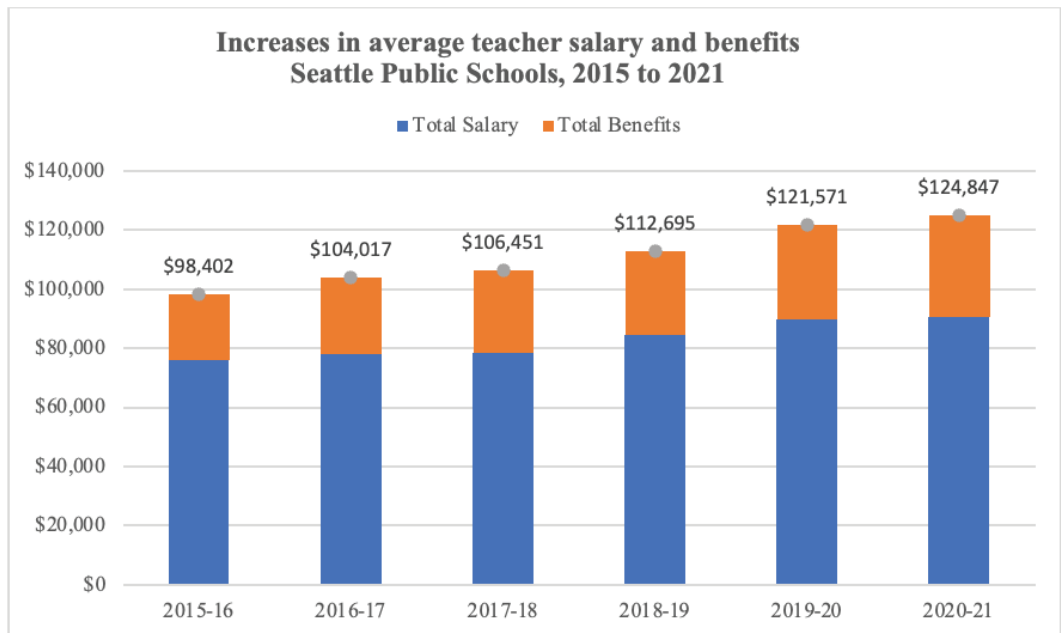
3 “Average Wage in Washington State, 2019,” Washington Data and Research, Statewide Data, Office of Financial Management (OFM), accessed November 19, 2021, at <https://ofm.wa.gov/washington-data-research/statewide-data/washington-trends/economic-trends/washington-and-us-average-wages/average-wages-county-map>.

4 “School District Personnel Summary Profiles,” School Apportionment and Financial Services, Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2015-16 through 2020-21, <https://www.k12.wa.us/policy-funding/school-apportionment/school-publications/personnel-summary-reports>.

5 “CPI Inflation Calculator,” Data Tools, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015 – 2021 to date, accessed November 19, 2021, at https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

6 “F-195 Budget Overview, Seattle Public Schools, 2021-2022,” Apportionment, Enrollment and Fiscal Reports, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, at <https://www.k12.wa.us/policy-funding/school-apportionment/safs-report-api>.

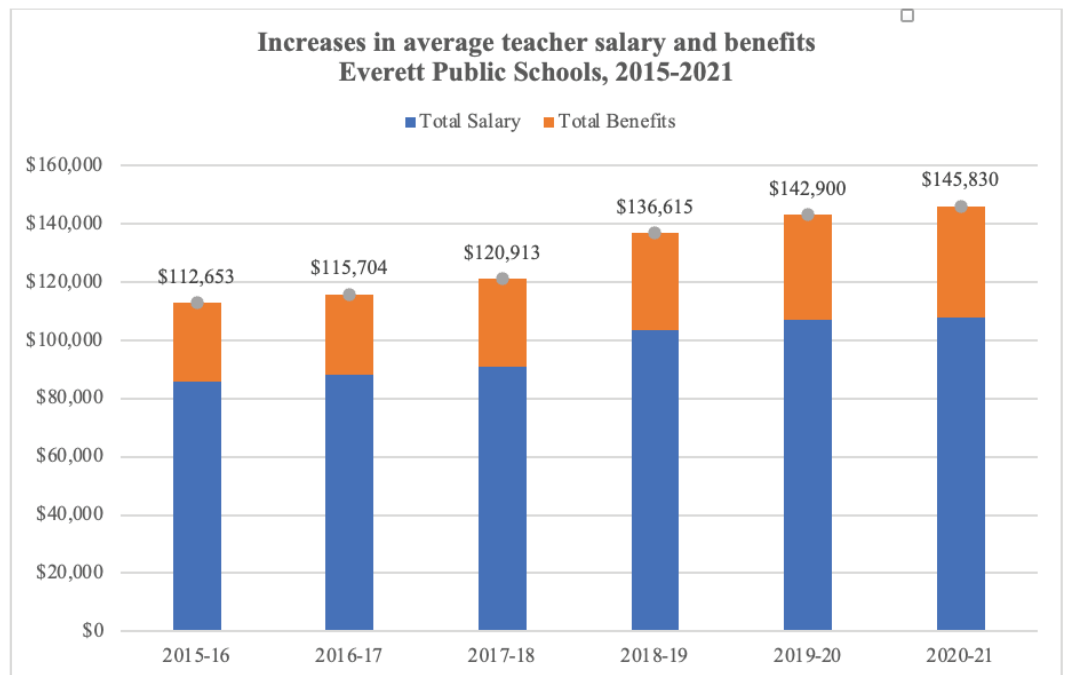
7 “Tuition and Tuition Assistance Scholarships, 2021-22,” Seattle Preparatory Academy, Seattle, Washington, accessed November 19, 2021, at <https://www.seaprep.org/admissions/tuition>.



Case study – Everett Public Schools

With a current school year budget of \$380.7 million, Everett Public Schools spends \$19,100 per student in operating spending.⁸ For comparison, this is more than the yearly tuition of \$17,500 charged by the city’s top-rated private high school, Archbishop Murphy School.⁹

The chart below shows the rise in average salary and benefits paid to teachers in Everett public schools, an increase of 29 percent in six years. Average teacher pay and benefits in Everett public schools are just under \$146,000 a year, more than two-and-a-half times the statewide average wage.



8 “F-195 Budget Overview, Everett Public Schools, 2021-2022,” Apportionment, Enrollment and Fiscal Reports, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, at <https://www.k12.wa.us/policy-funding/school-apportionment/safs-report-api>.

9 “Tuition and Affordability,” Archbishop Murphy High School, Everett, Washington, accessed November 19, 2021, at <https://www.am-hs.org/admissions/tuition-fees>.

School districts with the highest average teacher salaries and benefits

State budget reports show that local officials in 38 school districts pay an annual average of \$125,000 or more in teacher salary and benefits. Those high-pay school districts are listed in the table below.

District			
Name	Average Salary	Average Benefits	Annual Total
Anacortes	\$92,747	\$34,099	\$126,846
Arlington	\$98,800	\$35,545	\$134,345
Auburn	\$92,336	\$34,088	\$126,424
Bainbridge	\$93,023	\$34,035	\$127,058
Bellevue	\$95,461	\$35,594	\$131,055
Bellingham	\$92,460	\$34,037	\$126,497
Burlington-Edison	\$91,357	\$34,391	\$125,748
Camas	\$93,439	\$35,170	\$128,609
Central Kitsap	\$92,228	\$34,230	\$126,458
Conway	\$100,732	\$36,400	\$137,132
Coupeville	\$93,698	\$34,334	\$128,032
Dieringer	\$95,869	\$35,082	\$130,951
Edmonds	\$102,836	\$37,928	\$140,764
Everett	\$107,643	\$38,187	\$145,830
Fife	\$91,618	\$34,019	\$125,637
Issaquah	\$94,704	\$35,919	\$130,623
La Conner	\$91,781	\$35,587	\$127,368
Lake Stevens	\$100,997	\$36,029	\$137,026
Marysville	\$100,134	\$36,983	\$137,117
Mercer Island	\$94,788	\$34,611	\$129,399
Monroe	\$90,942	\$34,092	\$125,034
Montesano	\$90,891	\$34,306	\$125,197
Mukilteo	\$109,125	\$37,883	\$147,008
Northshore	\$99,143	\$35,514	\$134,657
Orient	\$114,535	\$39,560	\$154,095
San Juan Island	\$90,560	\$32,934	\$123,494
Seattle	\$90,679	\$34,168	\$124,847
Shoreline	\$105,538	\$37,702	\$143,240
Snohomish	\$100,522	\$36,406	\$136,928
South Whidbey	\$97,849	\$37,214	\$135,063
Stanwood-Camano	\$98,389	\$35,762	\$134,151



Liv Finne is the Director of the Center for Education at Washington Policy Center. She is the author of *An Option for Learning: An Assessment of Student Achievement in Charter Public Schools*, which in 2011 reignited the charter school debate in Washington state. She wrote “*Why parents will love charter schools*,” “*Why teachers will love charter schools*,” and many other publications during the 2012 public debate on Initiative 1240, the nation’s first charter school initiative. When charter schools came under attack from the state teachers union, she wrote “*Analysis: Why the state supreme court ruling against charter schools is wrong*.” She is also the author of Washington Policy Center’s widely-read education blog, and of Washington Policy Center’s Education Reform Plan: *Eight Practical Ways to Improve Public Schools*. Liv holds a law degree from Boston University School of Law and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Wellesley College. She retired from civil litigation practice to raise two children and work as business partner for a small business she owns with her husband.

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Sultan	\$91,227	\$33,073	\$124,300
Tacoma	\$94,383	\$20,779	\$115,162
Tahoma	\$94,152	\$34,544	\$128,696
Tukwila	\$93,975	\$34,504	\$128,479
Vashon Island	\$91,863	\$51,069	\$142,932
Wa He Lut Tribal	\$91,719	\$37,914	\$129,633
Willapa Valley	\$93,652	\$49,287	\$142,939 ¹⁰

Conclusion

Washington’s working families, homeowners, business owners and other taxpayers are clearly generous in the funding they provide for the public education system, particularly in yearly spending for the single largest budget item, teacher salaries and benefits. The figures reported here are on an annualized 12-month basis and do not take into account that many teachers, unlike most taxpayers, only work a ten-month year.

Still, the findings in this report largely answer the question, “Where does the money go?” in regard to public education spending. Yet the public is continually told that public schools are underfunded even though, as shown, many public schools receive as much or more per-student funding than some of the most prestigious private schools in the state.

Clearly, the often-cited political claim that public education is underfunded is not true.

These findings show that adding more money to the current public education system will not improve learning outcomes for students, reduce the high drop-out rate or close the long-standing achievement gap. Instead, greater structural reforms, a focus on core learning, higher academic standards and increased learning alternatives and parent choice are clearly indicated. These are the constructive policy areas on which state lawmakers should focus, not simply increasing teacher pay and overall budget amounts if they want to ensure that every child living in Washington has access to a good public education.

¹⁰ “School District Personnel Summary Profiles,” School Apportionment and Financial Services, Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2020-21, <https://www.k12.wa.us/policy-funding/school-apportionment/school-publications/personnel-summary-reports>.