

## POLICY NOTE

# Reasons parents are leaving Washington state public schools

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

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### Key Findings

1. Governor Inslee closed all public schools in March 2020 in response to COVID, and these schools stayed closed to in-person instruction in September 2020.
2. By contrast, with health and safety measures in place, private schools and public charter schools reopened to in-person instruction in September 2020.
3. The mandated online instruction provided by the public schools for over 13 months was disorganized, unfocused, and did not cover a full school day.
4. During this period of time, school administrators lowered academic standards in curriculum, testing, credits, and grading.
5. Washington was one of the last states to reopen public schools in late April 2021.
6. On May 5, 2021 the governor signed a law requiring the teaching of Critical Race Theory in the schools, an ideology that teaches students to be racially intolerant.
7. November 2021 test scores, the latest available, show public schools failed to teach 70% of students to the required math standard, and failed to teach 52% of students to the required English standard.
8. The state legislature mandated a radical sex education curriculum which includes graphic materials and the teaching of gender and sexual issues at inappropriate ages.
9. In many urban areas, particularly Seattle, parents feel the physical environment at public schools is becoming increasingly unsafe.
10. The union proposed legislation to reduce classroom instruction time to four days a week.

### Introduction

Over the last two years more than 41,000 families have pulled their children out of Washington's public school system, according to a recent report by the Washington State Caseload Forecast Council.<sup>1</sup> The Council's researchers say this number is not temporary and that most of these families will likely never return to public schools.

The data shows that tens of thousands of parents have lost confidence in public education and are seeking alternatives. The decision to turn down a free public education is not made lightly. Moving to private school, homeschooling, private tutoring, or enrolling in private online courses involves considerable family sacrifice and expense. Yet thousands of Washington families are doing exactly that, indicating strong dissatisfaction with the way many public schools are managed.

### Public schools have ample funding

One factor is clear. Families are not objecting to a lack of money in public schools. The public education system now receives \$17.5 billion a year, or about \$17,000 per student on average. This is the highest level of public education funding in history, and more than the per-student tuition at many exclusive private schools. Yet drop-out rates are high and academic standards are falling.

Teachers in public schools receive average salary and benefits of \$119,000 for a ten-month work year, and some teachers are paid well over six figures in salary alone. Further, nearly half of school district employees are not in-class instructors, and it is common for public school teachers to send their own children to private schools.

Details and sources are reported in the Washington Policy Center study "Public education spending – Where does the money go?" published in January 2022.<sup>2</sup>

There are many factors that lead families to pull out of public education. This study examines the primary reasons parents become

1 "Common Schools Education, Enrollment," Washington State Caseload Forecast Council, February 11, 2022, at [https://www.cfc.wa.gov/Handouts/Common\\_Schools\\_Enrollment.pdf](https://www.cfc.wa.gov/Handouts/Common_Schools_Enrollment.pdf).

2 "Public education spending – Where does the money go? Trends in teacher salary and benefits costs in Washington public schools," by Liv Finne, Policy Notes, Washington Policy Center, January 2022, at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/library/doclib/Finne-Public-education-spending-Where-does-the-money-go.pdf>.

disillusioned with public schools and make the difficult decision to place their children elsewhere. This study also presents practical solutions that would strengthen the public education system and allow all Washington school children to gain access to a high-quality education.

## Reasons families are leaving public education

Many parents have lost trust in the system of public education in Washington state. This has occurred for a variety of reasons. These include:

- Governor Inslee closed all schools in March 2020 in response to COVID. Private schools and public charter schools soon re-opened, in September, with health and safety measures. Public schools remained closed, or experienced repeated openings and closures, well into the 2021-22 school year.
- Public school administrators lowered academic standards by reducing assessment requirements, lowering the number of credits to graduate and consistently falling short of state learning requirements.
- The latest state test scores show public schools fail to teach 70% of enrolled students to the required standard in math and 52% of enrolled students to the required standard in English.<sup>3</sup>
- State education leaders seem uncaring or uninformed about the concerns of parents, with the Superintendent of Public Instruction stating his view in the media that, “no one is failing.”<sup>4</sup>
- Parents found that mandated online instruction was disorganized, unfocused, and did not cover a full school day. Online classes were not effective at providing students with a high-quality education, especially young children, and most students are experiencing long-term learning loss due to COVID school closures.<sup>5</sup>
- On May 5th, 2021 the governor signed a law to require the teaching of Critical Race Theory in the schools. CRT tells students that their friends, neighbors, and classmates are either oppressors or victims depending on outward physical appearance.<sup>6</sup> The racial intolerance promoted by CRT lessons undermines the personal characters of trust, tolerance, and openness that most parents want to teach their children.<sup>7</sup>

3 “Washington State Report Card, November 2021,” Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, accessed March 7, 2022 at <https://washingtonstaterreportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/103300>.

4 “Dori: Masks on school buses? Sad test scores? Data disagreements with state superintendent,” by Dori Monson Show, February 19, 2022, at <https://mynorthwest.com/3356386/dori-superintendent-reykdal-disagreements/>.

5 “Seattle schools’ report card mirrors statewide dip in standardized test results,” by Kim Malcolm and Ann Dornfeld, KUOW public radio, February 15, 2022, at <https://www.kuow.org/stories/sps-report-card-mirrors-statewide-dip-in-standardized-test-results>.

6 Senate Bill 5044, “Concerning professional learning, equity, cultural competency, and dismantling institutional racism in the public school system,” Washington state legislature, signed by Governor Inslee on May 5, 2021, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=5044&Year=2021&Initiative=false>.

7 “Washington public school officials lower academic standards as they implement Critical Race Theory,” by Liv Finne, Washington Policy Center, September 21, 2021, at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/detail/washington-public-school-officials-lower-academic-standards-as-they-implement-critical-race-theory>.

- Washington was the 47th state to reopen public schools, one of the last in the country. Washington is also one of the last states in the country to roll back mask mandates for children in schools. Studies show that long-term forced mask-wearing causes mental, emotional, and developmental distress in children.<sup>8</sup>
- The state legislature mandated a radical sex education curriculum to children as young as five and six years old, without consultation with parents. The classroom curriculum includes graphic materials and requires discussion of physical, gender, and sexual issues at inappropriate ages.
- In many urban areas, particularly in Seattle, parents feel the physical environment at public schools is becoming increasingly unsafe, with students commonly experiencing unregulated homeless encampments, hazardous chemicals, used needles, and harmful public behavior in and around school grounds.
- Legislation introduced in 2022, strongly backed by the teachers union (WEA), proposed reducing in-person classroom instruction by 20%, with classes meeting only four days a week.<sup>9</sup>
- The state Superintendent of Public Instruction has announced his intention to eliminate grades to prevent parents, students, and teachers from receiving an accurate assessment of a child's failure or progress.<sup>10</sup>
- Some school officials require teachers to give students passing grades for work that does not meet state learning standards to prevent students and parents from knowing about educational failures.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

Low academic standards, increased controversy, political pressures, extended COVID closures, and other restrictions have led nearly 42,000 families to pull their children out of public schools. State officials report these families are unlikely to return.

The best way to help these families, and other families that lack access to learning resources, is to provide direct public aid for the purpose of educating children. Four school choice bills introduced in the 2022 legislative session would provide from \$6,250 to \$10,000 per student per year to pay for private school tuition, tutoring, online education, books and supplies, and other educational

8 "Mandatory masking of school children is a bad idea," by Neerja Sood, PhD and Jay Bhattacharya, PhD, Schaeffer Center for Health Policy and Economics, University of Southern California, July 16, 2021, at <https://healthpolicy.usc.edu/article/mandatory-masking-of-school-children-is-a-bad-idea/>.

9 Senate Bill 5735, "Counting asynchronous instructional hours towards those required by the instructional program of basic education," introduced by Senator Manka Dhingra, Washington state legislature, January 5, 2022, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/bills/summary?BillNumber=5735&Initiative=false&Year=2021>

10 "Superintendent Reykdal says after COVID schools may drop letter grades and use an automatic minimum instead," by Liv Finne, Washington Policy Center, May 1, 2020 at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/detail/superintendent-reykdal-says-after-covid-schools-may-drop-letter-grades-and-use-an-automatic-minimum-instead>.

11 "Grading practices: Assessing Late Work in the Second Semester," Northshore School District Memorandum of Understanding with Northshore Education Association, February 15, 2022, <https://www.loom.com/share/13c307b13f694ac4ac56dce873233ac8>, at Time Stamp 5:50.



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resources.<sup>12</sup> These proposals are based on the proven success of similar direct-aid programs in other states.<sup>13</sup>

Improving academic performance, honestly reporting student progress or failure, providing direct public aid to families, and keeping schools safe from political controversy and radical social agendas are the best ways to stop the exodus of students from the public system. A return to core academics is also the best way to restore community pride in public education and ensure that all students have access to a high-quality education.

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<sup>12</sup> HB 1555 to provide families \$6,250 per student; HB 1215 to provide families \$7,000 per student; SB 5205 to provide families \$9,000 per student, and HB 1633 to provide families \$10,000 per student.

<sup>13</sup> “Eighteen states have expanded school choice programs to benefit children and families,” by Liv Finne, Washington Policy Center, November 3, 2021 at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/detail/eighteen-states-have-expanded-school-choice-programs-to-benefit-children-and-families>.