

POLICY NOTE

Taxpayers are doubling Richland School District's budget, while the superintendent calls for more funding

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education
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Key Findings:

1. Richland public schools Superintendent Rick Schulte says taxpayers are not paying enough money to fund Richland public schools.
2. Many school superintendents seek to create the same impression. This impression is false.
3. Homeowners and other property owners will give Richland schools a \$10.9 million budget increase in 2018-19.
4. In addition, Superintendent Schulte received a \$13,000 pay raise in 2017, bringing his salary to \$228,000 a year.
5. Many school officials want residents to reduce their own household incomes by paying more in burdensome, regressive property taxes.
6. A better approach would be District leadership that can do the job of funding teachers, classrooms and schools, and perhaps say "thank you" occasionally.

Richland public schools Superintendent Rick Schulte recently argued in a guest column (*The Tri-City Herald*, October 25, 2017) that taxpayers are not paying enough money to fund Richland public schools. He says he has a \$9 million shortfall in 2018-19. He creates the impression that Richland schools are in dire need of funds, a picture of poverty and want. Many school superintendents seek to create the same impression, calling for increased funding based on the accusation that taxpayers are not providing enough money.

This impression is false. Under the new state budget, Richland public school officials will receive more than double the level of funding they spent just five years ago.

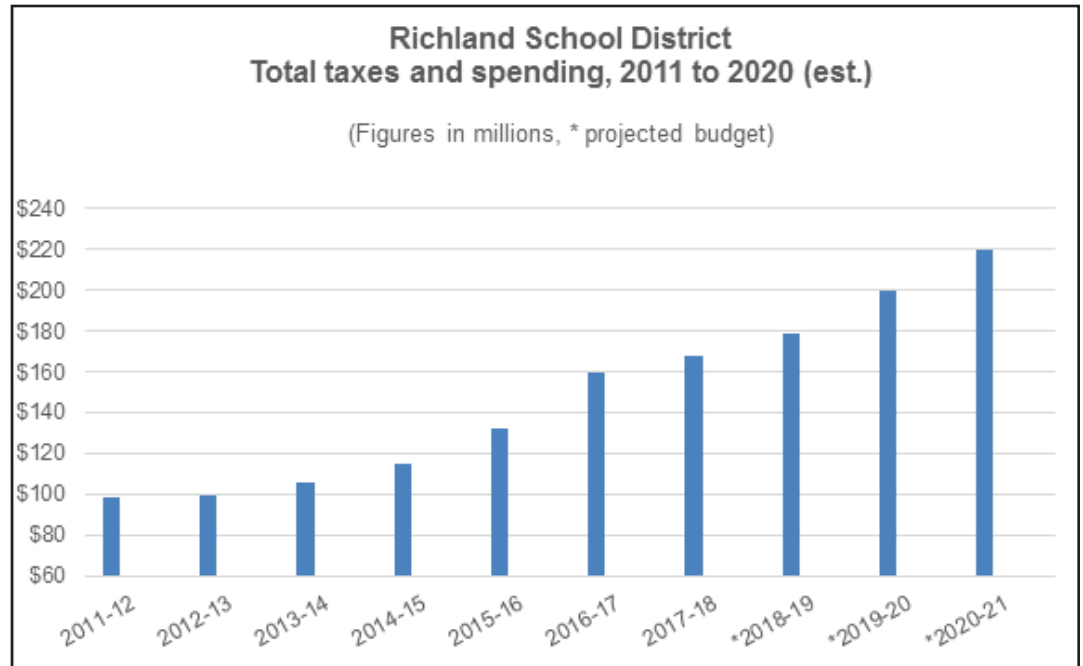
As shown in the graph below, homeowners and other property owners in Richland and across the state will give Superintendent Schulte a \$10.9 million budget increase in 2018-19, plus an additional \$21 million by 2020-21.

In 2012, the Richland public school budget was \$9,000 per student. It is now \$12,500 per student. The Richland public school overall 2012 budget was \$98 million. Today it is \$168 million—a 71 percent increase. Under the new state budget, Richland is scheduled to receive \$52 million more by 2020-21. Similar budget increases are being provided to other school districts across Washington.

In addition, Superintendent Schulte received a \$13,000 pay raise in 2017, bringing his salary to \$228,000 a year. The previous year he received a \$15,000 pay raise. The median household income for taxpayers in Richland is just \$67,000, three times less than what they are paying the school superintendent. In most communities, superintendents receive salaries and benefits far in excess of the typical working family.



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The size of the spending increases the Richland School District is receiving is unprecedented. This year, Richland will receive more tax money, in real terms, than at any period in the history of the state.

State Senate Ways and Means Committee chairman John Braun describes the increase as “the greatest K-12 funding infusion in state history.”

Yet Superintendent Schulte is not satisfied. He asserts that taxpayers are not providing enough money to do their job of providing a high-quality public education for every child living in the Richland area.

He says he wants more. He wants Richland residents to reduce their own household incomes by paying more in burdensome, regressive property taxes. He doesn’t address how this rising financial burden falls on working families, the poor and retired couples living on a fixed income.

He says he cannot manage the schools with a budget that is doubling in size. In fact, he claims his budget is being cut.

Where is all that money going? Superintendent Schulte’s talk about “budget cuts” conveys a sense of fiscal crisis at a time when property taxes and school spending are rising.

A better approach for children and families in Richland and across the state would be district leadership that can do the job of funding teachers, classrooms and schools, and perhaps say “thank you” occasionally to the community for so generously supporting public education. Most importantly, it would be a welcome relief to have school leaders who are focused on the business of making sure every child learns to the fullest of his or her potential.

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