

## POLICY NOTE

# Washington School Improvement Framework (WSIF) shows more money has not improved schools

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

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### Key Findings

1. In 2018 state Superintendent Reykdal replaced the School Achievement Index with a weaker measure called the Washington School Improvement Framework (WSIF).
2. Families can no longer use the School Achievement Index to determine whether the school their children attend is rated as Exemplary, Very Good, Good, Fair or Underperforming.
3. The new WSIF categorizes schools by the level of funding school officials believe schools should receive, as requiring “Foundational Supports,” “Support Tier 1,” “Support Tier 2,” or “Support Tier 3.”
4. State spending on public education in Washington has doubled in eight years, rising from \$13.5 billion in 2013 to \$27.3 billion in the current state budget, while the number of students has only increased by about 10 percent.
5. Nevertheless, results on the WSIF show no overall improvement in school rankings.

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### Introduction

In 2009 the Legislature directed state officials to create a rating system for schools to inform the public and ensure that children attending public schools are receiving a good education. The Legislature said:

The SBE [State Board of Education] has responsibility for implementing a statewide accountability system that includes identification of successful schools and districts, those in need of assistance, and those in which state intervention measures are needed.<sup>1</sup>

In response, the State Board of Education created the School Achievement Index. It rated the schools based on four indicators of student academic achievement on state tests, categorizing schools as Exemplary (A), Very Good (B), Good (C), Fair (D), and Underperforming (F). The Index was published every year, starting in 2010.

### Weakening standards

Then, in March 2018, state Superintendent of Public Instruction Chris Reykdal, whose office had assumed responsibility for the School Achievement Index, announced it had replaced it with a weaker measure called the Washington School Improvement Framework (WSIF).<sup>2</sup>

The WSIF assesses schools based on a contrived rating called “Support Tiers.” These Support Tiers represent subjective judgments about how much more public money Superintendent Reykdal and school officials believe schools should receive. The policy is based on the belief, among government officials, that the preferred response to a failing program is to give it more money.

1 ESHB 2261, “Concerning the state’s education system,” passed on April 22, 2009, signed by Governor Gregoire on May 19, 2009, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/bills/summary?BillNumber=2261&Year=2009&Initiative=false>.

2 “Washington Releases New School Accountability Index under ESSA,” press release, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, March 15, 2018, at <http://www.k12.wa.us/Communications/PressReleases2018/AccountabilityIndex.aspx>.

## Key Findings

6. The WSIF does show continuing, persistent school failure; about 250 schools in Washington fail to provide their 55,000 students a quality education.
7. Ironically, the WSIF reveals the failure of the idea that more money improves the schools.
8. As an accountability measure to improve schools, WSIF, has failed.
9. The better approach is to increase school choice for families by opening more public charter schools, and by offering tax credit scholarships and vouchers to private schools.
10. Parents are in the best position to find schools that meet the learning needs of their children.

The superintendent asserts the WSIF identifies how schools can improve, but the weaker standard actually provides the public with less information than the previous rating system.<sup>3</sup>

Superintendent Reykdal also promised that under WSIF, “schools will partner with OSPI to develop programs to improve student performance that will work best for their local schools and communities.”<sup>4</sup> He said the new Framework would allow the public to “really dive” into the performance of individual schools.<sup>5</sup> He said WSIF would “help administrators, teachers and parents identify deficiencies in all schools, including those that may get among the best scores.”

So far, results on the WSIF show that 1,483 schools, or 62 percent, are in the top half of performance, and that 252 schools, or 11 percent, fail to educate students to state standards.

These percentages are essentially unchanged for the two years of WSIF school rankings, for tests taken by students in May 2017 and May 2018.

### Washington School Improvement Framework (WSIF) results for 2017

Under WSIF, officials assign each school an average score from one to 10, based on academic indicators, graduation rates, and proficiency on state tests in math and English. WSIF also adds three additional non-academic measures: attendance, 9th graders on track to graduate, and the presence of dual credit and advanced courses.

Under WSIF, high-performing, average and low-performing schools are no longer identified.

Successful schools are no longer recognized, but are lumped into a single category labeled “Foundational Supports.” Lower-performing schools are grouped under headings called “Support Tier 1, Support Tier 2, and Support Tier 3.” Schools are assessed based on level of spending, not on successful learning by students.

3 The website of the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction describes WSIF like this: Initially released in March 2018 (and updated in April of 2019), the Washington School Improvement Framework identifies how schools can improve the education of all students. The Framework combines as many as nine indicators (such as graduation rates, attendance, and proficiency on state tests in math and English language arts) into a 1-10 score. The school’s score then determines the state supports for the school to improve.

See Washington School Improvement Framework, Student Performance, Assessment, Trend,” accessed by author, August 20, 2019, at <https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/103300>.

4 Ibid.

5 “Washington implementing new system for judging schools,” by Thomas Clouse, The Spokesman-Review, April 19, 2018 at <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2018/apr/18/washington-implementing-new-system-for-judging-sch/#/0>.

## This is a summary of the results on the first WSIF:

Washington School Improvement Framework for test results through May 2017

### Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction

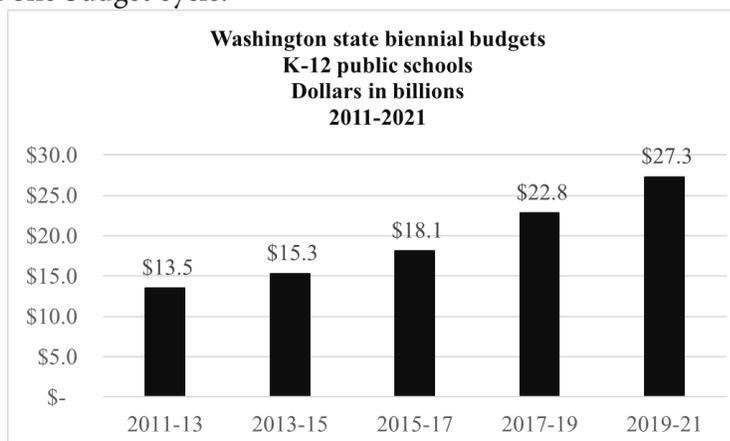
Support Tier	Number of Schools	Percentage of Schools	Student Enrollment
Foundational Supports	1483	62%	688,069
Support Tier 1	484	20%	251,205
Support Tier 2	160	7%	94,625
Support Tier 3	252	11%	54,429
Total	2,379	100%	1,088,328

## State lawmakers double spending on schools

State lawmakers of both parties have been increasing state funding to the schools in response to the state supreme court's 2012 McCleary decision, as shown in the chart below.

In June, 2017 lawmakers passed a bill to provide schools with the greatest funding increase in Washington state history. This bill, HB 2242, was the Legislature's final resolution of the McCleary case, and the latest in a series of six years of higher taxes and more funding to schools.

HB 2242 added \$4.7 billion to K-12 school funding in Washington, increasing state funding for schools from \$18.1 billion to \$22.8 billion, an increase of 26 percent in one budget cycle.



Then in 2019, lawmakers added billions more to K-12 schools, adding \$4.5 billion to school funding, from \$22.8 billion to \$27.3 billion, an increase of 20 percent in one budget cycle.

Overall, spending on public education in Washington has doubled in eight years, rising from \$13.5 billion in 2013 to \$27.3 billion, while the number of students has only increased by about 10 percent.

## Washington School Improvement Framework (WSIF) results for 2018

The April 2019 update of the WSIF shows no appreciable benefit to students of the additional spending, or any improvement in overall school rankings:

*Washington School Improvement Framework – updated April 2019 for test results through May 2018*

*Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*

Support Tier	Number of Schools	Percentage of Schools	Student Enrollment
Foundational Supports	1385	61%	696,571
Support Tier 1	483	21%	258,150
Support Tier 2	161	7%	96,363
Support Tier 3	246	11%	56,139
Total	2,275	100%	1,107,223

### Policy Analysis

Superintendent Reykdal promised the WSIF would “help administrators, teachers and parents identify deficiencies in all schools”<sup>6</sup> and that “schools will partner with OSPI to develop programs to improve student performance that will work best for their local schools and communities.”<sup>7</sup>

Actually, the weaker standard under WSIF has obscured the information provided to the public about the performance of public schools. Families cannot determine whether the school their children attend is rated by the state to be Exemplary, Very Good, Good, Fair and Underperforming. In addition, by arbitrarily placing schools into Support Tiers, the WSIF has removed the incentive for school administrators to improve learning programs and replaced it with an incentive to seek additional funding.

While announced as a means of directing funding to the schools, the WSIF is now revealing the failure of the idea that simply adding more money improves public schools. Billions of additional dollars for Washington’s schools have not improved overall student learning.

### Another failed education reform

The WSIF as an alleged accountability measure to improve the schools is another example of a failed education reform. Over the last thirty years, every proposed federal and state effort to hold the public schools accountable for teaching children has failed to improve the quality of education students receive. Here are some examples:

- Goals 2000 (Clinton Administration)

<sup>6</sup> “Washington implementing new system for judging schools,” by Thomas Clouse, The Spokesman-Review, April 19, 2018 at <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2018/apr/18/washington-implementing-new-system-for-judging-sch/#/0>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

- No Child Left Behind (Bush Administration)
- Race to the Top (Obama Administration)
- The Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL)
- Common Core (promoted by the Gates Foundation)
- Every Student Succeeds Act (Obama Administration)

### **Policy recommendation: adopt policies that improve learning by offering families school choice**

In contrast to this list of failed initiatives, policies based on school choice, rather than top-down regulation, are providing a practical solution. Parents offered educational choice are in the best position to find schools that suit the learning needs of their children.

One of the benefits of school choice is automatic improved school accountability. School districts where parents are allowed choice tend to treat parents as valued partners rather than as the passive recipients of decisions issued by the central office. Parents are less easily misled, as happens with centralized rating systems.

School choice options include public charter schools, online learning, vocational schools, tutoring services, tuition vouchers, tax credit scholarships and Education Savings Accounts.

School choice is becoming increasingly common and non-controversial. Thirty states and the District of Columbia offer 61 different school choice programs, benefiting nearly 500,000 students. Every year more states consider and pass new programs.

To cite one example, officials in North Carolina each year provide disabled students with a \$7,000 voucher to purchase educational services.<sup>8</sup> The state has also enacted an Educational Saving Account program, providing \$9,000 a year to families with special needs, military families and students in foster care.<sup>9</sup> These programs are optional and respect the choices of parents.

A 2017 poll found that 68% of respondents support school choice.<sup>10</sup> School choice support is bipartisan and diverse, with majority support from Latinos (75%), African Americans (72%) and Millennials (75%). A large majority, 83%, of respondents support offering scholarships to children with special learning needs.

8 "The ABCs of School Choice, 2018 Edition," EDChoice, at <https://www.edchoice.org/what-we-do/research/>.

9 "North Carolina General Assembly Expands Educational Opportunities," press release, American Federation for Children, June 22, 2017, at <https://www.federationforchildren.org/north-carolina-expands-educational-opportunities/>.

10 "Poll: Public Support for School Choice Remains Strong, Supportive of Federal Movement to Increase School Choice," American Federation for Children, January 12, 2017, at <https://www.federationforchildren.org/poll-public-support-school-choice-remains-strong-supportive-federal-movement-increase-school-choice/>.



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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.

Liv is committed to improving public schools by expanding school options for all parents, regardless of their zip code, including charter schools, vouchers, online and other innovations in education.

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## Conclusion

The weakened Washington School Improvement Framework (WSIF) categorizes schools by the level of funding school officials believe schools should receive, as requiring “Foundational Supports,” “Support Tier 1,” “Support Tier 2,” or “Support Tier 3.”

Since results on the first WSIF in 2018, taxpayers have added \$4.7 billion to K-12 schools, a 26 percent increase over the previous state budget. Yet, even after this dramatic funding increase, overall school rankings on the WSIF have not improved. Washington still has about 250 failing schools whose 55,000 students are not being provided a quality education.

Ironically, the WSIF reveals the failure of the idea that more money improves the schools. Superintendent Reykdal’s decision to rank schools based on Support Tiers is showing that more money does not improve school rankings.

The failure of the WSIF to improve the schools provides important lessons for policymakers. Top down initiatives like the WSIF have failed or been repealed again and again at national and state levels, but school choice programs are making a world of difference to individual families.

Policymakers should reject bureaucratized and easily manipulated top-down rating systems and allow families to make real choices about education. An education-choice approach will lead to real and meaningful accountability in public school performance.