Superintendents Unified in Partnership for Equitable Schools (UW SUPES)

Statement of the Problem:
Addressing Washington's Inadequate and Inequitable Education Funding System

December 15, 2025

Audience:
Public education policy community members, including students, parents, family members, and guardians, rank-and-file educators and school leaders, members of professional organizations, education system leaders, analysts and researchers, journalists and media representatives, and state and federal policymakers and legislators.

The collaboration between the University of Washington College of Education and Superintendents Unified in Partnership for Equitable Schools (SUPES) began as a "grasstops" initiative to address persistent concerns about inadequate and inequitable funding for Washington's students. Over four convenings held in 2024 and 2025, our coalition engaged with community partners, school finance experts, and state legislators to deepen our collective understanding of the state's education funding. Our shared goal is to advocate for comprehensive finance reform that fulfills Washington's "paramount duty … to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste, or sex" (Wash. Const. Art. IX, § 1).

Effective policy reform begins with a clear, **shared definition of the problem**. The purpose of this document is to articulate our understanding of the current problems in Washington's K-12 finance system. Our intent is for future legislative efforts to directly address the inequities that we have identified and move Washington closer to a system that delivers on its constitutional promise for every student. We acknowledge that families, students, educators, and policymakers will view these challenges through different lenses, and these diverse perspectives are essential to developing and implementing equitable solutions. We highlight three primary policy challenges that are common among state school finance systems and explain the unique challenges for Washington.

1. Not All Students have Equal Educational Opportunity

As in other states, Washington's school finance system reflects decades of political decisions, legal battles, and deeply embedded historical patterns of racial and economic exclusion. Federal redlining, as well as racially restrictive covenants and discriminatory residential zoning practices–common across every U.S. metropolitan area–have yielded

segregated school systems and lasting disparities in property wealth. These historical injustices continue to shape the distribution of resources in public education. Studies show schools in higher-poverty contexts require additional funds to provide equal educational opportunities, and several states including California, Minnesota, and New Jersey, have enacted progressive funding models to address concerns about unequal opportunity across school districts.

Despite the Washington Supreme Court's ruling in *McCleary v. State* (2012) and subsequent legislative reforms, school districts continue to face significant challenges in delivering the basic education guaranteed to students under state law. The 2018 "*McCleary* fix" failed to address underlying structural inequities and instead entrenched a regressive system that advantages property-wealthy communities while under-resourcing those districts serving Washington's most marginalized students with the greatest needs. The current funding formula fails to account for the additional costs of educating students who have been historically underserved by public school systems. Educators often require additional supports in order to provide equal educational opportunities to students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, multi-language learners, students in poverty, and youth in foster care. A funding model that does not meaningfully adjust for these needs reinforces disparities, rather than closing them.

2. State Funding Policies Do Not Adjust for External Cost Pressures

Washington's prototypical funding formula uses fixed staffing ratios and cost assumptions based on what the legislature assumes is a "typical" school. However, staffing ratios do not meet expert recommendations to provide necessary services[1], nor do the formulas reflect the actual costs of providing a basic education. In practice, districts rely heavily on local levies to compensate for insufficient state funding and fund necessary staffing. Although these levies are intended to provide "enrichment", they are routinely used to cover basic operational costs, particularly in three core areas. Below we outline five challenges that arise from this structure.

First, state funding for liability insurance is provided through the funding stream for Materials, Supplies, and Operating Costs, or MSOC, but these funds are not tied to actual changes in the cost of liability insurance, so the funding is insufficient when insurance costs increase.

Second, state funding is tied to enrollment, but Washington uses a monthly average, so that districts experiencing declining enrollment throughout a school year lose state funds every month, even though most service contracts last a full year. Other states allocate funds for districts with declining enrollment based on prior year enrollment to provide the necessary planning time to make sound budget cuts.

Third, districts pay full fringe benefits for any employee even when hired part-time up to 630 hours (3.5 hours per day in a 180 day school year), or through local enrichment funds. As a

[1] For example, Washington's formula funds 0.049 school psychologists for a high school of 600 students, significantly lower than the 1:500 ratio recommended by the National Association of School Psychologists.

result, state funds are often insufficient to cover the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff members that the state formulas are designed to fund.

Fourth, because the state removed the statewide teacher salary schedule, districts with unexpected increases in average workforce experience will face unexpected cost increases. While the statewide salary schedule introduces other problems, including disadvantaging high-turnover districts and distorting district-union determinations of how much to compensate teachers at different experience levels, the removal of the statewide salary schedule created uncertainty for districts that see improvements in their teacher retention. A district that improves its teacher retention will see an increase in their teachers' average years of experience, increasing the cost of teacher salaries. The solution is not straightforward, and the bargaining process typically focuses on the overall level of salaries, rather than the relative difference across experience. By removing the extra state funds to support higher teacher experience, districts are incentivized to design teacher salary schedules that fit their needs, rather than the preferences of state lawmakers, but they also now face greater fiscal uncertainty if they experience increased teacher retention.

Fifth, evidence suggests districts are drawing local levy funds to support special education. Under both federal and state law districts must provide special education services in line with Individualized Education Programs and should not be using levy dollars to provide these services.

Finally, even with the regionalization cost-of-living adjustments, inconsistent application across districts and time implies that the salaries provided under the prototypical school funding model are not sufficient to support the professionals the formula intends school districts to hire. For example, the salary provided for a school principal in 2024-25 was $116,092, and districts in the highest regionalization factor (18%) receive about $137,000. However, the average salary of school principals in the Puget Sound area, where many districts have the highest regionalization factors, is between $180,000 and $200,000[2]. A common thread among these five factors is that each represents an external cost pressure that is outside the control of the school district, but that districts none-the-less must address to make budgets every year.

3. Washington's Tax System Does not Equitably Support Public Education

The state's bifurcated levy lid system further compounds these inequities. Districts with higher property values can generate significantly more revenue at lower tax rates, while districts with low property wealth must levy higher rates to raise less revenue. While Local Effort Assistance (LEA) is designed to mitigate this imbalance, it does not fully equalize funding. More broadly, the state relies heavily on sales tax, which disproportionately impacts lower-income households. The state could make the incidence property taxes more progressive by introducing additional LEA funding and consider other reforms to the state's tax system.

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[2] Office of Superintendent for Public Instruction (2026). Personnel summary reports. 2024-25 School District Personnel Summary Profiles (Table 17. Certificated Principal - Duty Root 21, 23). https://ospi.k12.wa.us/policy-funding/school-apportionment/school-publications/personnel-summary-reports

In summary, three key policy challenges in Washington state involve inequitable allocation, inadequate funding, and unfair taxation. Addressing these challenges is critical for improving the state's school finance system and delivering an effective state education system.

As superintendents and educational leaders committed to the success of all Washington students, we urge the Legislature to take our perspectives into account when shaping the future of school finance policy. The inequities we have outlined are visible every day in classrooms across the state, where too many students are denied the resources they need to achieve and succeed. We believe that meaningful progress is possible, but only if future legislation centers the needs of those most impacted by underfunding and systemic inequity. We remain committed to working in partnership with lawmakers, community members, and advocates to advance policies that uphold Washington's constitutional promise. We hope the Legislature will seize this opportunity to enact bold, equity-driven reforms that move us closer to a system of educational justice.

Signatories:

Dr. Jeff Snell, Executive Director | Washington Association of School Administrators

David Knight, University of Washington
Kendall Fujioka, University of Washington

Amii Thompson, Superintendent | Bainbridge Island School District
Dr. Kelly Aramaki, Superintendent | Bellevue School District
Dr. Chris Pearson, Superintendent | Burlington-Edison School District
Dr. John Anzalone, Superintendent | Camas School District
Dr. Erin Prince, Superintendent | Central Kitsap School District
John H. Belcher, Superintendent | Cle Elum - Roslyn School District
Ron Banner, Superintendent | Clover Park School District
Dr. Kriti Dominguez, Superintendent | Ferndale School District
Dr. Rob Darling, Superintendent | Grandview School District
Dr. Brian Hart, Superintendent | Granger School District
Mindy Shultz, Superintendent | Highland School District
Steve Marshall, Superintendent | Hockinson School District
Brian Freeman, Superintendent | Inchelium School District #70
Dr. Wesley N. Benjamin, Superintendent | Kalama School District
Mary Beth Tack, Superintendent | Kelso School District
Dr. James Everett, Superintendent | Meridian School District
Dr. Curt Guaglianone | Mt. Adams School District

Robert Bowman | Naches School District
Dr. Justin Irish, Superintendent | Northshore School District
Dr. Michelle Kuss-Cybula, Superintendent | Oak Harbor School District
Ryanyou Maxwell, Superintendent | Sunnyside School District
Andrew M. Perkins, Superintendent | Thorp School District
Christopher Schumaker, Superintendent | Toutle Lake School District
Dr. Concie Pedroza, Superintendent | Tukwila School District
Andrew Harlow, Superintendent | Wahluke School District
Dr. Ben Gauyan, Superintendent | Walla Walla School District
Ezequiel (Kelly) Garza, Superintendent | Wapato School District
Aaron Hansen, Superintendent | Washougal School District
Asha Riley, Superintendent | Woodland School District
Dr. Trevor Greene, Superintendent | Yakima School District
Doug Burge, Superintendent | Zillah School District