CHAPTER 5

EDUCATION

1. K-12 Education Spending

Recommendations

1. Return the education system to its core function by focusing resources on classroom instruction.

2. Reform basic education funding to allow money to follow the child to the public school of the family's choice. Allow principals to control their budgets, and to assemble their own teaching teams.

3. End rigid separation of programs to eliminate costly and wasteful administrative oversight. Allow more flexibility in spending education dollars, especially by local principals.

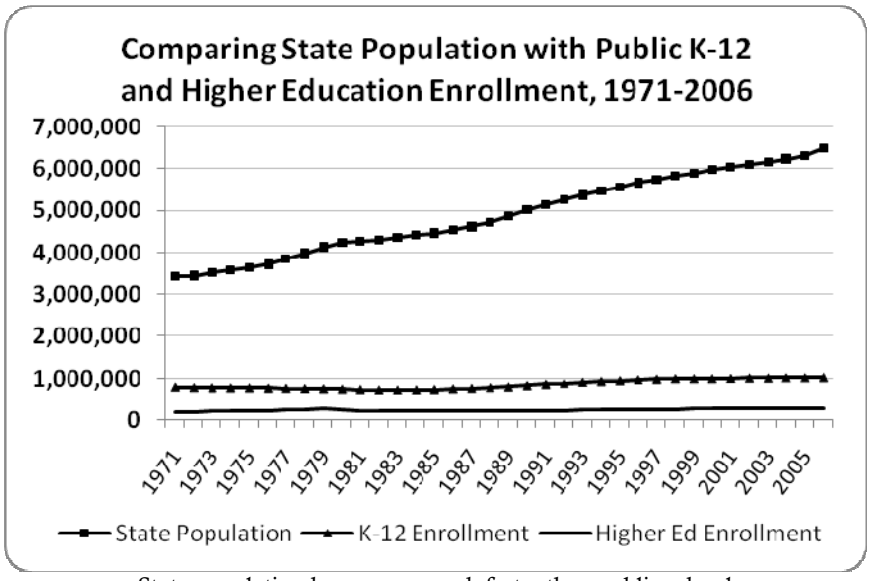
4. Remove restrictive class size requirements and other legal restrictions to allow more flexibility and innovation in spending education dollars.

5. Create a transparent accounting system to inform policymakers and the public about how education dollars are spent.

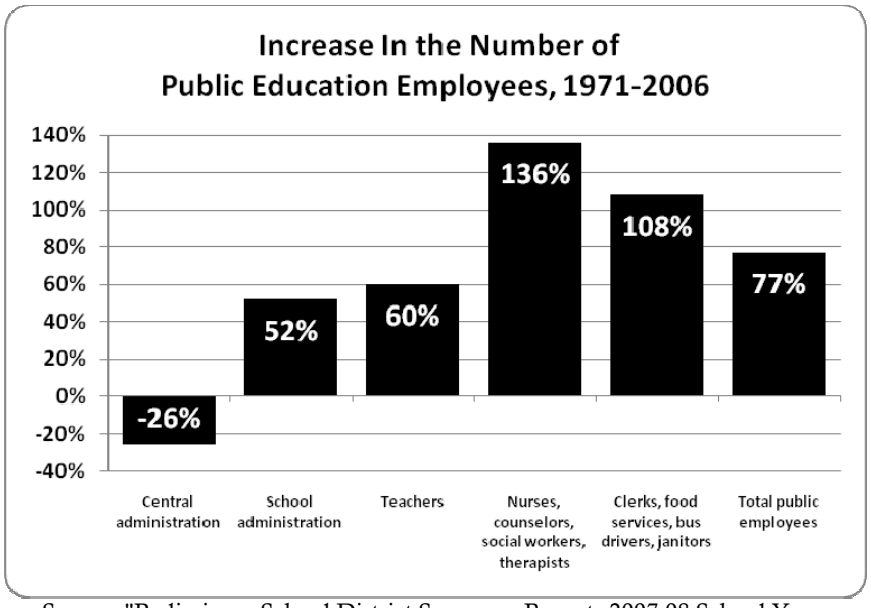
Background

Public schools were established in Washington in 1854 by the first territorial legislature. The system started with 53 schools and about 2,000 students.[1] A century and a half later, there are just over a million (1,026,000) K-12 public school students attending 2,275 schools in 296 districts across the state.[2]

The state's total population has grown at a much faster pace than the number of students, creating a larger tax base to pay for educating a proportionately smaller number of students. Between 1971 and 2006, the state population increased by almost three million people (82 percent),[3] while K-12 public school enrollment increased by only little over 200,000 students (25 percent).[4] These trends are shown in the chart below.[5]



State population has grown much faster than public school enrollment, creating a larger tax base to pay for educating a proportionately smaller number of students.



Source: "Preliminary School District Summary Reports 2007-08 School Year, Historical Comparison of Statewide School District Personnel," OSPI.[6]

While the number of students enrolled in public schools since 1971 increased 27 percent, the number of public school employees increased by 77 percent, more than twice as fast.

The rise in K-12 spending

K-12 education is the largest single expenditure in the state budget. For 2007-09, the total budget for public schools is $17.9 billion, including state, local and federal grant funding. The bulk of K-12 education spending, over $13.52 billion, comes from the state general fund budget.[7] About $1.6 billion comes from federal grants, and about $2.8 billion is provided by local funding, raised primarily from property taxes.[8]

Details on how the state portion of education funding is spent are shown in the following table.

2007-09 State Basic Education Programs (in millions)		
General Apportionment	$ 8968.6	66.3%
Special Education	1112.9	8.2%
Transportation	550.7	4.1%
Learning Assist. Program	189.9	1.4%
Bilingual Education	134.5	1.0%
Institutions	36.8	0.3%
Subtotal: Basic Education Programs	$10,993.5	81.3%
2007-09 Non-basic Education Programs (in millions)		
Student Achievement Fund (I-728)	$869.8	6.4%
Initiative 732 COLA (3.2%, 2.9%) and Other Compensation	380.0	2.8%
Levy Equalization	414.7	3.1%
Education Reform	265.2	2.0%
K-4 Enhanced Staffing Ratio	233.3	1.7%
Health Care Benefit Increases	66.4	0.5%
Two Learning Improvement Days	66.0	0.5%
Salary Equity Increases (2007-09)	64.2	0.2%
Promoting Academic Success	49.0	0.4%
Statewide Programs/Allocations	41.7	0.3%
State Office and Ed Agencies	33.5	0.2%
Highly Capable	17.2	0.1%
Educational Service Districts	16.0	0.1%
Food Services	6.3	0.0%
Summer & Other Skills Centers	5.7	0.0%
Pupil Transportation Coordinators	1.7	0.0%
Subtotal: Non-Basic Education Programs	$2530.6	18.7%
TOTAL – STATE FUNDS	**$13,524.1**	**100.0%**

Altogether, average spending per student in Washington public schools is about $9,500 a year, not including capital spending.

Of the money for public schools, about 59 percent is spent on classroom instruction. The rest of the public school budget is spent on administrators, maintenance personnel, special education, counseling, transportation, food services and interest on debt. An additional $1.33 billion is spent on school construction. The state

spends a further $9.6 billion on Higher Education and "Other Education" programs.[9]

Yet, even with higher levels of funding, and fewer students in school in proportion to the number of taxpayers paying for public education, high school drop-out rates are very high. The state reports that 67 percent of our students graduate from high school,[10] and an independent estimate shows that only 66 percent are graduating from Washington's high schools.[11] Washington is ranked 37th in the nation in graduation rates.[12]

Thirty-seven percent of freshmen attending a four year university or two year community college must take high school level remedial math or reading courses. Many students are unable to overcome this handicap and do not complete their college degree.[13]

Policy Analysis

Advocacy groups argue that K-12 public education in Washington is underfunded. Yet by most measures, K-12 public education in Washington is very well-funded.

The problems that continue to plague the public education system require fundamental changes to the way public money is spent. Directing more dollars into the current entrenched system, no matter how carefully targeted or lavishly spent, will not improve student achievement.

Rising trend in spending

K-12 education funding in Washington has increased significantly in recent decades, even after accounting for inflation. Between 1980 and 2000, state and local spending on K-12 schools increased by 94 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars, from $3.96 billion in 1980 to $7.67 billion in 2000.[14] The rising trend continues. As mentioned, general fund K-12 spending in the current biennium exceeds $13.52 billion.[15]

Yet, while spending has almost tripled since 1980, the number of K-12 public students over the same period increased only 36 percent, increasing from 756,500 K-12 students in 1980 to 1,026,000 in 2007.

Washington public schools are well-funded

Advocates for increased spending argue that education is underfunded because it makes up a smaller share of the state budget than in the past. Their choice of statistics is selective, however, and it is only by looking at broad measures that an accurate picture emerges.

As the state expands spending on non-education programs, the *proportion* of the budget going to pubic education falls, even as the *amount* spent on education is increasing. Public schools in Washington are receiving more public money than in the past, even as total state spending on other programs expands.

Despite claims that schools have been "cut," state education funding has steadily increased over time, and in no year has the legislature reduced the amount of money devoted to public schools.

In fact, per-pupil spending is higher than ever, and therefore school district administrators have more resources than in the past to educate a given number of students. In addition, there are more taxpayers paying into the system than ever before. By almost every reasonable measure, public schools in Washington receive more than adequate funding.

More spending does not lead to better learning

While education spending in Washington has increased sharply in recent decades, there has been little or no increase in student performance. Nationally, the money spent on K-12 schools has also been dramatically increasing, even after figures are adjusted for inflation.

Between 1960 and 2000, real expenditures per student in the United States more than tripled from $2,235 in 1960 in inflation-adjusted dollars to $7,591 in 2000.[16] Per-student spending continues to rise. As noted, Washington is spending about $9,500 per student in 2007. Yet state and national test scores show no significant improvement in student performance.[17]

In 2007 only 36 percent and 34 percent of Washington's 8th grade students achieved proficiency or better on the reading and math

portions, respectively, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress test (NAEP). This assessment is the recognized gold standard for assessing the achievement of U.S. students.[18]

Despite increased spending and costly class size reductions, the "achievement gap" between white and minority students on the 4th and 8th grade NAEP reading and math tests from 2002, 2003, 2005, and 2007 has not decreased, but has actually increased.[19]

Placing an effective teacher in every classroom

Policymakers have focused money on reducing class sizes, particularly in grades K-3, but independent research shows that placing an effective teacher in every classroom is more important than any other factor in improving student learning, including smaller class sizes.[20]

Shifting from funding staff ratios to funding children

Currently, Washington allocates money to the schools by funding a certain number of certified instructional staff (teachers) and classified staff (bus drivers, janitors, cafeteria workers and other support personnel) for every 1,000 students. This funding is adjusted for inflation and staff pay is based on a pre-set statewide salary grid, which blindly pays teachers based on seniority and number of degrees and credits, not ability to convey knowledge to students.

For example, the current (general apportionment) ratio of teachers to students is 49 teachers for every 1,000 students. Other funds add 15 teachers, for a current total of 63 teachers per 1,000 students.[21]

In this system no account is taken of actual student needs at the local level, or in recognizing and rewarding particularly talented teachers. It also does not account for ineffective teachers. If parents complain, bad teachers are simply transferred to another classroom.

Staffing schools by allocating ratios allows central school district bureaucracies to control the assignment of personnel to individual schools. Schools have little flexibility to alter the mix of resources in a way that would most benefit students. As a result, principals in Washington are hamstrung by lack of control over their

budgets, and over their personnel choices. Principals control less than five percent of the money allocated to their schools.[22]

Washington's Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) reports that:

> "In most cases, central administrators determine the number of certificated and classified staff assigned to individual schools. Almost 96 percent of districts responding to JLARC's survey said that central administrators determine whether to hire additional teachers and 89 percent said central administrators determine the number and type of classified staff employed at each school."[23]

The JLARC study reveals that in almost all cases central administrators decide which teachers will work in a particular school. Local principals have almost no control over which teachers are assigned to their schools, or whether a particular teacher's skills and experience match with the needs of students.

A better way is to "fund the child"

A better, innovative method of school finance, called "fund the child," or "weighted-student formula," has revitalized schools across the country. This approach has proved successful in Cincinnati, San Francisco, Houston, St. Paul, Seattle (in the past) and Oakland, and there are pilot programs in Boston, Chicago and New York City.

Under this system, education funding follows the child to the public school of his family's choice. Schools which are successful attract students and dollars. Schools which do not teach students and do not satisfy students see declining enrollment. This signals to the district superintendent that the leadership of that school needs to be replaced.

Funding for each child can include a dollar multiplier to account for children who are more difficult to teach, such as disabled children and children with limited English proficiency. Devoting these dollars to the local school level allows principals to decide how to best educate these children.

Funding the schools in this way allows principals to control their budgets, and to hire teachers who best meet the needs of their students. The results in San Francisco and other cities are promising. Student achievement and parent satisfaction and involvement rates are soaring.[24] Accountability is built in. Schools which do not to educate children are reorganized and their failed leadership is replaced.

End separation of categorical spending programs and eliminate waste.

In addition to six Basic Education programs, the Washington legislature currently funds sixteen non-basic education programs, as listed in the table. One of these categories, "Education Reform," funds twenty-five programs. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and Statewide Programs includes 25 programs controlled by that office, including funding to the Professional Educator Standards Board to "strengthen teacher preparation requirements in cultural understanding" and a program to create a program to recognize "outstanding classified staff across the state."[25]

Numerous categorical spending programs are a bureaucrat's dream come true, as explained by UCLA Professor of Management Bill Ouchi:

> "When a state legislator or governor runs for office and talks about education, he or she will usually promise voters to allocate more money for whatever is the concern of the day…After the legislature allocates the new money, that cash doesn't go directly to individual schools – it goes to the district central office. There, the bureaucrats don't send dollars to the schools. Instead, they hire people to perform new tasks in the schools. The problem with doing it this way is that the decisions on exactly what kind of staff each school needs aren't made at the local school, they're made far away in the central office.
>
> "One school might need only 0.6 of a specialist, while another school might need 1.3 – but each school will get one whole person. Not only that, but the schools might have a better, more creative way of using that money to meet the goal – but they don't have the freedom to do so. And here is the topper: before the central office bureaucrats assign the

> new personnel out to the schools, they'll create several new positions in headquarters – with several new executive positions to oversee the new offices – and to make matters worse, those newly created central office bureaucrats will proceed to tell the new teachers in the schools how to do their jobs!"[26]

Combining categorical programs into fewer revenue streams would allow school superintendents to remove central staff now employed to track and oversee spending for over 50 different sources of revenue. It would also relieve local principals from having to apply and account for all the supplemental funding for their schools. Instead, categorical funding should be provided to principals without strings attached, so they can enhance the quality of their teaching staff.

Create a transparent accounting system

It is impossible for policymakers or the public to make informed decisions about K-12 spending, because the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction does not show how spending relates to student learning. A recent Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) study identifies the kinds of data needed to inform the public and policymakers:[27]

- School expenditure data;
- Staff/teacher descriptive data;
- Student descriptive and outcome;
- School/community descriptive data.

For example, school-level spending is not reported to the state, so important information, such as actual spending per teacher is not available. Better information about teacher and staff costs is needed, including their academic degrees and majors, and routes to certification. Also, the state superintendent does not keep track of whether high school students are ready for college, even though most people assume possessing a Washington public high school diploma should mean a young person is prepared for college-level work.

Recommendations

1) Return the education system to its core function by focusing resources on classroom instruction. Independent research shows that placing a good teacher in the classroom is the single most effective way to educate children, especially if that teacher has mastery of the subject matter. Over the years, the school system has been given more and more social tasks to make up for failures in other policy areas. Education leaders should be allowed to focus their money on academics, and not be asked to solve other problems facing society.

2) Reform basic education funding to allow money to follow the child to the public school of the family's choice. Allow principals to control their budgets, and to assemble their own teaching teams. Policymakers should allow parent choice among public schools, not staffing ratios, to guide funding of schools. They should also give local principals control over their own budgets, and over the hiring and firing of teachers and staff in their own school.

3) End rigid separation of programs to eliminate costly and wasteful administrative oversight. Allow more flexibility in spending education dollars, especially by local principals. This policy change would allow more flexibility and innovation in spending education dollars at all levels of decision-making.

4) Remove restrictive class size requirements and other legal restrictions to allow more flexibility and innovation in spending education dollars. Reducing class sizes has not resulted in improvements in student learning, as education advocates promised. Instead, policymakers should remove legal restrictions which micro-manage schools, and let local principals implement the kind of learning program that works best for their students.

5) Create a transparent accounting system to inform policymakers and the public about how education dollars are spent. The Office of Superintendent of Instruction should do a better job of collecting relevant information about the funding and performance of local schools, especially how spending on teachers relates to student learning, and make this information easily available to policymakers, parents and the general public.

2. Teacher Quality

Recommendations

1. Raise teacher quality by reforming teacher pay.

2. Hire teachers based on their proven experience and mastery of academic subject matter, particularly in math and science, rather than on the number of teaching certificates earned or school of education requirements met.

3. Put local principals in charge of hiring the teaching staff for their own schools, so they can select teachers based on the learning needs of their students.

4. Allow local principals to fire or suspend bad teachers, and hold principals accountable for teacher performance and yearly progress in student learning.

Background

Research consistently shows that placing an effective teacher in the classroom is more important than any other factor, including class size, in raising student academic achievement.[28] A good teacher can make as much as a full year's difference in students' learning growth.[29] Students taught by a high-quality teacher three years in a row score 50 percentile points higher than students of ineffective teachers.[30] Students taught by a bad teacher two years in a row may never catch up.

Two decades of research show that the qualities of an effective teacher are:

- mastery of the subject matter being taught;
- five years or more of teaching experience;
- teacher training that emphasizes content knowledge and high standards of classroom competency;
- strong academic skills, intellectual curiosity and an excitement about learning for its own sake.[31]

Policy Analysis

In Washington, only half of the class scheduled to graduate in 2009 was able to pass the 10th grade WASL.[32] This is in part because public school teachers often do not have mastery of the subjects they teach. Only 40 percent of math teachers hold math degrees from college, and only 77 percent of science teachers hold college science degrees.[33] School officials regularly report they are unable to find people who hold a teaching certificate and who are qualified to teach math and science in high schools.

Many Washington professionals are highly qualified to teach these subjects but, because they do not have a formal certificate, it is illegal for public school officials to offer them teaching positions. Getting a teaching credential requires months of additional classroom work, something many qualified professionals have neither the time, money nor inclination to do.

Another major factor causing qualified teacher shortages is the single-salary "time and credits" pay grid the legislature requires school districts to use. The limitations of teacher pay policy are discussed further in the next section.

Meanwhile, schools of education require students training to be teachers to spend most of their time learning pedagogical techniques, not on gaining mastery of the subject they will teach when they graduate and enter a classroom.

School of education administrators defend the current system by saying someone who knows a subject may not be able to teach the subject. The research shows, however, that experienced professionals, like an engineer who wants to teach high school math, can quickly be taught classroom procedures, and that his mastery of mathematics is the most important factor in whether his students will learn.

Putting the local principal in charge of the teaching staff would allow the principals easily to remove any teacher who was not working out. Principals should then be held accountable for teacher performance and student learning.

If a district superintendent finds that a local school is consistently failing to teach students, he should dismiss the principal

and hire a new one. The lines of responsibility should be clear to public school employees and to the public. Teachers and principals who are unable to educate children to the standard required by the state should be removed from the system, and their places taken by people who can be effective educators.

Recommendations

1) Raise teacher quality by reforming teacher pay. See Section 3 on Teacher Pay for details.

2) Hire teachers based on their proven experience and mastery of academic subject matter, particularly in math and science, rather than on the number of teaching certificates earned or school of education requirements met. Current state credential requirements make it illegal to hire many highly-qualified people to teach in a public school. Mid-career professionals, former military service members, retired business owners and others are all potential teachers, if they show mastery of their subject and acquire the necessary classroom skills. Professionals bring life experiences into the classroom and help students understand the complex grown-up world they will enter upon graduation.

3) Put local principals in charge of hiring the teaching staff for their own schools, so they can select teachers based on the learning needs of their students. Local principals should be encouraged to be education leaders, rather than routine government employees skilled at navigating the education bureaucracy. Principals should be able to hire the best person to teach in the classroom, and be able to hold all faculty members accountable for whether students are learning.

4) Allow local principals to fire or suspend bad teachers, and hold principals accountable for teacher performance and yearly progress in student learning. In order to assemble and maintain a high-quality, highly-motivated educational team, principals must be allowed to weed out teachers who are unwilling or unfit to do the hard work of educating children. Also, it is unfair and demoralizing to effective, hard-working teachers when poor-performing teachers are kept on staff, often with the same or higher level of pay.

3. Teacher Pay

Recommendations

1. Change the automatic single-salary pay grid so that teacher pay is based on ability to educate children, not on arbitrary degree requirements or years of employment.

2. Give local principals management control over their own school's budget and teaching staff.

3. Establish school oversight at the district level and an appeals process to ensure fair treatment of teachers. Allow superintendents to fire ineffective or abusive principals.

Background

More than half of the people employed by public school districts in Washington are not classroom teachers. In 2005-06, there were approximately 48,558 teachers working in elementary and high school classrooms, or only 47 percent of the 103,000 workers employed in public school education.[34] The average salary of public K-12 teachers for a nine-month work year (2006-07) is just over $48,000.[35]

School districts supplement teacher pay for additional time, responsibilities and incentives (known as "TRI"), most of which is paid from local levy revenue. The average additional salary paid to teachers under this arrangement is $7,476, bringing the total average salary for a nine-month work year to $55,487.[36]

Policy Analysis

The current pay structure for Washington public school teachers was established in the 1920s to "ensure fair and equal treatment for all." The system stresses equality over excellence.

This salary structure has changed little over the last 85 years. During that time, the world has changed, becoming more innovative

and competitive, yet teacher pay today is based on seniority and training level, not actual effectiveness in educating children.

The quality of the teacher is the most important factor in whether children learn, but the method of paying teachers actually deters people with technical knowledge from entering teaching, and it encourages those with such skills to leave teaching for work in the private sector.

Teachers with strong backgrounds in math and science sacrifice far more financially under the single-salary schedule than their college peers who did not go into teaching.[37] For example, four years after college, graduates with technical training who are not teachers earn almost $13,500 more than their peers who entered the teaching profession. After ten years the pay gap grows to almost $28,000.[38]

University of Washington researcher Dan Goldhaber notes how non-teacher professionals are rewarded based on ability:

> "Not surprisingly, the non-teacher labor market rewards ability at a much higher rate than the teacher labor market, with the teacher labor market actually giving a slight premium to those with the lowest SAT scores in 2003."[39]

He also notes that better-qualified teachers use their clout to avoid having to work in high-poverty schools:

> "Teachers with more labor-market bargaining power – those who are highly experienced, credentialed, or judged to be better – will therefore tend to be teaching in nicer settings with lighter work-loads. As a consequence, the most-needy students tend to be paired with the least-qualified teachers."[40]

A teacher-pay system designed to ensure "fair and equal treatment for all" has resulted in placing the least effective teachers in the classrooms of the neediest students.

Performance pay

Leaders of Washington's teachers' unions strongly oppose paying teachers based on ability, but this approach is now common in

many parts of the country. Douglas County, Colorado has had such a system since 1994. There, the system is designed to "reward teachers for outstanding student performance, enhance collegiality, and encourage positive school and community relations."[41]

In Douglas County, unions do not oppose merit pay. The president of the area's teachers federation says that under performance pay, "Teachers must demonstrate how their work is being used to drive instruction, and they are rewarded for employing new skills."[42]

Several states, including Tennessee, Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, Florida, and North Carolina, have adopted similar performance-based pay systems for teachers.

The advantage of performance pay is that it encourages teachers to develop their talents and acquire new skills. Performance pay also allows school administrators and parents to recognize quality educators and encourage them to excel in the classroom. At the same time, performance pay improves the quality of the teaching profession by encouraging underperforming teachers to seek a different line of work.

There are four different approaches to creating an effective performance pay system:[43]

- **Merit pay**. Individual teachers are evaluated and given bonuses based on improvements in their effectiveness in the classroom;

- **Knowledge- and skills-based pay**. Teachers receive a salary increase when they acquire new levels of education and training. In Washington, teacher contracts often include automatic knowledge-based pay increases;

- **Performance pay**. Teachers are rewarded when their students show measurable improvement on standardized academic tests;

- **School-based performance pay**. All the administrators, teachers, and staff at a particular school receive a bonus if their students meet certain academic standards.

To determine performance fairly, teachers should be assessed frequently on student achievement, teaching skills, subject knowledge, classroom management and lesson planning. An appeals process should be put in place so teachers receive an independent review if they feel they have been unfairly treated. Principals who abuse the performance pay system to benefit themselves or to unfairly enrich their friends should be disciplined or dismissed.

Policymakers who support equitable performance pay systems show respect for students, parents and taxpayers who have a right to expect that public schools will consistently and effectively educate children.

Recommendations

1) Change the automatic single-salary pay grid so that teacher pay is based on ability to educate children, not on arbitrary degree requirements or years of employment. The pay schedule should be changed to reward and retain top-performing teachers and attract talented teachers to high-need schools.

2) Give local principals management control over their own school's budget and teaching staff. It is almost impossible for principals to dismiss low-performing teachers. Using fair and objective measures of job performance, principals should be given the authority to hire, fire and promote teachers, and be held accountable for the quality of their teaching staff.

3) Establish school oversight at the district level and an appeals process to ensure fair treatment of teachers. Allow superintendents to fire ineffective or abusive principals. Teachers and other school employees should have the right to contest unfair treatment. Independent oversight by superintendents and school boards is needed to avoid favoritism, unmerited raises and management harassment of individual teachers. Principals who abuse the merit pay system should be disciplined or dismissed.

4. Student Testing and Achievement

Recommendations

1. Improve or replace the WASL with an objective test based on the highest-quality academic standards available, so that students are fairly judged based on an objective test which does not change from year to year.

2. Offer more practical career and technical education classes for graduating high school students who choose to enter the workforce instead of going on college.

3. Make a Washington state diploma a recognized sign of a good education, by raising the academic standard of the WASL or by choosing a better test, so it more closely matches respected, national tests, like the NAEP.

Background

Student testing and the WASL

The WASL was developed in the mid-1990s to assess whether Washington's children are adequately being taught reading, writing, math and science. While some educational activist groups oppose standardized tests, the WASL has been beneficial by placing student achievement front and center in the policy debate over Washington's schools, and by providing a clear basis for assessing whether education officials are fulfilling the paramount duty of the state.

The WASL shows that in general public schools are failing to educate children to the standard set by the legislature:[44]

- In 2007, only 76.6 percent of fourth grade students met the reading standard, 60 percent met the writing standard and 58 percent met the math standard;

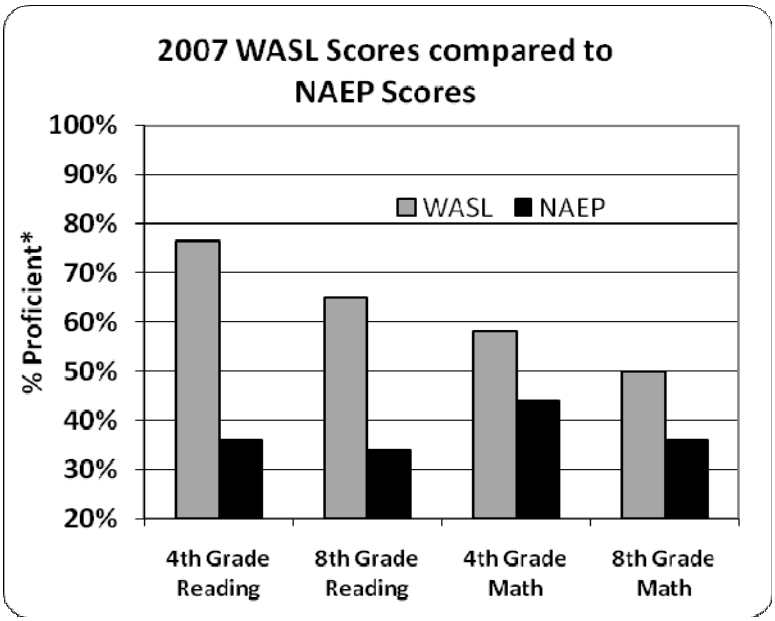
- In eighth grade, 65 percent met the WASL reading standard and 50 percent met the math standard in 2007;

- In tenth grade, 81 percent met the reading standard, 84 percent met the writing standard, and 50 percent met the math standard in 2007.

In all three grades, less than 45 percent of students met the WASL standard in science.[45]

Research by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation reveals wide gaps in state standards as states have succumbed to the temptation to water down the rigor of their tests in order to meet the high expectations of federal law.[46] Washington lawmakers did exactly that in 2007, when they canceled the math portion of the WASL.

The wide disparities between achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test and on the WASL shows that Washington's statewide test inflates student achievement and makes it appear Washington children are learning more than they really are.



*WASL scores shown are those which are deemed to have "met the standard."

The WASL is subjectively graded, and thus cannot be considered scientifically valid and reliable. The Superintendent of Public Instruction admits the lack of objectivity in the test:

> "The WASL uses far more open-ended questions than other states' tests to measure the higher-level thinking, reasoning and communications skills intrinsic to Washington's academic standards."[47]

In addition, in 2004, The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction lowered the bar for passing the WASL test, by reducing the score needed to "meet the standard."[48]

In 2007, the governor and the legislature, seeing that nearly half of students in the class of 2008 would probably fail the 10th grade WASL in math, and realizing this would be unacceptable to the public, cancelled the math requirement for that year.

The math standard is under review, and the governor has announced that no new standard need be in place until 2013. In the meantime, at least 340,000 Washington students will be issued high school diplomas without meeting the WASL standard in math.

State leaders have not maintained the quality of the WASL and they are not providing the level of education they have promised to Washington's children. The WASL should be improved or replaced by an objective test based on the highest-quality academic standards, such as those developed by the states of Massachusetts, Indiana, and California.

Dropout rates are very high

The world that our children face today is far different than the world their parents faced. In 1950, 60 percent of jobs were "unskilled" and required a high school diploma or less. Today, less than 15 percent of all jobs are considered "unskilled" and roughly two-thirds of jobs require some amount of college education.[49]

Yet, today, more than one-third of Washington public school students fail to graduate, and another third graduate without the knowledge and skills necessary for college or the workplace.[50]

- About 33 percent of public high school student drop out.[51] In 2007, about 29,800 students did not graduate.[52]

- Over half (52 percent) of students entering community or technical colleges have to take remedial math, English or reading courses to catch up.[53]

- 37 percent of students entering our two-year and four-year colleges must take remedial math or English courses.[54]

The National Association of Manufacturers' Skills Gap Report finds that 84 percent of employers say that public schools are not doing a good job of preparing students to succeed in the workplace.[55]

Public education leaders have failed to teach math effectively because of poor curriculum choices and by placing artificial limits on who is allowed to teach math in the classroom.

Policymakers should set a goal that 90 percent of high school students pass the math portion of the WASL. Today, less than half are able to pass this portion of the test, even though it measures only middle school math skills. A better standard is needed, so that children receive the education they have been promised.

In Washington, a government-issued diploma should, at a minimum, certify that a young adult entering college or the workforce has received an adequate education.

Not all graduating students are college-bound; many must earn a living after leaving high school. Career and vocational education opportunities should be expanded, and these programs should be rigorous enough to provide students with the math and writing skills they need for success.

Finally, instead of watering down the WASL test, state education leaders should pick a high academic standard and stick to it because that is what's best for students. As education researcher Chester Finn put it:

> "It's really squalid to see states set 'tough' requirements and then back off, defer, or punch holes in them. Our kids deserve to grow up in a country where policy makers do what they say."[56]

Recommendations

1) Improve or replace the WASL with a test based on the highest-quality academic standards, such as those developed by other states. Students should be fairly judged by an objective test which does not change from year to year. The legislature and state education leaders should pick a high academic standard for graduation and stick to it. Lawmakers should refrain from repealing sections of the standard chosen, as they did by canceling the math section of the WASL, and instead apply and maintain a consistent standard of learning. This approach would give students a valuable educational asset, a Washington state diploma, as they go on to college or enter the workforce.

2) Offer more practical career and technical education classes for graduating high school students who choose to enter the workforce instead of going to college. Public education leaders should encourage all students to graduate, but not all graduates need or want to go on to college. A basic Washington high school education should open career opportunities and prepare graduating students for success in the workplace, if that is the path they choose.

3) Make a Washington state diploma a recognized sign of a good education by improving the WASL or choosing a better test, so it more closely matches respected, national tests, like the NAEP. Over the years, lawmakers and the Superintendent of Public Instruction have gradually weakened the WASL academic standard, putting Washington students at risk of falling behind their peers across the country and around the world. A better test more closely aligned to a respected standard like the NAEP would ensure that Washington's children are receiving the level of education they need and deserve.

5. Universal Preschool and All-Day Kindergarten

Recommendations

1. Public policy should support stable, long-term relationships between parents and young children.

2. Encourage voluntary participation and avoid programs based on universal or mandatory participation.

3. Respect parental choice by making early learning public assistance portable and child-centered, not fixed and provider-centered.

4. Build on innovation in the private market, as providers compete to offer flexible, high-quality services that serve the needs of families.

5. Allow voluntary professional memberships, so child care providers are not required to join a union against their will.

Background

In 2007, the legislature created a new Department of Early Learning, with initial two-year funding of $329 million. The Department's program includes an expanded, by 2,250 places, Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), at a subsidy rate of $6,500 per child. It also increases payments to providers, creates a Quality Rating and Improvement System, and devotes $51 million to an all-day kindergarten program.[57]

Advocates of early learning programs argue that some young children are entering school at a disadvantage, and that this contributes to the state's low academic achievement and high drop-out rate. Advocates plan to spend $100 million to develop public opinion to support broad, permanent state programs. Their stated purpose is:

> "to create the public and political will to develop a sustainable system of affordable, high-quality early learning across the state."[58]

Policy Analysis

Research indicates, however, that any benefits to children of institutional-based early learning programs are short-lived. Early academic gains fade quickly, and by the fifth grade, children who attended early learning programs show no measurable improvement over children who did not attend these programs.[59]

Oklahoma, New Jersey and Georgia have all recently tried highly-regulated universal preschool programs, some providing taxpayer subsidies of as much as $11,000 per child per year. The results are not encouraging. Any short-term gains for disadvantaged children fade out over time, especially if children were slated to attend low-performing public schools.

Early learning advocates point to three studies, High/Scope Perry Preschool, Abecedarian, and Chicago Child-Parent, to claim that these programs can achieve long-term success. However, they overlook three key aspects of these programs that make them impractical for application in Washington state.

First, each program delivered an intensive level of center-based care to severely disadvantaged children, with low student-to-teacher ratios and intensive parent involvement and education over several years. These programs stayed involved with particular families for six years in the case of the Chicago study, and for five to eight years in the case of the Abecedarian program. This level of involvement is not practical for the much larger child populations that would be covered by a universal early learning program.

Second, the main benefit to children of these programs was a stronger relationship with parents, not being part of a universal institutional program. As psychologist Dr. Matthew Thompson points out:

> "It is possible that parental involvement explains more of the variance in outcome among inner-city children than do structured programs...

> "If policy makers mistakenly accept the conclusion that preschool intervention results in less criminal activity later, they may mistakenly invest in these programs when the money might be better invested in parenting skill programs and other interventions to increase parental involvement."[60]

Third, these specialized early learning programs involved very high costs; $11,000 per child in the Abecedarian program, and $12,300 per child in the High/Scope Perry program. The Chicago program had a student/teacher ratio of 8.5 to one, and the High-Scope Perry program included 90-miniute weekly home visits.

These are key features that would be impractical in a statewide, universal program. The positive results of these three studies could not be duplicated on a larger scale.

Fostering strong bonds to parents

Policymakers should avoid public programs that separate parents from their very young children for long periods of time. Social science and brain research shows that the healthy development of very young minds depends on the quality and reliability of a young child's relationships with the important people in his or her life, especially with parents.

A strong parent-child relationship is associated with better cognitive skills and enhanced social competence and work skills later in school. The science shows a direct connection between the social and emotional development of young children and their intellectual growth.

Conversely, too much time away from parents and in institutional care can inhibit a small child's social and emotional development. Social scientists at U.C. Berkeley and Stanford found that more hours in center-based care, 15 to 30 hours a week or more, resulted in, "no cognitive gains and substantially greater behavioral problems associated with additional hours of attendance."[61]

Elementary school teachers depend on the eagerness and natural curiosity of young children in order to impart important skills and knowledge. It is important to protect these social attributes of very young children. Natural excitement can be stifled by exposure to

an over-structured environment, such as center-based care. Child development researcher Bruce Fuller notes that:

> "Institutions, no matter how small and warm and fuzzy, start to regulate kids' behaviors. Once you rigidify and routinize that, then kids start to shut down, and their cognitive growth starts to slow down."[62]

The vast majority, 77 percent, of Washington's 442,000 children under age five are cared for in family-based, non-institutional settings.[63] Most parents in Washington choose individual home-based care, usually from a parent or relative, or less than four hours a day of an institutional preschool setting, for their very young children. These children tend to learn self-control and socializing behaviors from their families, which prepare them for the classroom, without dampening their natural curiosity.

The downside of all-day kindergarten

A recent study by the RAND Corporation shows that developing nonacademic readiness skills, as opposed to spending time in all-day kindergarten, is important to raising overall achievement and narrowing the learning gap between minority and white children.[64]

Nonacademic readiness skills are significantly related to reading and mathematics achievement in the fifth grade. Nonacademic readiness skills include a child's motivation, his ability to exercise self-control, to interact positively with others, and the avoidance of negative behaviors.

The RAND researchers found that in some cases a child attending all-day kindergarten later experienced *reduced* mathematics achievement when nonacademic skills are considered.[65]

Attending an all-day kindergarten program hindered the development of these important nonacademic school readiness skills. Children who participated in all-day kindergarten demonstrated poorer dispositions toward learning, lower self-control and poorer interpersonal skills than children in part-day programs.

Children in all-day programs also showed a greater tendency to engage in externalizing and internalizing negative behaviors (acting-out, defiance, arguing, fighting) than children in part-day programs.

Thus researchers found that all-day kindergarten is not a solution to the widely-touted lack of learning readiness of many kindergarteners.

Recommendations

1) Public policy should support stable, long-term relationships between parents and young children. Research shows that one-on-one relationships with parents and close family members contribute to the social and educational development of very young children. Policymakers should build on this research and encourage, or at least not create programs that disrupt, these important early relationships.

2) Encourage voluntary participation and avoid programs based on universal or mandatory participation. Public assistance to low-income families seeking early learning programs should be individual, portable and voluntary. Decisions about whether a child should participate should be made by parents, not program managers. Programs based on universal or mandatory participation should be avoided.

3) Respect parental choice by making early learning public assistance portable and child-centered, not fixed and provider-centered. Early learning public assistance should be child-based, not provider-based. Parents should be able to select the program or learning institution that best serves their child. If parents become dissatisfied, they should be able to transfer their child to another program, with public aid following the child.

4) Build on innovation in the private market, as providers compete to offer flexible, high-quality services that serve the needs of families. Private, for profit entities tend to be much more creative and nimble than government agencies. Early education programs should build on choice, innovation and constructive competition among private providers, as they seek to develop flexible solutions that serve the needs of families. Similarly, policymakers should avoid

imposing top-down restrictions that tend to stifle innovation and drive providers out of the market.

5) Allow voluntary professional memberships, so child care providers are not required to join a union against their will. In order to draw high-performing and talented people to the early learning field, policymakers should insure that membership in any private outside professional organization, such as a union, is voluntary. The state should not force early learning teachers and care providers to join such a private organization as a condition of employment.

6. Online Public Education

Recommendation

1. Encourage public school officials to expand online public education opportunities, so this learning option is available to any willing student.

Background

In May 2005, the legislature unanimously passed, and Governor Gregoire signed, SB 5828, to allow public school districts to offer online learning programs. Students in an online program study from home and receive lessons, submit homework and communicate with teachers by computer. Currently, about 6,600 students in Washington are enrolled in online public education.

Online public education programs must comply with all the academic rules and standards that apply to traditional public schools, including civil rights protections, oversight by certified teachers and state-mandated testing.[66]

Lawmakers passed the bill to allow students to take advantage of emerging internet technologies, particularly for students who have dropped out, or who otherwise were not being served by traditional schools. Online programs are effective in reaching:

- Students who have dropped out or are at risk of doing so;
- Students who do not perform well in large, traditional school settings, or do not connect socially in such settings;
- Homeschooling families who want to re-connect with public education (there are more than 17,000 homeschooled children in Washington);
- Gifted students who need more challenging coursework, or slower students who need more time to master a subject;
- High school students who have jobs or family responsibilities;

- Students who have long-term health conditions or physical handicaps;

- Students pursuing high-level training in sports or the arts and who cannot attend regular school hours (for example, Olympic gold medallist Apolo Ohno is an online graduate).

Online education in Washington

The three largest online programs are operated by the Federal Way School District, the Steilacoom School District and the Quillayute School District.

A large percentage of students in the Steilacoom and Quillayute programs, 45 percent and 38 percent respectively, had previously left the public education system.[67]

In addition to full-time online learning programs, 12,097 other students in the 2006-07 school year were enrolled in one or more online classes through their local public school district.[68]

Online public education is popular

Nationally, online public education is popular, as the number of families enrolling their children in online programs has rapidly increased in just a few years. In 2001, an estimated 50,000 K-12 students were engaged in distance learning. By 2003, that number had grown to 327,670 students.[69]

In 2006, the number of K-12 students taking online courses ballooned to 700,000.[70] The number of families choosing online public education courses increased more than tenfold in only six years.

In addition, officials in 72 percent of public school districts offering distance learning programs report they plan to expand their online courses in the future, in response to growing demand from parents in their area.[71]

Policy Analysis

While the explosive growth of online enrollment shows this public education choice is popular, online education still represents a small percentage of the 48.6 million students attending public schools across the country.[72]

Online public education programs are providing a high-quality, rigorous educational program for students who do not fit well in a traditional public school. These programs have proved successful in persuading families that had previously rejected public education to enroll their children in a public school program.

Online programs are academically successful for students, financially sustainable for taxpayers, and popular with parents. As such, they play an important part in fulfilling the state's paramount duty to make ample educational provision for all children within its borders.

Recommendation

1) Encourage public school officials to expand online public education opportunities, so this learning option is available to any willing student. Washington policymakers have a paramount duty to make ample provision for the education of all children. Online education is effective at reaching hard-to-serve student populations. In addition, the choice of online education is popular with parents.

Policymakers should encourage school districts to offer the option of online courses to any willing student. Lawmakers should not place limits on how many students can enroll, as some have proposed, or impose restrictions on the ability of school districts to create or expand these programs. Online education has proven successful in drawing families back to the public system, and in providing rigorous, high-quality learning for children.

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