

Does Washington rank 41st, 29th, 22nd or 6th in education spending? It depends on how you count

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

January 2015

Key Findings

1. *Policymakers disagree on how Washington state ranks in education spending.*
2. *There are several methods for measuring how Washington state education spending ranks compared to other states.*
3. *Washington ranks anywhere from 41st to 6th depending upon which measure is used.*
4. *Washington's school districts now spend an average of \$11,300 per student, the highest level in state history.*
5. *Lawmakers should give parents education choice to direct public dollars in ways that help children, so the focus is less on how Washington compares with other states, and more on how well children are learning in class.*

During the legislative session in Olympia, lawmakers are likely to debate where our state ranks in education spending. A lot depends upon which metric a lawmaker uses. The metric chosen often depends on whether the lawmaker wants to increase taxes. A poor ranking makes it appear that more spending and a heavier tax burden are urgently needed.

A debate about Washington's ranking on education took place recently on TVW's show "The Impact."¹ The program provided a good example of the different ways to assess the level of education spending in Washington.

TVW reporter Anita Kissee summarized two studies ranking Washington's K-12 spending. A study by the national teachers' union, promoted by Rep. Ross Hunter (D – Bellevue and Chair of House Appropriations Committee), ranks Washington 29th among states in spending, at about \$1,000 per student below average.²

That study, however, is based on old numbers. Current figures show the legislature, in response to the *McCleary* decision, is providing K-12 schools a significant boost of \$864 per student in

1 "A wrap-up of the Fall Senate Committee Hearings, and the key issues facing the 2015 Legislature. Plus, how I-1351 could impact K-12 education funding," Anita Kissee, TVW's *The Impact*, November 26, 2014, at 15:37, tvw.org/index.php?option=com_tvwplayer&eventID=2014110078.

2 "Highlights Table 2, Summary of Selected Estimates Data for 2013-14, NEA Rankings and Estimates, Rankings of the States 2013 and Estimates of School Statistics 2014," National Education Association, page 67 at www.nea.org/assets/docs/NEA-Rankings-and-Estimates-2013-2014.pdf.

today's budget.³ This increase has raised total per student spending from all state, local and federal sources to \$11,300, ranking Washington by this measure as 22nd among the states and the District of Columbia.

A more recent study looks at states based on the rate of education spending increase.⁴ As noted, Washington lawmakers have been sharply raising school spending, so by this measure Washington ranks 6th .

A section on the Washington Education Association (WEA) union website, "Education Statistics," says Washington ranks 41st in the nation in per student spending.⁵ That assessment is based on 2011 numbers, so it misses the increases passed in recent state budgets.

According to these four studies, Washington ranks either 41st, 29th, 22nd or 6th, depending on what counting method is used.

How should legislators and citizens look at school spending? The most commonsense approach is to look at the needs of Washington students, not at whether current levels of spending are greater than, less than or equal to what lawmakers in 49 other states and the District of Columbia are spending.

In other words, lawmakers should look at what Washington is actually spending and assess whether the problems in

education are caused by lack of money or lie somewhere else.

States that spend more per pupil do not get better student achievement results.⁶

Currently Washington's school districts spend an average of \$11,300 per student, the highest level in state history, or \$282,500 for a typical class of 25 students.⁷ Teachers receive an average of \$85,000 each in pay and benefits for a 10-month work year. That leaves some \$197,500 to cover all other operating costs, not counting added levy money provided for construction and capital expenses. Of course school finance is not that simple, but to most taxpaying working families, a quarter-million dollars to teach 25 kids for 10 months seems like a reasonable definition of "adequate."

This is the money lawmakers are pouring in at the top, but figures show public schools are so highly centralized and bureaucratic that only a fraction of these funds trickles down to students in class:

- Only 59 cents of every education dollar reaches the classroom.
- Most school district employees are not classroom teachers.
- Each year, union protests and strikes close schools or delay school starts, costing millions, disrupting families and shutting students out of class.

3 "2013-15 Operating Budget Overview," Senate Ways and Means Committee, June 27, 2013, page 6, at leap.leg.wa.gov/leap/Budget/Detail/2013/soHighlights_0627.pdf.

4 "Most States Still Funding Schools Less Than Before Recession," Michael Leachman and Chris Mai, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, October 16, 2014, at www.cbpp.org/files/10-16-14sfp.pdf.

5 "Education statistics," website of the Washington Education Association, accessed January 13, 2015, at www.washingtonea.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=211:washington-education-statistics&catid=135:weas-news-media-contact-info&Itemid=57.

6 "Education's No Dollar Left Behind Competition," by Vicky Alger, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 11, 2015 at www.wsj.com/articles/vicki-alger-educations-no-dollar-left-behind-competition-1421017161.

7 Email to author dated January 13, 2015, from Managing Consultant, Michael Mann, Staff for Washington State's Legislative Evaluation and Accountability Program Committee, reports that state expenditures per student are \$13,303. This figure is based upon December enrollment and SY2014-15 budgeted data (F195).

- Some school districts divert nearly half their funding away from classrooms. Seattle spends \$13,795 per student. The central office consumes \$306 million, or 45 percent, of the total \$689 million district budget.⁸
- Private schools typically spend 90 percent of their budgets on classroom instruction, and generally charge less than \$11,300 a year for tuition.
- Charter public schools spend less per student than traditional public schools and produce, in most cases, better outcomes for children.
- Other states (like Indiana, Wisconsin, Florida, Louisiana) let parents, not central administrators, direct education dollars in ways that serve children.⁹

Before thinking that raising taxes on working families will help children, lawmakers should first ask: “Where does the money go and why aren’t we getting better results?”

Solutions include reassigning more central district staff to help in the classroom, directing a larger share of school budgets to student instruction, increasing school choice for families, more charter school options, flexible online education, allowing students access to choose afterschool tutoring and urging union executives not to call teachers out on strike.

Most importantly, lawmakers should work to give parents a voice in education, by making choices that direct public dollars in ways that help their children learn. That is why public charter schools are popular – no one is forced to attend; every family is there because they want to be there.

Pell Grants, federal student aid and the GI bill all give families money for choices in higher education. Similar choices could be allowed at the K-12 level, giving families a greater voice in the system.

If Washington parents had more family choice in education, they would be less concerned about whether we rank 1st in some studies or 50th in others, because parents would be getting public education dollars where they are needed most – helping children in class.

*Liv Finne is
Washington Policy Center's
director of the Center for
Education.*

*Nothing here should be
construed as an attempt to
aid or hinder the passage of
any legislation before any
legislative body.*

*Visit washingtonpolicy.org
to learn more.*

-
- 8 Seattle Public Schools Adopted Budget 2014-15, Seattle Public Schools, page 79, at www.seattleschools.org/modules/groups/homepagefiles/cms/1583136/File/Departmental%20Content/budget/adopted15.pdf.
- 9 “The ABCs of School Choice, 2014,” The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, at www.edchoice.org/School-Choice/The-ABCs-of-School-Choice.