

# POLICY BRIEF

## Grading Washington's education system results

By Dr. Vicki Murray,  
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February 2025

### Key Takeaways

1. Between 2012 and 2024, Washington's education spending increased significantly, jumping from \$13,775 to \$19,163 per student, a 39% increase, adjusted for inflation.
2. State data show that in 2023, public schools failed to educate 49% of students adequately to standards in English, 61% of students adequately in math, and 57% adequately in science.
3. Fourth-grade students in Washington saw a significant decline in math and English proficiency. Between 2013 and 2024, Washington students fell from 10th in the nation in math proficiency to 27th. In English proficiency, students fell from 15th to 18th in the nation.
4. Eighth-grade students in Washington also saw a significant decline in math and English proficiency. Between 2013 and 2024, Washington students fell from 7th in the nation in math proficiency to 24th. In English proficiency, students fell from 8th to 17th in the nation.
5. The number of non-teacher public school employees grew at a faster rate than certified teachers, increasing by 28% between 2012 and 2024. Today, nearly half (49%) of Washington public school employees are not certified classroom teachers.
6. While public school enrollment increased by only 7% from 2012 to 2024, alternative education options expanded at a much higher rate. Homeschooling increased by 76%, and full-time online public school enrollment grew by 36% over the same period.



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## Introduction

During Governor Inslee’s term in office the public education system experienced a significant decline in test scores despite a significant increase in per-student spending.

The number of children attending Washington public schools increased only slightly during the study period. Public school attendance was 1,001,485 students in 2012, rising to 1,073,425 students during the 2024-25 school year, a 7% increase.<sup>1</sup> During that same period, Washington state population grew by about 14%.

While still a relatively small percentage of total students, homeschooling and attendance at privately-run full-time online schools increased at a faster rate than traditional public school attendance. Attendance at Insight School and Washington Virtual Academy, both full-time online programs, increased from a combined 5,010 students in 2012 to 6,842 students in 2024, a notable 36% increase. In addition, the number of students in homeschool rose dramatically from 16,722 in 2012 to 29,467 in 2024, a remarkable increase of 76%.<sup>2</sup> Homeschooling families now educate a number of students equal to the second or third largest school district in the state.

During that period, private school attendance kept pace with public school attendance, rising from 76,429 students to 81,962 students, a 7% increase.<sup>3</sup>

The advent of some modest forms of school choice has allowed parents to choose alternatives within the public system. In 2012 there were no charter public schools in Washington. After a voter-approved initiative, which was ratified by a bipartisan

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1 "K-12 Public Schools: District Staffing and Finance Data, Workload, Staffing, Finance Charts," Washington State Fiscal Information, at <https://fiscal.wa.gov/K12/K12FinanceStatewide>.

2 "Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS)," Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, accessed June 17, 2024, at <https://ospi.k12.wa.us/data-reporting/reporting/cedars>.

3 "Private School Enrollment from 2012-13 through 2021-22," Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, figure 65, page 173, accessed June 17, 2024, at <https://ospi.k12.wa.us/policy-funding/school-apportionment/school-publications/organization-and-financing-washington-public-schools>, and "Private Schools," State Board of education, accessed June 17, 2024, at <https://www.sbe.wa.gov/our-work/private-schools>.

bill that Governor Inslee allowed to become law without his signature, there now are 18 charter schools serving 4,800 students.<sup>4</sup>

## Falling test scores

In the 1990s, state lawmakers adopted testing standards to ensure that every child had access to a good public education.

As of 2023 the state's own data show that public schools failed to educate 49% of students adequately to standards in English, 61% of students adequately in math, and 57% adequately in science.<sup>5</sup>

During the Inslee Administration Washington lost ground in state educational rankings, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In 2013, Washington ranked 7th among states in math proficiency and 8th in English proficiency for eighth grade students. By 2024, Washington had fallen to 24th in math proficiency and 17th in English for eighth graders.<sup>6</sup> For fourth grade students in 2013, Washington ranked 10th in math and 15th in English. In 2024, Washington fell to 27th in math and 18th in English for fourth graders.<sup>7</sup>

Part of that reduction in relative ranking could be due to Washington's COVID lockdown policies, which tended to be stricter than other states. Using 2019 NAEP data, to avoid any impact from COVID policies, test scores declined slightly in both 4th and 8th grade math and reading between 2013 and 2019.

Washington's COVID policies made that poor trend worse. Between 2019 and 2023, Washington's students had the fourth worst loss of proficiency in English and fifth worst loss of proficiency in math.<sup>8</sup>

## Public education funding increased significantly

The decline in public education was not caused by lack of resources. Although the public school population rose by just 7%, the level of education spending nearly

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4 Initiative 1240, "Creation of a public charter school system," ballot measure passed on November 6, 2012, at <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20121106/initiative-measure-no-1240-concerns-creation-of-a-public-charter-school-system.html>, Revised Code of Washington 28A.710, "Charter Schools," and SB 6194, "Concerning public schools that are not common schools," Washington state legislature, enacted April 3, 2016, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/BillSummary/?BillNumber=6194&Year=2015&Initiative=false>.

5 [50.3% of Washington public school students at grade level in English, 39.7% in Math » Publications » Washington Policy Center](#).

6 "State Profiles: Washington," State Performance Compared to the Nation, The Nation's Report Card, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), fourth-grade math and English test results, 2013 and 2024, at <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile?chort=1&sub=RED&sj=WA&sfj=NP&st=MN&year=2011R3>.

7 *Ibid.*, eighth-grade math and English test results.

8 [CSDH\\_STSR\\_DataSeries\\_2023-19-WA-01\\_Washington.pdf](#)

doubled, rising from \$13,775 per student in 2012 to \$19,163 per student in 2024, a 39% increase when adjusted for inflation.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, although the number of students statewide increased by only 7%, the number of public school employees increased from 101,445 in 2012 to 123,891 in 2024, a 22% increase.<sup>10</sup>

Over the study period the number of non-teacher employees on the public education payroll increased from 48,107 in 2012 to 61,501, a 28% increase. Today nearly half (49%) of the workers employed by Washington's public school districts are not certified classroom teachers.

## Education solutions

### 1. Expand access to charter schools.

Parents like charter schools because the teachers tend to listen more to the voices of parents than those of special interests. Lawmakers should provide fair funding for charter schools and expand the number of schools as an innovative option within the public education system.

The Washington State Board of Education reports that Black, Hispanic and low-income students attending the state's 18 charter schools "outperformed their matched peers" at traditional public schools in learning English and math.<sup>11</sup> The State Board found that overall the academic results for charter school students are higher than the performance of comparable students assigned to traditional schools in the same district.<sup>12</sup>

### 2. Allow universal school choice.

States across the nation are enacting or expanding popular school choice programs. Choice empowers parents and lets them decide which school their children will attend. By allowing family access to universal school choice, Washington lawmakers can ensure they are meeting their paramount duty to provide for the education of every child living in the state.

### 3. Enforce I-2081, the Parental Rights Citizens Initiative.

In early 2024 nearly half a million concerned citizens submitted Initiative 2081 to the legislature to bar school district officials from hiding children's sensitive academic and health information from their parents. On March 4, 2024 the legislature enacted I-2081 into law. However, State Superintendent Reykdahl and some administrators announced they would not fully implement the new law, and that public school officials would continue

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<sup>9</sup> [Education spending has doubled in ten years, and most of the money went to hiring administrators and non-teachers](#) » Publications » Washington Policy Center.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> "Charter Schools Report," The Washington State Board of Education, 2024, page 5, at [https://sbe.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/2024%20SBE%20Report%20on%20Charter%20Schools%202022-23%20School%20Year-Final\\_041124.pdf](https://sbe.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/2024%20SBE%20Report%20on%20Charter%20Schools%202022-23%20School%20Year-Final_041124.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, page 29.

to withhold student information from parents at their discretion.<sup>13</sup> Public school officials should follow state law and uphold the Parental Rights Initiative openly and honestly. Doing so will help officials rebuild trust with parents and help slow the withdrawal of families from the public education system.

## Conclusion

As new state leaders look to the future, they should recognize that the problems facing public education are not caused by lack of funding or lack of staff. Increased spending has not improved student learning or stemmed the ongoing exodus of families from the system.

State leaders should publicly recognize that Washington schools receive ample funding and turn their focus to practical reforms that will improve the quality of learning that children receive.

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<sup>13</sup> “The Parental Rights Initiative just passed, but some lawmakers are telling school officials to ignore it,” by Liv Finne, Washington Policy Center, March 6, 2024, at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/detail/the-parental-rights-initiative-just-passed-but-some-lawmakers-are-telling-school-officials-to-ignore-it>.

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### About the Author

Vicki Murray (Alger) is the Director of the Center for Education and the Paul W. Locke Research Fellow for Education at Washington Policy Center. Her research focuses on education reforms that promote a competitive education marketplace and increase parents' control over their children's education.

Vicki is the author of *Failure: The Federal 'Misedukation' of America's Children*, an in-depth history of the U.S. Department of Education and federal education policy. She is a co-author of eight additional books, as well as nearly 80 policy studies. Vicki has advised the U.S. Department of Education, policymakers in 45 states, and provided expert testimony before state legislative education committees. Her research has also been used in educational choice program litigation, including the successful defense of country's first tax-credit scholarship program in the U.S. Supreme Court. Vicki's research and commentary on education policy have been widely published and cited in leading public policy outlets such as Harvard University's Program on Education Policy and Governance, Stanford University's *Hoover Digest*, *Education Week*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, as well as national news media outlets, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, *Investor's Business Daily*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *US News & World Report*. She has also appeared on the Fox News Channel, Global News, local ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS affiliates, in addition to news radio programs across the country. Prior to her career in education policy, Vicki taught college-level courses in American politics, English composition and rhetoric, and early British literature.

She received her Ph.D. in political philosophy from the University of Dallas, where she was an Earhart Foundation Fellow. Vicki lives in Seattle and hails from Scottsdale, Arizona. She is dedicated to expanding educational opportunities for all families, regardless of their income or address. These include public district and charter school choices, as well as private, home, virtual, and parent-tailored options made possible through education savings accounts.