

WASA 2021 LEGISLATIVE PLATFORM

WASA believes that the commitment of resources to the education and welfare of the children of Washington State is an investment in the quality of our future. We believe that effective school leaders initiate and manage change resulting in a system of K–12 education in which all students receive a quality education.

As the coronavirus wreaks havoc on Washington's economy, the state is expected to undergo significant revenue losses. This will force legislators to make widespread reductions in all areas of government as they write the 2021–23 Operating Budget. In recent years, the Legislature has done an admirable—and appreciated—job of providing substantial education investments; however, K–12 education will not be spared cuts next session.

Washington's schools and districts continue to have urgent needs that require assistance to ensure all students have equitable access to continuous learning opportunities and programming. Given the state's financial circumstances, educators cannot expect ongoing sizable investments during the current financial crisis, even though K–12 education continues to have pressing needs. Addressing many of these longer-term needs will have to be postponed; however, legislators must be reminded of these requests.

In addition to those long-term issues, there are several near-term issues—many a direct result of the COVID-19 outbreak—that must be addressed immediately. Administrators urge the 2021 Legislature to address the short-term needs below, while keeping in mind K–12's additional requests, to be addressed as the economy recovers following the current crisis.

Short-term Needs to Address

- **K–12 Budget.** The Legislature has made great strides in implementing a new education funding system, including providing significant financial investments. As necessary state budget reductions are contemplated, the Legislature must hold the line on K–12 funding and continue to honor its constitutional commitment. Education plays a critical role in building and maintaining a strong economy and supporting a well-educated workforce necessary to attract more stable and higher wage jobs; education is a great equalizer, providing all students access and opportunity to thrive in our communities and workforce; and a strong education system lessens reliance on social services, saving money in the long run. If K–12 reductions are deemed necessary, the Legislature must ensure reductions do not create or further exacerbate funding inequities between districts. Additionally, as the federal government provides relief funds dedicated to K–12 education, those resources must promptly be appropriated to school districts, without supplanting state funding.
- **Mid-year Reductions.** In the event K–12 funding is included in the Legislature's budget reductions, no cuts should be made mid-year. School districts have employment contracts and other obligations that cannot be avoided; mid-year reductions would further complicate local budget matters and impact labor issues.
- **Mandates.** As the state addresses the coronavirus outbreak and its economic impacts, the Legislature should avoid imposing additional mandates—funded or not—on school districts. School leaders are already overwhelmed with the implementation of an entirely new funding structure, including an overhaul of staff compensation and local funding with levies and Local Effort Assistance.
- **Flexibility.** If education funding must be cut, one way to mitigate the impact is to provide local districts greater flexibility in how they spend their dollars. School district leaders better understand their needs and their community desires. Allowing districts flexibility would ensure limited dollars are used where there is the greatest need.
- **Technology/Connectivity.** The COVID-19 outbreak, and the resultant school closures, exposed the current technology gap, including availability and affordability of devices and broadband connectivity. The Legislature must ensure there is equitable access to technology resources.
- **Bargaining.** COVID-19 and school closures disrupted the education system, forcing modifications in the delivery of education, the school calendar and employee responsibilities. These issues impact local bargaining. Given drastically altered circumstances and expected revenue difficulties, school districts seek strong sideboards on bargaining, including clearly defining the minimum professional duties and expectations for teachers in statute.

Long-term Needs to Address

Because of the state's current fiscal emergency, addressing some of K–12's greatest needs will have to be paused. Legislators, however, should be reminded about these needs because at some point, the state's economy will rebound and the Legislature will have available revenues to invest. While we cannot expect much movement on these long-term issues in 2021, we urge legislators to keep these priority issues in mind:

- **Staffing Allocations.** The Prototypical School Funding Model is a core, fundamental part of the education funding structure. The funding ratios for most staff positions, however, have remained the same since the Model was first implemented, resulting in outdated and unrealistic state-funded staffing levels.
- **Consistent, Equitable, and Ample Education Resources.** Several components of K–12's new funding structure have exacerbated inequities between districts and urgently need to be revised. These components include: Special Education; State Salary Allocations and Experience Factors; the School Employees' Benefits Board insurance program; and Regionalization.
- **Capital Facilities.** School facilities remain a core need and the Legislature provides a considerable investment in the School Construction Assistant Program. Grants that are provided, however, use outdated funding formulas that fail to recognize the true cost of building or educational space needs.