

HOT TOPICS

FISCAL ISSUES

Enrollment Stabilization

The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on the state's economy. The pandemic also had direct impacts on school districts. Last March, schools were closed by the state and were forced to provide educational services remotely. As the pandemic continued through the summer and fall, some schools started to reopen, mostly with limited numbers of students. Whether providing limited in-person instruction through a hybrid model or continuing fully online, many families sent their children to private schools (most of which were operating in-person), took advantage of online opportunities not associated with their local district, or kept their students at home, providing home-school instruction. As a result, most school districts saw an enrollment decline in the 2020–21 school year compared with the 2019–20 school year.

Current apportionment formulas are mostly enrollment-driven and school budgets (along with staffing decisions) for 2020–21 were built on full enrollment; however, unanticipated lower enrollment means lower state allocations. In addition to enrollment determining a school districts' general apportionment, multiple other programs are enrollment-based, including Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) programs, special education, the Transitional Bilingual Instructional Program (TBIP), the Learning Assistance Program (LAP), highly capable programs, Career and Technical Education (CTE), Skills Centers, dropout reengagement programs, and institutional education. Local Effort Assistance (LEA or "levy equalization") for eligible districts is also negatively impacted by enrollment declines and, if a district utilizes the per-pupil funding model to calculate levy lids, declining enrollment will also lower a district's maximum levy authority.

Pupil Transportation

When schools were shut down last March, pupil transportation ceased. Many districts, however, continued to utilize school buses for meal or instructional materials delivery. Some districts even used buses as mobile "hot spots" to provide internet connectivity. In August last year, Governor Inslee signed a Proclamation to specifically allow school districts to use transportation allocations provided for "to and from" school pupil transportation on an expanded list of permissible activities, including: delivering learning materials, meals, and

technology solutions to students in their remote learning locations. Additionally, transporting students to and from learning centers or other agencies where educational and support services were provided was allowed.

This flexibility has allowed school districts to creatively use transportation resources to equitably address student needs. The current funding model, however, does not allow the same flexibility necessary to adapt to temporary remote instruction by school districts. The pupil transportation funding model uses student ridership data ("to and from" school) to allocate funding to school districts. This means pupil transportation allocations already provided to school districts are in jeopardy when OSPI goes through its reconciliation process. Without legislative action, many school districts will report a significant drop in traditional student ridership, resulting in a funding decrease that will affect their ability to continue delivering services to students.

Federal Funding

The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA), adopted by Congress in December, provided \$54.3 billion for education through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund. The second round of ESSER funds allocated to Washington was a total of \$825,852,000. Ten percent (\$82,485,200) was reserved at the state level (OSPI), with the remaining ninety percent (\$742,366,800) being dedicated to school districts through Title I, as the earlier round of ESSER funds were distributed.

We appreciated the prompt release of \$668 million provided to local school districts as part of the "early action" Pandemic Relief bill (ESHB 1368); however, there are two major concerns. The first is that the Legislature is withholding \$74 million of the ESSER II funds dedicated to school districts, as well as the \$82 million dedicated to OSPI. The second is that using the Title I methodology to roll funds out to school districts (as required by the CRRSA) leaves non-Title I districts behind—even though they have the same fiscal concerns regarding enrollment declines, pupil transportation funding issues, and increased costs due to COVID as Title I districts have.

Our Requests:

- **WASA/WSSDA/WASBO support [HB 1476](#)**, which will provide enrollment stabilization funding in the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years to school districts in which enrollment in the 2020–21 school year has declined from the 2019–20 school year. As provided for in the bill, state enrollment stabilization funding will be provided to school districts if their funding loss due to enrollment declines is greater than the federal funds appropriated to school districts in ESHB 1368 (Pandemic Relief). Additionally, the bill requires the use of 2019–20 enrollments to calculate maximum levy authority and allocations for Local Effort Assistance, if greater than 2020–21 and 2021–22 enrollments.
- **WASA/WSSDA/WASBO support [SB 5128](#)**, which provides for an alternative student transportation allocation formula and, similar to the Governor's Proclamation, allows expanded transportation services to be provided beyond pupil transportation when a

school district is providing remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. The bill also temporarily provides a fixed level of funding to school districts based on student service data to ensure that districts have the resources they need to continue serving students. Additionally, the bill provides a mechanism for calculating pupil transportation funding immediately following the COVID-19 emergency, so that the temporary drop in student ridership does not impact future transportation allocations.

- We appreciate the \$668 million in ESSER II funds allocated to K–12 education; however, WASA/WSSDA/WASBO now urge the Legislature to:
 - Promptly release the remaining \$74 million of ESSER II funds to school districts and provide the \$82 million dedicated to OSPI; and
 - Appropriate sufficient state funds in the Operating Budget to ensure all school districts are made whole.

GRADUATION FLEXIBILITY AND CAREER OPTIONS

The one-size-fits-all standard for graduation has become obsolete. To provide effective, basic education to 1.2 million Washington state students, our system is evolving. Considerations for flexibility and innovation are becoming central to the education system. Washington students want and need to graduate with diverse skills related more closely to their interests and aptitudes. While many students are still thriving with the traditional 24-credit course schedule, others need alternatives within that framework to pursue their academic, personal, and professional aspirations.

Career Pathways

House Bill 1599, enacted in 2019, was a big leap toward putting students first in our K–12 environments, honoring their diversity and unique interests. In place of meeting the graduation standard in the mathematics and English language arts (ELA) state assessments alone, this legislation extends the options for meeting graduation requirements to include state assessments, dual credit options, advanced placement/International Baccalaureate (IB)/Cambridge exams, SAT/ACT, a transition course, Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), or a CTE sequence. These changes enable students starting in the graduating class of 2020 to demonstrate competency and mastery of skills and subjects in a variety of ways. The graduation pathway that a student intends to pursue is established through their high school and beyond plan (HSBP), which guides the student's high school experience and prepares students for postsecondary education and career opportunities.

In the same legislation, a [Mastery-Based Learning Work Group](#) was established to identify barriers to mastery-based learning and explore ways to increase student access to relevant and robust mastery-based academic pathways aligned to personal career and postsecondary goals. Mastery-based learning considers strategies to allow students to advance upon demonstrated mastery of content based on explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students. Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include application and creation of knowledge along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

Flexibility

Never before has flexibility been so essential as with the arrival of a pandemic in the middle of the school year. COVID-19 led to the closure of in-person instruction for all Washington public schools on March 13, 2020. With the school year close to completion but not close enough for most twelfth graders to have completed all of their graduation requirements, the Legislature was able to quickly pass a law enabling SBE to establish emergency waivers for students in the graduation class of 2020. The waiver allowed school districts, charters schools, tribal compact schools, and private schools to waive certain credit requirements for graduating students on a case-by-case basis. It was a change urgently needed and districts soon identified a desire to continue the waiver option due to persisting issues caused by COVID-19 and potential future emergencies.

Three bills have been introduced during the 2021 Legislative Session that continue the advancement of career pathways and options for graduation flexibility while retaining the existing layers of accountability. **WASA/WSSDA/WASBO** have been supportive of these bills as they recognize the foundation of local governance and student pathways.

Our Requests:

- **WASA/WSSDA/WASBO support [HB 1121](#)** which proposes that the graduation waiver program be continued by allowing the SBE to authorize public and private schools to grant individual student waivers from graduation requirements due to a local, state, or national emergency. It also requires school districts to maintain records and report on waiver usage and directs the SBE to provide waiver data on the graduating classes of 2020 and 2021 to the Legislature. The bill has passed both the House and Senate and is waiting for action by the governor.
- **WASA/WSSDA/WASBO support [HB 1162](#)** which requires districts to continue offering the 24 credits for high school graduation but would allow students to graduate by earning at least twenty to provide greater personalization for individual students while maintaining rigor. In addition, the bill would enable students to fulfill the graduation pathway requirements by demonstrating knowledge and skills through a performance exhibition, a type of performance assessment in which the student organizes their authentic work to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities. This legislation would also hold school

districts accountable for ensuring equity. It requires school districts to take appropriate corrective actions if they observe disproportionality among student subgroups participating in and completing pathway options.

This bill has only progressed to the Rules Committee in its house of origin; initial momentum has significantly slowed. Some legislators and education stakeholders have expressed concern that the bill does not ensure student learning and academic rigor. The considerations for this bill strengthen the current system by providing options and opportunity for our students while continuing to rely on our educators to provide the high-quality and relevant instruction most needed by each student.

- **WASA/WSSDA/WASBO support [SB 5249](#)** which requires the Mastery-Based Learning Work Group (established through HB 1599) to develop a Washington State profile of a high school graduate, in consultation with students, families, educators, and other stakeholders and places additional representatives from various education groups on the work group. The State Board of Education (SBE) is also required to develop recommendations relating to the profile of a graduate and to perform a survey on graduation pathways that includes high school students and recent graduates. This proposed policy supports the direction of career pathways and alternatives for student learning and demonstration of mastery/competency.

STUDENT WELL-BEING

The pandemic impacts not only physical health but also social and emotional wellness. Depression and suicide are on the rise. Before COVID-19, suicide was already the second leading cause of death for teens 15 to 19 years old in Washington state. The uncertainty, isolation, loneliness, and chaos of the pandemic only exacerbates these issues for our students and their families.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is broadly understood as a process through which individuals build awareness and skills in managing emotions, setting goals, establishing relationships, and making responsible decisions that support success in school and in life. While schools have been working to embed SEL in their curriculum, delivery of this content can be challenging in a remote environment. School counselors and social service staff are the most well-prepared to inform the content but are grossly underrepresented in our schools. Beyond academic achievement, research has also found an “association between lower student-to-counselor ratios

and fewer disciplinary incidents, less misbehavior, reduced suspension rates, higher attendance rates, and greater reported connection to school” (Lapan et al., 2012; Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012; Carrell & Hoekstra, 2014).

The current prototypical school funding model (PSFM) does not recognize this need. Staff allocations in the model need to be increased to include more school counselors, school nurses, social workers, psychologists, family engagement coordinators, and student and staff safety. Except for middle and high school counselors, none of these allocations have been adjusted since the PSFM was implemented in the 2011–12 school year. These initial values were based on research and analysis from the mid-1970s, without consideration for the evolving changes in student needs or more effective educational practices. Furthermore, the National Association of School Social Workers reports that “school social workers are an integral link between school, home, and community in helping students achieve academic success.” Without access to these trained professionals in our school systems, we will be unable to effectively reach our students disproportionately impacted by trauma.

Several bills have been introduced in the 2021 Legislative Session intended to strengthen mental health supports in schools. While they each would advance policies to support the social and emotional well-being of students, they are not funded adequately. As such, WASA/WSSDA/WASBO have not been able to weigh in with support.

Our Requests:

- **WASA/WSSDA/WASBO support** OSPI's operating budget request to build staffing capacity to support student well-being in the amount of \$346 million for the 2021–23 biennium (beginning in Fiscal Year 23). The needs of students have changed significantly over the past several years and the model for supporting school districts has not kept up. This request is for the implementation of the first of two evidence-based phases recommended by the 2019 Staffing Enrichment Workgroup. This initial phase, to be implemented no later than the 2024–25 school year, closes opportunity gaps through the prototypical school funding model. Funding this request will allow school districts to better meet safety and social-emotional needs of students, provide more professional development for school staff, increase allocations for school principals, and add continuous learning coaches to the prototypical model.
- **WASA/WSSDA/WASBO support** the [Staffing Enrichment Workgroup recommendations](#) (2019). The Workgroup included representatives from WASA, WSSDA, and WASBO. The recommendations are organized in phases that prioritizes mental health supports for students. Phase 1 proposes an increase to the prototypical school model to provide for school counselors, school nurses, social workers, psychologists, family engagement coordinators, and student and staff safety. The Workgroup recommends that school districts have the resources to hire the social and emotional health staff best positioned to serve their students by calculating compliance across the broad category of social and emotional health staff. However, the Workgroup recommends maintaining the funding via individual staffing units in the prototypical school funding model. While compliance calculations are recommended across the broad category of social and emotional health staff, the prototypical school model shall retain the individual positions for allocation purposes only.