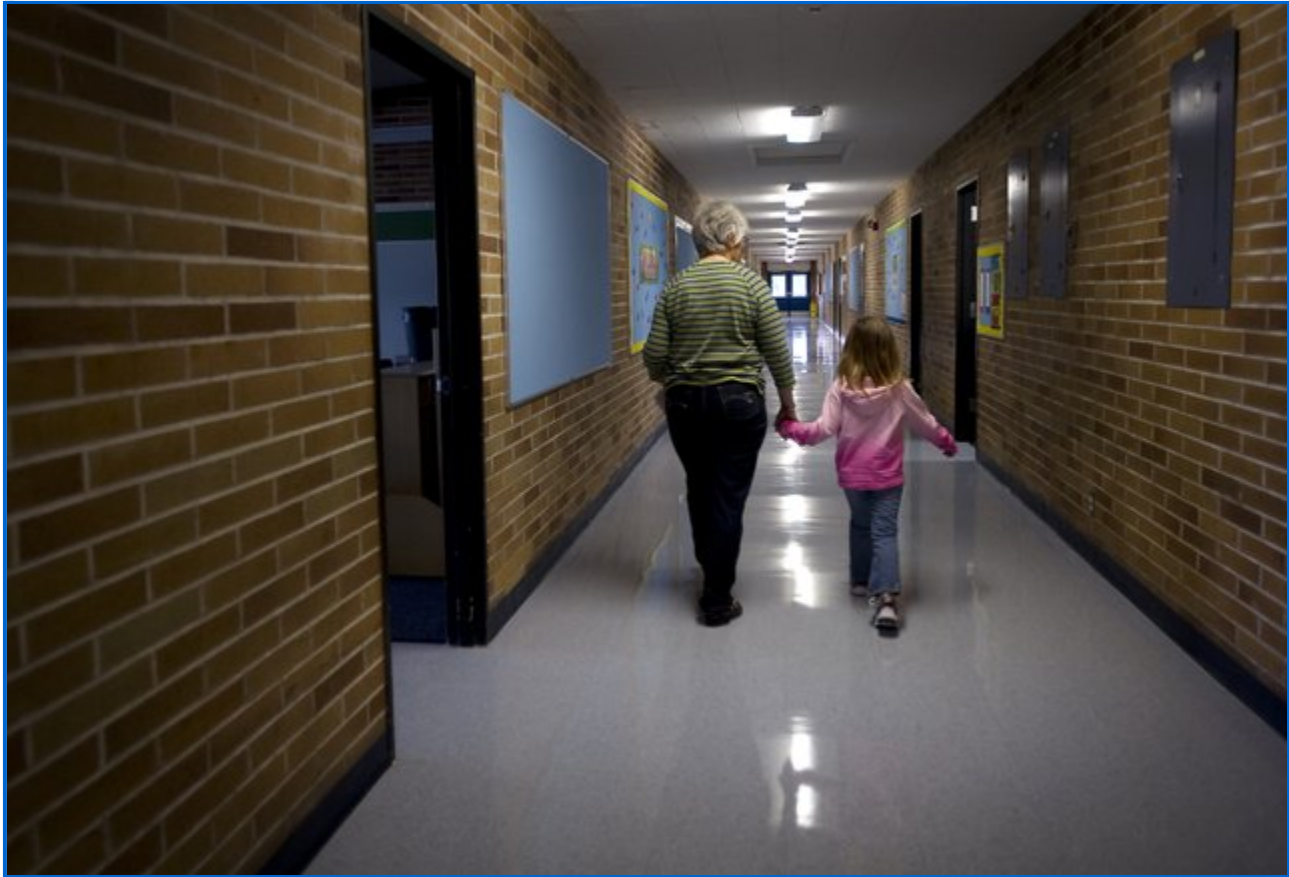


County schools' budgets increase

Districts say they'll expand offerings after years of cuts



The Columbian files

Staff assistant Sharleen Smith escorts a student to her first grade class at Ellsworth Elementary School in 2011.

By [Tyler Graf](#)

As of Monday, September 16, 2013

SCHOOL DISTRICT BUDGETS IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS			
District	2012-13	2013-14	Increase
Battle Ground	\$120.8	\$130.4	7.9 percent
Camas	\$54.8	\$59.7	8.9 percent
Evergreen	\$240.8	\$260.6	8.2 percent
Green Mountain	\$1.5	\$1.6	6.7 percent
Hockinson	\$16.8	\$17.4	3.6 percent
La Center	\$13.6	\$14.5	6.6 percent
Ridgefield	\$18.3	\$20.3	10.9 percent
Vancouver	\$201.4	\$234.6	10.9 percent
Washougal	\$28.8	\$30.1	4.5 percent
Woodland	\$21.5	\$23.4	8.8 percent

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School districts are feeling budgetary relief this month following years of belt tightening.

As budgets are tallied, Clark County schools will have roughly \$64.1 million more to spend on capital improvements, technological upgrades and programs this year. Districts, both large and small, promise to use the revenue to expand their offerings after several years of cuts.

Between 2009 and 2012, Evergreen Public Schools was one Clark County district whose budget was up against a wall, with increases to spending capped at roughly \$1 million a year. For a district with budgeted expenditures exceeding \$230 million, the year-over-year increases were considered sparse, leading to painful cuts within the state's fifth largest school district. In one notable move last year, the district transferred \$2.4 million toward its debt service, forcing the district to take \$250,000 from its savings account to balance the budget.

But now, the budget pendulum is swinging in the other direction. Evergreen's expenditures will increase by nearly \$20 million this year, an 8.2-percent one-year bump for a district that serves more than 26,000 students.

Mark Merlino, Evergreen's chief operating officer, called it a "significant increase" — the result, in part, of a state mandate to better fund K-12 education. Even though districts like Evergreen expected the state to increase its contribution to K-12 education this year, just how much of an increase was in question until lawmakers approved the budget in June.

"We didn't have any idea until late June," Merlino said. "We had our baseline (budget) stuff put together, but we were waiting for how the Legislature ended up."

In June, Washington lawmakers added \$1.5 billion to K-12 education, including about \$1 billion directly to satisfy last year's McCleary decision, a Washington Supreme Court directive that called on the Legislature to "adequately fund" primary education. By the end of August, all Clark County school districts had completed their budgets, which are now awaiting certification from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

For school districts across the county, the new funding levels will be used to pay for capital improvements and spent on programs to revamp in-classroom technology. School districts are working to place tablet computers into the hands of more students.

The top issue, school districts say, is expanding full-day kindergarten. In recent years, school districts throughout the county have struggled to provide full-day kindergarten, often cutting budgets elsewhere to do so, as Evergreen did in 2010. The state prioritizes offering grants for full-day kindergarten to schools with the highest rates of poverty.

In Vancouver, this year's 10.9 percent budget increase, a \$23 million jump, will be used to bolster the district's needs-based assistance programs, said Tom Hagley, Jr., the district's chief of staff.

"The notion is to provide wraparound support for disadvantaged youth," he said.

At an Aug. 23 school board meeting, Vancouver Superintendent Steven Webb remarked that the district's budget was "the best ... in over a decade." The district plans to use the influx of cash to provide more support to struggling students and expand the number of Family-Community Resource Centers inside high schools.

The centers are places where families can access academic and early-learning programs, as well as youth activities health and social services and some resources for parents.

Not all of Vancouver's money came from the state. The local technology levy constitutes about \$2 million, while the maintenance and operations levy comprises \$1.7 million for the next fiscal year, through Aug. 31, 2014.

Small districts grow

In La Center, the school district is using its 6.6 percent increase, roughly \$900,000, to expand a pilot program that uses tablet-style computers, such as iPads, in the classroom. It's part of a new wave in wired — and wireless — learning that's sweeping county schools, in other districts such as Washougal and Vancouver.

Another new program, called the Home School Academy, is intended to assist home-schooled students integrate into the classroom. The district is currently home to roughly 50 home-schooled students, a dozen of whom will take part in the program. While the curriculum is primarily online, a teacher will meet with the students for an hour each week.

Mark Mansell, La Center's superintendent, said the program was a new way of reaching the growing demographic of learn-at-home students.

"Parents want a different experience with their kids through the learning process," Mansell said. "Often, they have a special skill set that goes along with the educational experience. We need to find a different way to support home-schoolers."

The district intends for the program, which costs roughly \$100,000, to become self-sufficient in the coming years. The district recoups money for every student who participates in the program. Currently, there are around 12 students who participate in the program. The district needs 20 students to break even, Mansell said.

At the Washougal School District, the biggest change is the addition of full-day kindergarten at Hathaway Elementary School. Hathaway was the only school in the district to qualify because it has a free and reduced-price lunch rate of roughly 62.7 percent.

The district is also revamping how it uses technology in the classroom, adding tablet computers and boosting its wireless infrastructure.

Les Brown, the district's technology director, said the district's technology levy is paying for the program.

"We hope to expand into a seventh- and eighth-grade program next year," Brown said. "After that, funding for technology ends, so extending it will be subject to voter approval."

Waiting game

Districts say delays to the release of the state budget resulted in unintended costs.

The reason: During the Legislature's protracted 153-day session, which took up two special sessions, school districts were left waiting for approval of the state budget before they could move ahead on drafting their own.

In Vancouver, the waiting game resulted in an estimated \$70,000 being spent on staff salaries.

"We incurred extra expenditures for labor costs of people who wouldn't be on the payroll," said Steve Olsen, the district's chief fiscal officer for Vancouver Public Schools.

He said the district is in the process of determining just how much extra it spent on staff salaries.

Nonetheless, Olsen said the state's funding of K-12 education will add some clarity to the budget-writing process moving forward.

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