

# State school funding gets low marks

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A national report on school funding and opportunity showed last week that Washington hasn't been the only state struggling to pay for its K-12 public school system. Or to make school funding fairer.

The report issued Monday by the New Jersey-based Education Law Center wasn't especially kind to our state's past efforts, either. Based on Census and other national data, it gave Washington a D grade for its much-criticized school funding system and an F for effort in improving funding in key areas.

The report, relying on Census data through 2012, obviously lags behind much of the recent progress by legislators that is deserving of some credit. Washington clearly has done better since the state Supreme Court ruling on school funding in 2012; about \$1 billion added in the last budget cycle was meant to address the state's failure to meet a constitutional duty to fully fund basic education.

The new investment included an expansion of full-day kindergarten starting in higher-poverty school districts; there also was more money for early childhood education or preschool; more for learning assistance program investments for struggling students; and some work to lower student class sizes in grades K-3.

But the report findings serve as a timely reminder that Washington's quest to boost school funding — and the state Supreme Court's order to improve funding — have not been extraordinary demands. Other states are straining after the recession, too, and our state clearly remains far from the top of the class even after recent investments.

A key element of our state's F grade for effort was the comparatively low percentage of the state's economic output that Washington has invested through taxes into K-12 schools. Part of the problem is our over-reliance and regressive tax system that ignores a large share of economic activity including the sales of services and such income-producers as capital gains.

The Education Law Center report ranked Washington No. 28 among the states for school funding. It said the state's compensation ranked No. 43 with teachers earning 73 percent of what non-teachers made at age 25 in 2012; the relative pay percentage slipped to 67 percent for teachers at age 45.

Only Wyoming, which paid teachers about 121 percent of what non-teaching counterparts earned, and Iowa, which paid about 101 percent, exceeded the non-teaching pay levels.

The report also found a lot of unfairness in the treatment of public school students, based on whether they attend schools in high or low poverty areas.

State schools Superintendent Randy Dorn said he thinks the report findings are accurate indicators of where Washington has been, and it shows broadly where improvements are needed. He said the prospect of adding \$1.3 billion in new funding for K-12 schools this year – in addition to the roughly \$1 billion increase for 2013-15 — are steps that will improve overall funding and improve opportunities in higher poverty areas.

But Dorn, who thinks vastly more money is needed, said lawmakers are failing to answer a major, glaring problem raised by the Supreme Court: the over-reliance on local, voter-approved levies. Despite finding quite a few more dollars for basic education, lawmakers have not agreed on a way to shift the burden of paying for basic education costs completely onto the state's shoulders.

This is critical for reducing disadvantages faced by students in poorer districts.

Currently a quarter or more of basic education is paid by local taxpayers through voter-approved property tax levies. Because salaries are subsidized by local levies, rich districts that have an easier time passing levies can pay more – which has caused pay variances of up to \$10,000 in adjacent districts, according to the Legislature.

A new Senate proposal for fixing the levy problem emerged last week, but it doesn't shift levies until 2018-19. It ultimately shifts about \$3.5 billion from local levies to the state budget, but does it over four years. Its biggest flaw is that it does not say where extra money would come from.

Lawmakers face a June 30 deadline to enact a new budget that would avert a partial government shutdown.

Beyond that, the state's lack of a clear plan to replace local levies raises the question of whether the nine state justices will lift their contempt finding against the Legislature in July.

Washington's funding of schools may be improving, but the state may still get another failing grade.

Read more here: [http://www.theolympian.com/2015/06/15/3775830\\_state-school-funding-gets-low.html?rh=1#storylink=cpy](http://www.theolympian.com/2015/06/15/3775830_state-school-funding-gets-low.html?rh=1#storylink=cpy)