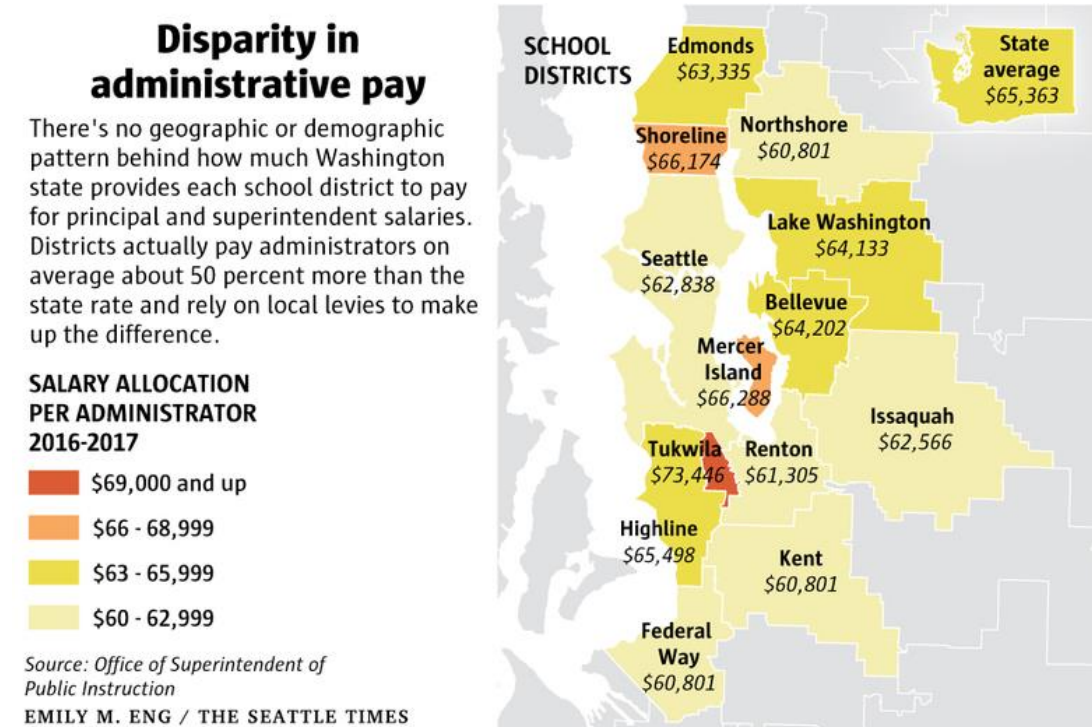


# As part of McCleary fix, lawmakers may end disparities in pay for school administrators

Originally published April 21, 2017 at 4:00 am Updated April 21, 2017 at 11:39 am



When it comes to school administrator salaries in Washington, there's no rhyme or reason to how much the state provides each district. But that all may change as the Legislature tries to resolve the landmark McCleary school-funding case.

By [Neal Morton](#)

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Schools in Federal Way, Tacoma and Spokane this year received about \$61,000 from the state toward what they pay a principal, or an assistant superintendent or superintendent.

On well-to-do Mercer Island and in rural Yakima, the state doled out more than \$66,000 per administrator. And in Tukwila and Skykomish, schools banked nearly \$73,500 and \$88,500, respectively.

When it comes to school administrator salaries in Washington, there's no rhyme or reason to [how much the state](#) provides each district.

And such differences add up. If the Federal Way Public Schools collected the Mercer Island rate, for example, it would have banked an extra \$340,000 this year to help pay school-based administrators alone, not counting superintendents and some central office staff.



[Education Lab](#) is a Seattle Times project that spotlights promising approaches to persistent challenges in public education. It is produced in partnership with the [Solutions Journalism Network](#) and is funded by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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The same is true for teacher pay, to a lesser degree: A dozen districts have, for 40 years, received more per teacher from the state than the rest, [a historical artifact](#) that the Legislature has never fully addressed.

But in the hallways of Olympia, it's a well-known secret that the same problems exist with salaries for school administrators.

In fact, they are worse.

"It's baffling that when these inequities were created, there wasn't greater effort made to address or ameliorate the impacts," said Michael Mann, a longtime consultant with the nonpartisan [Legislative Evaluation and Accountability Program](#).

More on McCleary

- [1,933 days and still no McCleary education funding fix in sight](#)
- [As the session ends, wine and dandelions, but no McCleary fix](#)
- [As part of McCleary fix, lawmakers may end disparities in pay for school administrators](#)
- [How the complex history of teacher pay in Washington slows down education funding solutions](#)
- ['Stealth inequities': How Washington's education system hurts poor schools](#)
- [How we got this far behind in school funding](#)

But this year, the problem may finally go away.

Amid all the bickering over how to finally resolve the [landmark McCleary school-funding case](#), there appears to be bipartisan agreement to stop giving some districts more per teacher and per administrator than others.

For many, such a fix has been a long time coming.

Washington's school-finance system is "based on a 40-year-old snapshot of salaries and a promise on the part of the Legislature to raise all boats so that we're all at the level of the highest-paid school districts," said Jennifer Priddy, an assistant superintendent with the Olympia School District who [previously oversaw K-12 finances](#) for the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

"That never happened, so we (have been) left living with a system that's archaic."

### Earlier lawsuit

The disparity in administrator pay, as [with teacher salaries](#), has roots in decisions made in the 70s and 80s. That's when the Legislature, in response to [a lawsuit very similar](#) to McCleary, was first required to cover all costs of a basic education for Washington's schoolchildren — everything from student transportation to heating school buildings and paying school employees.

To decide how much to give each district for administrator salaries, lawmakers used the average each district was paying at the time. The same was true for support staff: Lawmakers lumped together the salaries of lunch ladies, teaching assistants and district lawyers and [set an average rate](#) that also remains inequitable to this day.

That meant relatively wealthy districts like Mercer Island, Shoreline and Everett were guaranteed a higher rate simply because, at that time, they could afford to pay more competitive wages.

### More on money and schools

The biggest issue in this year's legislative session is school funding, with lawmakers working against the 2018 deadline for fully funding basic education.

To help all of us better understand what's at stake and the key issues, Education Lab has published a series of stories over the past month. (And some of them come directly from you, as part of [Education Lab IQ](#), a series in which we answer reader questions.)

In addition to today's story, we've also explained:

- [How the complex history of teacher pay in Washington slows down education funding solutions](#)
- [How did we get so far behind in school funding?](#)
- ['Stealth inequities': How Washington's education system hurts poor schools](#)
- [How much do Washington schools spend testing students?](#)
- [Will rich districts suffer under McCleary school-funding fix?](#)

*Watch for more education funding stories on [www.seattletimes.com/tag/education-funding](http://www.seattletimes.com/tag/education-funding)*

The majority of districts, however, were paying much less.

In Federal Way, for example, voters in the 70s rejected six successive school tax levies.

Sally McLean, the district's chief finance and operations officer, described it as a "tumultuous time" for the district, noting it couldn't afford to offer competitive salaries to administrators — or any school employee, for that matter.

"And that became the baseline for (our) salary schedules," she said.

The district estimates it now spends about 70 percent, or \$37 million, of its local levy to cover the part of employee salaries not provided by the state.

In the 70s, lawmakers [originally promised to narrow the gaps](#) between the highest- and lowest-funded districts. And in 1979, they passed a plan to reach that target within 10 years. But that plan was abandoned in 1987.

"No one wants to pay administration or talk about it. It never sells well," said JoLynn Berge, assistant superintendent for business and finance with Seattle Public Schools.

By 2006, Federal Way had had enough, and sued the state.

The district [ultimately lost that lawsuit](#) after the state Supreme Court ruled that the constitution, while requiring the state to pay all the costs of a basic education, didn't guarantee equal funding for every district.

Later, in its 2012 McCleary decision, the Supreme Court ruled the state is not providing enough money for teacher and administrator salaries.

In their ruling, the justices quoted the superintendent for Colville schools, in the northeast corner of the state, who in the original McCleary trial testified that it was impossible to find anybody to take a principal's job for only \$58,000 — what the state provided.

"It's nowhere close to what the market value is for our principal(s), not even — it's ridiculous," the superintendent said.

### [Fix isn't cheap](#)

To fulfill the McCleary order, lawmakers don't have to change anything about how school employees are paid — just how much the state provides for their salaries.

For teachers, that means the state must come up with at least another \$748 million for the roughly 54,000 teaching positions in the state, according to [conservative estimates](#). That's how much districts are providing through local levies now.

Fixing administrator pay isn't cheap, either — a total of about \$218 million for 4,000 positions.

But beyond the total dollars, lawmakers also are debating whether to change how they dole out the money.

For teachers, there's been a lot of talk about cost-of-living differences, to account for the fact that it's more expensive for teachers to live in some parts of the state than others.

Lawmakers have also come up with several proposed changes for administrative pay,

Democrats in control of the House want to set [a flat, statewide rate](#), with some extra money given to districts where it's more expensive to hire people. Meanwhile, the GOP-led Senate has proposed [dismantling the entire salary system](#), favoring a per-pupil funding model that allows districts more flexibility in setting pay rates. But Republicans also want to cap all school-district salaries at 80 percent of a district's total budget.

About 120 districts already are above that threshold, said Priddy, the Olympia assistant superintendent.

Many school-funding advocates worry that the [salary system is so complex](#) that lawmakers, by trying to solve one problem, may unintentionally create others.

If lawmakers bite off more than they can chew, Priddy said, the winners and losers may not feel the full impact of those decisions until it's too late.

"This is complex. It is large. So, fixing the problem, I think, has to be phased in," Priddy said. "The most important thing is when we find a fix, we don't make it worse."

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