

Fix public-school financing and end district inequities

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More than \$11 billion is being invested in our public schools each year with far too little to show for it.

By [Chris Korsmo](#)

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OVER the past two bienniums, the state of Washington has increased funding for K-12 education by nearly \$3 billion dollars. In addition, local maintenance and operations levies provide an additional \$2 billion each year. The state and local school districts have told the public that these additional dollars will be invested in increases in teacher pay, K-3 class-size reductions, full-day kindergarten, transportation, and costs for materials, supplies and operations.

With this level of investment, parents should expect significant new services.

They should expect their K-3 classes to be demonstrably smaller.

They should not be asked to provide basic supplies.

Schools should not have to shut down computer labs or libraries for testing.

And there should not be teacher strikes this fall.

Unfortunately, these reasonable expectations will not be met.

The reason for this is at the heart of the recent state Supreme Court McCleary ruling, which largely focused on compensation. The ruling certainly [has issues](#), including all but dismissing the local levy elephant in the room — a system the court has called “unconstitutional” for 30 years.

Local property tax levies were intended to fund resources or programming not covered under basic education, like after-school enrichment programs or new band uniforms.

What happened instead is the steady underfunding of schools across Washington. School districts that could afford it replaced what should have been state-provided funding with their local property tax dollars.

Some legislators are also not happy about the McCleary order, but the reality we are facing is this: More than \$11 billion is being invested in our public schools each year with far too little to show for it.

The current system for paying our K-12 employees is nonsensical, unfair, and is not remotely reflective of the needs of our students. It creates inexcusable inequities between districts, limits educational opportunity for thousands of students, and creates annual labor strife.

Without action by our Legislature to address the state's K-12 compensation structure, investments will continue to follow adults rather than students. Our teachers should be paid fairly and generously across the state, and teachers who demonstrate their ability to close the achievement gap should have incentives to teach where they are most needed.

Both political parties took credit for the investments in education this past session, and they will share the blame if all the new money gets vaporized before benefiting any students. The fault is collective. It cuts across party lines and between the state and local districts.

As the new school year begins, the League of Education Voters will be vigilant in following the money that has been invested. We will help communities understand the truth behind local strikes. We hope our work will help more people understand the necessity of fixing the broken way we pay our most important state employees.

And lastly, we hope our Legislature applies the lessons learned from the last two budget cycles and works in a creative, bipartisan way to solve this problem. Lawmakers have shown that they can do things of this scale that are great for the state of Washington. We hope they remember their responsibility, their duty, and their ability, to do the job.

Chris Korsmo is CEO of the League of Education Voters, a statewide nonprofit working to improve public education in Washington from early learning through postsecondary education.