

March 9, 2017

**DRAFT**

Dear House & Senate Education Budget Writers:

Given the looming contempt order issued in the *McCleary* court case, the 2017 legislative session necessitates some important and difficult decisions about the future of school funding in Washington State. As a Board, we want to offer our support and input in this regard.

In shaping our advocacy on this issue, we have evaluated the merits of proposals at a high level using two basic criteria. One is whether the proposal in question will meaningfully improve the learning experience of students in our system. The second consideration is one of equity: how does the proposal address opportunity gaps that present in our system? Do historically marginalized groups of students have greater access to programs and services that will aid in their success?

Following up on the input we provided the Education Funding Task Force, we wanted to provide additional feedback grounded specifically in proposals now before the legislature.

- **Professional development as part of basic education**

Access to professional development is one of the more pronounced inequities in our system. Districts with substantial local levy capacity are able to provide dedicated professional development. Other districts seek to provide that professional development within the 180-day school year, either through basic education waivers, or through a program of half or partial school days. Currently, there are a minimum of 36 districts receiving basic education waivers for professional development and related activities, and this accounts for approximately 121 lost instructional days in those districts each year. By funding professional development as part of the basic education calendar, you can effectively “buy back” those instructional days and make an immediate impact for students in those communities.

- **Equitable distribution of high quality teachers**

Because teachers are the most important school-based factor impacting student learning, our investments in teachers should be significant and intentional. Teacher salaries is one of the largest financial investments in the state budget.

### *Competitive compensation*

As several studies have pointed out, our starting salary for teachers in the state budget is not competitive with similar professions competing for the same high-caliber college graduates. Here again, districts with property wealth and local levy capacity are often able to supplement the state beginning salary, while others are not, leading to a fundamental inequity, particularly for some of our smaller, more remote districts. Higher starting pay on the state salary guide is likely to benefit all districts, and help eliminate the inequitable practice of “salary grandfathering” in the process. The new compensation model should also incorporate a regular reviews of the relative competitiveness of overall teacher pay as compared to comparable occupations.

### *Move away from salary schedule based on experience & graduate credits*

The Legislature should also take this opportunity to reconsider how the statewide allocation model (SAM) subsidizes years of experience, and clock hour graduate credits. For years, the requirements for being a teacher have been out of alignment with the compensation model utilized by the state. Instead, the compensation system incentivizes teachers to accumulate graduate credits that have a limited relationship to improved student outcomes.

### *Equity & staff mix factors*

The state may also be creating inequities through the use of its teacher allocation formula. This formula subsidizes the differences in teacher seniority that naturally materialize across districts. If communities with better quality of life (property wealth and other local advantages) are able to attract more senior teachers, the state subsidizes that local advantage by providing them more funding. We should consider state policies that adjust for local advantage – in much the way that local effort assistance corrects for lack of property wealth – rather than reinforcing those advantages. Please reconsider this policy going forward.

- **Support services for students**

Currently, about 1 in 5 students in our system do not graduate high school in four years. Within that statewide rate, fewer than 6 in 10 Language Learner students graduate on time, and fewer than 7 in 10 low-income students do so. Data suggest that the system does a good job of graduating students who do not experience economic or language-based obstacles, or are subject to race-based bias. But for students who do, student support services can be crucial to their success.

As we detailed in our [Report to the Legislature](#) on Education System Health, support for the positions contained in the prototypical school model, such as guidance counselors, family engagement coordinators, nurses, and social workers, can be hugely beneficial to these children. Additionally, support for scholarship and mentorship programs that help students navigate the transition from high school to post-secondary education, such as the [Washington Achievers Scholars program](#), the [Opportunity Scholarship program](#), and [MESA](#), can also yield considerable return on investment for the state. Finally, aggressive investments in the Learning Assistance Program and the Transitional Bilingual Program helps direct funding to those populations that need it the most.

### **Local school levies**

As the Board takes a close look at the education system and attempts to identify the major sources of opportunity gaps, we believe local levies is one important source. This is one obvious way in which state policy creates opportunity gaps for students, based solely on community of residence. There are at least two ways the legislature can address this issue. One is by eliminating grandfathering of local levy lids, and bringing every district to an equitable, uniform lid. Another approach is to equalize levies to 100%, rather than the current practice of 50%. By fully equalizing levies, we are sending the message that our policy goal is to close, rather than merely narrow, opportunity gaps created by state policy for low-income students and communities.

These are several important ways that your final budget can reflect the values of equity for all children in Washington state. We offer our assistance as work toward a final budget deal. As you balance the needs of interest groups, please let the voice of the students themselves be the final input you consider in crafting a budget this year.

With respect and admiration for the work you do,

Members of the Washington State Board of Education