

It's Basic: First you have to define it

Washington's system to pay for schools is broken. By law, the state is supposed to pay for basic expenses like salaries and utilities. But across Washington, districts face severe financial shortfalls and some may become insolvent. The state is under-funding K-12 education, primarily by not covering actual staffing costs and not keeping up with inflation.

Consider: Experts hired by the Washington Learns committee recommend 71 certified instructors for every 1,000 students; the state funds 46 per 1,000. Caught in the discrepancy are kids who aren't getting the help they need. So districts hire more teachers and pay for them with local funds. Statewide, local funds pay for 22 percent of our teaching corps.*

Then there are non-employee costs, like utilities. In 2006-07, districts spent \$259 million on utilities. The state paid \$118 million.

So the question is: How much do schools really cost? To answer that, the Basic Education Finance Task Force – a group of state and education representatives charged with making sure schools get enough money – *first* has to define what we need to pay for. What skills do employers expect? What standards do colleges stipulate? How do we prepare kids for life and career, and what infrastructure does that require?

The Legislature hasn't addressed this issue in 30 years. In the interim, PTA members – you guys – have argued for tougher graduation requirements, better diagnostic assessment, stronger math and science curriculum, and more funding for facilities. The PTA position is we need to make schools better for all students. And when the state only pays to replace textbooks every 18 years, and only pays for five hours of the average six-hour school day, we need to re-evaluate the state's definition of "basic."

Over the summer, a number of groups testified before the task force, discussing everything from accountability to collective bargaining. The Washington PTA was there, too, laying out our positions, asking the state to match financing to expectations, and reminding them: Kids first. Members of the task force have since written or sponsored preliminary proposals. Some want fundamental overhaul, such as changing the way teachers are certified or evaluated; others just want enough state funds to cover what districts have cobbled together. The task force is meeting weekly and is seeking public input. By mid-December it will send a report to the state Legislature. What happens after that depends on all of us.

We need to ask ourselves: What do our kids need? What reforms are essential and doable? And we need to ask our representatives in Olympia: Why is our current system unstable? Our schools are financially at risk and we have high drop out rates. Will the proposed changes fix the problem? We as a community need to speak up and make sure that the Legislature plans and budgets for what kids really need.

“It’s Basic” is a campaign of the state PTA. Our goal: Make sure Washington kids have stable, secure and sufficient funding for basic education. Materials are posted at www.wastatepta.org/leg/funding.htm.

*All budget information in this article comes from figures provided by the Office of the Superintendent for Public Instruction.

How to get involved:

- Send comments on the proposals to: bef@wsipp.wa.gov
- Contact your legislator: <http://capwiz.com/npta2/wa/home/>
- Read a summary at www.wastatepta.org/leg/FUNDING_COMMITTEE/BEF_proposal_sum.pdf
- Read the full proposals or get background info: <http://www.leg.wa.gov/joint/committees/bef/>
- Review WSPTA testimony: http://www.wastatepta.org/leg/BEF_July_2008.pdf
- Learn more about Washington State school funding: www.fundingwaschools.org

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