



April 10, 2021

Dear Chair Rolfes, Chair Ormsby, and Senate and House budget leaders,

The proposed Senate and House budgets both contain critical strategies so that our K-12 system can fully support academic success and address the mental health needs of our students as they return fully to in-person instruction. These shared priorities are:

- Provide budget stability across enrollment and transportation for the 2020-21 school year.
- Ensure learning recovery funding allows targeted supports for students most in need of academic and social-emotional support in each district.
- Increase the number of school counselors for high-poverty schools (vetoed in 2020).

By combining state and federal funds in the supplemental and biennial budgets, the Legislature can fund these priorities and put students in a position to thrive. On behalf of the Washington State PTA, we would respectfully encourage House and Senate budget negotiators to:

1. Fund the actual costs of transportation funding for the 2020-21 school year.
  - As we've said all session: it costs the same amount to transport 5 students as it does 50.
  - District buses have been busy delivering school to students: meals, homework, hotspots, home visits and engagement checkups, and so much more under the Governor's proclamation and these are allowable transportation activities.
2. Preserve ESSER 1 and ESSER 3 federal funding for purposes related to the pandemic, not as backfill to enrollment or transportation decline.
  - ESSER 1 funds were the first round of grants to school districts last September. These funds have been spent on PPE; devices and online curriculum; hiring additional instructional staff to address remote learning; hiring health staff to support in-building screening, contact tracing, quarantine protocols; and additional sanitizing in buildings.
  - ESSER 3 funds can be spent through September 2023 and must be focused on the most pressing needs of a district's students. To combine or force districts to use these funds before making state investments deprives students of valuable and needed staff and services.
3. Stabilize all categories of enrollment decline with combined state and federal (ESSER 2) funds so that all school districts benefit, and mid-year cuts are softened or avoided. This includes levy equalization to protect local levy collections in at least calendar year 2022.
  - The original HB 1476 stabilized all enrollment categories of students for this school year, ensuring no district would get less funding due to enrollment decline.
  - The original bill also allowed districts to use 2019-20 enrollment numbers for next school year to avoid reductions in funding for 2021-22. This is critical because funding formulas weren't built for a pandemic and can have unintended consequences.

- The LAP Program must be stabilized. This school year, the federal government has covered the cost of meals for students. Families have not turned in their “free and reduced price lunch” eligibility forms, and LAP is based on the district’s FRPL percentages. Without the forms, the percentages for the 2021-22 school year will cut districts short and students may not get the services they expect and deserve.
4. Make a down payment on increasing staff to support student mental health and academic success, with the House investment in .5 school counselors for every level of high-poverty prototypical school.
- This was a promise made more than 10 years ago, and never has the time been more important to start phasing in the adults needed to support the varied needs of our students.
  - While we would support a more robust effort – mental health issues are not just in our high-poverty schools – we see this as a necessary first step for the 2022-23 school year.

In addition to these common priorities we see in your proposed budgets, Washington State PTA has these specific policy-level priorities that are based on our [2021 legislative platform](#):

- Include additional funding supports for innovative approaches to address the mental and physical health needs of our students through access to direct and telehealth services and an expanded Nurses Corps program for the next two school years.
- Match the House levels of appropriations for computers and devices to close the digital divide for all students, increasing MSOC allocations rather than creating a grant program.
- Support the House investment of \$12 million for inclusionary practices training for educators.
- Provide the funding and policy to conduct an anonymous suicide prevention/youth tip line pilot program, as envisioned in Representative Tom Dent’s striking amendment for 2SSB 5327.

As always, we appreciate your commitment to strong funding to support Washington’s 1.1 million students. This session, more than any other year, you are using your budgets as policy drivers to ensure Washingtonians across the state rebound from this pandemic. We ask you to support these funding requests and policy choices in the final conference budget.

Thank you for your consideration. Along with our legislative consultant Marie Sullivan, we are available to discuss any of these proposals at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Janice Kutzera, WSPTA President and Sherry Rudolph, WSPTA Advocacy Director



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