

## How to use these talking points

Here are talking points for each of WSPTA's Top 5 priorities for the 2024 legislative session. These talking points are not to be read word for word, they are to help you prepare for - and execute - successful meetings with legislators. The talking points for each priority include:

- Brief background on the issue (Why is this a problem? What are we trying to solve?)
- WSPTA proposed solutions (adopted by delegates at WSPTA Legislative Assembly)
- Questions to ask your district or school to help form your personal facts or story (if time allows - responses from your district could take time)
- "Asks" to make of legislators
- Link to the issue one-pager that has more detail about the topic

## Recommended Meeting Flow

Every meeting with a legislator should include a quick overview of [WSPTA's Top 5 legislative priorities](#). Meetings are usually around 15 minutes, so you should pick one of the priorities you would like to focus on during your meeting.

1. **Introductions** - Quick introductions
2. **Overview** - Share a brief overview of WSPTA's Top 5 issues
3. **Highlighted Priority** - Describe the issue your local PTA or council is most passionate about, be concise and to the point.
4. **Fact or Statistic** – Share a noteworthy fact or statistic that relates to this issue. You can find these in the background section of this document and in the issue one-pager.
5. **Personal Story** – Share a personal story that goes with the issue. Who on your team has a relevant story to share? We're giving you facts – you supply the personal story from your student, your school, your district to make a strong impact.
6. **The Ask** – Be specific about what you want them to do (for example, vote yes on a specific bill.)
7. **The Close** – Share three to five words for the person you are meeting with to remember.

## Washington State PTA Top 5 Legislative Priorities - 2024

1. Addressing the Student Mental Health Crisis
2. Addressing Critical Gaps in Education Funding
3. Preventing and Reducing Gun Violence and Suicide
4. Addressing Funding, Inclusion, and supports in Special Education
5. Building and Maintaining Safer School Facilities

## Additional Legislator Meeting Planning Resources

- [How to Have a Successful Meeting with Legislators](#)
- [Build Your Pitch](#)

# Addressing the Student Mental Health Crisis

## Background

- Nearly half of all adolescents have experienced some sort of mental health issue, and 1 in 5 of these is serious (per the National Institute of Mental Health).
- In 2021 in Washington state, 45% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders reported having depressive feelings, 15% reported they have a suicide plan, and about half that have a plan attempted suicide in just that one year.
- There are not enough people in the pipeline applying for relevant training and graduate level programs.
- Lack of funding for mental health staff forces some districts to use educators and administrators who are not adequately trained to deliver these services.

## Proposed Solutions (legislation, policies, and funding)

- The legislature increased staff ratios for school nurses, psychologists, social workers and counselors, and that is very much appreciated. But more is needed to fill the gaps and to backfill now that federal COVID relief funds expired.
- Please support programs and incentives to recruit, train, and retain mental health professionals.
- There is a need to improve resources to assist families.
- Encourage the legislature to add an additional day of professional development for ALL school staff, so that every employee has the training to support students experiencing mental health issues.

## Questions to ask your district or school (if time allows)

- How many nurses, counselors, social workers or psychologists are in your student's school or district? How many are paid by the state and how many from local levy funds?
- Where do they think the greatest need is for increasing staffing ratios?

## “Asks” of your legislators

- Is student mental health support a priority for your caucus?
- Can we count on your support for bills addressing this critical issue? (For House members, the increase to school staffing is [HB 1741](#). Find current bill numbers on the [WSPTA blog](#) or in the Focus on Advocacy newsletters and look on the bill list for “Addressing the Student Mental Health Crisis.”)
- What kind of incentives can we provide to people who want to go into the mental health profession?

## Issue One-Pager

# Addressing Critical Gaps in Education Funding

## Background

- We are still trying to recover from the learning disruption caused by school closures and remote learning in the 2020 and 2021 school years.
- Per OSPI, special education funding in our state had a \$400 million shortfall in the 2020-21 school year. Most districts make up this gap using enrichment levy dollars. Legislation passed in 2023 increased funding, but it was not enough to fully close the gap.
- Highly mobile student populations (students in foster care, students facing homelessness or housing instability, incarcerated students, migrant students, and students in military families) show gaps in kindergarten readiness, attendance, graduation rates, dropout rates, and assessment scores for all categories and grade levels.
- Many districts are consistently underfunded for transportation under the current formula and have to make up this shortfall using enrichment levy dollars.
- Many districts face challenges getting voter approval for school construction and modernization projects which leads to inequitable learning environments around the state.

## Proposed Solutions (legislation, policies, and funding)

- Resources for students needing additional academic/physical/emotional supports
- Services for students with disabilities
- Categorical funding to support [highly mobile students](#)
- Student transportation
- Unfunded mandates to school districts
- School construction

## Questions to ask your district or school (if time allows)

- How much of a gap does your district still face related to special education funding? Is it over the increased 15% cap? Do they use local enrichment levy dollars to make up this gap?
- How many highly mobile students (students in foster care, students facing homelessness or housing instability, incarcerated students, migrant students, and students in military families) are in your district? What additional funding would help better serve highly mobile students?
- Is the state on track to meet your transportation expenses? If not, do you use enrichment levy dollars to make up this gap?
- What challenges does your district face related to school construction projects (maintenance, safety, new/remodel schools, seismic upgrades, etc.)?

## “Asks” of your legislators

- Do you support removing the enrollment cap for special education funding?
- Do you support fully funding student transportation?
- Can we count on your support for bills addressing these critical funding issues? (Find current bill numbers on the [WSPTA blog](#) or in the Focus on Advocacy newsletters and look on the bill list for “Addressing Critical Gaps in Education Funding.”)

## Issue One-Pager

# Preventing and Reducing Gun Violence and Suicide

## Background

- More than 357,000 American students have experienced gun violence at school since Columbine in April 1999 (Washington Post).
- 4.6 million children live in a home with at least one unlocked and loaded firearm - and access to unlocked firearms increases youth suicide risk almost tenfold.
- In Washington, suicide (primarily by firearm) is now the leading cause of death for youths 1-24, killing more than 150 children per year (Washington Department of Health).
- Suicides are 5 times LESS likely when neither guns nor ammunition is available.
- Black American youth are dying at 10 times the rate of white American youth.
- LGBTQ+ youth are 5 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.

## Proposed Solutions (legislation, policies, and funding)

- Addressing the disproportionate impact on BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth
- Funding community-based prevention and intervention programs
- Expanding existing law to prohibit firearms where families and youth congregate in public places, such as parks, zoos, and libraries
- Restoring local government authority to enhance state firearms regulations to protect children and youth in their communities

## Questions to ask your district or school (if time allows)

- How many gun related “incidents” has your district had in the past year?
- Has your district had students die by gun violence or suicide in the past year?

## “Asks” of your legislators

- Is preventing and reducing gun violence and suicide a priority for your caucus?
- Do you support community-based prevention and intervention?
- What expansion of our existing laws would you support to reduce the impact of gun violence on youth and families?
- Can we count on your support for bills addressing this critical issue? (Find current bill numbers on the [WSPTA blog](#) or in the Focus on Advocacy newsletters and look on the bill list for “Preventing Gun Violence & Suicide.”)

## Issue One-Pager

# Addressing Funding, Inclusion, and Supports in Special Education

## Background

- In 2022-23, 170,930 students (15.6% average statewide) of the Washington state K-12 student population received special education services and 39% of all school districts still exceeded the increased 15% cap.
- In the 2020-2021 school year, Washington school districts spent \$400 million more than they received in special education funding.
- Approximately 30% of special education funding relies on voter-approved enrichment levies.
- Washington state is one of only 5 states that limits special education funding through flat caps.
- Our state faces a significant special education teacher and staff shortage.
- Washington state ranks 44<sup>th</sup> out of 50 states for inclusionary practices.

## Proposed Solutions (legislation, policies, and funding) (pick 2-3 to raise)

- Fully funding special education services with no caps on funding enrollment
- Developing solutions to address a statewide special education staffing shortage
- Promoting full inclusion in general education classrooms
- Promoting high leverage teaching practices
- Assessing needs for and providing assistive technology and multi-tiered systems of support
- Simplifying the safety net reimbursement process to school districts
- Banning student isolation in schools

## Questions to ask your district or school (if time allows)

- What is the underfunding between the state and federal funding and actual costs to support educational programs for students with disabilities? How does your district make up this difference?
- What is the percentage of students with disabilities in the district? Is your district above or below the 15% cap currently in place?
- Does your district face a shortage of special education teachers and staff?
- Does your district ban the use of student isolation?

## “Asks” of your legislators

- Is addressing the gap in special education funding a priority for your caucus?
- Do you support removing the enrollment cap (not simply raising it)?
- Do you support banning student isolation in schools?
- Can we count on your support for bills addressing this critical issue? (Find current bill numbers on the [WSPTA blog](#) or in the Focus on Advocacy newsletters and look on the bill list for “Special Education Funding, Inclusion & Resources.”)

## Issue One-Pager

# Building and Maintaining Safer School Facilities

## Background

- There is an 83% chance of a magnitude 6.5 or larger earthquake in Washington in the next 50 years.
- A recent study Of 561 buildings shows 93% of schools are likely to collapse during an earthquake.
- Schools also face environmental hazards such as lead in drinking water and poor air quality.
- Schools need to improve building safety (limited entrances, etc.) and improve school safety plans.
- School bonds are one of the few things that require a supermajority vote in Washington state. Excluding the pandemic year of 2021, in 2023, Washington saw the lowest number of bonds to pass since 2000, with only TWO meeting the 60% super majority requirement. If simple majority for bonds was in place, an additional 14 bond measures would have passed! Schools that could reach a simple majority are missing out on necessary updates- and instead adding more portables, and letting bigger fixes wait even longer, which will cost more in the long run.

## Proposed Solutions (legislation, policies, and funding)

- Fund school safety changes, including emergency signs, improving indoor air quality and other environmental hazards, seismic upgrades, and an earthquake early warning system in all schools
- Require safety plans to include persons with disabilities and all people in school buildings, and to conduct annual emergency reunification training
- Increase the transparency of the condition of school facilities to allow public review
- Reduce the supermajority to a simple majority for school bonds, so it's more feasible for school districts to get the construction funding needed instead of relying on temporary fixes like portables and borrowing parts from other buildings

## Questions to ask your district or school (if time allows)

- Was your school built after 1975 (those built before had the most vulnerabilities to earthquakes; those built mid-1990s are generally safer)? If built before 1995, has it had any retrofits?
- What has the school done to prepare for non-structural hazards, such as light fixtures and bookcases?
- How many of your buildings deal with lead in drinking water? Poor air quality?
- Does your district have a comprehensive safety plan? Does each building have an emergency plan that includes visitors and students with disabilities in the building? Do all schools have adequate equipment and supplies?
- Does your district do an annual reunification drill? If they're in a tsunami zone, what do they practice for earthquake and tsunami drills?

## "Asks" of your legislators

- In what ways are safer school facilities a priority for your caucus?
- What are obstacles for your support in voting for a simple majority for school construction funding?
- In what ways would you modernize school construction funding to make it more streamlined- to deal with inflation costs, and to make it more equitable, to account for schools in areas with less tax base?
- Can we count on your support for bills addressing this critical issue? (Find current bill numbers on the [WSPTA blog](#) or in the Focus on Advocacy newsletters and look on the bill list for "School Safety, Planning & Emergency Preparedness.")

## Issue One-Pager