

Conflict over funds? It's a state problem playing out locally

**Bellevue teachers
set for strike**

(Seattle PI, 9/2/2008)

**Budget crisis
forces Northshore
school closure**

(King TV, 2/12/2008)

**Grass roots
effort begins to save
school libraries**

(Seattle Times, 11/20/2007)

They're all connected, these headlines. They reflect tough budgeting decisions and all speak to the mess surrounding basic education in Washington. Simply put, the state isn't picking up the bill.

Did you know that for most kids, the state doesn't even pay for a full day of school?

At the high school level we talk about tougher standards, more math, science, more language. The need to prepare kids for the global workforce. But that means more credits. And how are the kids supposed to squeeze in more credits when the state only pays for five hours?

And how is your district supposed to pick up that extra bill when the state's allotment for fuel and health services doesn't keep up with actual costs? Or pay the balance on special ed? Or tackle the myriad problems associated with students in poverty?

Never mind funding language immersion programs or better dyslexia screening, many districts struggle to provide basic tools. Like copy paper for lesson plans. Books. A sixth hour of class time.

Districts are on the brink of financial emergency. Statewide, ending fund balances are at an all-time low; seven districts can't pay the bills and are under state oversight (something called binding conditions); five more are on the state's watch list.

It's not supposed to be this way. The state is supposed to cover basic education for all kids. School districts are supposed to tap local levy funds for enrichment programs. But as standards changed (and funding didn't), as inflation rose (and funding didn't), **a disconnect grew between what most folks consider basic and what the state actually pays for.** The results are tense salary negotiations, school closures, cutbacks to libraries – and a voting base that doesn't understand why all those levies aren't enough.

Of course, there's a flip side to the story. Those headlines also reflect this: Advocacy works. When the community steps up and insists on being heard, change happens.

In Bellevue this fall, there was a serious dispute over money that helped trigger a strike. Bellevue's seventh period is expensive, and attracting and retaining a top tier teaching corps takes substantial financial commitment. State reimbursements weren't keeping up, and the pool of local funds was tapped. But there is an underlying story that's positive. In earlier years, advocates won over a community, convincing it to add electives, toughen standards and better prepare kids for marketplace realities. Whether Bellevue can sustain the program is now in question. But that the community aims so high speaks to advocacy's success.

In Northshore, a community faced with school closures is mobilized – and targeting its efforts at the state Legislature where the root of the problem lies.



“It’s Basic: Basic Education Finance”

is a campaign of the Washington State PTA. We will be sending out articles and posting information to let members know what’s going on right now with basic education and how you can get involved.

Our goal: Make sure Washington kids have stable, secure – and sufficient – funding for basic education

The easiest way to get involved:

Sign up for **Grassroots Connection** and **Action Alerts**. Just send an email to support@wastatepta.org

As for the libraries, three Spokane moms stood up and said enough to quiet cutbacks. They tapped a groundswell of frustration and headed to Olympia – where they won bi-partisan support and \$4 million (over \$4 per student) to maintain and improve school library materials.

So, we’ve got a problem. But as members of the PTA, the state’s largest child advocacy organization, **we can fix this.**

Basic education finance is the foundation of our school system. When it fails, kids suffer. If we don’t have stable and secure funding, our children won’t get the quality education they need, and our state’s future will be compromised. This issue affects the ability to attract and retain teachers, introduce math and science curriculum, and prepare children to step into jobs, apprentice programs or higher education.

Two years ago, Gov. Gregoire’s Washington Learns committee did a top-to-bottom, 18-month review of our education system. Its findings were grim. Here’s one:

- We have been importing educated workers from other states and nations to fill our best jobs, leaving the less stable and lower paying jobs for people educated in Washington.

In response to Washington Learns, the Legislature set up the Joint Task Force on Basic Education Finance. Its charge: To review and redefine basic education and develop a funding model for it. **Pretty basic: Define it and price it.**

This is the first overhaul in 30 years, and task force members are starting to float proposals now. The group’s report is due in December, then the ball moves to the Legislature’s court, where our representatives will decide what sort of education Washington kids will get. We need to be there, speaking up.

Each of us needs to understand how the crisis in basic education funding is jeopardizing our future. We need to make the local connections and explain to legislators what the gaps are, not just in funding but in equity and standards.

What is the baseline we’re going to guarantee our kids?

We need to explain to others, especially our representatives in Olympia, what’s at stake. Get informed and engaged. It’s pretty basic, really.

– *Washington State PTA education committee for basic education finance*

To learn more about the work in Olympia:

BEF task force: www.leg.wa.gov/Joint/Committees/BEF ■ The Washington Learns report: www.washingtonlearns.wa.gov/

To learn more about funding education in Washington:

Funding Washington Schools: www.fundingwaschools.org/ ■ League of Education Voters: www.educationvoters.org/ ■ Network for Excellence in Washington Schools: www.waschoolexcellence.org