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The value of membership



Larry Delaney
WEA President

Like many of you, most months when I receive my pay stub, I fold it up, put it in a drawer and never look at it again. Today, I was cleaning out that drawer and came upon years of old pay stubs that were destined for the shredder. Curiosity got the better of me, however, and I took a pause from my cleaning to look. What I noticed was eye opening.

Last year I made nearly \$15,000 in the form of professional learning stipends and longevity stipends. This is compensation that my local has bargained for our members.

I've received several stipends through the years. This is also compensation that my local has bargained.

I was paid for my time on district committees. Locally bargained? Yes.

I was paid when I gave up my planning period to cover classes. Again, my local bargained this for our members.

I received compensation for oversized classes. Did my local bargain this? Yup.

I received 12 sick days per year. I can save unused leave. I can share my leave with other members. I can also use my sick leave to care for family members – this was not always the case. My local bargained this, too.

I also receive personal leave days that I can save and bank for the future. I can also cash out those

days if I choose. When I started my career in education, I had to give a detailed reason for my personal leave and my superintendent determined if I would be allowed to take leave. Local bargaining changed this.

As this issue of *We2.0* goes to press, WEA is fighting in Olympia for a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for all educators that allows our compensation to keep pace with inflation. Your Association is fighting for increased funding for the wrap-around services — counselors, nurses, psychologists and social workers — that our students so desperately need. And we are fighting for greater access to paid leave for educators whose leave has been wiped out by COVID. No one should be forced to take leave without pay.

So, why am I sharing this with you today? Well, there are individuals and organizations who would like you to believe that your union does nothing but take your money each month. They would like you to believe that you do not benefit from union membership. These groups are attempting to capitalize on differences that we have on masks and vaccines and create division within our union. With that in mind, I would like to give you a homework assignment: Take a look at your recent pay stub and add up how much you earned in supplemental salary, stipends, committees, class oversize and sub pay. Then, look at what you paid in union dues. And while you're at it, calculate what a 5.5% increase in pay would mean for you and your family. I think that you'll find that the benefit is clear.



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Jerad Koepp leads a discussion on the relevance of cedar in the Pacific Northwest and Native communities as students learn about cedar bracelet weaving. Photo courtesy: North Thurston Public Schools





Pro-Education. Pro-Labor.

In WEA-PAC, educators build the power to move the Legislature

As educators, so much of our work is determined by elected officials, whether that's funding for class sizes and mental health supports, the curriculum we teach or how much we're paid. That's why it's critical that we unite in WEA-PAC to support pro-education, pro-labor candidates including our fellow educators.

Lillian Ortiz-Self, a WEA member and counselor at North Middle School in Everett, is one of those WEA-PAC supported candidates. She was frustrated legislators were making decisions that impact education without understanding real-life implications in the classroom, so she stepped up to the challenge of elected office. With the help of WEA-PAC members, Ortiz-Self was appointed to the state House of Representatives in 2014.

"I wanted to make sure that the voices of students, families, teachers were heard," Ortiz-Self shared. "It was during the McCleary decision, and I wanted to make sure we were investing dollars where they were needed and would make the biggest impact."

Since her appointment, WEA-PAC members have helped re-elect her four times, each time with more than 60% of the Snohomish County vote. She champions an equitable education system that meets the needs of each student and respects the talents of all educators. She brings to office a deep understanding of how we as educators and our students have adapted during the pandemic as well as the mental and behavioral health impacts it has had on students and staff.

"I am very proud of being able to advocate and vote for raises

for our educators," Ortiz-Self noted. "I was so proud to take that vote because to me it meant validating the profession."

Ortiz-Self is one of six WEA members in our state Legislature, along with Reps. Monica Stonier, Steve Bergquist, Jesse Johnson, Sharon Shewmake and Matt Boehnke, who won elections with the support of WEA-PAC members. Having these key votes and voices supporting our students and schools is only possible with a strong WEA-PAC.



WEA member and state legislator
Lillian Ortiz-Self is a fan of WEA-PAC.

'I wanted to make sure that the voices of students, families, teachers were heard.'

— Rep. Lillian Ortiz-Self

By electing six WEA members to the Legislature, along with a majority of pro-union, pro-public education legislators, WEA-PAC has been instrumental in increasing the state's investment in education. Together we've increased the average teacher salary by more than \$20,000, making us No. 6 in the nation for teacher pay. Per student spending increased from \$10,395 to \$15,642, now making us No. 15 in the nation. We've only made these gains because of our investment and commitment to electing pro-education, pro-labor representatives in WEA-PAC.

"The advocacy I have seen from our educators throughout the years has been so inspirational," Ortiz-Self said. "Educators have powerful stories to tell, and we make a difference!"

Now we need to keep building on our wins. We still need to get the Legislature to fund lower class sizes and we need legislators who respect that educators, not lawmakers, should determine curricula. This fall's election will be a test of educators' ability to keep a pro-public schools' majority and continue to advance policies that help our students.

Be part of a strong voice in both the classroom and in the state Legislature

Be a part of WEA-PAC's strength in the 2022 elections and beyond and have a strong voice in both the classroom and in the state Legislature on impactful issues like your salary and benefits. You can join now for \$10, \$5.50, or \$2.25 (for ESPs) a month. Text WEAPAC to 81411 for a link to join or join online at WashingtonEA.org/JoinWEAPAC.

Already a member? Now's a great time to give a little more! Use the above link to increase your monthly donation or make an additional one-time donation at <http://washingtonea.org/givetoweapac>. Donors contributing \$120 will receive a new WEA-PAC branded hat and donors sending \$240 will receive a WEA-PAC branded hoodie.

Rural schools looking for more connection

Outside of cities, lack of high-speed internet leaves students struggling



When COVID-19 shut down schools in Belfair in 2020, the North Mason School District set up a Wi-Fi-enabled bus in a parking lot every day.

"We had a bus driver and a paraeducator staff the bus all day," North Mason EA president and teacher Anne Johannsen says. "Parents would come down and download all the assignments, pick up breakfast and lunch, and drive back up the hill."

"Some kids didn't have transportation. We'd make them a thumb drive once a week and deliver it to them. Then we'd go next week and drop off the new thumb drive and pick up the old one with assignments," she says.

During the pandemic, millions retreated to dining-room tables and bedroom corners to work or attend school from home. But students without good home internet access faced even larger hurdles.

According to a September 2020 NEA report by Public Policy Associates, Inc., almost one in five K-12 students in Washington state lack access to reliable broadband internet and a device. Outside metro areas, that rises to one in four students.

Some states have it even worse: 45.9% of Mississippi's students and 42.1% of Arkansas students lack access. But Washington's students go without in a state where vast tech fortunes are amassing.

Often, poverty and race play a role. While 13% of white children lack full access, the report showed that one-third of Latinx, Black and Indigenous children lack access. Programs such as the Emergency Connectivity Fund and Computers 4

Kids can help students with financial assistance for devices and internet service.

But cost isn't the only issue. For students in some rural areas, high-speed home internet service isn't available at all, at any price. In a *Spokesman-Review* story in January about test scores, Northeast Washington ESD 101 superintendent Michael Dunn estimated that about half the students in his rural district do not have home internet access.

Almost one in five K-12 students in Washington state lack access to reliable broadband internet and a device

Nine Mile Falls EA President and Spanish teacher Caitlin Tumlinson says that, like Johannsen's Belfair students, her students also used Wi-Fi in school parking lots. Some there also didn't have cars or someone to drive them.

"We were busing them in to work in the gym," Tumlinson says. It depended on the day, but 10 to 30 students regularly worked there while in-person school was shut down. Having that many students in one room — even a big room — was a challenge for students who were trying to be on different Zoom calls.

Some schools gave out hotspots, Tumlinson says, but that didn't work for students who live in areas without cell service. She commutes to Nine Mile Falls from Spokane and regularly loses cell reception along certain curves of the road, especially when she crosses from Spokane County to Stevens County.

Wellpinit EA President Shawn Brehm, who teaches music in the Wellpinit School District on the Spokane Indian Reservation, has seen the same issue with hotspots issued to students as part of a joint district-tribal project.

"We live in the mountains," he says, "and cellular



signal is not good in a lot of places. There are a couple of providers, but if you have a tree in the wrong place, you can't get access."

One other complication for Brehm's students is the issue of sovereignty of tribal land. CenturyLink does provide service to nearby areas, but the company typically owns the land where their equipment is placed. That's not possible on the reservation, where land is owned by the tribe.

There's a tribal broadband program, but it gets its initial signal through a cellular tower rather than fiber-optic cable, which limits the capacity.

Even students who had home internet had connection problems, because their parents were using the same service to work from home. Those in large families had even more household competition for a limited signal. In many cases, students had enough of a connection to turn in assignments, but not to stream video.

Tumlinson's student Keegan Trudeau, 17, confirmed that doing schoolwork from home was difficult.

"Things would be due on a certain date," he says. "I would turn them in to the bus, and the bus driver would turn it in late and my grade would suffer."

He was able to get his grade straightened out later but communicating with teachers was a logistical challenge as well. Trudeau's father worked from home, so the home landline was tied up during the day. If he needed to communicate with a teacher, he had to go to the school to get online and email the teacher and ask to be called back in the evening when the landline was free.

"It was really hard," he says, and now that schools are back in person, he's also feeling the effects.

"I feel like I lost a lot of my second-year Spanish," he says. "I'm in third year now and it's kind of stressful."

Johannsen worries about how her students will catch up because of the critical learning they missed: "Some students effectively checked out in kindergarten and didn't come back until second

grade. We have second graders who are still learning letters, which isn't typical."

Brehm agrees: "Basically, I lost an entire year of instruction last year."

That's particularly discouraging because his program is new.

"When I came here in 2017, we hadn't really had music instruction for 3+ decades," he says. "We ended up getting several large grants and restarting the program. We had basically one good year, and then a half year, and then COVID hit."

Even now, rural students aren't on an even playing field.

"In urban areas, they had a hard time, too," Johannsen said. "But when they got back to classrooms, they had more funding to put more staff into the classrooms to help them. [Rural students] aren't going to get the same catchup options. Schools in cities got funding to hire staff to help students catch up, but in rural areas, we don't have the quantity of students, so we don't qualify."

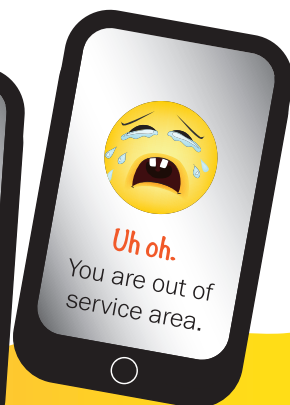
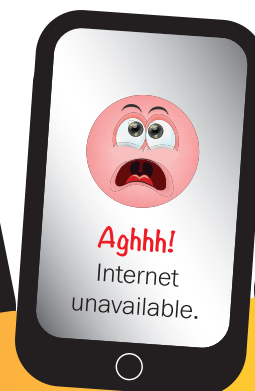
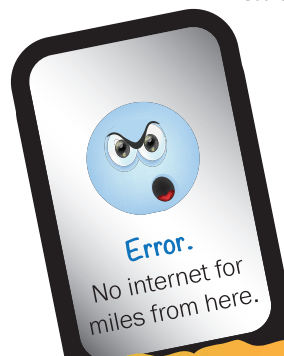
In Nine Mile Falls, Tumlinson says, there's a similar issue when it comes to qualifying for aid. As its name suggests, the town is just nine miles as the crow flies from downtown Spokane, but it isn't part of the city's suburbs. Its more rural setting means that it's also very economically diverse, which puts it behind communities with a higher percent of poverty.

"We have some people who live in large homes on the lake," she says. "And others — one student told me they couldn't finish their homework the night before because they ran out of gas. I didn't understand until they explained that the power in their home was running off a gas generator."

So even though there's real poverty in the district, the higher average income means that the school district is lower on the priority list for extra help.

And in Belfair, even being at school in town is no

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The power of acknowledgment

Jerad Koepp, Washington's 2022 Teacher of the Year, focuses on increasing visibility and voice of Native communities

"What if Native education was for all?" That's what 2022 Washington State Teacher of the Year Jerad Koepp wants to know. Koepp is the Native Student Program specialist for North Thurston Public Schools.

While he primarily works with Native students, Koepp has a broader focus. "Native education doesn't need to exist on the fringes of education," he says, "because the experiences and knowledges carried by Native people and Native students benefit all of our students."

Through Native perspectives, Koepp explains, educators, our schools and our communities can learn how to improve ourselves and our relationships with each other and our environments.

Being a Native educator can be a lonely experience. "Native educators make up only 0.7% of all teachers in our state," Koepp says. So, his selection as the State Teacher of the Year recognizes more than him as an individual educator. He

As the Native Student Program specialist for North Thurston Public Schools, Jerad Koepp teaches across grades and co-teaches in the district's Native Studies program. He also provides professional development across the district. His position has allowed him to be a liaison to the local tribes, strengthening relationships with tribal partners.

Jerad is responsible for creating the ideal conditions for success, focusing on improving pro-indigenous representation and equity-based classroom practice.'

– Willie Frank III
Chairman of the
Nisqually Indian Tribe

considers it a platform for Native communities, to highlight Native educators and students and to look at their contributions. Koepp sees this award as a chance for Native students to be seen and to make visible Native communities by helping educators learn from Native education and Native leaders. Through this journey, Koepp hopes to celebrate his colleagues and all his relations and allies in this field who are working hard to include indigenous cultures and practices.

Koepp's work has had a direct impact on Native students in his community. In 2020, the district's Title VI Native Student Program had a 100% graduation rate.

Ella Sherin, one of Koepp's students, explains his impact. "I was 8 years old and relatively new to Evergreen Forest Elementary School. I was struggling with my parents' recent divorce. Dealing with the sadness, I didn't like going to recess. Mr. Koepp kept reaching out to me to visit the Native program during recess. I started going and he taught me things about myself and my culture that I had never been taught before."

She explains that Koepp understands the importance of teaching students about their cultures and helps give Native students that same opportunity to teach about who they are. "In our culture, our values are in our family, our traditions and in our ways of life. He has given me all these things which I will always carry with me."

In his work, Koepp supports Native students, but also works as a liaison between the school district and tribes.

Willie Frank III, chairman of the Nisqually Indian Tribe, says this of Koepp's work: "Jerad is responsible for creating the ideal conditions for success, focusing on improving pro-indigenous representation and equity-based classroom practice. Due to Jerad's focus on community engagement, Nisqually people have been able to frequently visit classrooms, sharing the rich history of our people. Jerad's approach has focused on healing for our community, ensuring Indigenous students and families feel welcomed and valued. Jerad has created community in a place where community has never existed."

Koepp understands that leadership makes a huge difference and recognizes his privilege in being able to work within a district that supports diversity, equity and inclusion. That is why he also focuses on bringing his messages beyond his district, to policymakers.

"Policy makes permanent," he says. "We require what we value." He encourages decisionmakers to assess how curriculum is being taught and how it is working for students, and ensure we are working on creating, maintaining and nurturing reciprocal relationships and communication with tribal governments.

Koepp emphasizes that in our relationships with tribal partners, we must open our eyes and realize there is no fixed destination. The work is constantly moving, and we must focus on the "liberatory idea of 'yes, and...'" We can celebrate reaching a goal but must always look toward the next one.

He highlights the need to support tribal sovereignty as an asset to opportunity, equity and social justice. "Indigenous knowledge has tens of thousands of years of knowledge, experience and leadership, and a unique position within this nation. The more we can support tribal sovereignty, the more opportunities that they can provide within their own communities but also in the broader community across our state."

Outside of the school buildings he serves, Koepp practices what he teaches. Finding inspiration in creating, Koepp creates things out of wood, sews, beads, and takes every opportunity to be with nature. "Any time I have a chance I have to be creative, challenged and engaged in nature is an opportunity to be inspired in ways I may not have otherwise considered."

River Ridge High junior Laura Free shows off a plate of fry bread in Alison McCartan's U.S. History through Native Perspectives class. The cooking assignment was part of a lesson on forced removal of Native Americans that included the Trail of Tears and the Navajo Long Walk, when fry bread originated.



Koepp ensured the flag of the Nisqually Indian Tribe, the original stewards of the district's land, flies above every district site as a reminder of the influence of Native Americans and their culture. Photo courtesy of North Thurston Public Schools



Unlocking ESSER's three billion opportunities

Unprecedented federal investment in public education could make a big difference to our students

When Renton ESP Treasurer Shyla Butler's family came down with COVID-19 in January — despite being fully vaccinated — she was glad to have 10 days of extra COVID leave to isolate herself to keep her students and their families safe from the virus. Her local union negotiated additional COVID leave with the district so our communities can be safer.

She personally wouldn't have run out of sick leave. "I've been with the district seven years and I never get sick," she says with a laugh. But she knows it will help her newer co-workers, especially first-year educators who start with less sick leave.

"That first year, you catch everything," says Butler, who is the office manager for Renton Remote Elementary. "I know they're going to be out at some point."

That's just one of a broad array of benefits and programs that can be funded in schools across the country using federal emergency aid approved in 2020 and 2021, also known as Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER). Public schools will receive total of \$190 billion from the federal government in ESSER funds in what the National Education Association calls "the single largest investment ever in public education." Washington's total share is \$2.9 billion.

Where did this funding come from?

This money was approved in three different pieces of legislation:

- CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security) Act in March 2020
- CRSSA (Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations) Act in December 2020
- American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act in March 2021

Most of this funding is still available for public school programming. As a condition of receiving these funds, parents, communities and educators should have a voice in the districts' plans for how to best use these resources. Educators in the classroom with their students have the on-the-ground perspective of what kids need as we move forward to recover from the pandemic.

What's it for?

Some of the money is intended to cover costs directly related to COVID-19, such as cleaning and

hygiene supplies and training, building ventilation improvements and personal protective equipment. Those health and safety expenses aren't the only things it can be used for, though, and that's why local unions should be talking with district officials now about what spending priorities for their students should be implemented.

In addition to direct mitigation, funds can be used to:

- Help students succeed, especially students with disabilities, multi-language learners, those experiencing homelessness, those in foster care, migratory students, those who are incarcerated, and other underserved students and communities.
- Specialize and individualize educational approaches, adding instructional time where needed to address coronavirus impacts on learning.
- Provide additional mental-health support.
- Recruit and retain school staff.
- Improve supports and accommodations for students and educators with disabilities.

Isn't this funding one-time-only? How can it be used for ongoing programs?

ESSER funds can be used as seed funding to pay for startup or equipment costs to launch new programs. After that, there are potential state and federal sources of funding for on-going costs. Work with your bargaining team to learn more about maximizing available state and federal entitlement programs in your school district.

Districts may not be maximizing state and federal resources. This could include programs such as: K-3 class-size funding, transitional kindergarten, school lunches, learning assistance, special education, career and technical education programming for aspiring educators and national board certification. State and federal resources could provide ongoing support through entitlement funding formulas after programs are started with ESSER funds.

Statewide, school district ending fund balances have almost doubled in the past 20 years, especially in the wake of the McCleary decision. These funds were intended to create more learning opportunities for students, not sit in an account unspent. School districts with growing fund balances are spending less than they receive in total revenue. These funds

should be targeted for ongoing investment in these newly launched ESSER programs.

School district levy limits have changed in recent years and some districts do not collect their allowed local enrichment levy. Local communities should be provided the opportunity to invest in their children by maximizing their local funding to support ongoing costs of programs that supplement the state-defined basic education.

What are some things Washington locals have bargained so far with ESSER funds?

- Increased staffing to reduce class sizes or provide more individualized instruction.
- COVID leave, if members have a positive test and are required to isolate, to ensure our students, families and communities are safe.
- Retention and recruitment incentives to ease staffing shortages.
- Workload management and hazardous condition compensation.
- Educator student-loan repayment programs.
- Additional temporary Health Service Assistants hired to address workload issues, support nurses and provide contract tracing.
- Upgraded ventilation systems for school facilities so students could return to safer school environments.

Programs already in place in some districts can be used as templates for those that don't yet have them.

School districts can use an initial ESSER investment to make long-term improvements for students and staff alike. An example of existing programs that can be used as a template for ESSER funding are:

- The Academy of Rising Educators (ARE) designed to attract and support early career educators of color. Participants receive school district-provided financial support and preferred placement upon ARE completion.
- Students deserve to see themselves represented in the educator at the front of the class.
- Similarly, West Valley School District near Yakima has a program to conduct home visits for early learning, a registered apprenticeship program where participants can earn an associate degree at a discount and become paraeducators, and a two-year residency for those paraeducators to become certified teachers.

Other things we could bargain for

- ▶ Recruiting and retaining school staff, including:
 - Hiring more staff to provide small-group learning.
 - Targeted recruitment of underrepresented groups.
 - Improving pay, both in addition to salary schedules and hiring/retention bonuses.
 - Creating educational assistance programs (EAP) to help pay for professional development or go toward employees' school loans.
 - Paying fees for educator licensing and certification.
 - Compensation for staff who take on new duties and responsibilities.
 - Grow Your Own career and technical programs and paid teacher residencies.
 - Adding school counselors and psychologists.
 - Reducing class sizes.
 - Incentives to address the substitute educator shortage.
 - Increasing mentorship opportunities.
 - Investments in recruitment and hiring, such as greater presence at job fairs and establishment of virtual recruitment platforms.
 - Programs to help new and aspiring educators navigate complex credentialing requirements.
- ▶ Funding to maintain or expand virtual options for students who need or prefer them.
- ▶ Enhanced leave for COVID-related illnesses, vaccination appointments and potential vaccine side effects.
- ▶ Culturally responsive programs and trainings for students and staff.
- ▶ Programs to prevent bullying and harassment, and additional support to help students resolve behavioral issues.
- ▶ Health and safety improvements, such as upgraded HVAC systems.
- ▶ Purchasing educational technology, such as laptops, wi-fi hotspots and software.
- ▶ Funding supplemental programs (both staff and materials costs) during summer or other school breaks, after school or online. This can include:
 - Ensuring that families do not have to pay fees for students to participate.
 - Subsidizing transportation costs.
 - Enrichment activities and experiences.
 - Work-based or community-service learning.
 - Costs associated with ensuring universal access for students with disabilities.
- ▶ In-school accelerated learning and high-quality tutoring.
- ▶ Improving access to instructional materials with video captions, sign-language interpreting and multiple languages.
- ▶ Access to regular, nutritious meals, especially during long school closures.
- ▶ Screening all students for anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress. This program could investigate opportunities to leverage Medicaid reimbursements for eligible students, to ensure long-term sustainability for the program.
- ▶ Screening and supporting emotional health and self-care for educators and school staff.
- ▶ Helping students develop stronger interpersonal relationships and practice social and emotional skills as they learn or relearn in-person classroom norms.
- ▶ Increasing civics education that especially engages and uplift students of color, LGBT+ youth, students with disabilities and those from low-income or immigrant communities.
- ▶ Identifying and addressing needs from student Individual Education Plans (IEPs), such as additional staff, assistive technology, educator professional development and student accommodations.

How can I help?

Want to make sure educators have a voice in your district's ESSER spending plan?

- ▶ Districts have until September 2024 to spend the last round of ESSER funding, so there is still time for locals to have a voice in the planning process.
- ▶ Talk with your local leaders and your UniServ representative and see what they know about the district's plans.
- ▶ If your local education association has not been involved in discussions, your officers and staff can send the district a letter to notify officials of your concerns and priorities and begin the bargaining process.



CONNECTION from Page 5

guarantee that students can get online.

"We bought all these computers and we were excited to use them," Johannsen says. "But we can't with the service available in school. If everyone's on them, the entire network shuts down."

She worries that without improved internet access, the kids who had to learn the alphabet at home on their own last year will become high-schoolers who are at a disadvantage when applying to college, and eventually college students and young workers who find themselves behind peers who grew up with more advantages.

For-profit companies haven't built out rural networks because of the expense of installing fiber-optic cable. It costs a lot

to install and maintain a mile of infrastructure, whether in a city or the countryside. But cities offer thousands more potential paying customers per mile, so that's where for-profit companies build first.

That's why in 2021, Johannsen testified in support of ESHB 1336, a bill to expand broadband access. In the past, taxpayer-supported entities could build a network, but a for-profit company had to be involved to connect retail customers to it. If a for-profit company didn't find the return on investment worth its while, service couldn't be offered. That bill passed, and as of last August, utility companies in Washington can now build and sell broadband internet service directly to customers.

Because of that change in the law, Snohomish County and the state Department of Commerce Broadband Office announced in January that they were starting a \$16.7 million project to build a fiber broadband network between Arlington and Darrington. That project is due to start connecting customers in January 2024 and would serve

6,500 students in the Arlington, Darrington and Stanwood-Camano school districts.

That's part of \$145 million in grants the state awarded in January to communities across the state, including Lewis, Clallam, Mason, Island, King, Adams, Jefferson, Lincoln and Whitman counties, the Port of Bellingham, and the Spokane, Nisqually and Colville tribes. These projects are designed to help Washington move toward its goal of connecting all residents to broadband by 2028.

Reaching that goal can't come soon enough for educators, who worry about how their students will compete in the future.

"I really believe, especially in the last two years, we really got to a place where it's become a public need that affects the quality of life," North Mason's Johannsen says.

Tumlinson agrees that improving home internet access is of critical importance.

"The inequities were highlighted during the pandemic," Tumlinson says, "but it's still an ongoing issue. If students can stay to use school internet, they can do that after school. But if they have to ride the bus, they can't. Since it's a rural area, there's no public transportation. If they lived in a city, they could stay and work and take the city bus home. But here, there's not even an Uber driver, if your parents could even afford an Uber."

As co-chair of Washington Education Association's Small Rural Task Force, Brehm says, "I'm hearing the same issue across the state."

"Remember those wireless ads? 'Can you hear me now?'" Brehm says. "Basically, the answer for 75 percent of the land in Washington is, 'Nope. Still can't hear you.'"



Chimacum school bus drivers and paraeducators deliver sack lunches and homework packet to students and parents at home after the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools statewide for in March 2020.



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Remembering Ester Wilfong

WEA's first Black president

Aug. 28, 1929 – Feb. 2, 2022



Ester Wilfong

Ester Wilfong Jr. was hired, fired and rehired all within 24 hours of his first teaching job in 1952.

That experience would be the first of many firsts Wilfong as a Black teacher would face as he rose through the ranks, including being the first Black person to serve as president of the Washington Education Association.

Wilfong passed away on Feb. 2, 2022, in University Place in Pierce County. He was 92.

Tom Carter, WEA's longtime parliamentarian, met Wilfong in 1968 when he attended his first WEA annual Representative Assembly. It was held at the University of Washington's HUB Auditorium in Seattle, where Carter was a student.

"I knew him as a kind, gentle and well-respected man with the most wonderful sense of humor and laugh," recalls Carter, who served two terms as Student WEA president. "He was an excellent role model for me."

Born in Arkansas and raised in Oregon, where his father worked in the logging industry, Wilfong Jr. graduated from La Grande High School in 1948 and attended Eastern Oregon University, where he earned his teaching certificate. The Central Kitsap School District superintendent met Wilfong at a church function and offered him a job at Silverdale Grade School. When the superintendent brought Wilfong's application to the school board, he did not mention Wilfong's race.

Wilfong became a teacher in 1952 in Silverdale but was fired by the school board when community members complained. They claimed that his race would cause voters to reject school-funding measures. The State Board Against Discrimination interceded, and he was rehired within 24 hours.

"I was hired and fired and rehired, all within 24 hours my first job teaching in Silverdale," Wilfong said in a Q&A interview with the Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center in Oregon. "My first year there, I had the high school principal's son in my room, the school superintendent's son in my room, one of the school board members' sons in my room, and some of the store owners of the community. So, I was in a fishbowl so to speak, but I never thought about it that way. But I did have a successful experience."

After serving in the Army, he returned to Silverdale to resume teaching. Eventually, he moved to Tacoma, where he taught and became a principal. It was also about that time when he became president of the 37,500-member Washington Education Association, which was in downtown Seattle.

When he took office, Wilfong also became the first release-time president. He would break other barriers, too. He became the first African-American member of Seattle's College Club, a social club for men with college or university degrees. He was elected to serve a term on the NEA Executive Committee, and he remained active with the Washington State School Retirees Association and Alpha Phi Alpha until his death.

Former WEA President and state legislator Carol Gregory, who worked on Wilfong's NEA election campaign, said he was "a great communicator and leader" who had a passion for legislative issues.

"He was good at relating with people," she recalls.

"He knew how to bring people together. He was quite good at bringing people together to lobby."

In his president's message in the WEA Handbook 1968-1969, Wilfong hailed the Association as "second to none throughout the nation" and urged leaders to keep members informed of the union's offerings and engage in two-way communication.

"The forward progression of the Washington Education Association is dependent upon the efforts you make to stimulate interest and participation at the local level," he wrote. "The WEA will continue to be a dynamic force for good education in the state as long as its leaders are willing to engage in honest dialogue and to keep attuned to the needs of the membership."

Wilfong spent his final days at Franciscan Hospice House in University Place. He is survived by his daughters, Monica Wilfong of Mesa, Ariz., and Ellen Wilfong Greene and her husband, Jan Greene, of Federal Way; granddaughters, Jordan Greene and Delaney Greene; and ex-wife June Kilgore. A memorial service was held virtually on Feb. 21 with arrangements coordinated by Neptune Society-Tacoma.

Gregory, who last saw him about six years ago, says Wilfong remained active with retired educators' issues long after retiring.

"He worked hard pretty much till the end," says Gregory, who served as WEA president from 1975 to 1981. "He was a trailblazer in many ways."



Clover Park school bus driver honored for saving choking student

“It was like an out-of-body experience,” Batiste recently recalls. “I didn’t even have time to really think about it until it happened. It just kind of kicked in, and I did what I needed to do.”

“We get trained for that all the time but never think you have to use it,” she says.

The student eventually coughed up a plastic ring from the cap of a soda bottle he had been chewing.

“I helped him help himself,” Batiste says emphatically, dismissing the “hero” label some have given her. “We worked together.”

Heidi Mahoney, transportation supervisor, says Batiste’s quick action “speaks directly to the validity of training, and to her levelheadedness” required of all school bus drivers.

“We’ve had medical emergencies before but nothing of this nature,” Mahoney says.

Late January, Clover Park Schools Superintendent Ron Banner recognized Batiste for her actions in a short ceremony with a thank-you coin and letter. Colleagues know Batiste prefers to stay under the radar but they say the kudos are well-deserved.

“We’re really proud of her,” says Tomacenia Gilman, a Clover Park ESP colleague.

After the choking incident, the ninth-grader got back on the bus and Batiste took him to his stop where he stepped out and thanked her.

Since the incident, Batiste says she finds herself doing quick visual checks regularly of her front-row passenger.

“I look over and I say, ‘You good?’ and he says, ‘Yes, I’m good, Ms. Janice.’

“I made him pinky swear he would never do that again,” she chuckles.

All the preparation and training Clover Park school bus driver Janice Batiste practiced in the last 30 years was put to the test in January when she found herself saving a choking passenger on her route.

Batiste is credited for saving a choking student on her afternoon route from Lakes High School in Lakewood near Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

“He talks all the time,” Batiste says of the ninth-grade student passenger. “He kids a lot.”

He was joking around with his friend across the aisle on Jan. 14 when he suddenly started coughing. His friend alerted Batiste and that’s when she heard the boy had something in his throat.

She looked over to her passenger in the front row and that’s when she knew something was wrong.

She pulled the bus over at one of the regular stops and asked the other students to get off the bus. The choking passenger also had managed to get himself off the bus and was on his knees, coughing. She got behind the student and started administering the Heimlich maneuver.