

Investing in our public schools: Rebutting Liv Finne's misleading school funding statements

The Washington Policy Center is a right-of-center think tank funded by corporations. WPC Education Director Liv Finne is an attorney and does not have a professional education background. Finne's job is to promote WPC's education agenda to media, elected officials and other leaders. Finne serves on the American Legislative Exchange Council's (ALEC) Education Task Force. ALEC is funded in part by the Koch brothers.

Finne spin:

Finne and WPC argue that state funding for public education is adequate and has not been reduced, because the overall biennial education budget has increased from \$12.9 billion in 2009–11 to \$13.7 billion in the 2011–12 budget.

Reality: The “funding increases” are largely due to regular increases in enrollment and an increase in pension costs associated with the state's failure to fully fund pensions in prior years. Those two items account for \$604 million. Additionally, the legislature delayed payments to school districts by a day (from one fiscal year to the next), shifting \$128 million in spending from 2011 to 2012, artificially increasing the current schools budget for a cost incurred in the previous biennium. Together, these items account for \$732 million of the so-called “increase” of \$789 million (without considering inflation).

Furthermore, the 2011–13 figure is the current budgeted amount, not the actual amount the state will spend. Gov. Gregoire has proposed cutting at least another \$250 million from the current K–12 school budget.

Reality: The Legislature has cut K–12 education funding by \$2.5 billion over the last three years, compared to what was required to maintain current programs and service. Among the largest cuts were voter-approved I–728 (smaller class sizes) and I–732 (educator pay), which totaled about \$1 billion of the total cut. In the same time period, the state eliminated funding for smaller K–4 class sizes, eliminated two teacher preparation days and cut funding for educator salaries by 1.9 percent. Funding for educator health benefits has been frozen, despite premium increases.

State funding has DECREASED by \$482 per pupil in the last three years. In fact, state Senate documents show the current \$6,740 in state funding per student in fiscal year 2012 is the SAME as it was in 2008 – without counting for inflation.

According to Education Week, based on the most recent numbers available (2008), Washington's per-pupil spending ranked 44th in the country before the most recent budget cuts.

Finne spin:

“Number of students per classroom teacher: 20.5”

Reality: It is unclear where WPC found this figure. The state’s current funding formula funds class sizes between 25 and 29 students, depending on the grade (K-12). Based on NEA’s most current research, Washington’s average class sizes are third-most crowded in the entire country. Only Utah and California have class sizes larger than Washington’s.

Finne spin:

“Share of employees who are classroom teachers: 47%”

Reality: It is unclear where WPC found this figure.

Finne spin:

Finne and WPC cite school staffing statistics that include positions funded by school district levies approved by local voters.

Reality: The state’s share of total K–12 school funding has dropped from 70.4 percent in 2002–03 to about 65 percent in 2010–11. In other words, the reliance on local levies and federal funding has increased as state funding has dropped.

Finne spin:

“In 2010–11, schools added an additional 235 employees to school payrolls, increasing from 101,675 employees in 2009–10 to 101,910 employees in 2010–11.”

Reality: School enrollment increased in the same period by 6,000 students.

Conclusion: Liv Finne and the Washington Policy Center use misleading data to argue against investing in public education, and they ignore the harm budget cuts have caused students and families. Their arguments fail to reflect the reality that teachers and education support professionals encounter every day in their work with our state’s children.

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