

Sustaining a Shared Vision of Ample and Equitable K-12 Funding in Washington: A Convening of Superintendents to Support School Finance Reform (Part 2)

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Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy

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Acknowledgements

This document represents “Part 2” of a series of reports based on a set of convenings with Washington school district superintendents, hosted by the University of Washington College of Education Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy. The first report was published in August 2024, titled “Convening Superintendents to Envision Ample and Equitable School Funding for Every Washington Child” (Fujioka et al., 2024) is available on the website of the Education Policy Analytics Lab, located within The Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy (https://www.education.uw.edu/epal/?page_id=792).

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Executive Summary

To help advance and build consensus around needed K-12 school finance policy reforms in Washington state, leaders in the University of Washington College of Education Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy have engaged a diverse group of school district superintendents through a series of learning and policy design sessions. Led by Dean Mia Tuan and Professors Anthony Craig and David Knight, the first convening was held on July 1 and 2 with 12 superintendents. On October 21, 2024, the project leaders brought the group together for a second time to refine their collective vision for establishing an ample and equitable K-12 funding system for all students. The group plans to reconvene in the spring and again in summer of 2025. This document describes the learning sessions that took place during the October 21 convening, describes the group's policy discussion and priorities, and places this content and the policy recommendations within the broader research and policy context.

The convening centered on three key goals: deepening participants' understanding of the relationship between school funding and student outcomes, exploring weighted student funding models as a possible alternative to the current resource-based funding formula, and preparing for advocacy in the upcoming legislative session. After introductory remarks and statements, Dr. David Knight opened the convening by presenting data on student outcomes across Washington school districts, synthesizing research on the impacts of school spending, and reviewing potential policy reforms facing Washington legislators. Next, Rebecca Sibilila, Executive Director of EdFund, provided a national perspective on student-based funding models, highlighting their potential to advance equity for students, and sharing insights from case studies of states that have implemented similar funding models. Finally, Representative Sharon Tomiko Santos of the 37th Legislative District and Chair of the House Education Committee shared her experiences in championing educational equity and encouraged the group to pursue comprehensive systemic reforms rather than temporary solutions.

Building on discussions from the July session, the October convening focused on learning more about actionable policy solutions to the state's education funding challenges. The superintendents reaffirmed their shared commitment to collective advocacy for legislative reforms to improve student outcomes statewide. The meeting underscored the essential link between adequate, equitable school funding and student success, reinforcing the urgency for sustained collective action and advocacy. The group's efforts align with Washington's constitutional duty to provide ample funding for the education all children.

Sustaining a Shared Vision of Ample and Equitable K-12 Funding in Washington: A Convening of Superintendents to Support State School Finance Reform (Part 2)

School districts across Washington state have demonstrated significant success in supporting students since the COVID-19 pandemic, investing federal stimulus funds into effective programs and services that have made a meaningful impact on students (Dewey et al., 2024; Goldhaber & Falcon, 2024). However, district leaders statewide are also faced with multi-million dollar budget deficits which have been exacerbated by the expiration of federal stimulus funding, and many districts have closed schools or enacted budget-based educator layoffs. School district fiscal challenges stem from multiple sources. The pervasiveness of budget shortfalls across the state suggests that local mismanagement of funds is not a sufficient explanation. In addition to expiring federal stimulus, many regions have declining K-12 enrollment and increasing costs associated with special education services, insurance, and transportation, while state funding has not kept pace to match these rising costs (WASA, 2024). More broadly, studies show that Washington lacks a progressive state school funding model that targets additional state and local revenues to higher poverty school settings, and that recent reforms expanded funding disparities (Fujioka & Knight, 2023; Knight et al., 2022). Large disparities remain, and districts serving the highest concentrations of marginalized student populations face continued challenges in providing equal educational opportunity.

Education leaders have expressed a need for state legislative reforms, collectively calling for a diverse set of policy priorities (Vela & Jayaram, 2024). Greater synthesis among these policy priorities—including a longer term, evidence-based strategy for providing equal educational opportunity for all Washington students—would

assist education leaders in their advocacy efforts and provide greater clarity to state lawmakers about needed K-12 policy reforms.

The University of Washington (UW) College of Education Dean Mia Tuan and Professors Anthony Craig and David Knight are hosting a series of convenings of school district superintendents to discuss state school finance policy. On July 1 and 2, 2024, project leaders convened a group of 12 superintendents from across the state to examine the current state of Washington's education finance system and to explore "policy possibilities" to address both the short- and long-term fiscal challenges. The two-day convening included presentations by national experts and state agency leaders, as well as superintendent discussion and work sessions. Dr. Kelly Aramaki, superintendent of Bellevue School District, and Dr. Trevor Greene, superintendent of Yakima School District, organized and facilitated the meeting, and the project team produced a report describing the shared learning and next steps (Fujioka et al., 2024).

On October 21, 2024, the group reconvened superintendents. The purpose of this second meeting was threefold: (a) to build a deeper understanding about the relationship between school funding and student outcomes; (b) to learn about the design and structure of student-based funding models as a possible alternative to Washington's current resource-based funding formula; and (c) to prepare for advocacy in the upcoming legislative session. This document provides an overview of the October 2024 convening and describes the group's shared vision for advancing school finance equity and adequacy in Washington state. The facilitators have planned follow-up sessions for spring and summer 2025 for the group to continue their learning around school finance policy and advocacy, building a long-term strategy for reform.

1. Contextualizing Washington State School Finance

School finance in Washington is distinct from other states in several critical ways. First, the state has especially strong constitutional commitments pertaining to public education. The state constitution declares “[i]t is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children ... without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste, or sex” (Wash. Const. art. IX § 1). An analysis of the education clauses in all 50 state constitutions revealed that Washington is one of only five states where the constitution prioritizes public education above other government functions (Thro, 2016). That study placed Washington in the highest of four categories in terms of the strength of constitutional language in guaranteeing adequate education funding.

In the 1978 decision *Seattle School District v. State*, the Washington Supreme Court interpreted this constitutional language to mean that the state legislature must fully fund basic education for all students without relying on other sources such as federal funds or local revenues. Further, the use of local levy dollars, according to the Washington Supreme Court’s interpretation, is restricted to “enrichment” beyond the program of basic education. The means that districts in Washington receive all their foundation or base allotment of funding as state aid and use local revenues for enrichment and capital improvement (and use federal funding for specific federal programs). In contrast, most other state finance models consider local revenues as part of the foundation or base allotment of funding and allocate state aid on a sliding scale proportional to a district’s ability to generate local revenues. Under that more typical model, all districts receive the per-pupil base allotment of funding, but districts with high

property values receive the majority of their base allotment from local revenues, while districts with low property values generate less local revenue and receive the majority of their base allotment as state aid.

Another distinction that is relevant to Washington's current context is the large infusions of new funds over the past decade. The 2012 *McCleary* decision, where the state supreme court found that the legislature was in violation of its constitutional duty, prompted substantial policy reforms implemented over time, with the largest sum of new funds added in 2018-19. The key features of these policies included increases for staff salaries, the introduction of regionalization factors to address varying district costs for educator recruitment and retention, and modifications to the state levy formulas and Local Effort Assistance (Fujioka & Knight, 2024). A large share of new funds supported teacher salary increases, which reduced educator turnover (Sun et al., 2024). While schools across the state benefited from these reforms, districts serving more advantaged student populations disproportionately benefited from the reforms (Knight et al., 2022).

Washington's context is also distinct given the state's strong economy, which helped support funding increases over the past 12 years. While Washington's current per-pupil expenditures are higher than the national average, the state does not rank as highly in "fiscal effort", a measure of the state's education spending as a proportion of its gross state product, a measure of the size of the state's economy (Baker et al., 2024). In 2022-23, Washington's average per-pupil expenditure was \$18,287 (OSPI, 2024), and a recent national report based on 2020-21 data ranked Washington 16th in spending across all the states (Baker et al., 2024). However, Washington spends 3.17%

of its GDP on education compared to the national average of 3.53%, which ranks 36th among 50 states nationally (Baker et al., 2024). This indicates that Washington has the financial capacity to increase its per-pupil spending in alignment with its constitutional mandate to ensure ample funding for education.

Last, Washington is one of few states that uses a resource-based funding formula, whereas most states use some version of student-based funding, also called dollar-based funding or weighted-student funding (Education Commission of the States, 2024; Knight, 2022). While both funding models can be considered a “foundation aid” system (Chingos & Blagg, 2019), where all districts receive a base or foundation amount of funding per student, the key difference is how that base amount is calculated (Knight, 2022). Under **resource-based funding**, legislators set the base amount of funding by establishing a series of student-to-staff ratios. Each district receives a funding amount sufficient to hire a particular number of staff per student, and district administrators have authority to determine the actual staffing levels in each school. Under **student-based funding**, legislators set the base amount by choosing a per-student dollar amount, without relying on student-to-staff ratios. Both models allow legislators to use student weights, which send additional funding to students with certain enrollment classifications such as low-income or multi-language learner. For example, students classified as low-income may be assigned a weight of 1.3 for the purposes of funding-based enrollment counts so that such students generate an additional 30% in per-student state funding. Student-based funding models are sometimes called weighted-student funding models because they lend themselves to student weights, but student weights can also be used in a resource-based funding formula.

Washington's resource-based funding formula is called the Prototypical School Funding Formula, which defines the prototypical elementary, middle, and high school and then specifies staffing ratios for each of those schools (e.g., administrators, classified staff, counselors, custodians, librarians, psychologists, social workers, and teachers). The formula also provides per-pupil funding for technology, utilities and insurance, curriculum and textbooks, and supplies (RCW 28A.150.260). These student-staffing ratios, such as one teacher for every 27 students, one counselor for every 500 students, and so on, are multiplied by a standard salary amount to determine the per-pupil funding rate for each school district. Districts then have wide flexibility for making local spending decisions. Critics have described the Prototypical School Funding Formula as "insufficient" and "outdated", especially in the context of meeting the needs of students who have been historically underserved by school systems (Vela & Jayaram, 2024).

These contextual factors place Washington in a unique policy position. The state is more aligned with the rest of the country in terms of its tumultuous fiscal future for K-12 funding. Like many states around the nation, Washington schools are facing shortfalls. The Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) estimates that the state legislature currently underfunds education by \$4 billion annually (Reykdal, 2024) and the Superintendent's 2025-27 Legislative Budget Requests call for dramatic increases to support basic education (including operating costs, special education, and transportation), community partnerships, and student learning and well-being (OSPI, 2024). Across the state, districts are facing multi-million dollar budget deficits and leaders are confronted with unpopular decisions about closing schools,

eliminating programs, or reducing staff (Retka, 2024; Vela & Jayaram, 2024), each of which have direct consequences for students' educational experiences and learning opportunities.

2. Goals and Learning Sessions

As noted above, the three primary goals of the second UW-Superintendent convening were: (a) to build a deeper understanding of the link between school funding and student outcomes and the benefits of targeted investments; (b) to learn about student-based funding models as a possible alternative to Washington's current resource-based funding formula; and (c) to prepare superintendents for advocacy in the upcoming legislative session. Three learning sessions were held to support these goals, facilitated by state leaders and national experts in school finance. Throughout the day, participants had opportunities to ask questions, connect with each other, and reflect on how these issues impacted their communities, districts, and students.

In the first session Dr. David Knight, Associate Professor of Education Finance and Policy, presented research about the critical role of school funding in supporting student outcomes including academic achievement, attendance, graduation, and post-secondary success. He also shared data on student outcomes across Washington school districts, and reviewed potential policy reforms facing Washington legislators. In the second session Rebecca Sibilia of EdFund provided a national perspective and introduced weighted student formulas as a potential alternative to Washington's current resource-based funding formula. In the final learning session, Representative Sharon Tomiko-Santos of Washington's 37th Legislative District and Chair of the House Education Committee participated in a question and answer session facilitated by

Superintendent Trevor Greene, with topics covering evidence-based policies and effective advocacy for schools and students in preparation for the upcoming legislative session.

In recognition of National Disability Awareness Month, Dr. Jeff Snell, superintendent of Vancouver Public Schools, shared the story of his son, Micah. Micah is a champion for empowerment and inclusion of people with disabilities; he has completed more than forty marathons, participates on his school's cross-country and track teams, and sings in the school choir. Dr. Snell recounted his family's journey advocating for Micah's inclusion in public school and extracurricular activities, which eventually led to the founding of the non-profit organization Micah's Miles to promote inclusive communities. Mackenzie Snell, Micah's sister, has authored two children's books, *Micah the Mighty Marathoner* and *Micah the Mighty Marathoner and His Friends*, to share Micah's story and inspire others; attendees received copies of the books for their districts' elementary schools. Dr. Snell's story was a powerful reminder of the importance of the superintendent's work to advance equity for all students.

3. Learning Sessions and Outcomes

This section describes the content and outcomes of each learning session and how the presentations contributed to superintendents' broader knowledge base.

Student Outcomes and Targeted Investments

The first presentation, facilitated by Dr. David Knight, analyzed student outcomes in Washington, discussed research on the impact of educational spending, and reviewed the merits of potential policy reforms facing Washington legislators. One point of feedback facilitators received following the July 2024 convening encouraged greater

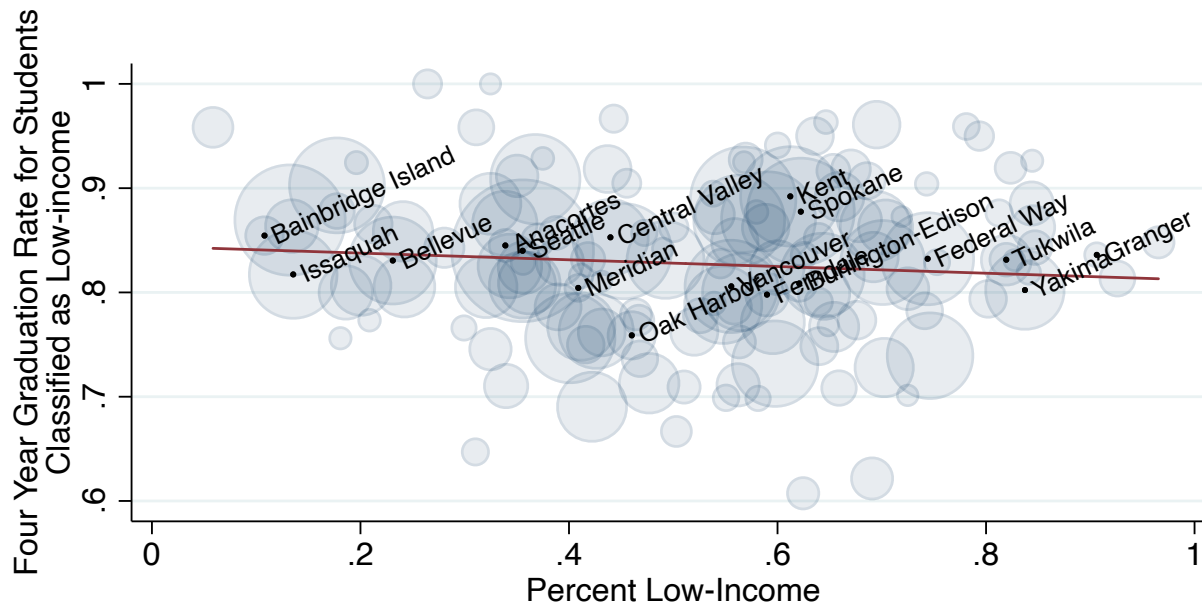
emphasis on student experiences, especially the widely different contexts in which they attend school. Dr. Knight's presentation began by documenting wide racial and economic segregation across Washington school districts and significant variation in educational outcomes across districts. Importantly, these disparities do not result solely from differences in individual students, but from the contexts in which those students go to school.

For example, Figure 1 shows the relationship between graduation rates and district poverty rate. Panel A displays graduation rates specifically for students who are individually classified as low-income, while Panel B displays graduation rates for students who are not individually classified as low-income (Appendix Figure A1 includes additional groups). The downward sloping lines suggest lower-poverty districts generally have higher high school graduation rates. The fact that the regression lines in both graphs are downward sloping suggests the simple individual classification of a student as low-income is not the only mechanism through which economic hardship impacts educational experiences. Attending school in a higher-poverty context is associated with lower graduation rates regardless of whether an individual student is classified as low-income. This point matters especially because, as we documented in our prior report and elsewhere (Fujioka et al., 2024; Knight et al., 2023), students of color disproportionately attend higher poverty school districts.

FIGURE 1

Four year graduation rate for each school district and the percent of students in the district classified as low income, graduating class of 2022-23

A. Students classified as low income (slope = -0.032)



B. Students not classified as low income (slope = -0.069)



Note. Panel A shows the four year graduation rate by district poverty rate, for students who are not individually classified as low income, while Panel B also shows four year graduation rate by district poverty rate, but for students who are classified as low income. Appendix Figure A1 shows similar data for students who identify as a person of color and Appendix Figures A5 and A6 show data for other outcomes.

Source: Author's calculation based on the Washington Office of Superintendent for Public Instruction graduation and enroll data and U.S. Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates.

Recognizing the role of school context is important, yet most state school report cards display student outcomes with results disaggregated only at the individual student level (Polikoff et al., 2023). Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, all states are required to maintain a school report card website that reports student outcomes disaggregated into student subgroups. However, states have flexibility with how these data are presented and are permitted to also report disaggregated data by district or school context. The practice of reporting outcomes disaggregated only at the individual level places the emphasis on student deficiencies rather than deficiencies of the system (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Appendix Figure A2 provides an example, displaying a screenshot of Washington's School Report Card, which shows the same data as in Figure 1, but disaggregated at the individual level rather than by district characteristics. By disaggregating student outcome data at the school or district, rather than at the individual level, states could better highlight differences in educational opportunities across context, which are more visible in Figure 1 than in typical report card data such as that shown in Appendix Figure A2.

Given wide differences in student outcomes across district contexts, what policies may help school districts provide all students with equal educational opportunity to reach outcome goals? The second portion of Dr. Knight's presentation focused on research linking educational spending to student outcomes. There is robust empirical research demonstrating a strong relationship between education funding and student achievement, and scholars have reached a wide consensus that "money matters" for schools (Baker, 2023). A meta-analysis of studies that used the strongest research designs estimated that each \$1,000 increase in per-pupil spending causes a significant

increase in outcomes, including an average increase in student test scores of 0.032 standard deviations and a 2.8 percentage point increase in post-secondary enrollment (Jackson & Mackevicius, 2024). Research also indicates variation in impacts depending on how the money is spent, and targeting educational investments can extend the impact of a given spending increase (Levin et al., 2012).

To translate their findings into policy relevant metrics, Jackson and Mackevicius (2024) calculated the probability of different outcomes resulting from a \$1,000 increase in per-pupil spending, sustained for four years. The impact of a 2.8 percentage point increase is expected to take place 50 percent of the time, and the authors predict a positive to effect to occur 97 percent of the time and a 4.5 percentage point impact just over 10 percent of the time. The authors further show that effects will be larger and more consistent if targeted to higher poverty areas. The same policy is expected to produce an impact of 3.9 percentage points for students classified as low-income, compared to 2.8. percentage points overall, and only 1.2 percentage points for non-low-income students. In rare cases, around 10 percent of the time, students classified as low-income will experience an effect of 5.8 percentage points. In sum, allocating state aid progressively with respect to household income is an effective policy for addressing wide differences in student outcomes across district contexts. A progressive state school finance system, where districts serving higher percentages of historically marginalized student populations receive additional resources, helps provide equal educational opportunity for all students to reach their greatest potential.

One policy proposal that is likely to receive attention during the 2025 Washington legislative session, and in the future, would increase the current levy lids and allow local

school districts to levy a higher tax rate. This policy would help increase funding for some districts but could introduce greater inequities if state legislators do not pair levy lifts with greater tax base equalization. Under current policy, Washington school districts receive state funding for what legislators determine is adequate to provide a basic education as stipulated in state law (RCW 28A.150.210). Districts are permitted to “enrich” the basic education by passing voter-approved enrichment levies. The amount of funds districts can raise is capped at the lesser of a revenue amount (\$2,500 per student, set in 2019 and adjusted upward for inflation) and a rate amount, set at \$2.50 per \$1,000 of assessed value (0.25% of a property’s value). In other words, under this policy, a district can only raise its local property tax for enrichment levies until it generates \$2,500 per student, or its tax rate reaches \$2.50, whichever comes first. Districts in areas with higher property values reach the revenue cap first, resulting in a relatively lower local property tax rate. In contrast, districts in areas with lower property values reach the rate cap first, but do not generate as much local revenue. Washington has a tax base equalization policy called Local Effort Assistance (LEA), which ensures that all districts generate at least \$1,500 per student if they levy \$1.50 in tax rate (Senate Ways and Means Committee, 2024). Many lower property wealth districts would not generate \$1,500 per student from a \$1.50 tax rate and thus benefit significantly from LEA funds. Higher-wealth districts do not receive LEA because they generate more than \$1,500 per student from a \$1.50 tax rate.

Figure 2 displays the result of this two-pronged system visually. The figure shows the revenue per-student generated at different levels of local levy tax rates, for two example school districts (the x-axis shows the school district’s enrichment levy local tax

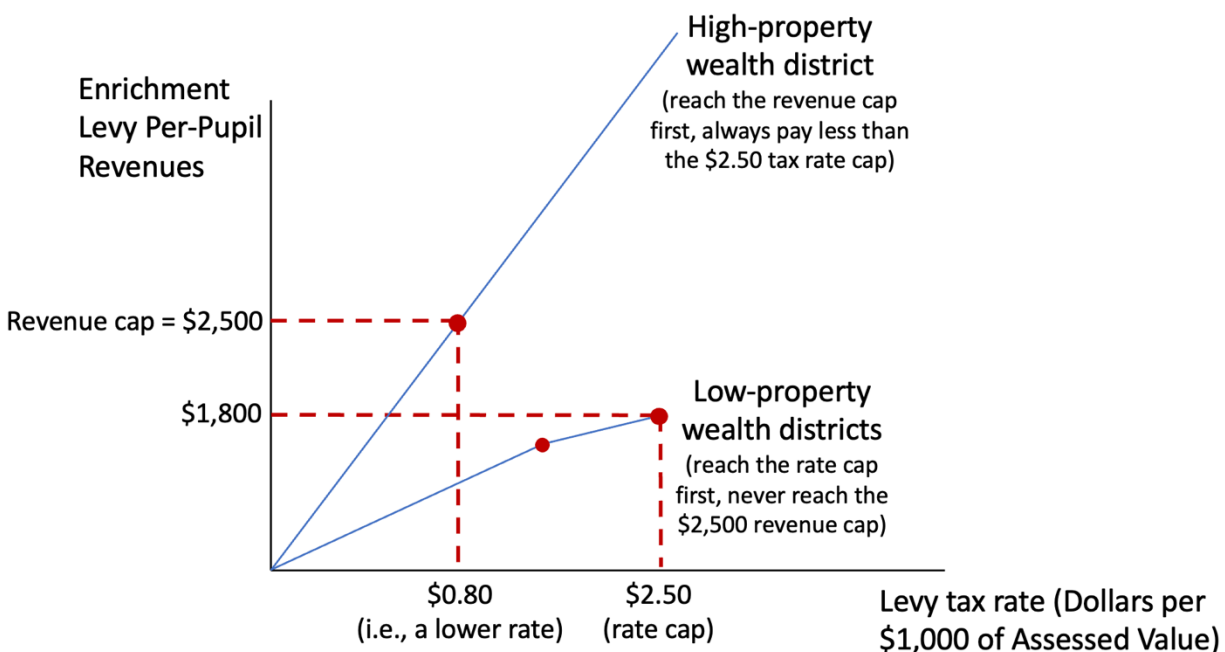
rate, and the y-axis shows the enrichment levy per-pupil revenues). The first example districts is one with high property values, a high-property wealth district, which would reach the revenue cap of \$2,500 per-student before reaching the rate cap. In the graph, the higher wealth, or “revenue capped” district receives the revenue cap of \$2,500 per-student and pays a rate of only \$0.80 in tax rate.

The second example district in Figure 2 is a school district in an area with lower property values per student, which would reach the rate cap of \$2.50 prior to reaching the revenue cap. For this example, the lower-wealth, “rate-capped” district pays the rate cap of \$2.50 in tax rate but only generate \$1,800 per student. The abrupt change in the slope of the line for lower-property wealth district represents the point at which districts stop receiving Local Effort Assistance, after the district has generated \$1,500 per student.

The slope of each line shown in Figure 2 represents the “tax price,” the amount of tax rate increase necessary to generate a given amount of funds. In general, higher wealth districts have a lower tax price because they can generate additional revenues with smaller increases in local property tax (Brunori, 2005). LEA reduces the tax price for lower-wealth districts, but only up to \$1.50 in tax rate. Lower-wealth districts experience an increase in their tax price after \$1.50, and any tax increases after that amount only generate funds in accordance with their local property wealth, placing lower-wealth districts at a disadvantage. Because local property wealth is correlated with household income and race/ethnicity (Baker et al., 2020; Chingos & Blagg, 2017; Knight et al., 2024), this levy cap system disadvantages lower-income students and students of color.

FIGURE 2

Illustration of Washington's levy cap system, using two example districts



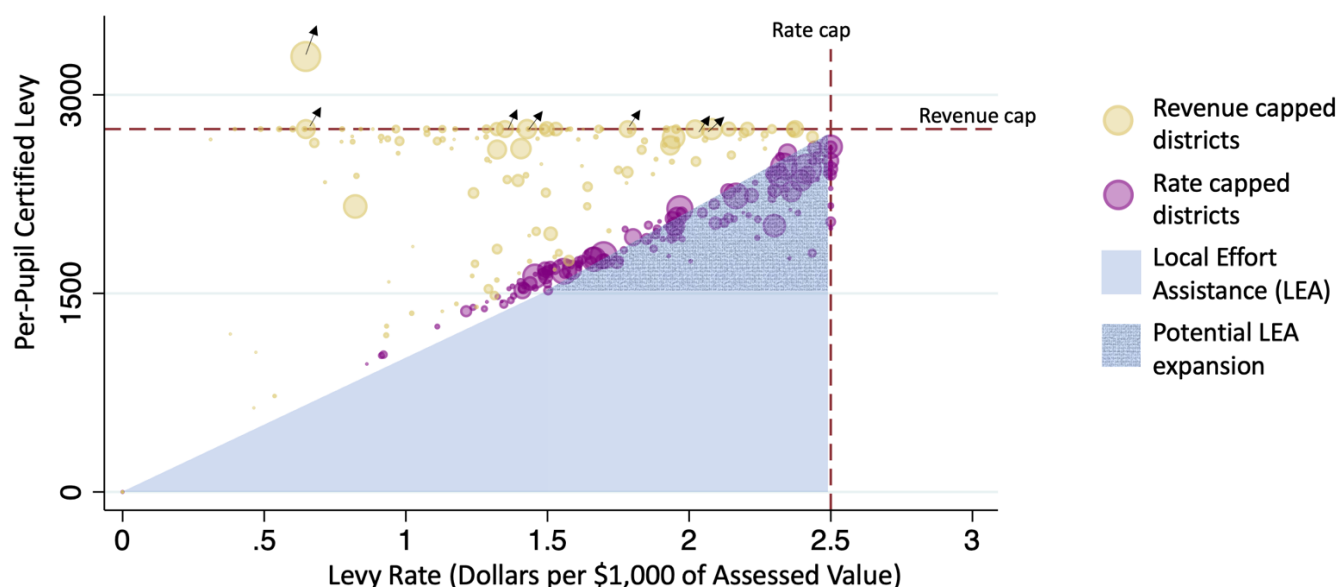
Note. Graph shows revenues per-pupil generated from local enrichment levies, based on two example school districts, one in an area with high local property values and one with lower property values. The change in the slope of the line for low-property wealth districts the tax rate after which districts do not receive LEA funding.

Figure 3 shows how Washington's two-pronged local enrichment levy cap policy works in practice. As with Figure 2, the x-axis shows the local property tax rate, and the y-axis shows the per-pupil local dollars generated. Each circle represents a school district, with "revenue-capped" districts shown in gold, and "rate-capped" districts shown in purple. Revenue-capped districts are those with higher property values that reach the revenue cap first, while rate-capped districts have lower property values and reach the rate cap first. Not all rate-capped districts actually levy the highest allowed rate of \$2.50, and many rate-capped districts levy an amount closer to where LEA ends, at \$1.50 per student. Similarly, not all revenue-capped districts are at the revenue cap. Those at the

cap generate the maximum revenue amount of \$2,784 (the cap of \$2,500 has been adjusted for inflation). A policy that would increase the revenue cap would benefit districts currently at the revenue cap, indicated by little arrows pointing upward (signifying their increased revenue under a levy cap lift).

FIGURE 3

Levy tax rate and per-pupil levy revenue among Washington school districts, average from 2019-20 to 2021-22



Note. Small arrows attached to some revenue capped districts illustrate that some districts would receive additional per-pupil certified levy under a policy that lifts the revenue cap. The revenue cap appears at \$2,784 reflecting the cap during the years shown, which has been adjusted upward with inflation from \$2,500 beginning in 2019.

The light blue semi-trapezoid shown in Figure 3 represents Local Effort Assistance (LEA)—no district appears within that light blue space because LEA provides that base level of equalization. For example, if a district with low per-pupil property values of \$300,000 per student levies a tax rate of \$1.50, it would generate only \$450 per student. That district would receive \$1,050 per student in LEA, bringing their levy revenue up to \$1,500. If that same district further increased its local tax rate to

\$2.50, the additional \$1.00 of taxes would only generate an additional \$300 per student, bringing its total levy revenue to \$1,800, far less than the revenue cap of \$2,500. The slightly darker blue triangle, labeled “potential LEA expansion” represents the area for which LEA ends, and the area where many low-wealth districts experience significantly higher tax price. If legislators expanded LEA up to the revenue cap amount, providing equalization for low-wealth districts up to the rate cap of \$2.50, low-wealth districts would experience a significant funding increase, which would reduce the state’s income-based funding gap highlighted in our prior report and elsewhere (Fujioka et al., 2024; Knight et al., 2022).

Student-Based Funding Models

States have used a variety of policy mechanisms to drive additional funds to higher-need school districts, in addition to tax base equalization (Education Commission of the States, 2024). Rebecca Sibilia, Executive Director of EdFund, provided a national perspective on one approach, student-based funding models, a potential alternative to Washington’s current resource-based funding model. The mission of EdFund’s broader work is to foster more policy-relevant research and translate findings so advocates and policymakers can make better decisions about funding schools to meet student needs (EdFund, n.d.). The organization highlights student-based funding models in their advocacy materials as a simple and transparent mechanism for allocating funding to school districts and schools that more directly targets student needs.

The presentation began with four foundational concepts in school finance: adequacy, equity, flexibility, and transparency. Adequate funding provides sufficient resources to meet the costs for all students to achieve outcome goals (Baker et al.,

2024). Equity in this context refers to the allocation of resources to meet the needs of diverse student groups to provide the same level of opportunity to meet outcome goals, typically by providing additional state aid to districts where there are higher costs (Baker & Green, 2008; Baker et al., 2024). Flexibility refers to the ability of school and district leaders to exercise autonomy and use resources to innovate in classrooms and schools (Fordham Institute, 2006). Transparency or accountability refers to the clarity or simplicity of funding formulas (Fordham Institute, 2006).

Student-based funding models assign a certain dollar amount per pupil, with additional weights to increase funding for students with greater needs such as those who are experiencing homelessness, living in foster care, multi-language learners (MLL), students with disabilities, students who are not achieving benchmark test scores, youth in families living in poverty, or other historically underserved populations (Fordham Institute, 2006; Roza et al., 2020). The foundational principles of WSF suggest that (1) per-student funding should follow children to the schools they attend, (2) per-student funding should vary according to the child's needs and circumstances, (3) schools should have autonomy and flexibility in spending dollars (rather than fixed ratios or staffing levels), (4) the principles for allocating money should apply to federal, state, and local funding, and (5) funding systems should be simple and transparent (Fordham Institute, 2006).

WSF formulas are believed to enhance equity by providing additional funds to support learning for students with the highest need as defined by state or federal policies (Roza et al., 2020). This flexibility allows school and district leaders to allocate resources strategically, such as by hiring additional staff (whether it be administrators,

classroom teachers, counselors, instructional coaches, nurses, paraeducators, psychologists, or social workers), offering extended learning time (e.g., before/after school or summer programs), reducing class sizes, sourcing additional curricula or programs, or supporting non-academic services such as maintenance, nutrition, or transportation (Fordham et al., 2006). In the context of special education, states may differentiate weights based on the nature of the disability so that students with the highest needs receive additional resources and services.

Research reviewed in the presentation shows that transitioning to WSF may improve student outcomes. A recent study of a large urban district in the southeastern United States found that adopting a WSF improved students' test scores in both ELA and math (Candelaria et al., 2024). That study, currently a working paper (i.e., a pre-publication that is not yet undergone masked peer review), found that greater resource levels helped school leaders provide better services for students who were struggling. In a separate study comparing Washington's resource-based model to California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which uses WSF as its basic model, researchers found that California's schools had much more flexibility in how schools were staffed, particularly for non-instructional employees such as bus drivers, maintenance, and nutrition services (Aldeman, 2023). Another study of California's adoption of LCFF concluded that a \$1,000 increase in per-pupil spending over three consecutive years led to gains in students' math and reading scores, improved graduation rates and college readiness, and reduced the likelihood of grade repetition (Johnson, 2023). Together, these findings suggest that WSF may advance students' achievement when funds are properly utilized in a manner that supports the needs of students who are furthest from

educational justice. The presentation provided valuable information for superintendents to understand the possible advantages of WSF as an alternative to the prototypical funding formula.

Preparing for Legislative Advocacy

Legislative advocacy remains a critical component of the shared work of the superintendents group, and the group intends to engage a broad range of state educational leaders. An important set of decisionmakers include the Washington Senate and House K-12 Education Chairs and Ranking Members, leadership from the Senate and House Ways & Means, Appropriations, and Finance Committees, as well as leadership from the Governor's office. We also anticipate maintaining collaboration with leadership from OSPI and seeking their expertise. To inform legislative advocacy efforts, Representative Sharon Tomiko Santos of the 37th Legislative District and Chair of the House Education Committee spoke to the group about the challenges and opportunities facing the state's education system. Representative Tomiko Santos shared how her lived experience as a child of immigrants and the daughter of a special education teacher has shaped her commitment to civil rights, educational equity, and social justice. She acknowledged that many elements of today's education system were established in the 19th century, and many policies have not evolved to reflect the needs of educators, schools, and students in the 21st century.

Representative Tomiko Santos discussed her work contributing to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) 2017 report, *No Time to Lose: How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State*. The comprehensive report urges state legislatures to reimagine and redesign world-class education systems where all

students have access to high-quality instruction and opportunities to achieve high standards (NCSL, 2017). The report emphasizes the importance of comprehensive, systemic reforms that align and integrate various initiatives (NCSL, 2017).

Representative Tomiko Santos cautioned that increasing funding for education may require diverting resources from other critical government programs, such as healthcare, public safety, transportation, utilities, and social services. Reflecting on the insights from Representative Tomiko Santos, superintendents recognized the need for a holistic strategy that is aligned with the state's current initiatives such as the Washington Integrated Students Support Protocol (WISPP). The superintendents also noted the importance of engaging stakeholders including classroom teachers, non-instructional staff, school and district administrators, and students and families, to ensure future policies effectively address community needs; stakeholder engagement will be a priority for the group in upcoming sessions scheduled for spring and summer 2025.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Despite modest improvements in multiple measures of student outcomes coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic (Deng, 2024), Washington school districts face several challenges in the years ahead. Many districts have reported budget shortfalls as federal stimulus funds dry up, and system leaders have highlighted concerns across the state about student mental health and academic learning. At the same time, educational outcomes vary substantially across school districts. Those enrolling more advantaged student populations maintain graduation rates above 90 percent with high rates of attendance, course grade completion, and proficiency on state tests. Districts enrolling the highest concentrations of marginalized student populations report substantially

lower average student outcomes yet receive approximately the same level of funding as other districts, suggesting students in those districts are not provided with equal educational opportunity (Knight et al., 2024). A primary goal of the UW Superintendent convenings is to gain a stronger consensus about how best to resolve these issues. In the subsections below, we summarize and conclude this report by describing some of the points of consensus and misalignment, the utility and limitations of student-based funding, and plans for next steps.

Sustaining the Shared Vision of Ample and Equitable Funding

Discussions during the fall reconvening of superintendents underscored the need for comprehensive school finance reforms to ensure ample and equitable funding for Washington students. Participants explicitly expressed a need for increased resources, and many support policy recommendations that both increase overall funding and change how funds are generated or allocated. This shared vision highlights the need for a longer-term policy strategy that addresses not just the overall funding amount, but (a) how school funding is generated from the state and taxpayers, and (b) how school funding is allocated across school districts. Further research into what such policies may look like for the state of Washington would help clarify policy possibilities and potential areas for advocacy. Research about how money matters for students demonstrates that schools and districts would benefit from increases in funding, but insights from Representative Tomiko Santos demonstrate that it will take time to implement major policy reforms that provide long-term solutions to address persistent educational inequities across the state.

Student-Based and Resource-Based Funding

Many school finance advocates have criticized the Prototypical School Funding Model, and resource-based funding models more broadly, citing a lack of ability of these models to deliver adequate funding. Moving to a student-based model, some argue, would help ensure funding is allocated to meet student need (Smith, 2022). The superintendent's group generally supports a transition to student-based funding, but several cautions were noted by experts in attendance. First, the overall level of funding is set by the state legislature and both student- and resource-based models can be adequately funded, or underfunded (Knight, 2022). Second, both models provide the same degree of local spending flexibility. Resource-based models start with a particular set of staff ratios as a frame, but district leaders are generally free to determine local staffing and compensation levels regardless of whether their state uses a student- or resource-based funding model (Knight, 2022). Critics of resource-based funding argue district leaders make staffing decisions based on the staff ratios in their funding formula (Aldeman, 2023); however, district leaders are not required to do so. Lastly, student funding weights, a primary feature of student-based funding, can also be implemented under resource-based funding. Student-based funding is not inherently more "progressive" than resource-based funding because the level of progressivity depends primarily on the size of student weights. In short, student- and resource-based funding models have advantages and disadvantages, but many critical issues such as the overall adequacy, equity, and fiscal flexibility, depend on additional state policy factors beyond the formula.

Future Directions

Despite progress toward building a consensus among educational leaders in the state, the superintendent group has much work yet to complete. The group plans future convenings in the spring and summer, to further continue and define their five-year vision of ample and equitable school funding. Moving forward, the group of superintendents organizing on behalf of their communities and districts are committed to ongoing advocacy for legislative reform. These efforts will help ensure all Washington's students receive equal educational opportunity to learn, achieve, and succeed.

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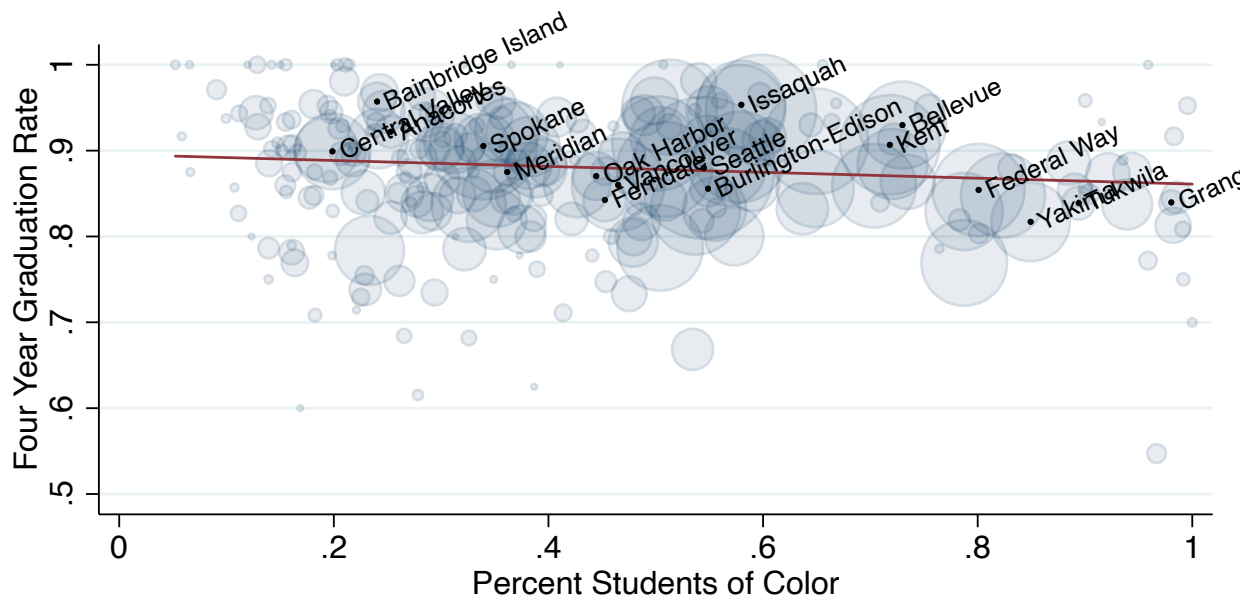
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Appendix A: Additional Figures and Tables

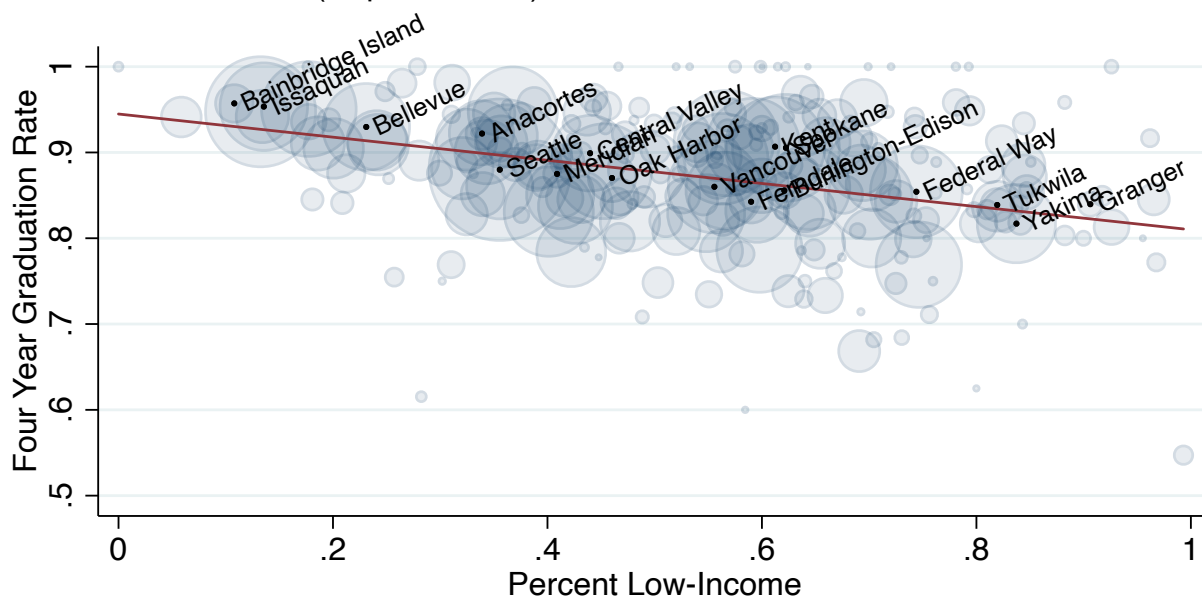
APPENDIX FIGURE A1

Four year graduation rate for each school district and the percent of students in the district who identify as a person of color (Panel A) or who are classified as low income (Panel B), graduating class of 2022-23 (cohort that started 9th grade in 2019-20)

Panel A. High school graduation rate and percent of students who identify as a person of color in each district (slope = -0.034)



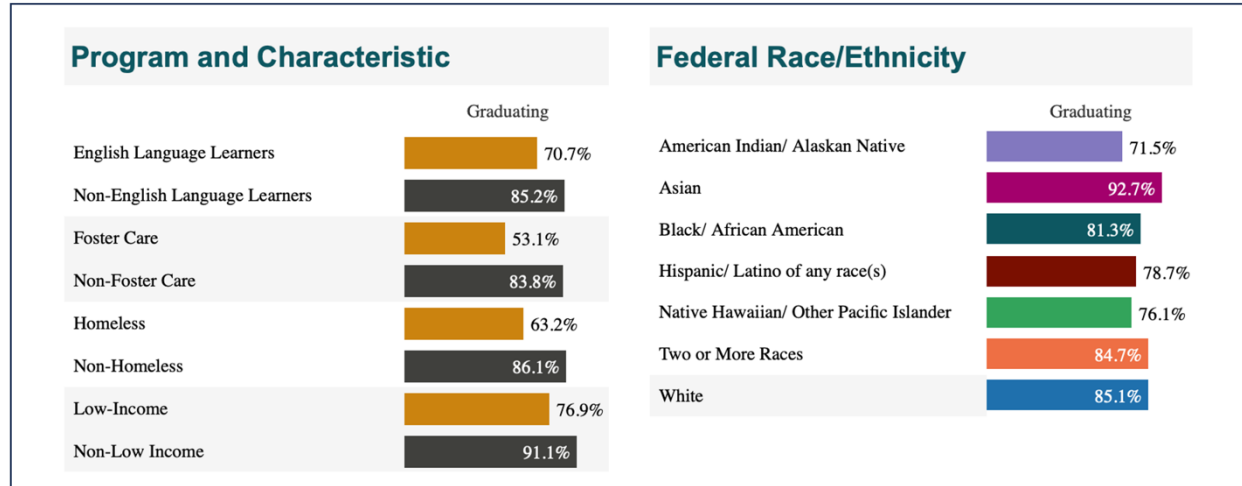
Panel B. High school graduation rate and the percent of students classified as low income in each district (slope = -0.137)



Note. Each circle represents a school district, with size proportionate to enrollment level (n=262 districts reporting data in 2022-23 out of 295 traditional public school districts and 35 other districts including Tribal Compact, Charters, and other district types). Source: Author's calculation based on the Washington Office of Superintendent for Public Instruction SQSS dataset.

APPENDIX FIGURE A2

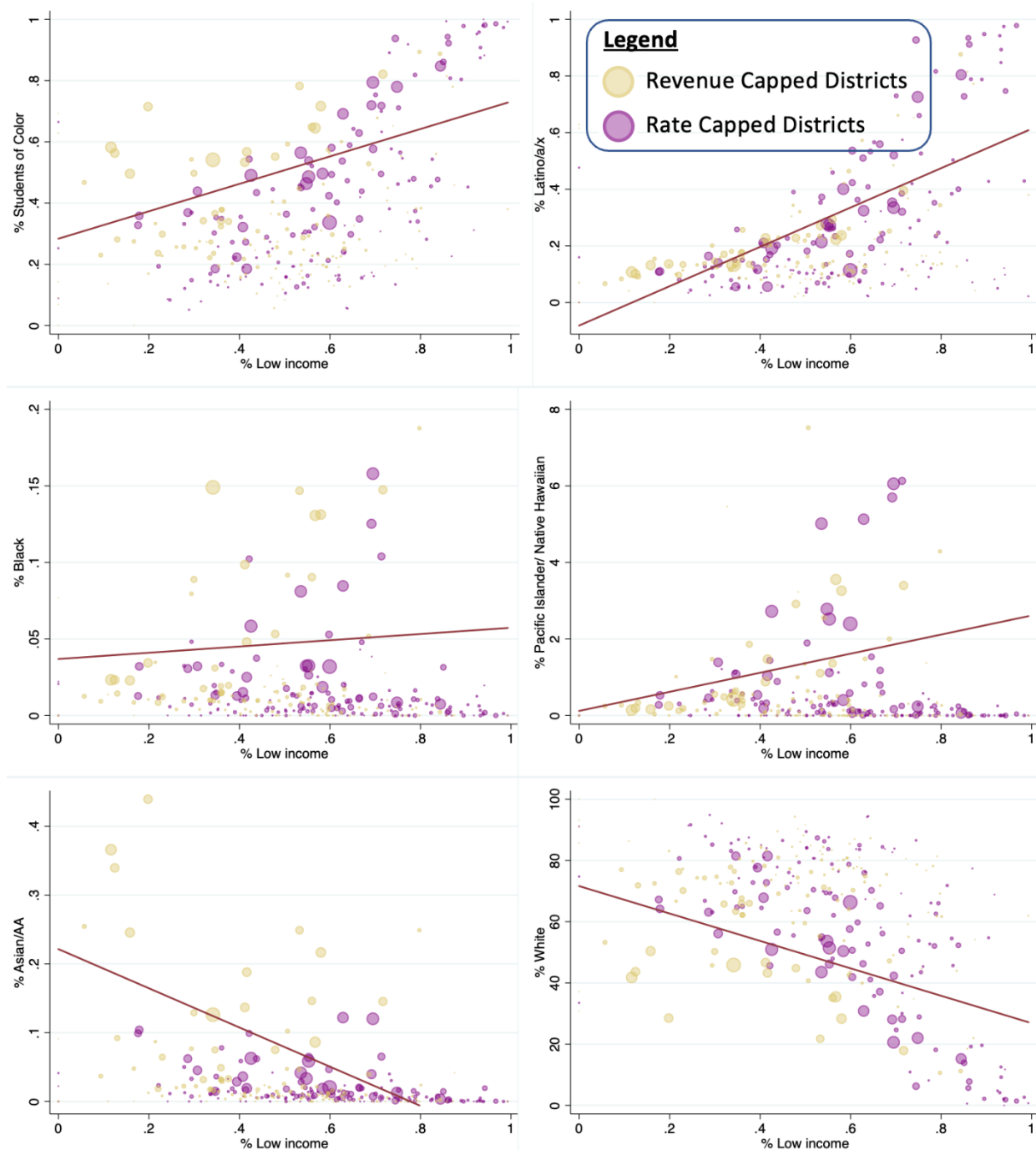
Screenshot from Washington OSPI School Report Card showing average four year graduation rate, disaggregated by individual student subgroup, graduating class of 2022-23 (cohort that started 9th grade in 2019-20)



Source: Washington OSPI School Report Card, <https://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/>

APPENDIX FIGURE A3

Relationship between student income and race/ethnicity for each Washington school district, by district levy cap type, 2021-22

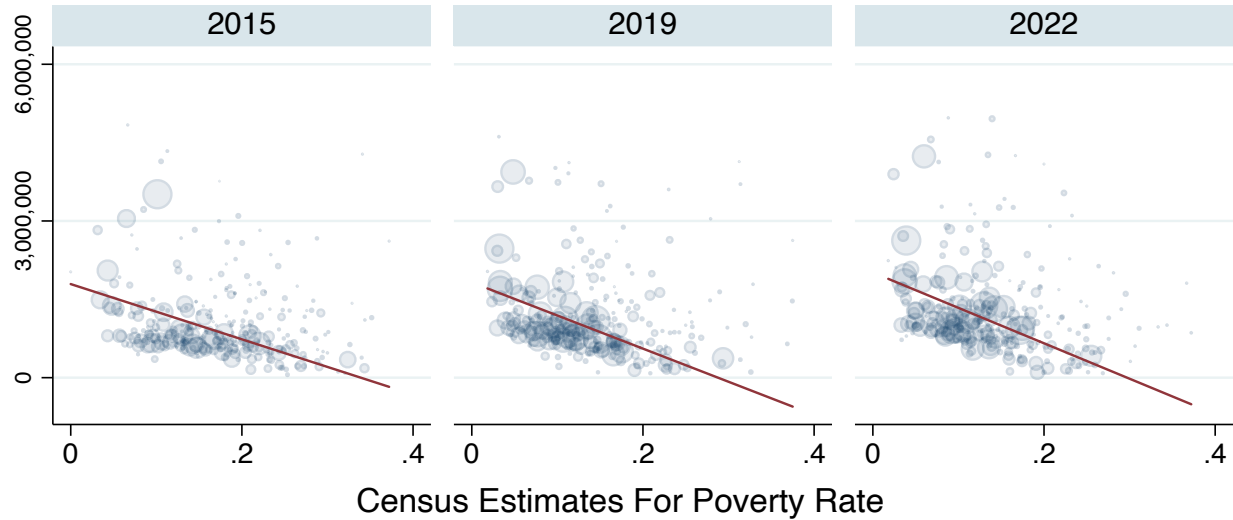


Note. Washington's levy lid system limits local revenues to the lesser of a per-pupil revenue maximum (or "cap") and a rate maximum. Revenue capped districts are those with greater local property wealth such that they reach the revenue limit prior to reaching the rate limit. Rate capped districts have less property wealth per student and, as voters choose to increase local tax rate, reach the levy rate cap prior to reaching the revenue cap. Percent low-income is based on the proportion of students in the district receiving free/reduced price lunch.

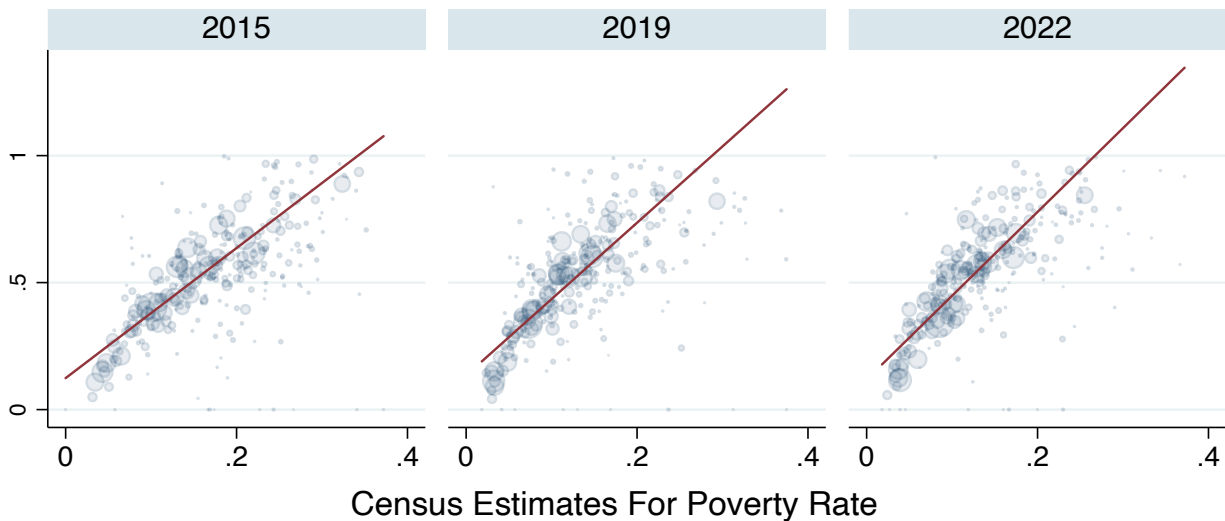
APPENDIX FIGURE A4

Relationship between per-pupil property values, neighborhood poverty, and free/reduced price lunch, Washington school districts, 2014-15, 2018-19 and 2021-22

Panel A. U.S. Census neighborhood poverty rates and per-pupil property values



Panel B. U.S. Census neighborhood poverty rates and free/reduced price lunch rates

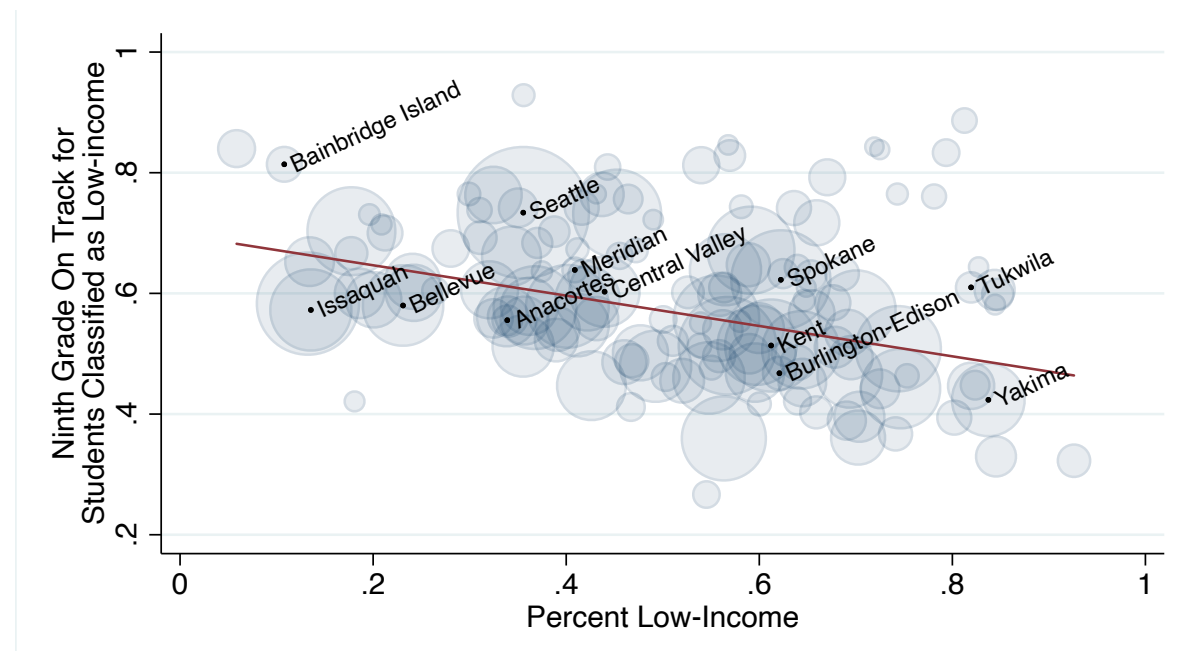


Note. Each circle represents a school district, with size proportionate to enrollment level. *Source:* Washington Office of Superintendent for Public Instruction, property value and levy valuation report; U.S. Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates.

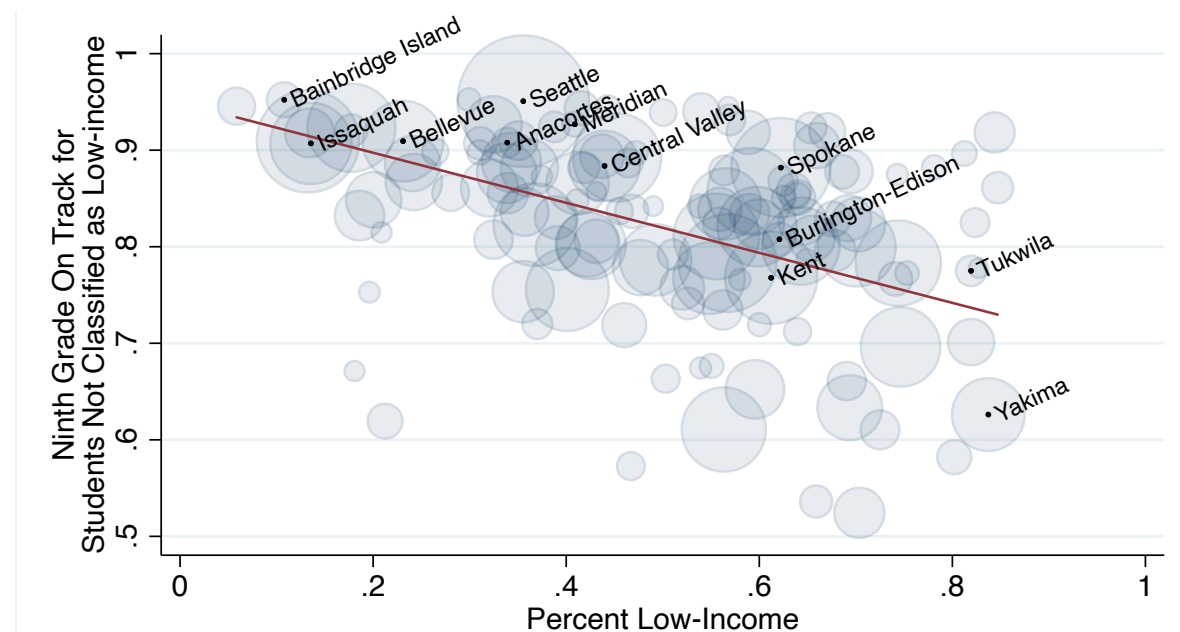
APPENDIX FIGURE A5

Ninth grade on track rate and the percent of students in the district classified as low income, 2022-23

A. Students classified as low income (slope = -0.252)



B. Students not classified as low income (slope = -0.259)

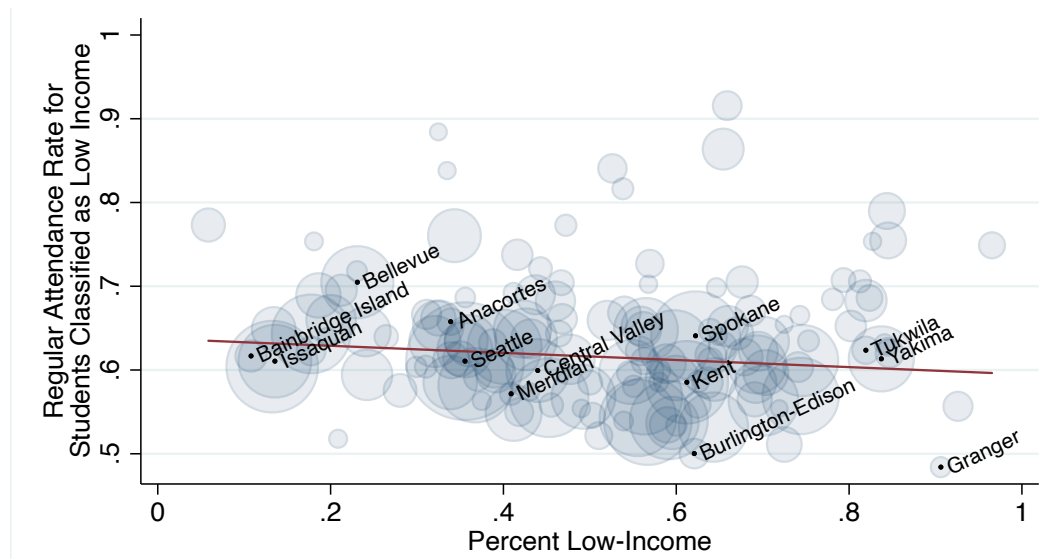


Note. Ninth grade on track is the percent of ninth graders who pass all coursework with a C grade or better. Panel A shows the on track rate by district poverty rate, for students who are individually classified as low income, while Panel B also shows the on track rate by district poverty rate, but for students who are not classified as low income. Percent low-income is based on the proportion of students in the district receiving free/reduced price lunch. Source: Author's calculation based on the OSPI data.

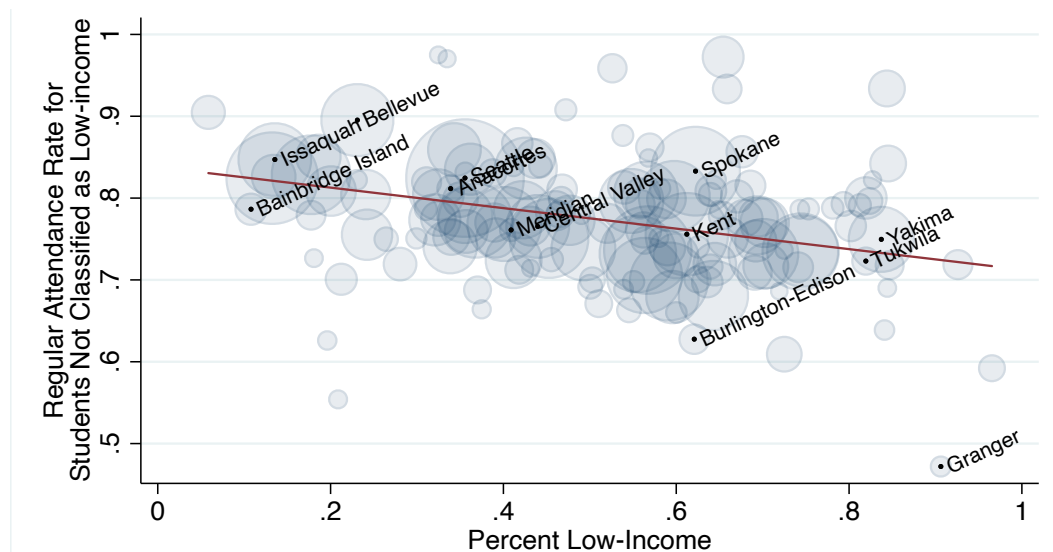
APPENDIX FIGURE A6

Regular attendance rate for each school district and the percent of students in the district classified as low income, 2022-23

A. Students classified as low income (slope = -0.042)



B. Students not classified as low income (slope = -0.125)



Note. Regular attendance is the percent of students who miss fewer than three days of school each month. Panel A shows the regular attendance rate by district poverty rate, for students who are individually classified as low income, while Panel B also shows the regular attendance by district poverty rate, but for students who are not classified as low income. Source: Author's calculation based on the OSPI data.

APPENDIX TABLE A1

Superintendent participants at the October 21, 2024 UW superintendent convening

Name	School District
Kelly Aramaki	Bellevue
Kurt Buttleman	Seattle (Asst. Supt. Finance)
Kristi Dominguez	Ferndale
James Everett	Meridian
Trevor Greene	Yakima
Justin Irish	Anacortes
Michelle Kuss-Cybula	Oak Harbor
John Parker	Central Valley
Damien Pattenaude	Renton
Chris Pearson	Burlington-Edison
Concie Pedroza	Tukwila
Dani Pfeiffer	Federal Way
Jeff Snell	Vancouver
Amii Thompson	Bainbridge Island
Heather Tow-Yick	Issaquah
Israel Vela	Kent

Note. Superintendent Thompson attended the July 2024 convening but not the October convening. Seattle School District Assistant Superintendent for Finance represented Superintendent Brent Jones by proxy. Dr. Ishmael Vivanco, Superintendent of Northwest Educational Service District 189, also attended, representing school districts in that Educational Service District.

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