

Op-Ed Draft:

## Local Levies Can't Keep Covering for the State's Broken School Funding System

Washington's Constitution is a lengthy read, but one thing it says clear as day is that it is State's *paramount duty* to ensure sufficient funding for our public schools. That means the State — not individual communities — is responsible for funding the basic education for every student in the state of Washington.

Local levies were never meant to carry that weight. Levies exist so communities can invest in the programs and opportunities that reflect local values — things like outdoor education, music, arts, and smaller class sizes. In Bellingham, voters have consistently shown up for kids, time and time again.

But today, levies aren't paying for the "extra." They're paying for the basics — heat, insurance, special education services, and staff that the State requires but doesn't fully fund. And that is a fundamental failure of the system.

Over the last several years, essential operating costs have skyrocketed. Utilities are up more than 40 percent. Insurance premiums have more than doubled. Special education needs have increased, to say nothing of the costs of hiring and retaining qualified educators in a region where housing costs continue to rise. Meanwhile, state funding formulas have barely budged.

Instead of adjusting to real-world costs, the State continues to rely on outdated formulas that ignore local housing markets and staffing realities. In Bellingham, this has resulted in a regionalization factor that is the lowest in the county despite having the highest median housing costs. It has also left special education deeply underfunded — to the point that the district must shift millions of dollars away from general education simply to comply with state law. Mandates that are rarely funded by the lawmakers who create them.

And now, with enrollment fluctuating, the State has considered pulling back already-budgeted funds, even though every superintendent and school employee can tell you: the cost of running a school does not shrink just because enrollment dips. You still have to heat the buildings. You still have to run buses. You still have to provide mandated services. Fixed costs are still fixed.

This isn't just unfair — it's unconstitutional. A child's access to a stable, fully funded education shouldn't depend on the generosity of their neighbors or the volatility of enrollment trends. When the State underfunds education, communities with stronger tax

bases end up patching the holes, while less-resourced districts simply can't. That inequity compounds year after year.

This week, the Bellingham School Board adopted a new resolution urging the Legislature to fix these problems. Labor unions, community organizations, and civic partners across the region are also signing onto a public letter calling on the State to honor its constitutional obligations. Both documents outline the same core issue: Washington cannot keep balancing its budget on the backs of local taxpayers and expecting communities to cover basic education costs.

Bellingham is fortunate to have a community that believes in its children. But it shouldn't require extraordinary local effort just to give kids what our Constitution has promised them for more than 130 years. And it shouldn't leave other districts without the same resources struggling to provide the basics.

Fully funded public schools are not just an investment in children — they're an investment in the stability and future of Bellingham and every community in Washington. Strong schools mean a strong workforce, a strong economy, and a healthier, more resilient state.

This legislative session, lawmakers have a clear choice: continue with piecemeal fixes and outdated formulas, or finally commit to a funding system that reflects the real cost of operating schools in 2026, not 2018.

Our community will keep doing its part. The Legislature must update the public education funding formula to reflect the real cost of education in 2026, not 2018. Without this update, we will continue to see a steady decline in the quality of our public schools, and we will be unable to provide the same level of education to our children as we have in the past. The Bellingham School Board's resolution is a call to action for the Legislature to take responsibility for the future of our children's education.

### **TIGHTER VERSION (If this is the vibe):**

Washington's Constitution is unusually direct: educating our children is the State's *paramount duty*. Not a shared duty. Not a "nice to have." The duty.

Local levies were never meant to fund the basics of that duty. They exist so communities can build on top of the foundation — adding the programs, opportunities, and experiences

that reflect local values. In Bellingham, voters have always stepped up for kids. That generosity is one of the defining features of this community.

But generosity is not supposed to replace the State.

Right now, local levies are covering operating costs the State is legally obligated to fund. Insurance costs have doubled. Utilities are up more than 40 percent. Special education remains deeply underfunded, forcing districts to shift millions away from general education. Meanwhile, state formulas for regionalization and staff experience are years out of date and do not reflect the actual cost of living or the qualifications of the educators standing in our classrooms every day.

This is why districts across Washington — not just Bellingham — are cutting programs, draining reserves, and using local tax dollars to fill holes in a system the State is required to maintain.

Worse still, the State has considered reducing budgeted education dollars when enrollment fluctuates, as if the cost of running a school goes down because a few seats are empty. It doesn't. Heating bills remain. Transportation remains. Mandated services remain. Children remain.

When the State pulls back, the burden shifts to local communities — and that creates inequity. Communities with stronger tax bases can patch some of the holes. Communities without that capacity can't. A child's opportunity shouldn't depend on the property wealth of their ZIP code.

That inequity compounds every year the State fails to act.

This month, the Bellingham School Board adopted a resolution urging the Legislature to update outdated formulas, fully fund mandated services, maintain budgeted funding regardless of enrollment, and finally build a sustainable education funding system. Labor unions, community groups, and civic organizations across the state are joining a public letter calling for the same.

Our message is simple: Bellingham will continue to support its schools — proudly and generously — but our community should not be asked to do the State's job. And neither should any other.

Fully funding public education isn't just about kids, though they feel it first. It's about the strength of our workforce, the stability of our communities, and the long-term health of our state.

promise. It's time for the Legislature to keep it.

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