



Providing Reliable Transportation for At-Risk Students

2025–27 Operating Budget Decision Package

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

Washington state’s model for funding school districts to provide students with transportation to and from school is opaque, unpredictable, and does not sufficiently reflect or cover the actual costs. Experience demonstrates that when any part of the K–12 system fails to operate efficiently, effectively, and equitably, the most vulnerable and disadvantaged students are hit hardest. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) requests funding to provide reliable transportation to and from school for special passengers, including special education students, homeless students, and students in foster care.

FISCAL DETAIL

Operating Expenditures	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
General Fund 001-01 (program 022)	\$50,063,000	\$101,742,000	\$101,742,000	\$101,742,000
Opportunities Pathway 17F (program 068)	\$252,000	\$511,000	\$511,000	\$511,000
Total Expenditures	\$50,315,000	\$102,253,000	\$102,253,000	\$102,253,000
Biennial Totals	\$152,568,000		\$204,506,000	
Staffing	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
FTEs	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Average Annual	\$0.00		\$0.00	
Object of Expenditure	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
Obj. N	\$50,315,000	\$102,253,000	\$102,253,000	\$102,253,000
Revenue	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
Fund 001	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Total Revenue	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Biennial Totals	\$0.00		\$0.00	

PACKAGE DESCRIPTION

What is the problem, opportunity, or priority you are addressing with the request?

The state's current K–12 student transportation funding model does not adequately meet the needs of the system, particularly the needs of students identified as special passengers. This group of students includes students receiving special education services, students experiencing homelessness, and students living in foster care. This proposal funds reliable and consistent transportation to and from school for these students, regardless of socioeconomic background or individual circumstance. Lack of reliable transportation contributes to student absenteeism, negatively impacts student success, and leads to lower high school graduation rates, particularly among Washington's most vulnerable students.

The Washington State Report Card shows that while 69.7% of students missed fewer than two days of school a month during the 2022–23 school year, that percentage fell to 61.7% for students with disabilities, 45.7% for students experiencing homelessness, and 59.3% for students living in foster care. These same student groups' four-year graduation rates are 66.8%, 63.2%, and 53.1% respectively, while the overall graduation rate sits at 83.6%.¹ By providing consistent transportation to special passengers, Washington can support attendance across these student groups, strengthen academic outcomes and graduation rates for systemically disadvantaged students, and better meet the state's obligation to provide all students with the high-quality education to which they are legally and constitutionally entitled.

What is your proposal?

OSPI requests dedicated funding to provide special passengers, including students receiving special education services, students experiencing homelessness, and students living in foster care, have consistent and reliable student transportation to and from school. Funds provided in support of this policy will be specifically earmarked for this purpose and will not be able to be spent on other goods or services.

How is your proposal impacting equity in the state?

1. This proposal is directly connected to equitable access to educational opportunities for Washington students. See above for more details.
2. At the forefront of every program, policy, and decision, OSPI actively focuses on ensuring all students have access to the instruction and support they need to succeed in our schools. This proposal is focused on the needs of our most vulnerable students, particularly students with disabilities, students of color, American Indian/Alaska Native students, and highly mobile students including migrant students, those in foster care, and those experiencing homelessness. These student groups face unique systemic barriers to completing their K–12 education, barriers which perpetuate larger systemic inequities that persist along racial and socioeconomic lines.
3. See above.
4. See above.

¹ Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). (9 September, 2024). Washington State Report Card. <https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.wa.k12.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/103300>.

What are you purchasing and how does it solve the problem?

This request funds a state K–12 transportation formula that provides transportation to and from school for special passengers. Funds will support costs associated with student transportation operations including gas, driver labor, and routine vehicle maintenance. Funds provided in support of this policy will be specifically earmarked for this purpose and will not be able to be spent on other goods or services.

What alternatives did you explore and why was this option chosen?

OSPI proposed transitioning the state’s K–12 system to a new student transportation funding formula during the 2023–25 biennium. Unfortunately, the Legislature was deterred by the cost of a complete overhaul.

OSPI submitted a budget request for the 2023–25 biennium to fully fund transportation costs for all students.² The 2022 Legislature allocated \$13,000,000 for fiscal year 2023 through an operating budget proviso in Senate Bill 5693, Sec. 507(12) to support special passengers. This proviso was intended to support transportation safety net funding to school districts with a demonstrated need for additional transportation funding for special passengers. OSPI collected data from districts, and distributed the funding to districts who submitted special transportation costs. Funding was continued into the 2023–25 biennial operating budget, Senate Bill 5950, Sec. 507(9), at \$13,000,000 per fiscal year.

In fiscal year 2024, OSPI received applications from 67 school districts with needs totaling \$74,803,535.

What resources does the agency already have that are dedicated to this purpose?

Currently, OSPI does not have existing resources dedicated to this purpose. OSPI proposed transitioning to a new student transportation funding formula during the 2023–25 biennium. Unfortunately, the Legislature was deterred by the cost of a complete overhaul. The agency cannot overhaul an underfunded and broken transportation system within existing resources.

ASSUMPTIONS AND CALCULATIONS

Expansion, reduction, elimination or alteration of a current program or service:

This proposal shifts the state’s student transportation funding model.

Detailed assumptions and calculations:

OSPI used enrollment data from the current 2023–24 school year in three separate student categories: students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and students in foster care. The total student enrollment for these three categories was 209,427. To cover the

² Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSP). (September, 2022). *Providing for Adequate and Predictable Student Transportation to School*. <https://ospi.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/2023-08/p2-student-transportation-funding-model.pdf>.

increased cost of special transportation for some, not all, of the students in these special categories, OSPI proposes a per-student allocation of \$310 for the 2024–25 school year and \$540 for the 2025–26 school year. Funds allocated will be considered revenue in *Program 99 – To/From Transportation* and must be spent only to cover the excess costs of transporting these students to and from school.

Workforce assumptions:

This proposal does not impact state workforce assumptions.

Historical funding:

Historically, dedicated funds for special passengers have been provided through the Student Transportation Allocation Reporting System (STARS). Unfortunately, the funding has not been adequate to support special passenger transportation.

Fiscal Year 2026

- Headcount = 209,427 (students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and students in foster care)
- Total Funds = \$0
- Near General Fund = \$0
- Other Funds = \$0

Fiscal Year 2027

- Headcount = 209,427 (students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and students in foster care)
- Total Funds = \$0
- Near General Fund = \$0
- Other Funds = \$0

STRATEGIC AND PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

Strategic framework:

Many students depend on reliable transportation to and from school to participate in and receive their public education. This proposal supports OSPI's strategic goals #1, #2, and #4 by providing all of Washington's K–12 students with strong educational foundations; providing equitable access to rigorous, learner-centered options in all communities; and supporting school districts through consistent, timely, and meaningful funding and supports that center the needs of students.

Performance outcomes:

Funding this proposal will ensure that special passengers, including students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and students in foster care have reliable and consistent transportation to and from school.

OTHER COLLATERAL CONNECTIONS

Intergovernmental:

None.

Stakeholder impacts:

Many districts have expressed concern or frustration with the gaps in the current student transportation funding model. Based on the collective feedback of school districts, OSPI is confident that most districts would be supportive of additional funding to support special passenger students.

Legal or administrative mandates:

None.

Changes from current law:

This change would require a change in budget language and RCW that describes the current funding model.

State workforce impacts:

None.

State facilities impacts:

None.

Puget Sound recovery:

None.

Governor's salmon strategy:

None.