

Student Weighting Factors

Executive Summary

Subgroup Co-chairs

Dr. Kelly Aramaki: Superintendent, Bellevue School District

Shawna Moore: Washington Education Association, Highline Public Schools, Puget Sound Skills Center

Recommended Options to Explore in 2026

1. **Conduct a thorough and methodical study of states that have transitioned to weighted funding models**, identifying both lessons learned, potential pitfalls, and how the weighted approach works for different types of districts (ex. urban v. rural, large v. small). Washington is among only a handful of states that continues to use a resource-based allocation model of funding; all other states have transitioned to a version of a student-weighted funding model.
2. **Prioritize currently available solutions in the upcoming legislative sessions** to address the urgency of improving equity in our current funding model (ex. resolve the discrepancy between LEA and local levy; enhance investments in LAP and high poverty LAP funding). As we build the longer-term plan for a more equitable funding system, our students in our care right now need more support and can't wait.
3. **Identify a list of student weights** that we would want to consider in a student weighted funding model, based on the needs of students across our state.

Themes from Subgroup Meetings and Discussion

State Funding Based on Student Weighting Factors Will Help Us Achieve Ample and Equitable Funding

Washington's public education funding model must evolve to meet the real and complex needs of our students. The concept of student weighting factors centers those who have been pushed to the margins of public education, students whose needs aren't fully reflected in any prototypical model. Moving toward a student-weighted model, Washington will not only have a more sustainable, student-centered system, it will bring greater transparency and fairness to education funding, making it easier for policymakers and public to see how resources follow student need and increasing accountability for student outcomes.

Students at the Margins Reveal Strengths and Weaknesses of Our Current Funding Model

By looking through the eyes and experiences of students who are pushed to the margins of our educational system, we reveal where Washington State's funding system shines and where it

falls short. Our group highlighted stories of students who are pushed to the margins which include but are not limited to students who are from generationally underserved communities, students who live in under-resourced communities, students with intellectual or developmental disabilities, students in foster care, students who are incarcerated, students impacted by trauma, and students who are experiencing homelessness.

Centering Students and Community Voices in the Process

The subgroup agreed that meaningful funding reform must begin with those most impacted by the system – students and families themselves. Authentic engagement and co-design are essential; “nothing about us, without us” should guide the process. Future work must elevate student voice by asking: What is working in your education? What isn’t working? What would it take to feel truly supported?

A Shared Definition of Ample and Equitable

In striving for ample and equitable funding, members articulated the importance of working on a shared definition of “equity” and “equitable resourcing”. Since the 1960s, education funding has been structured around adult-centered systems – staffing formulas, compliance rules, and program categories.

Education Funding is About Investment Not Costs

Moving toward a student-centered model requires both structural change and a mindset shift. One participant noted that instead of talking about the “costs” of education (which equates education to business or commodities), we should call the funding of education what it is: an “investment”. Ample and equitable investment in students and public education will bring valuable returns, including the thriving of individuals, communities, and our economy now and into the future.

Early Intervention and Prevention is An Equitable Investment

Members also emphasized the importance of early intervention and prevention. Investing in the earliest stages of learning and well-being is more equitable and cost-effective than reacting to challenges after they escalate.

Cross-Agency Collaboration is Essential

Our group acknowledged that schools cannot (and should not) be expected to meet every social and emotional need alone. Collaboration across systems is essential, particularly with courts, health agencies, and community organizations that work with system-involved youth.

Implementation Fidelity Will Be Key

Once a plan is designed and a roadmap to implementation is developed, fidelity of implementation and follow-through will be key. While structures and programs exist, implementation often varies widely, and supports for students can depend on local capacity rather than state design. As one participant noted, “When we get systems right, we thrive.” Another participant reminded the group, “Without a plan, a goal is a wish.” The path forward must be grounded in deliberate design and measurable outcomes, not aspirations alone.

Additional Workgroup Information

Subgroup Reflections on Washington’s Current Funding Model

Washington’s current approach, known as a resource-based or prototypical school model, allocates funding based on staffing ratios tied to an assumed “typical” school. It defines how many teachers, administrators, and support staff a district should have per number of students. This model has notable positives: it provides consistency and predictability, ensuring somewhat stable funding tied to enrollment; it demonstrates the state’s constitutional commitment to fund education; and it includes certain categorical supports such as LAP and High Poverty LAP, Career and Technical Education (CTE), and safety nets for students with high-cost needs. Additionally, the model attends to unique geographic needs.

However, participants agreed that the model does not reflect the realities or actual costs of today’s schools and students. Key roles (ex. bus drivers, paraeducators, substitutes, specialists, administrators) are not fully funded, forcing districts to stretch limited resources. The model underestimates the cost of serving students with disabilities, English learners, twice exceptional students, and highly mobile students. It also does not account for the increasing costs of unfunded mandates or new, emerging practices to address important needs such as student mental health and wellness. Over-reliance on local levies exacerbates inequities, leaving students’ educational opportunities contingent on where they live.

A participant described the current approach as an “adult-based funding model for a student-based system.” While designed for predictability, it too often reflects historical, inequitable structures rather than student needs.

Subgroup Case for a Student-Weighted Funding Model

A student-weighted funding model, now used by the majority of states across the country, allocates resources based on student needs rather than on staffing formulas. Each student begins with a base allocation, and additional funding “weights” are added for specific needs such as poverty, disability, English learner status, foster care, homelessness, highly capable, or rural isolation. Under this system, dollars follow students, ensuring that schools serving students with greater needs receive proportionally greater funding.

Weighted systems are considered to be more transparent, easy to understand and communicate, and responsive to changing student demographics. They allow for local flexibility in how dollars are spent, while maintaining equity in how dollars are distributed. Most importantly, they are designed to align resources with student outcomes rather than institutional structures.

Across the United States, approximately 30 to 32 states now use a student-weighted or hybrid model. States such as California, Oregon, Nevada, Colorado, Texas, Florida, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Maryland have implemented versions that tie funding to student need and outcomes. Roughly 15 to 18 states, including Washington, Idaho, Wyoming, North Carolina, and Tennessee, continue to operate with resource-based or staffing allocation models. Over the past decade, however, the national trend has been steadily toward weighted funding systems, reflecting an increasing recognition that one-size-fits-all resource models cannot achieve equity in diverse and dynamic educational systems.

Ultimately, the group's discussion converged on a powerful recognition: the system is not broken – it is performing exactly as it was designed to. Our collective responsibility now is to redesign it so that it serves each and every student. The future of Washington's public schools depends on whether we can move from a model that funds systems and adults to one that truly funds students and learning.