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Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION
Chris Reykdal, Superintendent

September 16, 2024

The Honorable Jay Inslee
Governor of Washington
PO Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504-0002

Dear Governor Inslee:

It is my privilege to submit to you my K–12 Operating Budget proposal for the 2025–27 Biennial Operating Budget. Public education is the cornerstone of a thriving economy and a thriving citizenry, and we have worked together with the Legislature through some particularly difficult years, facing a global pandemic and weathering the financial ups and downs of an ever-changing world while continuing to make progress in education funding and policy. You have been an exceptional partner and champion of K–12 education throughout your tenure as Governor, and it is with gratitude and great respect for your partnership and your legacy that I put forward my case for significant new state investments in public education to meet Washington’s constitutional obligation to fund a program of basic education for all students.

Following a decision in the *McCleary* case, our State Supreme Court determined that the Legislature was fully funding basic education, but insisted that funding needs were ever-changing, and would require vigilance. There is no question that our state made important progress in funding our schools between 2017 and 2019. However, the funding enhancements weren’t centered on achieving the appropriate investment levels to wholly support our students’ diverse needs. Our Legislature was tasked by the Court with fully funding the model in place at the time, not a model for the future.

No matter how you look at the numbers, Washington currently underfunds K–12 education by around \$4 billion per year. The share of our Operating Budget dedicated to K–12 education has shrunk in recent years from its high-water mark of over 50% in 2019 to just 43% today. When looking at how we invest in our schools as a share of our thriving economy, Washington invests 3.1% of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in education while the national average is 3.6%. Washington remains behind high-performing states like Massachusetts when it comes to per-pupil spending at \$17,000 per student compared with \$21,000. In addition, despite the Legislature’s increased investments in elementary and secondary education in the 2022 fiscal year, the overall decline in education spending caused the state to seek a waiver of its federal Maintenance of Equity (MOE) requirement by nearly \$600,000,000. The federal government

approved the 2023 waiver but they may not—and should not—grant another if Washington continues to fall behind on MOE.

I have grouped this year's proposed investments into four categories. First and foremost, Washington must fund basic education as it is currently defined and constitutionally required. That means fully funding special education and providing adequate funding for student transportation to and from school. It also means providing sufficient funding for the materials, supplies, and operating costs needed to provide instruction each day so that districts do not need to deplete other important educational programs to cover these basic and necessary expenses. Funding basic education means meeting state-outlined school staffing ratios and supporting living wages for those staff, particularly classified staff.

But funding basic education as we know it today does not reflect the real costs of what students, families, and communities need from their schools and educators. Washington needs state-level coordination around student mental and behavioral health. We need increased funding for high-poverty schools and for students experiencing poverty within low-poverty schools. We need to fund the strategies that lift up our Native students and acknowledge the system's unique legal and educational obligation to tribal citizens. We must remove fees for students striving for postsecondary success who enroll in dual credit opportunities and continue to invest in finding and training the best educators in the face of a persistent educator workforce shortage.

Budget writers must recognize that schools today are expected to do everything from feeding and educating students, to supporting, protecting, and nurturing their developmental, physical, and mental health. Washington must look to the strengths of its communities, continuing to invest in state- and district-level partnerships between the K–12 system and the community-based organizations that are deeply embedded in our diverse communities. From early literacy to 9th grade and college success, from youth development to career-connected environmental learning, these partners have the knowledge of students and families, and the specialized expertise needed to pinpoint and meet diverse needs across the state.

And finally, lawmakers must fund the important work they have tasked my office with leading and implementing, from updating our inefficient and poorly functioning apportionment system to making progress on the state's plan to provide oversight over the educational delivery of justice-involved youth.

I know that you and lawmakers will have some very difficult decisions to make, but our students and families need the state to step up and affirm the importance of public education and its place at the forefront of Washington's priorities. The proposals described above, alongside others I have put forward, begin to fill the \$4 billion dollar hole in our state's K–12 education funding with a targeted total request of less than \$2 billion per year in the 2025–27 biennium. I hope you will consider all of these requests and the ways in which they move the system towards offering the world-class education our students deserve as you put together your final biennial Operating Budget as Governor of the State of Washington.

Governor Inslee
September 16, 2024
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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Chris Reykdal". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "C" and a stylized "R".

Chris Reykdal
Superintendent of
Public Instruction