

THE WILLIAM D. RUCKELSHAUS CENTER

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Situation Assessment of the K-12 Education Governance Structure in Washington



Prepared for the Washington State Legislature
by the **William D. Ruckelshaus Center**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

GLOSSARY	4
I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
II. INTRODUCTION.....	7
III. HISTORY AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE	7
A. HOW HAS WASHINGTON’S K-12 GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE EVOLVED OVER TIME?	7
B. WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE K-12 GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE AND STUDENT OUTCOMES?.....	9
C. HOW DOES WASHINGTON’S GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE COMPARE TO OTHERS?.....	10
IV. SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO TASKS SPECIFIED IN THE BUDGET PROVISIO	12
A. ISSUES, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES RELATED TO ADMINISTRATION OF K-12 EDUCATION IN WASHINGTON STATE	12
B. OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE ALIGNMENT, INTEGRATION, AND/OR CONSOLIDATION OF ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF ENTITIES IN THE K-12 GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE.....	20
C. AREAS OF POTENTIAL FOCUS IN A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS	24
V. POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS	25
A. PERCEIVED BENEFITS	25
B. PERCEIVED CHALLENGES	26
VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS	26
VII. RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE ABSENCE OF A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS.....	29
VIII. APPENDICES.....	30
APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW PROCESS AND DATA ANALYSIS	30
APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	31
APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW LIST.....	32
APPENDIX 4: BIBLIOGRAPHY	34
APPENDIX 5: INFORMATION ABOUT THE RUCKELSHAUS CENTER	35
APPENDIX 6: WORKING WITH THE RUCKELSHAUS CENTER	36

Glossary

DCYF	Department of Children, Youth, and Family
EOGOAC	Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee
ESD	Educational Service District
ESEA	Elementary and Secondary Education Act
ISD	Intermediate School District
MBL	Mastery-Based Learning
OSPI	Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction
PESB	Professional Educator Standards Board
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
RCW	Revised Codes of Washington
SB	Senate Bill
SBE	State Board of Education
SJR	Senate Joint Resolution
SPI	Superintendent of Public Instruction
STBCTC	State Board for Community and Technical Colleges
WTECB	Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board

I. Executive Summary

The [William D. Ruckelshaus Center](#) (the Center) was funded by a 2021/2022 legislative budget proviso to conduct a situation assessment of the state's K-12 governance structure (assessment) "to gauge the prospects for developing a collaborative approach to integration of leadership, aligning roles and responsibilities, and increasing efficiency and responsiveness of the state's K-12 education governance structure." The proviso directed the Center to:

- "Identify issues, challenges, and opportunities related to administration and governance of K-12 education in Washington State;
- "Explore potential opportunities for the integration, alignment, and/or consolidation of roles and responsibilities of entities; and
- "Identify key areas of focus."

The Center's Assessment Team conducted 42 semi-structured individual and group interviews with 51 people working with or for K-12 governance and associated entities in Washington State (See [Appendix 3](#) for a list of interviewees) from late August to early December. Interviewees included:

- Representatives of state agencies, boards, and commissions;
- State Legislature;
- Governor's Office; and
- Organizations representing the interests of parents, teachers, classified education staff, principals, school board members, superintendents, educational service districts, historically disadvantaged populations, rural school districts, special needs students, and the business community.

The assessment found that many interviewees do not see Washington's education system as consistently focused on serving the best interests of students, particularly students that are in some way disadvantaged, including those who live in poverty, live in rural areas, have special needs, and are non-White. Several respondents noted that the education achievement gap for low-income students, compared to their higher-income classmates, stubbornly continues, despite decades of effort to alleviate it.¹ Educational outcomes for Black, Latino/a/x, and Native American students also lag behind their White classmates. Outcomes for Washington's Native American students are particularly concerning, despite some well-performing tribal compact schools. Other racial or ethnic groups, such as Pacific Islanders or Southeast Asians, may be subsumed under broader categories, such as Asian, and their specific needs not recognized or adequately addressed.

Several interviewees, even some with many years of experience within the system, described the governance structure as confusing. Some described State agencies and associated interest groups as an "alphabet soup." Others cited a lack of understanding and clarity about the roles and responsibilities of each agency. The role and activities of the Education Service Districts (ESDs) confused several people, for example. Others mentioned that they found it difficult to know which agency to approach about specific issues, because of the sometimes-overlapping nature of responsibilities among agencies, or just a lack of clear information about those responsibilities.

¹ <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/washington-schools-rank-near-the-bottom-in-narrowing-rich-poor-achievement-gap/> For more detail see: <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/massachusetts-is-a-lot-like-us-so-why-are-its-schools-so-much-better/>

Among the core State K-12 governance entities—Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), State Board of Education (SBE), and Professional Educators Standards Board (PESB)—the lines of responsibility are not clearly delineated or understood in some areas, despite efforts in recent years to resolve many of them. In addition, several interviewees perceived the infrequent attendance of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI), a member of the SBE, at SBE meetings as a sign of political infighting and lack of role clarity. Others saw it more as disengagement.

Several interviewees questioned whether the governance structure is designed to best serve the needs and interests of students or whether it is designed to serve the interests of the adults that work within the structure. Several people noted that both the entities within the governance structure and the interest organizations that influence them may have interests that conflict with the best interests of students. Multiple interviewees cited the perceived lack of trust and political infighting among K-12 governance entities as evidence that the governance structure may not always prioritize the needs of students. However, several interviewees also expressed skepticism that changes to the governance structure would result in better outcomes for students.

While some interviewees perceive a relative lack of rancor within Washington State’s K-12 governance structure and cited examples of coordination and collaboration among SBE, OSPI, and PESB, they agreed on the need for greater alignment, coordination, and collaboration among all entities within the K-12 governance structure. A few interviewees also mentioned a lack of communication among divisions within OSPI that at times hinders effective coordination and collaboration.

Interviewees disagreed about the role of the governance structure in terms of the outcomes of the K-12 system. Some interviewees felt strongly that the governance structure plays a key role in the problems facing the K-12 system, including issues with alignment within the system and with early learning and higher education, as well as issues of equity, post-secondary enrollment, and student achievement. Others saw the governance structure as essentially agnostic and the problems facing the K-12 system as dependent on factors such as leaders, policy, and the unique circumstances of schools and districts.

Areas of potential focus

Interviewees suggested that the interrelated issues of student success, equity, accountability, funding, and data be the focus of this report, with the primary focus on a governance system that will serve the interests of all students equitably. Most interviewees felt that no governance issues should be avoided in a potential collaborative process.

Potential benefits and challenges of a collaborative process

The assessment found a strong consensus among interviewees that a collaborative approach to explore the potential for integration of leadership, aligning roles and responsibilities, and increasing efficiency and responsiveness of the state’s K-12 education governance structure would be worthwhile at this time.

Recommendations for a collaborative process

The Assessment Team recommends the formation of a new working group or committee of up to 25 individuals for a term of limited duration. Details can be found in [Section VI](#).

II. Introduction

On June 30, 2021, the [William D. Ruckelshaus Center](#) (the Center) was funded by a 2021/2022 legislative budget proviso to conduct a situation assessment of the state's K-12 governance structure (assessment). The assessment's purpose is "to gauge the prospects for developing a collaborative approach to integration of leadership, aligning roles and responsibilities, and increasing efficiency and responsiveness of the state's K-12 education governance structure." The proviso directed the Center to:

- "Identify issues, challenges, and opportunities related to administration and governance of K-12 education in Washington State;
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- "Identify key areas of focus."

III. History and Comparative Perspective²

A. How has Washington's K-12 governance structure evolved over time?

As in many other states, Washington's education system evolved out of the many small school districts created at the local level to teach children in their local communities in the years prior to and after statehood in 1889. Although education was largely a local affair at that time, the framers of the State Constitution saw it as not just one duty of the State, but the preeminent one. Article IX of Washington State's constitution proclaims that "It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste, or sex."

The Territorial Board of Education, which later became the State Board of Education (SBE), was created in the 1870s and the elected position of Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) was created in 1889. Schools initially taught only up to the 8th grade. They were deeply rooted in their communities and there was a strong community spirit supporting them. At the same time, many schools and districts could not fund themselves, particularly as the cost of education increased with secondary school becoming more normal in urban areas.

For much of the 20th Century, governors tended to leave education policy to SPIs, who reshaped the State's education system in the 20th Century. From 1941 to 1957, Pearl Wanamaker served as a powerful SPI. She instituted several major reforms to consolidate and make school districts more financially viable, including dramatically increasing State funding for education. She is also credited with creating community colleges, school nurses, and programs for both disabled and highly capable children in Washington.

Despite the State constitution's forward-thinking admonition against distinctions and preferences "on account of race, color, caste, or sex," de facto segregation by race, based on red-lining and other proscriptions, was the norm until the 1960s and 1970s. In that era the federal government became much more involved in education with the passage of several laws prohibiting discrimination based on race, sex, and disability. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) instituted a

² The Assessment Team recognizes the significant contributions of Edie Harding to this report, who provided a comprehensive history of Washington's K-12 system and governance, and thanks her for her invaluable insight.

comprehensive set of programs to provide federal aid to the disadvantaged. Congress has continued to reauthorize the ESEA since its enactment.

For most of the State's Native American students, the story was quite different. In 1860, the Bureau of Indian Affairs established the first of many Indian boarding schools in the country on the Yakima Indian Reservation. Native American children were forcibly separated from their parents and communities and sent to these boarding schools. To force Native American students to assimilate into White American culture, the schools forbade students to speak their languages or engage in their cultural practices and even gave them new "White" names. Discipline in the schools was often severe and there were many allegations of abuse, as well as outbreaks of disease. It was not until 1978 that Native American parents gained the legal right to deny their children's placement in off-reservation schools.

In the 1970s, the State Legislature became more engaged in education, as it added professional staff, formed committees, and examined issues more deeply. In 1969, the Legislature passed a bill requiring the formation of a statewide system of "intermediate school districts" (ISDs) to more productively use funds, increase educational leadership, and provide more services to school districts, replacing county education offices. In 1975, ISDs were renamed Educational Service Districts (ESDs).

In 1983, the publication of [A Nation At Risk](#) raised alarm bells in the nation's capital about the state of education in the U.S. relative to other countries. The federal response culminated in a push for standards and assessments in the 2001 reauthorization of ESEA called the No Child Left Behind Act.

In 2000, Governor Gary Locke created the Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB) to focus on the preparation and certification of educators, with standards of knowledge and competency necessary to help students with diverse abilities, experiences, needs, and learning styles.

Amid this national reassessment of education, the Washington Commission on Student Learning, led by Teresa (Terry) Bergeson, developed statewide standards for students, including the Washington Assessment of Student Learning. Bergeson went on to serve three terms as SPI from 1997-2009, leading further development of standards, assessments, and standardized tests for the State's education system. In 2006, the Governor's Office of the Education Ombuds was created "to reduce the opportunity gap by supporting families, students, educators, and communities in understanding the public K-12 education system and resolving concerns collaboratively."³

Governor Christine Gregoire (2005-2013) attempted to reshape the State's education system. In 2005, she convened the Comprehensive Education Study Steering Committee to evaluate the State's education system and reimagine it for the 21st Century, leading to several reforms. In 2006, Gregoire created the Department of Early Learning (later incorporated under the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) in 2017 by Governor Jay Inslee) to consolidate a number of programs focused on early learning. In 2009, the Legislature created the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (EOGOAC) to synthesize findings and recommendations from five 2008 achievement gap studies "into an implementation plan, and to recommend policies and strategies...to close the achievement gap."⁴

Washington Learns, Governor Gregoire's most ambitious reform attempt, proposed a major rethink of the State's education system to boost student achievement and increase higher education attainment.

³ <https://www.oeo.wa.gov/en/about-us>

⁴ RCW [28A.300.136](#)

Washington Learns would have created a new Department of Education, led by a cabinet-level director, to consolidate the functions of OSPI, SBE, and PESB. It also proposed a seamless alignment of early learning, K-12, and higher education and set out goals for measurement and accountability, but the legislation to enact it failed to pass. However, in 2012, the Legislature folded the duties of the Higher Education Coordinating Board into the Washington Student Achievement Council, whose mission is to increase educational attainment and improve student transitions from secondary to postsecondary education and among postsecondary institutions.

Education Funding in Washington

For much of the State's history, education funding came from local property taxes, levies, and the State. In the late 1970s, the Seattle School District and other districts sued the State, arguing that the State constitution required the State to fund basic education rather than rely on local levies. In 1978, the State Supreme Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, charging lawmakers to fund basic education. In 1995, the Legislature created the Quality Education Council to recommend a new education funding formula.

In 2007, the McCleary family, along with several school districts, local teachers' unions, and others, sued the State for failing to meet its constitutional duty to fund education. In 2012, the State Supreme Court set a deadline for lawmakers to fund education by 2018. The Legislature created the Joint Select Committee on Article IX Litigation to develop a response to the McCleary Decision, but the court again found that the State was not making adequate progress on resolving the issue.

In 2017, the Legislature increased State allocations for K-12 basic education programs and restricted the use of local levies and assistance to "enrichment." In the 2018 session, legislators increased property taxes to fund statewide education for the second time in two years, and the court declared the State in compliance with the McCleary Decision. As a result, K-12 education funding increased significantly and now represents 51.5 percent of the State's near-general fund in FY 2020 and 2021, at \$27.3 billion.⁵ Higher education comprises 8 percent, at \$4.6 billion. The statewide allocation per student was estimated by the Legislature to be \$9,400 in the 2020-21 school year.⁶ However, the issue of State funding of K-12 education continues to be an issue.

Today there are 295 public school districts and 6 State-tribal education compact schools in operation in Washington. The largest school district is Seattle, with 55,000 students, and the smallest is Stehekin, with fewer than 10.

B. What is the relationship between the K-12 governance structure and student outcomes?

During the interview process, several interviewees asked about the relationship between the structure of K-12 governance and student outcomes: Is there a correlation? To answer this question, the Assessment Team reviewed the academic and grey literature on education governance, with a focus on the United States (*see Appendix 4 for a bibliography*). Their research indicates that there is no clearly defined relationship between the structure of K-12 governance and student outcomes. In addition, their research suggests that no specific governance structure leads to better outcomes than others; good outcomes can occur in very different governance structures. The differential outcomes of governance structures likely result from variables that interact with governance structure, including things like leadership, context, culture, and funding.

⁵ <https://leg.wa.gov/LIC/Documents/EducationAndInformation/Citizens%20Guide%20to%20K-12%20Finance.pdf>

⁶ Ibid.

One can see this variability of outcomes across states, but also within Washington State, where school performance varies widely. For example, a report by the Center for Educational Effectiveness found a number of what they termed “positive outlier schools” in Washington, which performed well above the median on a number of academic and engagement indicators, in schools in both urban and rural areas with both relatively high numbers students in poverty and high levels of American Indian/Alaska Native, Black, Latino/a/x students.⁷ These schools thrived through purposeful leadership that included building trust with students and families, drawing on the diverse strengths of students and families, and eliminating deficit-based vocabulary.

“[The Team’s] research indicates that there is no clearly defined relationship between the structure of K-12 governance and student outcomes. In addition, their research suggests that no specific governance structure leads to better outcomes than others. Rather, good outcomes can occur in very different governance structures...”

“This is not to say, however, that the state’s K-12 governance structure has no impact on student achievement and other outcomes. As many interviewees noted, the structure of K-12 governance in many ways drives the behavior of the overall system, as it creates incentives, constraints, drivers, opportunities, risks, and problems for different groups, interests, and entities.”

This is not to say, however, that the State’s K-12 governance structure has no impact on student achievement and other outcomes. As many interviewees noted, the K-12 governance structure in many ways drives the behavior of the overall K-12 system by creating incentives, constraints, drivers, opportunities, risks, and problems for different groups, interests, and entities.

At the same time, the State’s governance structure is deeply impacted by federal funding and regulations, as well as local school board decisions. Finally, as several interviewees noted, leadership and other factors can play crucial roles in the outcomes that the governance structure produces. This includes leadership at all levels in the system, from the Governor and Superintendent of Public Instruction to school boards, superintendents, principals, and advocates outside of the system.

C. How does Washington’s governance structure compare to others?

Several interviewees expressed interest in knowing more about how other states and countries structure education governance and what we could learn from them. In terms of how Washington compares with other states, the Assessment Team’s research is instructive: nearly all the challenges of Washington’s K-12 governance structure detailed by interviewees in this situation assessment are endemic to education governance in the United States.⁸ This in large part arises from the complexity of the education governance structure in the U.S. and the diversity of opinions about what the education system should accomplish.

⁷ <https://www.effectiveness.org/research-resources>

⁸ Although the Team researched a wide range of sources (see [Appendix 4](#) for bibliography), much of the discussion that follows in this section comes from Paul Manna and Patrick McGuinn, Editors, *Education Governance for the Twenty-First Century, Overcoming the Structural Barriers to School Reform*, Brookings Institute Press, 2013, particularly Chapter 17, the Tall Task of Education Governance Reform.

The complexity and multiple layers of K-12 governance make accountability elusive. Influence, decision-making, and veto power are widely distributed within the system, such that no one person or institution can be held accountable for the failures or successes of the entire system. And superintendents and principals end up with limited operational flexibility as layers of statutes, obligations, contractual stipulations, and other requirements tie their hands. For people not working within it, this system can seem opaque and impenetrable.

The conclusion of at least one comparison of two consistently highly-ranked educational systems in South Korea and Finland is that, “Overall there is not a great deal to suggest that governance makes a strong difference to education outcomes for children, at least for the international education community’s star performers.”⁹ According to the literature the Assessment Team consulted, K-12 governance in the U.S. is structured contrary to basic management principles, which suggest that organizations are most likely to succeed when there is a clear vision and goals, frontline managers are given the operational discretion to solve problems at their level, and there are strong systems of accountability for everyone to achieve desired results.

“According to the literature the Assessment Team consulted, K-12 governance in the U.S. is structured contrary to basic management principles, which suggest that organizations are most likely to succeed when there is a clear vision and goals, frontline managers are given the operational discretion to solve problems at their level, and there are strong systems of accountability for everyone to achieve desired results.”

⁹ Ibid., pp. 273-274. The authors say, “Nonetheless there are features here that are worth exploring further. If you want to be Finland or South Korea, it would seem to be the case that you should adopt policies that value good teachers; devolve funding and administration to a local level but possibly keep decision-making out of the schools themselves; adopt enrollment policies that offer little or no parent choice; and emphasize preprimary education...it might also make sense to devolve responsibility for curriculum and assessment to a local level. The overarching message from this examination of high-fliers is much the same as many other places: teaching matters—pedagogy, curriculum, resources, and assessment. Good governance must support these items as a priority.”

IV. Summary of responses to tasks specified in the budget proviso

This section details the Center’s main findings on the specific tasks the Legislature outlined in the budget proviso funding this situation assessment, to identify:

- a) the issues, challenges, and opportunities related to administration of K-12 education in Washington State;
- b) opportunities for the alignment, integration and/or consolidation of roles and responsibilities of entities in the K-12 governance structure; and
- c) areas of potential focus for a collaborative process.

A. Issues, challenges, and opportunities related to administration of K-12 education in Washington State

Issues and Challenges

Respondents raised multiple issues and challenges related to K-12 education administration and governance in the State. Opportunities are identified immediately afterward, both in this section as well as in Section IV. B.

Local Control

Several interviewees expressed interest in exploring the balance of control between local school boards and the State. For example, most of these interviewees favored increasing OSPI’s authority to set and maintain standards over some areas (e.g., curriculum) so children can more seamlessly transfer between districts and schools and increase the equivalence of what students learn among different districts and schools. Several interviewees suggested increasing the accountability of school districts to State agencies. Currently, for example, OSPI’s primary tool for holding school boards accountable is through its control of funding. However, the threat of withholding funding from school districts is problematic because of its potential impact on students and the negative political implications of such a decision.

Others did not support increasing OSPI’s authority. They cited recent disagreements between OSPI and some local school boards over mask mandates and other Covid-19 pandemic responses, as well as other politically charged issues, including the teaching of racial justice in schools.

While a few interviewees expressed interest in eliminating local school boards, they saw them as likely to remain a feature of the governance structure for the foreseeable future. Most interviewees expressed the view that, as longstanding features of the political and social landscape, school boards have a constituency even if most voters don’t pay close attention to school board elections or attend meetings. However, school boards are seen as giving parents and communities the opportunity to provide input into district priorities in ways that can reflect local preferences.

Complexity of the Education Governance System

Many interviewees raised the issue of the perceived complexity of the K-12 governance system, which they felt can complicate decision-making and hinder accountability. The governance system (as opposed to the more formal governance structure of government agencies, boards, and commissions) includes not just the core K-12 government agencies, boards, and commissions, but also the many other actors and influencers in K-12, from the Governor’s Office and Legislature to the many nonprofits, interest groups, unions, and others. The complexity of the system and its governance structure makes it difficult for external stakeholders and even system actors to know which entity to approach for which issue and

which person within an entity might be most appropriate to contact. Even some interviewees with relatively intimate knowledge and experience of the system admitted to occasional uncertainty about how to best get information or move an issue forward.

Parent, Student, and Community Voices

Related to the complexity of the K-12 governance structure, several interviewees raised the concern that community groups and parents find it especially difficult to know how to access K-12 decision-makers or where to turn to have their concerns addressed. Parents, students, and community groups with issues that cannot be addressed at the school level often don't know how K-12 governance is structured and who makes what decisions. A few interviewees said that while the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) represents some parents, it does not always represent certain communities or their voices, particularly low-income and non-White communities. These interviewees expressed interest in additional ways for parents to be involved.

In addition, several interviewees said, the intended beneficiaries of the K-12 system, students, have very limited opportunities to give input into K-12 policy and decision-making.¹⁰

Alignment between K-12 and Both Early Learning and Higher Education

The desire for greater alignment between K-12 and early learning providers, particularly the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), as well as institutions of higher education (including technical and vocational education), arose frequently. Multiple interviewees cited the lack of integration of early learning, K-12, and higher education as an indicator of a fractured educational system that fails to put the needs of students first.

Some interviewees favored a more seamless approach for preschool through college graduation, noting the importance of the transitions from early learning to K-12 and from K-12 to postsecondary, as well as the growing requirement in many jobs for a postsecondary degree. Relevant K-12 entities do not communicate and collaborate well with other actors, according to proponents of improved alignment of both early learning and higher education. Some cited a lack of trust among the various actors. Others said that K-12 entities do not speak with one voice and that this limits their ability to partner more effectively with early learning and higher education entities.

Some interviewees noted that a decline in college enrollments in the State, among other factors, has made higher education actors more interested in collaborating with the K-12 system. Despite this interest, some interviewees expressed frustration that even basic coordination does not happen as often or as effectively as it could. Other interviewees noted that clear incentives do not seem to exist for these two systems to work together. From another's perspective, K-12 actors often seem to want to tell higher education entities what to do rather than discuss how best to partner to achieve mutually desired outcomes for students.

Funding

The issue of funding emerged often. Some interviewees applauded the McCleary decision for expanding funding for the K-12 system, but many pointed to gaps or distortions in funding. Several interviewees noted that most of the McCleary funding has gone to teacher salaries, which they saw as important, but

¹⁰ There are some opportunities. For example, many local boards have student members and the state board has two student members.

noted that other critical needs, including textbooks, school supplies, special education, capital costs, and other staff costs remain underfunded.

The continuing inequity of funding between districts and even schools within districts was the most frequently mentioned funding issue. Several interviewees mentioned that with the continuation of the levy system, property-rich districts and neighborhoods continue to have greater resources than property-poor ones, even after the effort to equalize funding under McCleary. At least one interviewee felt that McCleary has made inequity worse, because its funding formulas remain based on property values. There seemed to be a broad consensus, however, that the Legislature is unlikely to reconsider its response to McCleary anytime soon because it was such a heavy lift to come up with the current legislation.

Others desire to revisit the prototypical model. One interviewee suggested considering replacing it with a simpler formula, such as a specific amount per student, with additional funds for historically disadvantaged students or those with special needs. Others suggested a formula they thought would better fund needs. For example, under the prototypical model, the State pays for one school psychologist for every 200,000 middle school students.

Others noted that OSPI has limited ability to move funding around to address specific needs because of State and federal restrictions. Greater discretion exists at the local level, which sometimes can mean that funding disbursed by OSPI for specific purposes, i.e., for a school psychologist, might get redirected by districts for other purposes.

Student Success

Broad agreement emerged among interviewees that any potential changes to the governance structure should center on students. A few interviewees felt that the governance system, as structured, focuses more on how adults are impacted than students and that any attempts to improve governance should consciously emphasize the needs of students.

In large part, this concern seems to stem from the sense that the K-12 system is continuing to fail many students and their families. Several interviewees noted that Washington has not made significant progress in closing the achievement gap for low-income, Black, Native American, and Latino/a/x children and remains below the median in that regard when compared to other states.

Others noted that Washington has a lower-than-average percentage of students advancing from high school to post-secondary education. As a result, many Washington businesses are recruiting college graduates from outside of the State to fill positions, while Washington students fall further behind.

Several interviewees spoke of the loss of joy, or fun, in learning, which they said is vital to instilling a desire for learning among students and inspiring lifelong learners. Others spoke of the need to better prepare students for a future world that will require very different things of them than the education system prepares them for today, which they said largely looks at past needs and trends, rather than casting forward to determine the skills, knowledge, and abilities that future employers and markets will need. Consequently, they felt, students may graduate with outmoded skills and knowledge.

To better understand what students need, some interviewees said, the education system needs to look at what the world expects from students, rather than what educators expect from students. They said that a definition of success that looks primarily at what the education system expects from its students impedes progress and limits the potential utility of education. Or, as other interviewees put it, the

hallmark of K-12 education for many is on-time high school graduation, but that does not tell an outsider or potential employer anything about what the student learned or what capabilities they acquired.

Equity

Interviewees repeatedly raised issues of equity, deeply intertwined with the issues related to student success discussed above. Respondents focused on a range of issues related to equity, including:

- Students from low-income communities;
- Groups that have been historically disadvantaged, including Black, Latino/a/x, Asian, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American;
- Students from rural communities;
- Students with special needs;¹¹ and
- Others with specific disadvantages, including recent immigrants, foster children, and children who are homeless.

Many of the issues related to special needs more acutely impact rural schools and districts than urban ones. Smaller districts have a much more difficult time providing services to students with special needs than larger districts, which have more resources to hire specialists and create programs to serve them. In addition, the specialists needed to provide care for some students may not be available in more rural areas, either because there are insufficient students under the prototypical formula to fund them or because specialists tend to live in urban areas.

Some interviewees talked about the disparities in disciplinary actions schools enforced disproportionately against Black and other students of color, sometimes at very young ages. These disciplinary actions can lead to students entering the juvenile justice system because of issues that would otherwise be handled internally in the school, creating what some referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

Some interviewees said that a disproportionate number of students with disabilities end up in the juvenile justice system and that the disproportionality may be under-counted. One interviewee noted that, while juvenile education institutions are run by local school districts, they often get neglected because the parents of the students tend to live outside of the district and so have little say about conditions in the schools.

Some interviewees mentioned the need for leadership in K-12 governance, as well as teachers, to better reflect the communities they serve, particularly in communities with large or predominantly Latino/a/x, Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, Southeast Asian, and Native American populations.

For Native American communities, the history of the government forcibly sending their children to boarding schools has left deep scars. Some interviewees talked about the generational trauma that resulted and the lack of trust in the government and in the education system that the boarding school policy engendered. Some interviewees felt that separate tribal schools are essential for Washington’s tribal communities to continue to exist, because Native American students receive very little education about their tribes and languages in Washington’s public school system. Interviewees also talked about the experience of Native American students in public schools and the discrimination and lack of cultural

¹¹ Special needs in this report are defined broadly and includes students with a 504 plan, an Individual Education Plan, or those for whom English is a second language.

understanding that can lead to misunderstanding and disconnection from the school experience and learning.

Several interviewees asserted that an education system designed to serve and support those most on the margins would best support *all* students. At least one interviewee felt that a higher level of state-level control of the education system would allow a focus on the students being left behind, which would benefit children who are low-income and/or disadvantaged and thereby raise the performance of the whole system.

Communication, Coordination, and Collaboration

Interviewees generally agreed that communication, coordination, and collaboration among agencies and entities could improve. While a few perceived high levels of collaboration already, a greater number saw major problems with communication, coordination, and collaboration. Many interviewees felt that these problems have their roots in a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, primarily, but not exclusively, among the key State K-12 agencies, OSPI, SBE, and PESB. At least one interviewee noted that the SPI has a seat at the table with voting privileges on the SBE, PESB, and EGOAC, but could do more to leverage those roles.

Some interviewees said that the territorialism and tension among agencies, perhaps stemming from a lack of role clarity, creates unnecessary conflict. This conflict can make it difficult for those in the field to know whom to listen to. It can also impact students and families, particularly the marginalized, as it distracts from the larger tasks at hand. Interviewees cited some issues, such as graduation requirements and special education personnel requirements, as examples around which there is tension.

At least one interviewee noted that the Covid-19 pandemic has finally gotten many of the key K-12 interests—OSPI, ESDs, unions, principals association, superintendents association, school districts, and nonprofits—together in the same room. However, they perceive waning interest in ongoing coordination as compared to the early days of the pandemic. They suggested continuing these kinds of meetings into the future.

At least one interviewee felt that the decision to switch half of SBE's seats to governor-appointed positions muddled the role of SBE as a policy-making body established by the Legislature.

Data Collection, Sharing, and Analysis

Overall, many interviewees felt that the quality of K-12 data and data analysis is poor and that this negatively impacts understanding of what in the education system is working and what is not.

The difficulty in obtaining data and data sharing agreements among K-12 entities arose as an obstacle to improved communication, coordination, and collaboration, as well as decision-making. Some saw the unwillingness to share data as related to broader inter-entity conflicts and territorialism.

At the local level, some interviewees noted issues with data collected from districts, some of which are not connected to the State's management information system. In addition, districts may not always have the same definitions about the data they gather as the State does.

A lack of data collection and disaggregation can hinder efforts to address issues of equity, as several interviewees noted. Smaller racial or ethnic groups, such as Pacific Islanders or Southeast Asians, may be subsumed under broader categories, such as Asian, and their specific needs not recognized or adequately addressed. Some interviewees also expressed concern Native American students who claim

their tribal affiliation, but also identify as Asian or Latino, may not be recognized as tribal members by the school system. This has led, they say, to an undercounting of Native American students in the State. One interviewee cited an example in which one Latino/a/x community in Washington, people were assumed to be of Mexican descent, though most were from Central and South America, which required translations from languages other than Spanish. Interviewees cited the need to track both household and student languages to enable schools, districts, and the State to track interpreter needs, for example with parents or caretakers. At present, only student languages are tracked.

Leadership Churn

A number of interviewees raised the issue of leadership turnover, noting that this turnover impacts the ability of entities to coordinate and collaborate because it takes time to form relationships and build trust. When people leave a leadership position (particularly people effective at building and sustaining networks and collaborating), coordination and collaboration can falter. This is especially true in the absence of formal mechanisms for coordinating and collaborating but happens even where formal mechanisms exist. Leadership churn might also limit the effectiveness of collaborative processes.

Capacity for Coordination and Innovation

Some interviewees questioned whether sufficient capacity exists within the current K-12 governance structure to support additional coordination and governance innovation, particularly within and among the core State government entities. Many entities and individuals feel overstretched by the additional demands of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. A few interviewees said that additional staff positions are needed to more effectively coordinate and collaborate.

Burden of Obligations, Requirements, and Reporting Requests on Schools

The sheer volume of obligations, statutory requirements, contract stipulations, and reporting demands on districts and schools emerged as an outcome of the complexity of the current K-12 system. That volume of obligations, requirements, stipulations, and demands has a direct impact on schools, teachers, and students. It limits needed operational flexibility of superintendents and principals and amounts to unfunded mandates for schools and districts already under tight resource constraints, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

Several interviewees mentioned how the increasing regulation of teaching and requirements, for example, to teach to standardized tests or standardized learning requirements, has limited the ability of teachers to experiment and innovate.

Schools Being Asked to Do More Than in the Past

Another challenge for the K-12 system is that, over time, schools are being asked to take on greater responsibilities to address the learning needs of students who are homeless, hungry, emotionally troubled, or have behavioral issues, family issues, or other special needs. In many ways, this makes sense; schools have long been important community resources, as some interviewees noted. This remains the case, particularly in rural parts of the State. While the State and federal governments provide financial resources to support schools and districts in addressing these extra-curricular issues, in general they are under-resourced.

It was pointed out by more than one interviewee that people involved in K-12 governance increasingly recognize that to successfully address achievement gaps, schools and districts need to help students with issues outside of the classroom that impact their learning. A child who does not have a safe living environment, cannot get enough sleep, goes to bed hungry, or has developmental or behavioral issues will have a much harder time succeeding in school, unless those issues are addressed in some way. Many districts, schools, and local governments have begun collaborating to help to fill these gaps in student needs, but the needs often exceed available resources, particularly for the districts and schools most in need.

The pandemic highlighted issues of mental health for children and youth, but as some interviewees noted, these issues have been growing for some time. According to the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families, the rate of suicide and attempted suicide for adolescents from 10 to 17 years of age tripled between 2013 and 2018.¹²

In addition, as some interviewees said, an important benefit that schools provide for working families is childcare, which may not be an explicit consideration for policymakers and administrators, but which can have important ramifications for families, communities, and the broader economy.

As the Assessment Team heard from interviewees, schools, districts, ESDs, nonprofits, and State agencies are coming up with creative ways to address some of the issues that affect learning outside of the

Mastery-Based Learning

To help close the achievement gap, create transparency, and increase understanding of the skills and abilities a high school diploma provides, the Legislature created the State Board of Education Mastery-Based Learning Work Group in 2019 to study mastery-based learning (MBL) and make recommendations to state leaders. Proponents of mastery-based learning hope that it will address several issues raised in this report. For example, interviewees said that an MBL would better measure what students learned, so that the meaning and value of their degree and any certifications they received will be more apparent to potential employers and institutions of higher education. In addition, the intention of MBL is to increase student agency, so that students take ownership of their learning. Finally, it is intended to better provide differentiated support to students, based on their needs and interests which, it is hoped, will help to close opportunity and achievement gaps.

For more information, see:

https://www.sbe.wa.gov/faqs/mastery_based_learning

¹² <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/practice/oiaa/agency-performance/mental-health>

classroom. At the same time, broader social issues such as housing, homelessness, foster care, health, behavioral and mental health, and poverty impact students and lie largely beyond the capability of schools and districts to address.

Lack of Trust among Entities

As mentioned previously, interviewees described a lack of trust among entities, particularly the core K-12 government agencies. This came up in relation to communication, coordination, and collaboration along with data collection, sharing, and analysis.

Teacher Recruitment

Several interviewees expressed concern about the lack of a clear plan to address the issue of teacher recruitment, with enrollment in teacher certification programs now below the need for teachers. Rural areas, in particular, may find it difficult to recruit teachers. In addition, women and White people are overrepresented among the State's teachers, an issue as the State strives for greater equity. As one interviewee said, research has shown that children do better in school when they have teachers that look like them.

Opportunities

Support Intra-Educator Learning and Collaboration

At least one interviewee suggested that supporting intra-educator learning and collaboration could help spread the many innovations that teachers currently develop in relative isolation. If their approaches and innovations are not shared with others, those innovations may disappear when they retire.

Make the K-12 Governance Structure More Understandable and Accessible

As discussed above, several interviewees made note of the inaccessibility of the K-12 governance structure. Respondents described it variously as confusing, chaotic, an alphabet soup, and complex. Some interviewees did not know which organization to approach for specific issues or who within a given organization to approach. Many expressed a lack of understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the different entities in the K-12 governance structure. Some interviewees indicated a desire for a way to better understand the K-12 system and who is responsible for what, whether through organization charts, a system-wide network "map," or other means.

Recognizing and Working with Washington's Tribal Students and Governments

There are 29 federally recognized tribal governments in Washington State. While Washington law since 2015 (RCW 28A.320.170) requires the teaching of the existence and history of the State's federally recognized tribes and collaboration of school districts with neighboring tribes to incorporate expanded and improved curricula about Native American culture, some interviewees expressed concern that existence, stories, cultures, and contributions of Washington's tribes often go unrecognized by surrounding communities, governments, and school districts. Outdated textbooks rarely acknowledge the contributions of Native Americans and can contain derogatory or offensive material.

There is an opportunity at the school and district level to consult with local tribes on how best to support the needs of their tribal students. At the state level, there is an opportunity to continue working with tribal governments to improve the educational, psychosocial, and career outcomes for Native American students.

B. Opportunities for the alignment, integration and/or consolidation of roles and responsibilities of entities in the K-12 governance structure

Interviewees suggested a wide range of suggestions for better aligning or integrating roles and responsibilities in the K-12 governance structure. The Assessment Team found unanimous agreement among interviewees that there is room for improvement, ranging from simply improving communication and coordination among key state-level agencies to consolidation of the functions of key agencies and wholesale reform of the system.

However, disagreement emerged about where the primary locus of control in the K-12 education system should lie. Several interviewees suggested that principals should have maximum authority over their school buildings, so they can hire the best teachers and support them to perform their best for student achievement. Others felt that power should lie with superintendents and school boards. Still others felt that OSPI and other State agencies should have greater authority to set standards and hold districts and schools accountable for performance.

“The Assessment Team found unanimous agreement among interviewees that there is room for improvement [in K-12 governance], ranging from simply improving communication and coordination among key state-level agencies to consolidation of the functions of key agencies and wholesale reform of the system.”

Alignment between and among entities

Alignment among State Agencies

In terms of increasing the alignment among the key State agencies—OSPI, SBE, and PESB—people seem to agree that much of the low-hanging fruit has been plucked. Several years ago, for example, OSPI and SBE sat down to clarify roles and responsibilities, an effort that resulted in legislation to more clearly lay out what each agency should be responsible for.¹³ Still, as noted, challenges remain.

Several interviewees also felt that OSPI could better utilize the opportunities at its disposal to improve coordination and collaboration by, for example, regularly participating in SBE meetings.

Some interviewees suggested that systematizing existing ad hoc or informal coordination and collaboration efforts could help make progress toward alignment and begin to compensate for issues related to leadership churn. It might also build greater trust between agencies. A simple next step could be to formalize some of the informal meetings among K-12 governance entities and with the Governor’s Office, some of which began during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Another opportunity mentioned above is to clarify roles and responsibilities among agencies. As some interviewees mentioned, it may require additional resources and institutional capacity to enable alignment efforts. SBE, for example, currently has less than eleven full-time employees and its board members are volunteers.

Alignment within OSPI

As a few interviewees suggested, ensuring clear and consistent communication and coordination among the divisions in OSPI could help strengthen alignment with other parts of the K-12 governance structure.

¹³ <https://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2017-18/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/House/2824-S.L.pdf?q=20220107190336>

Alignment between state and local entities

Many interviewees expressed interest in the balance of control between the state and local, with a range of opinions. Most interviewees expressed interest in increasing state control to improve accountability and consistency across and within districts. Some felt that this would also improve the State's ability to gather data, see, and track issues across the system (such as student and school performance), including how they impact equity. These interviewees felt that OSPI should have greater authority to hold districts accountable for student achievement and ensure that the system does not disadvantage certain students because of poverty, race, ethnicity, geography, disability, or other factors.

Others disagreed with the idea of increasing OSPI's power relative to school boards. They felt that local school boards are best positioned to make decisions for their districts that reflect the needs and desires of their communities. School boards also provide a local avenue for parents and others to give input. A few interviewees felt that school boards should have more support from the State in some areas, such as union negotiations.

Alignment between State and Regional Entities

Several interviewees expressed interest in increasing the utilization of Educational Service Districts (ESD) to support schools and districts in more equitably educating students, including one who wondered whether ESDs might be a "missing link" in the K-12 governance structure.

At least one interviewee noted that ESDs have recently been charged with helping districts address the critical areas of increasing mental health awareness and suicide prevention during the pandemic. There is a growing sense among some school districts, they said, that perhaps ESDs are well-placed to implement regional programs currently not structured to run through ESDs. Another interviewee felt that ESDs might better address specific regional needs among districts, for example in helping to fill the gaps in specialist staff in smaller districts.

Alignment around a Clear Goal

Another issue related to K-12 governance is the extent of alignment among the disparate K-12 entities around a shared goal. Many interviewees felt that the goal for K-12 education in Washington is not clear. Some of these interviewees perceive a split between those focused on workforce development and those focused on college readiness. Interviewees had several perspectives about what the goal for K-12 education might be, expressing opinions about various perceived goals:

- A too-strong a focus on education as workforce development, which does not address the whole person.
- College readiness, which does not sufficiently support the development of soft skills for graduates or the possibility of other career pathways and certifications.
- The graduation rate, which is a standard metric of success, but does not provide a sense of what the student learned or is capable of.

Others said the goal should be to create life-long learners and critical thinkers who have a strong sense of agency, something they felt the current system is poorly equipped to do.

Some interviewees said that the goal is clear, but that there is a lack of alignment around it. A smaller number of interviewees felt that the goal of the K-12 system is clear and that most entities are aligned around it.

Aligning K-12 with Early Learning and Higher Education Entities

Some interviewees suggested that any K-12 governance reform should consider a continuous education model, either preschool through college completion or preschool through college or technical school and continuing support in students' early careers, particularly as college enrollments fall and the demand for post-secondary degrees from employers increases.

Improved communication and increased coordination and collaboration between K-12 and higher education entities, several interviewees said, could help K-12 students better understand their career options, know about financial aid, and get better information about postsecondary options. It could also help to resolve tensions around the different dual credit programs available for high school students, some of which compete with one another, and the funds associated with student enrollment. As several interviewees noted, student pathways after K-12 provide an important measure of K-12 student achievement.

Increasing alignment between early learning and K-12 similarly emerged as a priority for several interviewees. Some of them perceived a great deal of opportunity for coordination and collaboration among the many players in and funders of early learning, including the federal government, State government, for-profits, nonprofits, and school districts. Others said the key opportunity for improving coordination is between the DCYF and OSPI.

Integration and Consolidation of Entities*Consolidate Key State-Level Entities*

Several interviewees suggested consolidating the functions of various agencies, boards, and commissions under OSPI. Potential benefits of consolidation included simplifying the governance structure, centralizing decision-making, breaking down organizational silos, improving implementation, increasing accessibility to decision-makers, and decreasing overhead costs. The most mentioned consolidation was of SBE and PESB under OSPI, either individually or jointly. Currently, OSPI is the administrative entity for the two agencies and the SPI shares oversight of SBE and PESB as a board member of both agencies and with a consequent shared role in the hiring, firing, and evaluation of their executive directors.

Interviewees differed on the meaning of consolidation, with some feeling that the functions of SBE and PESB should be incorporated under OSPI and they should not continue as separate entities. Others felt that the oversight of each organization should move solely under OSPI, while SBE and PESB should remain separate entities and exercise their statutory roles.

Others did not support any consolidation, fearing it would overly centralize decision-making and decrease local control. Several interviewees favored retaining and even strengthening SBE to make it less dependent on OSPI for data and staff support and ensure that it continues to play an oversight function on behalf of the Legislature.

At least one interviewee felt that the capital needs of districts have not received the level of attention and awareness they require since being transferred from SBE to OSPI.

Consolidate or Eliminate other Entities

Several interviewees suggested other entities for consolidation. Ideas included consolidating EGOAC under OSPI, consolidating the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board and Washington

Student Achievement Council, consolidating ESDs under OSPI, and making the Washington State School Directors Association (WSSDA) a private association, like the associations for administrators, principals, and unions for teachers and other public school employees.

School district consolidation

Some interviewees suggested that 295 districts in the State are too many, and it could help to consolidate districts. Many districts, they noted, are quite small (as mentioned, Stehekin, the smallest, has approximately 10 students, and more than 40 districts have no high school). Interest in district consolidation is based on the reasoning that small districts are cost-intensive and have higher overhead costs per student, because they lack the economies of scale of larger districts. Also, smaller districts are less able to offer specialized services, even with the support of ESDs.

A few interviewees opposed consolidation. Some suggested that any collaborative process should avoid discussions of district consolidation because it could attract a great deal of opposition from local communities.

Making the Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) an appointed position

Several interviewees suggested making the SPI a cabinet-level position appointed by the Governor. Because the SPI is a constitutionally mandated position, this would require a change to the constitution, which would require a two-thirds majority vote of the Legislature, as well as a vote of the people in a general election. Others wondered whether this would make sense politically. In some ways, they said, the election of a separate SPI insulates the position to some extent (and by extension the K-12 system) politically from the Governor and state-level politics. However, some reasoned, a cabinet-level SPI could have more authority and decision-making power and greater ability to hold districts accountable, particularly if other entities were consolidated under OSPI.

On January 7, 2022, the SPI held a press conference on the state of K-12 education in Washington at which he said that a bill would soon be introduced (SB 5820 and SJR 8212) to propose making the SPI an appointed, rather than an elected position, a bill which he fully supports. He said the intention is to create a unified education executive to carry out the policy direction set by the Legislature. As of the publication of this report, both SB 5820 and SJR 8212 remain in committee.

Consolidation of services for students with sensory-based disabilities

Some interviewees noted that students with high-need, sensory-based disabilities (including students who are blind and low vision, deaf and hard of hearing, deaf-blind) are not always well served by the localization of support services. (This is also true of other low-incidence disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorder, traumatic brain injury, and orthopedic impairments.) This is partly due to a lack of awareness and understanding of the needs of these students. Because of this, and because some students have multiple disabilities, some disabilities may go unrecognized or not be officially counted. Smaller school districts are less likely to be able to hire trained professionals, of which there is a shortage in the State. At least one interviewee highlighted Oregon's Low-Incidence Regional Programs that provide services to students with sensory-based and low-incidence disabilities as one possible example Washington State might look into as a possible example.

C. Areas of potential focus in a collaborative process

The Assessment Team asked interviewees to suggest issue or focus areas that a collaborative process might include. Their answers suggest a set of desired outcomes to focus a collaborative process around. These include the interrelated issues of student achievement, equity, funding, data, and accountability, with the primary focus on a governance system that serves the interests of all students equitably. While a few interviewees suggested avoiding the potentially contentious issues of local control and consolidation of school districts, most felt that no governance issue should be avoided.

A clear message, from a majority of interviews, was that any collaborative process should center on the needs of learners. According to interviewees, a central focus on students touches on multiple issues, including what students should learn, their pathways to graduation, and measures of success for students.

Several interviewees felt that a shift toward measurement of competency or mastery of learning, as opposed to completion (referred to by some as “seat time”) would be essential to improving student outcomes. Relatedly, several interviewees felt that it should be clearer to those outside the K-12 system what a student has learned based on their certification i.e., what knowledge or skills they have competence in or have mastered.

“The Assessment Team asked interviewees to suggest issue or focus areas that a collaborative process might include. Their answers...include the interrelated issues of student success, equity, funding, data, and accountability, with the primary focus on a governance system that serves the interests of all students equitably. While a few interviewees suggested avoiding the potentially contentious issues of local control and consolidation of school districts, most felt that no governance issue should be avoided.”

Other issues seen by interviewees as important for student success included:

- Creating a continuum of learning, from pre-school to post-secondary and possibly beyond;
- An environment where learning is seen as fun and even joyful; and
- A learning environment that adapts to the individual needs of each student.

Finally, the issue of equity, as interviewees raised it, is tied deeply to student achievement and outcomes, because some students are disproportionately less likely to thrive and succeed, including those whose families are low-income or non-White.

A range of opinions emerged as to why the achievement gap persist for many students:

- Several interviewees felt that the funding formula and the use of levies result in an inequitable system.
- Others felt that closing the gap further will require addressing issues that students face outside of the classroom, including a need for safety, stable housing, food security, health, and mental health.
- Some felt that the governance structure itself is part of the problem.
- Still others pointed to factors such as community and parent engagement with schools, the lack of flexibility for teachers and principals, and the reporting, regulations, standards, and other requirements that take time away from teaching.

While interviewees saw different causes for it, virtually everyone agreed that inequity is a problem.

Interviewees saw the way that schools get funded as contributing to or exacerbating inequity between communities, districts, and schools. In addition, several interviewees described insufficient funding for education, in particular for specialists, special education, and (according to a few interviewees) for the time and resources required to improve communication, coordination, and collaboration among K-12 entities.

Several interviewees mentioned accountability as an issue requiring greater attention, mentioning three specific types of accountability:

- The State holding schools and districts accountable for student outcomes, including equitable outcomes for students who are low-income, Black, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, Latino/a/x, Native American, have special needs, and are otherwise disadvantaged or marginalized.
- The ability of parents and communities to hold districts and school boards accountable.
- The ability of entities in the State's K-12 governance structure to hold one another accountable.

Finally, several interviewees mentioned the importance of data. This included collecting the right data; making it available to K-12 governance entities, nonprofits, policymakers, and others; and analyzing it to support policy changes or other types of improvements. Interviewees saw these data-related steps as critical to ensuring that systems of accountability work; to measuring whether outcomes are being achieved; and to enabling more equitable outcomes for students, families, and communities. In addition, sharing the data and posting results in meaningful ways for families and communities would increase the overall transparency of the K-12 system and public trust and confidence in it.

V. Potential benefits and challenges of a collaborative process

A majority of respondents expressed strong interest in establishing a collaborative process to explore the potential for aligning roles and responsibilities, integrating leadership, and/or consolidating the roles and responsibilities of entities within the K-12 governance structure.

- A large number of interviewees expressed interest in simplifying or consolidating aspects of the governance structure.
- Many interviewees expressed interest in finding ways to better align efforts among entities through improved communication, coordination, and collaboration.
- A strong subset of interest emerged in support of collaboration to better align the K-12 system with both higher education and early learning, although some felt that including higher education in these discussions would be too much to bite off.
- A few interviewees felt that the current governance structure works well and needs only minor changes to work better.

A. Perceived benefits

Interviewees perceived several potential benefits of aligning or consolidating roles and responsibilities in the K-12 governance structure. The biggest perceived benefit was that it would enable parents, teachers, administrators, and others, including important stakeholders such as legislators, to better navigate the governance structure. Other potential benefits included:

- Making the K-12 system more efficient and effective, particularly for schools and districts, by reducing the administrative and reporting burden on them and making it easier for them to navigate the governance structure;

- Increasing the equity of the K-12 system for students, families, and communities;
- Increasing coordination and communication among K-12 entities;
- Improving student outcomes; and
- Saving time and money.

B. Perceived challenges

Many interviewees saw potentially steep challenges for any effort to align or consolidate roles and responsibilities of K-12 governance entities. Many interviewees recognized how difficult change can be, particularly in a large organization or system such as K-12, with so many entities, interests, and stakeholders. As one interviewee said, parents have a lot of emotional investment in education, because it involves their children. In addition, status quo bias, a strong impulse, makes change inherently difficult.

The biggest challenges interviewees mentioned included the potential for turf wars between different entities, the potential for loss of power or jobs, the lack of trust among entities, and the lack of funding and capacity needed for successful change.

Some felt that changes to the governance structure would likely not help to address the system performance issues raised in this report. Instead, they said, it could turn into a costly exercise of time and energy resulting in little improvement in student achievement and outcomes.

In addition, as at least one interviewee mentioned, the Covid-19 public health emergency has put considerable stress on the K-12 system. This has led to an unusually high turnover in superintendents and school board members. For this reason, they felt that this was not a good time to launch a collaborative effort.

VI. Recommendations for a collaborative process

The recommendations in this section arise from:

- An analysis of what the Assessment Team heard and learned from interviews,
- Exploration of and experience with similar governance processes in other contexts, and
- The Assessment Team's expertise in collaborative and multi-party processes.

Several factors raised by interviewees suggest a way forward for a collaborative process. It should be student-centered and focused on improving outcomes, and:

- No issue should be avoided.
- The process should be focused, with a clearly defined scope.
- There is no existing process or body that could readily take on the issue of K-12 governance.
- The process should be inclusive and representative of the diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of Washington residents along with those organizations and entities that can contribute to improving outcomes for students.
- A trusted, impartial facilitator would help to inspire confidence in the process and its outcomes.
- The process should model the improved communication, coordination, and collaboration desired by interviewees, through efforts such as:
 - sharing data,
 - offering resources, and

- ensuring that those at the table are (or can faithfully represent) decisionmakers and actively participate (both physically and with their attention).
- The process should focus on improving outcomes for students, particularly those who have been historically marginalized or are otherwise disadvantaged.

Based on these factors, the Assessment Team recommends the following as a possible way for organizing a collaborative process to explore opportunities for the integration of leadership, aligning of roles and responsibilities, and increasing of efficiency and effectiveness of the State's K-12 education governance structure:

The Legislature could establish a time-limited collaborative effort driven by a core group of up to 25 individuals to keep the group size manageable. Ideally, it would include the directors or chairs of their respective entities in K-12, early learning, and higher education. This committee or working group should submit its reports and recommendations to the Legislature, Governor, and Superintendent of Public Instruction. At a minimum, the working group could include the core group of agencies, boards, and commissions, including the directors or board chairs (unless otherwise indicated).

Below is an illustrative list of potential members that could either serve on the core group or have input through a structured process, for example, through interest or task-specific work groups or parallel committees:

- Legislature, represented by designees (staff or members)
- Office of the Governor, represented either by the Governor or a designee
- Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction
- State Board of Education
- Professional Educator Standards Board
- Washington Student Achievement Council
- Washington School District Directors Association
- Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee
- Department of Children, Youth, and Families
- Workforce Training and Education and Coordinating Board
- Governor's Office of the Educational Ombuds
- State Special Education Advisory Council
- Parent representatives (in addition to Parent Teachers Association)
- Student representatives (perhaps the Legislative Youth Advisory Council or other entity?)
- Association of Educational Service Districts
- Labor (for example, Washington Education Association and Public School Employees of Washington)
- Private sector (for example, Washington Roundtable and Association of Washington Business)
- Association of Washington School Principals
- Washington Association of School Administrators
- Other representatives of interests impacted by or interacting with the K-12 governance structure, with a focus on those that are historically underrepresented.
- Representatives of communities and community-based organizations
- Tribes (for example, Tribal Leaders Congress on Education, Washington State Native American Education Advisory Committee, and/or Governor's Office of Indian Affairs)

- Higher Education (for example, State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, Independent Colleges of Washington, and Council of Presidents)
- Washington State School for the Blind
- Washington School for the Deaf
- Commissions on Hispanic, African American, and Asian Pacific American Affairs
- Nonprofits representing students with special needs and their families, historically disadvantaged groups, businesses, rural schools, and others
- Charter School Commission
- OSPI Center for Improvement of Student Learning
- State of Washington Office of Financial Management

Some interviewees also recommended that any collaborative effort around K-12 governance should involve the State's juvenile justice system and Department of Health, both of which address issues of critical importance to the K-12 system.

The Assessment Team heard clearly from respondents that this effort should not result in the creation of a new ongoing K-12 working group. To avoid this, the Assessment Team recommends that the process be of limited duration of perhaps 18-24 months, perhaps with the option for an extension of specified duration, in the event additional time is needed, as well as a sunset clause.

The process could include:

- Agreement on the scope of issues to be considered by the group, areas of common concern, and information or data needed to generate collaborative solutions.
- Discussion of the characteristics of a student-centered K-12 system.
- Discussion of the principles of governance that seem most likely to support a high-functioning, student-centered K-12 system.
- Agreement on changes to the governance structure that would address the interrelated issues of student success, equity, funding, data, and accountability.

Possible intended outcomes:

- An education system that serves the interests of all students more equitably;
- A consolidated, simplified, and/or more understandable governance structure;
- Increased collaboration, coordination, communication among K-12 governance entities and other interested organizations and parties;
- Improved alignment of goals, policies, and strategies of K-12 governance entities;
- Increased collaboration, coordination, communication among K-12 and early learning governance entities and other interested organizations and parties;
- Increased collaboration, coordination, communication among K-12 and higher education governance entities and other interested organizations and parties;
- Increased accountability and transparency of key entities (and schools);
- Increased trust and decreased conflict among K-12 governance entities;
- Increased sharing of data; and
- Improved systems of accountability.

Key Questions to Consider

- What are the roles and responsibilities of each entity within the governance structure, including lines of accountability? Where are the gray areas or areas of contention?
- Where are decision-making bottlenecks?
- Which decisions does it make most sense to make at which level? How can the people at the right level be empowered to make the decisions that they are best placed to make, whether at the state level, regional level, district level, school level, or classroom?
- Where is the governance structure clearly an obstacle to addressing the needs of learners and how can that best be addressed?
- In the absence of federal reform of education governance, how can state level reform best succeed for students?

VII. Recommendations in the absence of a collaborative process

In the absence of a collaborative process to better align or consolidate K-12 governance and administration, interviewees recommended essentially two alternatives:

- Primary recommendation: double down on the opportunities for increased communication, coordination, and collaboration, as discussed in [Section IV](#) of this report.
- Absent efforts to more effectively coordinate and collaborate or a collaborative process to address issues of K-12 governance, several interviewees said that legislative action to mandate coordination and collaboration would offer one of the few available remedies.

VIII. Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Process and Data Analysis

Interview Process and Protocol

The Assessment Team conducted 42 semi-structured individual and group interviews with 51 people working with or for K-12 governance and associated entities in Washington State (See [Appendix 3](#) for a list of interviewees) from late August to early December. Interviewees included:

- Representatives of state agencies, boards, and commissions;
- State Legislature;
- Governor's Office; and
- Organizations representing the interests of parents, teachers, classified education staff, principals, school board members, superintendents, educational service districts, historically disadvantaged populations, rural school districts, tribal communities, students with special needs students, and the business community.

The Team used an iterative process for identifying interviewees, first developing a broad list of potential interviewees based on the key stakeholders in state K-12 governance. These included the Legislature, Governor's Office, and key agencies and commissions. The Team also conducted online research and gathered input from state government officials and informed observers, applying the following criteria to guide the selection of specific interviewees:

- Organizational and/or subject matter expertise and leadership,
- Geographically dispersed,
- Representative of the diverse perspectives on K-12 governance, and
- Able to carry out the number of interviews within the project's time and resource constraints.

The Assessment Team used a chain referral method to identify additional potential interviewees, asking each interviewee to identify individuals or organizations that they felt would be important to interview and reserving a portion of additional interview slots for interviewees identified this way. The interview list is meant to be representative, rather than exhaustive. The goal is for all interested parties to have confidence that, whether interviewed or not, their perspective is represented on the interview list and in the assessment.

A standard set of protocols, based on best practice in the field of collaborative governance, guided the interview process. The Assessment Team used a consistent set of interview questions for all individual interviews (See [Appendix 2](#)), invited interviewees by email and/or phone to participate. Interviewees also received the interview questions and background information about the situation assessment, the Ruckelshaus Center, and how the interview would be used. Prior to each interview, the Assessment Team emphasized that the interview was voluntary, that the results would be aggregated in a summary report, and that specific statements would not be attributed to individual interviewees. Per research protocol, interview notes were not retained beyond the drafting of this report.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

The Assessment Team used a qualitative process to identify, organize, and interpret the key points and themes from interviews, entering them into an anonymized spreadsheet to assess patterns and trends and identify additional themes. All results were double-checked by another Team member. The Team also consulted their detailed interview notes regularly in the drafting of this report.

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

1. *Please introduce yourself, your background, and your role in Washington State K-12 education governance.*
2. *If you could wave a magic wand and create a perfectly functioning K-12 education governance structure for Washington State, what would that look like?*
3. *Do you see opportunities to improve the current administration and governance of K-12 education in Washington State? If so, where?*
 - *Are there opportunities for aligning, integrating, or consolidating roles and responsibilities of entities within the state's K-12 governance structure?*
 - *Do you know of any such efforts currently underway? If so, what is their status?*
 - *Are there any issues or entities around which to organize an improved governance structure? If so, how would you see this working?*
3. *What do you see as the potential benefits--for students, teachers, administrators, and others--of aligning, integrating, or consolidating roles and responsibilities in the state's K-12 governance structure?*
4. *What do you see as the potential challenges that could arise during efforts to align, integrate, or consolidate roles and responsibilities of the state's K-12 governance structure?*
 - *Are there any major areas or issues that are best avoided, and if so, why?*
6. *What prospects do you see for a collaborative approach to increase the effectiveness and responsiveness of the state's K-12 governance structure, whether through existing structures or something new?*
 - *What individuals or organizations would ideally participate in such an initiative?*
 - *Would your organization be willing to participate in such a collaborative approach? If so, who would best represent your organization?*
5. *If a collaborative approach does go forward, what issues or areas of focus would you suggest it might include? Are there any issues or areas that you think are major sticking points or are best avoided?*
6. *If a collaborative approach does not go forward, what other steps would you suggest toward aligning, integrating, or consolidating roles and responsibilities in the interest of effectively serving Washington State's communities?*
 - *How could existing structures for collaboration and coordination be best put to use?*
7. *What did we not ask you that we should have?*
8. *Who else do you suggest we speak with and why?*

Appendix 3: Interview List

Name	Title	Affiliation
Carrie Basas	Director	Governor's Office of Educational Ombuds
John Braun	Senator	Washington State Legislature (Senate)
Robert Butts	Retired	Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction
Stephanie Browne	Parent	
Sally Brownfield	Education Liaison	Tribal Leaders Congress for Education
George Dockins	Executive Director	Public School Employees of Washington
Andrew Estep	Executive Director	Washington State Parent Teacher Association
Leonard Forsman	Chairman	Tribal Leaders Congress on Education
Paul Francis	Executive Director	Council of Presidents
Glenna Gallo	Assistant Superintendent	Special Education Division, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction
Tim Garchow	Executive Director	Washington State School Directors Association
Voshte Gustafson	Parent	
Lisa Guthrie	Parent	
Joshua Halsey	Former Executive Director	Charter School Commission, Office of Superintendent of Public Superintendent
Suzie Hansen	Executive Director	Federation of Independent Schools
Sam Hunt	Senator and Member, Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee	Washington State Legislature (Senate)
Ross Hunter	Secretary	Department of Children, Youth, and Families
Kevin Jacka	CEO	The Rural Alliance
Brian Jeffries	Policy Director	Washington Roundtable Partnership for Learning
Ginger Kwan	Executive Director	Open Doors for Multi-cultural Families
Tricia Lubach	Director of Leadership Development	Washington State School Directors Association
Alexandra Manuel	Executive Director	Professional Educator Standards Board
Peter Maier	Chair	Washington State Board of Education
Scott McCallum	Superintendent	Washington State School for the Blind
Mike Meotti	Executive Director	Washington Student Achievement Council
Randy Nuñez	K-12 and Higher Education Committee Chair	Commission on Hispanic Affairs & Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee
Eleni Papadakis	Executive Director	Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board
Ed Prince	Executive Director	Commission on African American Affairs

Name	Title	Affiliation
Chris Reykdal	Superintendent of Public Instruction	Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction
Sharon Tomiko Santos	Representative and Chair, Education Committee	Washington State Legislature (House)
Fiasili Savusa	Co-Chair	Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee
J. Lee Schultz	Director of Advocacy & Engagement	Washington State Board of Education
Scott Seaman	Executive Director	Association of Washington School Principals
Joy Sebe	Assistant Director	Open Doors for Multi-Cultural Families
Gene Sharratt	Senior Research Advisor	Center for Educational Effectiveness
Katelyn Shriber	Board member	WA Coalition 4 Kids
Steve Smith	Executive Director	Black Education Strategy Roundtable
Randy Spaulding	Executive Director	Washington State Board of Education
Jennifer Stanton	Youth Department Director	Open Doors for Multi-cultural Families
Dan Steele	Assistant Executive Director	Washington Association of School Administrators
Frieda Takamura	Member	Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee
Kori Dickman	Parent	
Bernie Thomas	Director	Education Division, Lummi Indian Business Council and Co-Chair, Tribal Leaders Congress on Education
Maddy Thompson	Sr. Policy Advisor on K-12	Governor's Office
Jessica Vavrus	Executive Director	Association of Educational Service Districts
Jeff Vincent	Council Chair	Washington Student Achievement Council
Laurie Weidner	Legislative & Policy Liaison	Professional Educator Standards Board
Lisa Wellman	Senator and Chair, Early Learning & K-12 Committee	Washington State Legislature (Senate)
Alex Ybarra	Representative and Ranking Minority Member, House Education Committee	Washington State Legislature (House)
Jan Yoshiwara	Executive Director	State Board for Community and Technical Colleges
Lucinda Young	Chief Lobbyist, Former	Washington Education Association

Appendix 4: Bibliography

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Appendix 5: Information about the Ruckelshaus Center

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

THE WILLIAM D. RUCKELSHAUS CENTER

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON



"Collaborative problem solving is an enormously powerful approach to resolving conflicts; it holds great promise for better, faster and more sustainable policy decisions. With the combined resources of our premier research institutions, this center establishes an invaluable neutral forum for addressing some of our most complex and pressing challenges."

- WILLIAM D. RUCKELSHAUS

For more information on the William D. Ruckelshaus Center, please visit our website at:
RuckelshausCenter.wsu.edu

ABOUT THE RUCKELSHAUS CENTER

MISSION

The mission of the William D. Ruckelshaus Center is to help parties involved in complex public policy challenges in the State of Washington and the Pacific Northwest tap university expertise to develop collaborative, durable, and effective solutions.

VISION

The Center envisions a future in which government leaders, policy makers, and community members routinely employ tools of collaborative decision-making to design, conduct, and implement successful public policy processes.

IDENTITY

We are a joint effort of Washington State University, hosted and administered by WSU Extension, and the University of Washington, hosted through the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Policy and Governance. Building on the unique strengths of these two institutions, the Center applies university resources and knowledge towards solving challenging public policy issues.

VALUES

Collaboration, consensus, equity, knowledge, education, inquiry, and independence.

WHAT WE DO

The Ruckelshaus Center helps people work together to develop shared solutions to challenging public policy issues. Areas where we work include:

- Community and Economic Development
- Land Use
- Natural Resources
- Transportation
- Agriculture
- Healthcare
- Tribal, Federal, State, and Local Governance

We build problem-solving capacity in the region by helping individuals and organizations better understand, initiate, participate in, and lead collaborative public policy efforts.

WHO WE SERVE

The Center assists public, private, tribal, nonprofit, and other leaders to build consensus, resolve conflicts, and develop innovative, shared solutions for Washington and the Pacific Northwest.

Appendix 6: Working with the Ruckelshaus Center

"You brought collaborative problem solving, you brought trust, and you shifted the discussion."

-MAIA BELLON

*Former Director, Washington State
Department of Ecology*



HOW WE DO IT

- Provide a neutral and safe forum for parties to constructively define shared goals and resolve differences
- Conduct a situation assessment to determine how parties should proceed with a collaborative approach
- Provide facilitation, mediation, dispute resolution, project management, strategic planning, and other services that help parties reach consensus and resolve issues
- Provide diverse groups with a common information base via university research and fact finding
- Provide knowledge, training, and tools to improve the collaborative problem-solving abilities of individuals and organizations
- Host policy discussions in the form of guest lectures, conferences, and our Ruckelshaus Circle Luncheon

GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING

We are guided by an Advisory Board which includes prominent leaders representing a broad range of constituencies from across Washington and both chambers/parties in the Legislature. Funding for the Center is sought from a mix of sources, including foundations, corporations, individuals, agencies, other state and federal sources, and fee-for-service contracts, when appropriate.

WSU Extension and UW Evans School of Public Policy and Governance programs and employment are available to all without discrimination.

Contact Us!

(206) 428-3021

RuckelshausCenter@wsu.edu



WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
EXTENSION

W
EVANS SCHOOL
OF PUBLIC POLICY & GOVERNANCE
UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON

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Slade Gorton (1928 – 2020), Former US Senator
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Jerry Grinstein, Madrona Venture Group **
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