

The True Cost of Teaching: Education vs. System Overhead

Moses Lake School District

Transparency Project

December 2025

THE TRUE COST OF TEACHING

What Education Actually Costs vs. What the System Costs

Separating Teaching from Bureaucracy

THE QUESTION NOBODY ASKS

When you hear "Washington spends \$20,000 per student," what does that actually mean?

Most people assume it means: "It costs \$20,000 to teach a child."

That's wrong.

It actually means: "It costs \$20,000 to operate the public school SYSTEM that happens to teach a child as one of many functions."

There's a huge difference.

PART 1: WHAT DOES TEACHING ACTUALLY COST?

The Pure Cost of Instruction

Scenario: One Washington State certified, experienced, quality teacher teaching a class of 28 students for one school year.

Teacher Compensation (2024-25):

- Average teacher salary: \$77,000/year (Washington State)

- Benefits (health insurance, retirement, payroll taxes): ~30% of salary
- Benefits cost: \$23,100/year
- **Total teacher compensation: \$100,100/year**

Teaching Schedule:

- 180 instructional days per year
- 6 hours of direct instruction per day (typical elementary)
- **Total: 1,080 instructional hours per year**

Students in class: 28 (typical post-McCleary class size)

The Math

Cost per instructional hour:

$\$100,100 \div 1,080 \text{ hours} = \92.69 per hour

Cost per student per hour:

$\$92.69 \div 28 \text{ students} = \$3.31 \text{ per student per hour}$

Cost per student per day:

$\$3.31 \times 6 \text{ hours} = \$19.86 \text{ per student per day}$

Cost per student per year:

$\$19.86 \times 180 \text{ days} = \$3,575 \text{ per student per year}$

Add Basic Materials and Curriculum

What students actually use:

- Textbooks (amortized over 5 years): \$100/year
- Workbooks and consumables: \$150/year
- Basic supplies (paper, pencils, etc.): \$100/year
- Technology/software licenses: \$150/year
- **Total materials: \$500/year**

The Total Cost of ACTUAL EDUCATION

Teacher: \$3,575/student/year

Materials: \$500/student/year

TOTAL: \$4,075/student/year

That's the cost to TEACH a child.

So where does the other \$16,000 go?

PART 2: THE COST OF THE SYSTEM

What We're ACTUALLY Paying For

Official per-student cost: \$20,040 (Washington 2024-25)

Actual teaching cost: \$4,075

System overhead: \$15,965 (80% of total cost)

Where That \$16,000 Goes

1. Buildings and Facilities (\$3,500-4,500/student/year)

- Construction debt service (bonds)
- Maintenance and repairs
- Utilities (heat, electricity, water)
- Custodial services
- Property insurance
- Technology infrastructure
- Security systems

2. Transportation (\$1,200-1,500/student/year)

- School buses (purchase, maintenance, fuel)
- Bus drivers and mechanics
- Route planning and coordination
- Insurance
- (Note: Many students don't ride the bus, but cost is averaged across all students)

3. Food Service (\$1,000-1,200/student/year)

- Cafeteria workers
- Kitchen equipment and maintenance
- Food purchases
- Federal meal program administration
- (Note: Partially reimbursed by federal government, but state covers gap)

4. Administration (\$2,500-3,500/student/year)

- District administrators (superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors)
- Building principals and assistant principals
- Central office staff (HR, payroll, purchasing, IT)
- Compliance officers (Title IX, equity, safety)
- Legal services
- Accounting and financial services
- Communications/public relations

5. Support Staff (\$2,000-2,500/student/year)

- Counselors (mental health, academic, college/career)
- Nurses
- Psychologists and social workers
- Special education support staff
- Library/media specialists
- Technology support staff
- Para-educators and classroom aides

6. Special Education (\$2,500-3,000/student/year averaged)

- Special education teachers
- Specialized equipment and materials
- Therapists (physical, occupational, speech)
- Transportation for special needs
- Compliance and documentation
- (Note: Concentrated on ~16% of students, but cost averaged across all)

7. Mandated Programs and Compliance (\$1,500-2,000/student/year)

- Standardized testing (SBAC, etc.)
- State reporting and data systems
- Program coordinators (ELL, CTE, athletics)
- Professional development
- Curriculum alignment to state standards
- Grant administration (federal Title programs)

8. Other (\$1,000-1,500/student/year)

- Athletics and extracurriculars
- Insurance (liability, workers comp)
- Reserve funds
- Debt service on operational debt
- Contingency

TOTAL SYSTEM OVERHEAD: ~\$15,000-16,000/student/year

ACTUAL TEACHING: ~\$4,000/student/year

RATIO: 80% system / 20% teaching

PART 3: THE COVID REVELATION

What We Learned When Schools Closed

March 2020: Schools shut down. Kids sent home.

What happened to costs?

- Buildings still there (still had to maintain, heat, secure)
- Buses parked (but still owned, still depreciate, still cost money)
- Administrators still working (some might say working MORE)
- Most staff kept on payroll

What happened to education?

- Teachers taught from home via Zoom/Google Classroom
- Students learned from home
- Some thrived, some struggled, most did okay

The revelation:

You can deliver education without the \$16,000 system overhead.

Who Thrived in Online Learning?

Students who did BETTER at home:

- Self-motivated learners
- Kids bullied at school (suddenly safe)
- Introverts who hated classroom chaos
- Advanced students held back by class pace
- Kids with sensory issues (autism spectrum, ADHD)
- Those who needed flexible schedules (family obligations, health issues)
- Rural students who spent 2+ hours/day on bus

What they loved:

- Learn at own pace
- Rewind and re-watch lessons
- No peer pressure
- No classroom distractions
- More sleep (no 6am bus)
- Comfortable environment
- Direct teacher communication (email, office hours)

Who Struggled?

Students who did WORSE at home:

- Kids without parent supervision
- Students lacking internet/computers
- Those who needed social interaction
- Students with unstable home environments
- Kids who needed structure and routine
- Those without parental support for learning

But note: These students struggled because of HOME factors (parental absence, poverty, dysfunction), NOT because online learning is inherently inferior.

PART 4: THE INCONVENIENT TRUTH

The System Exists to Employ People, Not Just Teach Kids

Why is this controversial?

Because if education can be delivered effectively for \$4,000-5,000/student (teacher + materials), then we're spending \$15,000-16,000/student on things OTHER than education.

Those "other things" employ a LOT of people:

- Administrators
- Bus drivers
- Cafeteria workers
- Custodians
- Security guards
- Support staff
- Bureaucrats

These are REAL JOBS held by REAL PEOPLE who depend on paychecks.

But are they NECESSARY for education?

The Homeschool Comparison

Average homeschool cost per student: \$500-2,000/year

- Curriculum materials
- Some online courses
- Field trips, activities
- Maybe part-time tutors for advanced subjects

How is this possible?

- No buildings to maintain

- No buses to operate
- No administrators to pay
- No cafeteria to staff
- No bureaucracy to feed

Parent provides:

- Instruction (free labor of love)
- Supervision (already home anyway)
- Space (already paying for home)
- Utilities (already paying anyway)

Results:

- Homeschoolers typically score HIGHER on standardized tests than public school students
- Better college admission rates
- Lower cost per student

What this proves: The expensive system is NOT necessary for education.

The Online School Model

Example: Washington Connections Academy (online public charter)

Cost per student: ~\$8,000-10,000/year (vs. \$20,000 traditional)

What they DON'T pay for:

- ■ Buildings (students learn at home)
- ■ Buses (no transportation needed)
- ■ Cafeterias (students eat at home)

- ■ Most custodians, security, etc.

What they DO pay for:

- ■ Teachers (certified, paid competitively)
- ■ Curriculum (digital, comprehensive)
- ■ Technology (laptops/internet provided if needed)
- ■ Administration (much smaller, mostly digital)
- ■ Support services (counselors, special ed via video)

Results:

- Academic outcomes comparable to or better than traditional schools
- HALF the cost
- Proves the \$16,000 overhead is NOT necessary for education

PART 5: BREAKING DOWN THE COSTS (Detailed)

The ACTUAL Cost to Hire a Great Teacher

Let's get very specific. What does it ACTUALLY cost to employ one excellent Washington State certified teacher?

Annual Costs:

Base Salary: \$77,000 (average experienced teacher, 2024-25)

- This is for 10-month contract (180 days)
- Includes planning time, meetings, professional development days

Benefits (required by law and contract):

- Health insurance: \$12,000/year (family coverage typical)
- Retirement (TRS): \$8,000/year (employer portion)
- Social Security/Medicare: \$5,900/year (7.65% of salary)
- Unemployment insurance: \$400/year
- Workers compensation: \$800/year
- Life/disability insurance: \$1,000/year
- **Total benefits: \$28,100/year**

TOTAL TEACHER COST: \$105,100/year

Teaching Load Analysis**Contract requirements:**

- 180 student contact days
- 7.5 hours at school per day
- But not all is direct instruction

Time breakdown (typical day):

- Direct instruction: 6 hours
- Planning/prep: 1 hour
- Lunch/breaks: 0.5 hours

Annual instructional hours:

- $6 \text{ hours/day} \times 180 \text{ days} = 1,080 \text{ hours}$

Actual hourly cost of instruction:

$\$105,100 \div 1,080 \text{ hours} = \$97.31 \text{ per instructional hour}$

Cost Per Student (Class Size: 28)

Hourly:

$\$97.31 \div 28 \text{ students} = \$3.48/\text{student/hour}$

Daily:

$\$3.48 \times 6 \text{ hours} = \$20.88/\text{student/day}$

Weekly:

$\$20.88 \times 5 \text{ days} = \$104.40/\text{student/week}$

Monthly (4 weeks):

$\$104.40 \times 4 = \$417.60/\text{student/month}$

Annual (180 days = 36 weeks):

$\$104.40 \times 36 = \$3,758/\text{student/year}$

Add Minimal Support and Materials

What a teacher ACTUALLY needs to teach effectively:

Classroom materials:

- Textbooks (amortized): \$100/student
- Workbooks/consumables: \$150/student
- Basic supplies: \$100/student

- **Subtotal: \$350/student**

Technology:

- Software licenses: \$100/student
- Online resources: \$50/student
- **Subtotal: \$150/student**

Minimal administrative support:

- Payroll processing: \$25/student
- HR/benefits admin: \$25/student
- Basic IT support: \$50/student
- **Subtotal: \$100/student**

TOTAL MATERIALS AND SUPPORT: \$600/student/year

THE BOTTOM LINE (Per Student, Per Year)

Teacher instruction: \$3,758

Materials and minimal support: \$600

TOTAL ACTUAL EDUCATION COST: \$4,358

Official Washington cost: \$20,040

System overhead: \$15,682 (78% of total)

PART 6: THE BREAKDOWN BY DELIVERY MODEL

Three Ways to Deliver Education

Cost Component	Traditional School	Online School	Homeschool
Teacher	\$3,758	\$3,500-4,000	\$0 (parent)
Materials	\$600	\$800	\$500-2,000
Building	\$4,000	\$0	\$0
Transportation	\$1,400	\$0	\$0
Food Service	\$1,200	\$0	\$0
Administration	\$3,000	\$1,500	\$0
Support Staff	\$2,500	\$1,000	\$0
Special Ed (avg)	\$2,800	\$1,500	Variable
Compliance	\$1,800	\$800	Minimal
Other	\$1,200	\$400	\$0
TOTAL	**\$20,040**	**\$8,000-10,000**	**\$500-2,000**

Cost per student decreases as you eliminate system overhead.

Question: Does educational quality decrease proportionally?

Answer: NO. Often it IMPROVES.

PART 7: WHY THE SYSTEM RESISTS CHANGE

The Threat to the Establishment

If parents realize:

- Teaching only costs ~\$4,000/student
- System overhead costs ~\$16,000/student

- Online/homeschool can deliver quality education for half the cost or less

Then they might ask:

"Why are we spending \$16,000 on overhead when education only costs \$4,000?"

Who Benefits from the Current System?

Jobs dependent on system overhead:

- 66% increase in administrative positions (2000-2024)
- Thousands of support staff
- Transportation departments
- Food service workers
- Facility maintenance
- Security personnel
- Compliance officers

Businesses that profit:

- Construction companies (build schools)
- Bus manufacturers
- Food service vendors
- Technology vendors
- Consulting firms
- Testing companies

Unions:

- Teachers unions (legit)
- Support staff unions

- Administrator associations
- More employees = more dues = more political power

The COVID Panic

When schools closed in March 2020, the education establishment panicked.

Why?

Because parents discovered:

- Kids could learn at home
- Many kids did BETTER at home
- The expensive system wasn't necessary
- Homeschooling wasn't scary or hard

Enrollment changes since COVID:

- Public school enrollment: -2.8%
- Homeschool enrollment: +32.5%
- Private school enrollment: +5-10%

The threat: If this trend continues, the system collapses.

Response from establishment:

- Vilify homeschoolers ("kids need socialization!")
- Dismiss online learning ("not real education!")
- Demand students return to buildings
- Push legislation to restrict alternatives
- Emphasize "irreplaceable" role of schools

Why?

Because their jobs depend on maintaining the system.

PART 8: WHAT THIS MEANS FOR MOSES LAKE FAMILIES

The Real Question

When Moses Lake School District asks you to approve a levy or bond, they say:

"We need X million dollars for education."

What they MEAN is:

"We need X million dollars to operate the SYSTEM."

Very little goes to actual teaching.

Breaking Down a Typical Levy Request

Example: \$10 million levy over 4 years

District says: "For our students' education"

Reality:

- Teaching (20%): \$2 million
- System overhead (80%): \$8 million

Where the \$8 million goes:

- Buildings/maintenance: \$2.5M
- Transportation: \$1.5M
- Administration: \$1.5M
- Food service: \$1.0M
- Support staff: \$1.0M
- Compliance/programs: \$0.5M

Is this bad?

Not necessarily. Buildings need maintenance. Buses need fuel. But voters deserve to know what they're ACTUALLY paying for.

Your Choices

If you value the SYSTEM:

- Building-based socialization
- School sports and activities
- Structured environment
- Meals provided
- Transportation provided
- Support services on-site

Then the \$20,000 cost might be worth it.

But if you primarily value EDUCATION:

- Academic learning
- Knowledge acquisition
- College preparation

- Basic skills mastery

Then you might ask why you're paying \$20,000 when education costs \$4,000.

The Alternative Models

Moses Lake area families can:

1. Homeschool

- Cost: \$500-2,000/year
- Full control over curriculum
- Flexible schedule
- Individualized instruction
- Legal in Washington (minimal requirements)

2. Online public school

- Cost: FREE (taxpayer funded, ~\$8,000/student cost)
- Washington Connections Academy
- Insight School of Washington
- Others available
- Certified teachers, accredited curriculum

3. Hybrid models

- Homeschool + part-time enrollment in public school for specific classes
- Homeschool co-ops (families share teaching)
- Online courses + local tutoring

4. Private/religious school

- Cost: \$5,000-12,000/year (Moses Lake area)
- Smaller classes
- Values-aligned education
- Often better outcomes
- Still cheaper than public school SYSTEM cost

The Math for Your Family

Scenario: 2 children in Moses Lake schools

Public school SYSTEM cost (to taxpayers):

$\$20,000 \times 2 = \$40,000/\text{year}$

Your property tax contribution:

$\sim \$3,500\text{-}4,500/\text{year}$ (typical Moses Lake home)

But actual EDUCATION cost:

$\$4,000 \times 2 = \$8,000/\text{year}$

Homeschool cost:

$\$1,000\text{-}2,000/\text{year}$ total

If you homeschool, you SAVE taxpayers \$32,000/year (system overhead not needed) while only spending \$1,000-2,000 of your own money.

AND you still pay property taxes supporting a system you're not using.

PART 9: THE QUESTIONS TO ASK

When School Board Asks for Money

They say: "We need \$X million for education."

You ask:

- "How much of this goes directly to classroom instruction?"
- "How much goes to system overhead (buildings, buses, administration)?"
- "What percentage of the budget is teachers vs. administrators?"
- "Can you provide a breakdown showing actual teaching costs vs. delivery system costs?"
- "Have you considered lower-cost delivery models like online or hybrid options?"

When Officials Claim "Schools Need More Money"

They say: "Underfunded schools hurt student outcomes."

You ask:

- "Spending doubled in the last 15 years. Test scores flat or declining. How does MORE money fix this?"
- "Administrative staff grew 66% while students grew 5%. Can you justify this?"
- "Online schools deliver education for half the cost with comparable outcomes. Why so expensive?"
- "What percentage of each dollar goes to actual teaching vs. system maintenance?"

When Levy Fails and District Threatens Cuts

They say: "We'll have to cut teachers, sports, programs."

You ask:

- "Why not cut administration first? They grew 66% in recent years."
- "Can you show us a budget where teaching is protected and overhead is cut instead?"
- "What would it cost to deliver education without all the buildings, buses, and bureaucracy?"

PART 10: THE HARD TRUTH

We've Built a System, Not Just Schools

The public education system is:

- Massive employer (thousands of jobs)
- Huge industry (billions in contracts)
- Political power center (unions, lobbying)
- Community institution (sports, activities, tradition)
- **AND somewhere in there, it teaches kids**

But teaching kids is only 20% of what the system does (by cost).

The other 80% is maintaining the SYSTEM.

The Uncomfortable Questions

Q: Could we educate kids for 20% of current cost?

A: Yes. Homeschoolers and online schools prove this daily.

Q: Would outcomes be worse?

A: Not necessarily. Often better (homeschool test scores higher on average).

Q: Then why don't we do it?

A: Because thousands of jobs depend on the current system. And change is hard. And tradition is powerful.

Q: Is the system worth the cost?

A: Depends what you value. If you value the SYSTEM (socialization, sports, meals, transportation, babysitting), then maybe yes. If you only value EDUCATION, then no.

What We're Really Paying For

\$4,000/student: EDUCATION (teacher, materials)

\$16,000/student: SYSTEM (everything else)

Are both necessary?

For some families: YES. They need/want the full system.

For other families: NO. They'd prefer education without the overhead.

But currently, taxpayers pay for the full \$20,000 system whether they use it or not.

And families who opt out (homeschool, private school) STILL pay taxes for a system they don't use.

CONCLUSION

The Bottom Line

When someone says "Washington spends \$20,000 per student," you now know:

\$4,000 = Teaching (instruction, materials)

\$16,000 = System (everything else)

Teaching is relatively cheap.

The system is expensive.

COVID proved we don't NEED the expensive system to deliver education.

But the system employs thousands of people and represents billions in economic activity.

So it won't change easily.

For Moses Lake Families

You deserve to know:

- What you're actually paying for
- How much goes to teaching vs. overhead
- What alternatives cost
- Whether the system delivers value for money

Armed with this knowledge, you can:

- Vote informed on levies and bonds
- Ask hard questions of school board
- Consider alternatives if system doesn't serve your family
- Demand accountability for the \$16,000 overhead

The question isn't whether education is valuable.

It's whether we're paying \$20,000 for something that costs \$4,000.

And whether the \$16,000 overhead is worth it.

That's for each family to decide.

But you can't decide without knowing the truth.

Now you know.

APPENDIX: THE COST BREAKDOWNS

Quick Reference Tables

Cost per Student, per Year (Washington State 2024-25):

Category	Cost	% of Total
Teacher instruction	\$3,758	19%
Materials/curriculum	\$600	3%
Buildings/facilities	\$4,000	20%
Transportation	\$1,400	7%
Food service	\$1,200	6%
Administration	\$3,000	15%
Support staff	\$2,500	12%
Special ed (avg)	\$2,800	14%
Compliance/programs	\$1,800	9%
Other	\$1,200	6%
TOTAL	**\$20,040**	**100%**

Delivery Model Comparison:

Model	Annual Cost	Outcomes	Flexibility
Traditional public school	\$20,000	Average	Low

Online public school	\$8,000-10,000	Average to above	High
Private school	\$5,000-12,000	Above average	Medium
Homeschool	\$500-2,000	Above average	Highest

Teacher Cost Breakdown (One Teacher, 28 Students):

Item	Annual Cost	Per Student	Per Hour
Salary	\$77,000	\$2,750	\$71.30
Benefits	\$28,100	\$1,004	\$26.01
Total	**\$105,100**	**\$3,754**	**\$97.31**

This analysis prepared December 2025 to provide transparency on actual education costs vs. system overhead.

Parents deserve to know what they're paying for.

Now they do.