

Part three of an ongoing series

Our children can't wait

It seems pretty basic: Give kids a good, solid education and watch them grow into productive citizens.

But there's a problem: In Washington state there's no agreement on what "basic education" should entail or just how much it should cost. The consequences are financially unstable schools and children increasingly left behind.

Our state's education policies were made with the best of intentions when drafted 30 years ago, but their success falls far short of our aspirations. They're full of ambiguities that are hurting our kids. Just read Olympia's current definition of basic education and contrast it to the challenges we face:

According to the Revised Code of Washington 28A.150.210, we want every child to have "academic success." Our reality: Statewide, **we have a thirty percent drop out rate.** On time graduation in Seattle Public Schools is 63 percent; in Yakima, it's 64 percent; in Spokane, it's 58 percent.*

We want our kids to have "productive lives." Our reality: The best jobs are going to candidates from out of state.

We want "high expectations" for children. Our reality: In Seattle Public Schools, the state's largest district, only 17 percent of graduates meet university entrance requirements. Of all Washington graduates who started community or technical college in 2007, **45 percent had to take remedial math.***

To combat these realities, PTA advocates call for smaller class sizes – yet the ratio keeps inching up towards 30 kids per teacher, even in the primary grades. We lobby to attract and retain a top tier teaching corps, but strikes and contract negotiations tear our communities apart.

We advocate for librarians, nurses and counselors – and books. Our reality? Cuts. In too many schools, art has been relegated to a privately funded enhancement, and even then it competes with tutors for PTA dollars.

We need change.

Yes, we've seen advancements, but by and large, children's advocates are fighting the same battles 10, 15, 20 years later. The state isn't picking up the full bill for education, and much of the reason loops back to the definition of basic education. How do we quantify "high expectations?"

Members of the Basic Education Finance Task Force were charged with this very duty, and here's what they came up with: **Give all kids the opportunity to meet new, more rigorous high school requirements,** the State Board of Education's CORE 24. The intent is to ready students for college or to step into an apprenticeship or living-wage job. But the key word is opportunity, and what it implies tracks all the way back to preschool. To have the opportunity means children are prepared. They're ready to learn in kindergarten, are reading by third grade, prepared for algebra by seventh grade.

With this opportunity comes a commitment from the state to fund advancements all along a student's path. By quantifying "high expectations" the task force has clarified what the state needs to pay for – and by laying out a blueprint, the task force has given the state a set of plans to build a world-class education system.

Not coincidentally, the blueprint echoes changes already underway in some districts and already embraced by PTA members:

- Smart, targeted investments in grades K-2 to make sure kids are on track with reading and math.
- Access to pre-school for our most at-risk kids so they, too, can start ready to learn.
- Six periods in middle and high school so students can take the math, science and foreign language courses our global economy requires.
- Meaningful professional training, mentoring and teamwork to promote best practices.
- Additional staffing to meet students' instructional needs.

The proposal would also ensure staff is paid a regionally competitive wage and that districts use a uniform budgeting system that better tracks revenue flow – so that communities can better understand our school funding system and collectively make smarter decisions about education funding and policy.

The task force was charged with defining and pricing education, with determining what baseline we would ensure our children, and with drafting a model that would make sure students got what they really needed.

It did all that, and its success lies in that one key word: Opportunity.

That's pretty basic. And PTA members should embrace it, because 10, 15, 20 years from now, we shouldn't still be fighting about high school kids with third-grade reading levels, or graduates unprepared to step into nursing or high tech training. Kids should be given the opportunity to meet CORE 24 requirements.

So, what now?

The task force proposal has been drafted into two mirror bills: House bill 1410 and Senate bill 5444. Other bills are expected and revisions will likely be made. The Washington State PTA board of directors has endorsed the task force proposal and called on legislators to implement it.

If you want to see meaningful reform enacted, you need to **contact your legislators**. You need to tell them that, yes, schools need more money, but it has to be tied to quantifiable goals.

- We need to solidify at the state level successful reform underway in districts across Washington
- We need more math and science teachers, and we need to pay all teachers competitive salaries.
- We need a funding model that factors in actual operating costs and which recognizes adequate staffing includes librarians, nurses and counselors.
- We need a system that not only catches the children left behind but addresses why.

You need to tell them that a system that relies on millions in private fund-raising is a system in peril. And mainly, you need to remind them: Good intentions just don't cut it. **Our children need a financial commitment**, and they can't wait any longer.

- To contact your legislators, visit the PTA advocacy center: <http://capwiz.com/npta2/wa/home/>
- **Rally for basic ed funding:** Join advocates from across the state at noon, Feb. 26, on the capital steps in Olympia. Register online: www.wastatepta.org/leg/session_09.htm -

"It's Basic" is a campaign of the state PTA. Our goal: Make sure Washington children have stable, secure and sufficient funding for basic education. Campaign materials are posted at www.wastatepta.org/leg/funding.htm.

- *The Basic Education Finance Task Force final report: <http://www.leg.wa.gov/documents/joint/bef/FinalReport.pdf>*
 - *Get background information and keep current on bills HB 1410 and SB 5444 at www.fundingwaschools.org*

*Graduation rates are 2007/08 figures posted by OSPI; Seattle's 17 percent college-preparation statistic provided by Seattle Public Schools; remedial math percentage provided by the State Board of Education.