

EDUCATION

Restoring faith in K-12 with a “Public School Transparency Act”

By Chris Cargill
President

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Introduction

A new survey by the Gallup organization shows a decline in the number of Americans who are satisfied with K-12 education. According to polling, 55% of Americans are now either somewhat or completely dissatisfied.¹

When asked about their own child's education, at least 48% of Americans express some satisfaction - but this question included parents of those in private schools, charter schools and homeschooling parents as well. It is reasonable to assume that those parents would be more likely to be satisfied.

More than 65% say their concerns are about curriculum, while 28% say a lack of resources and 17% say political concerns.

Increasing spending on K-12 public schools hasn't improved outcomes, nor has it increased faith in the system that, in most states, makes up roughly 50% of the budget.

Restoring confidence in K-12 schools will not be easy after years of COVID shutdowns and the behavior of some teachers' unions and school boards. The disapproval of the public can be seen in the number of families who have left the system altogether.

However, lawmakers do have the ability to improve transparency and give parents and taxpayers a clearer understanding of what is happening in public schools. In doing so, they can help school districts be committed to increasing educational opportunities for all children.

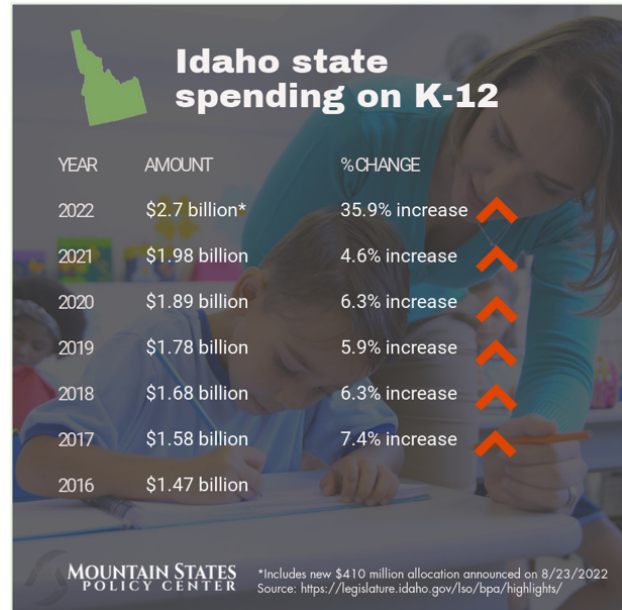
KEY INFORMATION COLUMN

K-12 Spending

One of the most frequent complaints about K-12 public schooling in the United States is a purported “lack of funding.”

A recent study by the Reason Foundation on K-12 trends in the United States shows the amount Americans are spending per student, per year, has continually *increased*.¹ In some states, the increases are staggering.

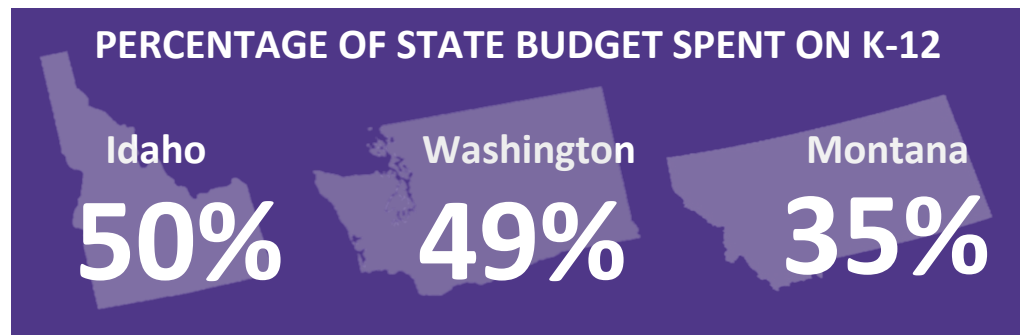
The research shows Americans spend an average of more than \$15,000 per student, per year. Most of that spending increase has not been on the child, but on the increased cost of salaries and benefits for teachers and school district employees.



Typically, public school funding comes from three sources: federal funds, state funds and local levies and/or bonds.

In some school districts, the amount spent per student will be higher, while in others it may be lower. Typically, public school funding comes from three sources: federal funds, state funds and local levies and/or bonds. The largest portion, typically, comes from the state.

In Idaho, for example, more than 50% of the state’s total general fund budget is allocated to K-12.² In Washington, it is just under 50%.³ Montana spends roughly 35% of its budget on K-12.⁴ In nearly every state, K-12 education makes up the largest portion of the state’s budget.



¹ Reason Foundation, K-12 Education Spotlight: An in-depth look at school finance data and trends, August 18, 2022, available at <https://reason.org/commentary/k-12-education-spending-spotlight/>

² Idaho State Budget, available at <https://legislature.idaho.gov/iso/bpa/highlights/>

³ Washington State Budget, available at <https://ofm.wa.gov/budget>

⁴ Montana State Budget, understanding school financing, available at <https://leg.mt.gov/content/Publications/fiscal/Session-2021/SubCom-F/K-12-Funding.pdf>

KEY INFORMATION COLUMN

School district budget documents are a maze of numbers and legal jargon – if you can even find them.

Idaho’s largest school district, the West Ada School District, has a budget that can be found online, but it is 336 pages long and includes six different funds and 36 different programs.

In Idaho, total state enrollment numbers for 2021 show 302,910 students in Idaho public schools, meaning, with the latest increases in state funding, the total *state* allocation for K-12 is at least \$8,913 per student.

In fact, Idaho has nearly doubled its K-12 spending over the past seven years. Many other states, including Washington, have done the same.

Transparency

School district budget documents are a maze of numbers and legal jargon – if you can even find them. Depending on the district, they can be hidden on websites, and only accessible if you know where to look.

When you finally do track down the document, it can be very difficult to read and understand. Idaho’s largest school district, the West Ada School District, has a budget that can be found online, but it is 336 pages long and includes six different funds and 36 different programs.⁵

In Montana, the Billings Public School district is the state’s largest. Finding its budget on the district’s website is nearly impossible.⁶

Unfortunately, transparency doesn’t mean much if it’s not understandable.

In 2021, Idaho legislators passed HB 73, which tasks the state Controller to create a uniform accounting, budgeting, and financial reporting procedure.⁷ It is expected to be completed by January of 2025, and it will be another tool available to track results and demand accountability. Idaho state Controller Brandon Woolf says:

“My team has been working alongside the State Board of Education and the State Department of Education to ensure aggregate and transactional data are available on our new Local Transparency website. Between now and the project completion date of January 2025, the team, will be phasing all school districts/charters towards uniform reporting.”

The release of all public data is paramount, but for working families and concerned citizens, certain data points are most important and should be easily found and understood – without a calculator or a degree in accounting.

⁵ West Ada School District 2021-22 Budget, available at https://core-docs.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/asset/uploaded_file/2699/WASD/2033363/Budget_2021-2022.pdf

⁶ Billings Public Schools, website home, available at <https://www.billingschools.org>

⁷ Transparent Idaho, available at <https://transparent.idaho.gov/transparentidaho/Pages/HB73-Information.aspx>

KEY INFORMATION COLUMN

The Public School Transparency Act would help taxpayers and parents determine whether their local district has enough funds and whether it is properly spending the cash in the classroom.

Parents and taxpayer may see this data and conclude their school districts need more resources. Others may see it and believe that not enough is being done to spend money in the classroom.

A Public School Transparency Act (PSTA)

A natural next step to HB 73 that legislators in Idaho and, in reality, all states could pursue would be a Public School Transparency Act. This simple step would help taxpayers and parents determine whether their local district has enough funds and whether it is properly spending the cash in the classroom.

As part of this idea, all public school districts would be required, both on the first page of their budget and also on the front page of the district's main website, to report six simple things:

1. *Amount of total dollars (all funds – local, state and federal) spent by the district that year*
2. *Amount of total dollars spent per student, per year*
3. *Amount & percentage of total dollars allocated to average classroom*
4. *Average administrator salary & benefits*
5. *Average teacher salary & benefits*
6. *Ratio of administrators to teachers to students*

Very little extra work would be needed to provide this data and make it assessable on paper and online. Most districts already have it hidden somewhere in their budget documents. They know where to look, whereas parents and taxpayers can get lost. In the interest of transparency, school districts should be eager to share this information with the public.

Parents and taxpayer may see this data and conclude their school districts need more resources. Others may see it and believe that not enough is being done to spend money in the classroom. Regardless, the community will have a broader sense of the results being achieved, and what – if any – changes need to be made. *(An example of this report is included at the end of this study.)*

It's Time to Grade Schools

While budgetary information is important, so, too, are the results. The Idaho State Department of Education Performance Recognition database allows parents and taxpayers to see results from each school and whether the school received “performance recognition” and “school identification” detailing whether the school needs to improve.⁸ This online tool is important in determining whether students are meeting expectations.

⁸ Idaho State Department of Education Performance Recognition database, available at <https://idahoschools.org/schools>

KEY INFORMATION COLUMN

The state of Florida, for example, adopted its A-F grading scale and a series of reforms in 1999 as part of a package supported by former Governor Jeb Bush.

However, the information could be made clearer. For example, parents may not fully understand what it means for their child’s school to be called a “goal maker.” Likewise, the website uses terms and abbreviations such as CSI, TSI, ATSI and more that may be unfamiliar or confusing to the average citizen.

Other states have moved in the direction of grading schools on a scale of A-F. There is nearly universal recognition of what a grade on a scale of A-F means.

The state of Florida, for example, adopted its A-F grading scale and a series of reforms in 1999 as part of a package supported by former Governor Jeb Bush. While there is a lot of data that goes into the grade the school receives, ultimately, every school receives an overall grade that is easy for the community to understand.⁹ In its latest report, Florida officials say more than 80% of schools that received either a D or an F improved their grades the following year, as attention increased, and school leaders sought to improve their public performance.

Conclusion

Transparency can help improve student outcomes. After years of school shutdowns, controversial curriculum, and questions about resources, one thing is certain – the public needs more information to improve education.

Some school districts may already be providing this information in an easy-to-understand format. But others clearly benefit from a budget process only understood by a certified public accountant.

It is clear we need to restore faith in K-12 education. Clearly grading schools, and considering a Public School Transparency Act, are tools that can lead us in the right direction.

⁹ State of Florida School Grades and Improvement Ratings, Florida Department of Education, 2022, available at <https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/18534/urlt/SchoolGradesResultsPacket22.pdf>

Nothing in this publication shall be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For more than 20 years, Chris Cargill has worked in communications and public policy. Chris has deep roots in our region and is a graduate of Gonzaga University with a degree in broadcast communications and political science. His experience includes a decade in television news as well as 13 years for another state based think tank.



Chris' work has been published in the Idaho Statesman, The Coeur d'Alene Press, The Helena Independent Record, the Spokesman-Review, The Seattle Times, the Tri-City Herald and Real Clear Policy, as well as many other regional newspapers. He is also a familiar voice on radio stations throughout the region.

Chris & his wife Lisa are the proud parents of two boys, including one who has special needs - one of the many reasons why he is so passionate about education choice options for families.

In his spare time, Chris spends time with family, serves on his local city council, and enjoys whatever down time he can in the great outdoors on his family property in North Idaho.

