



# ECONOMIC SENSE

A data-driven policy summary that examines the issues most important to families and businesses across the state.

**SENATOR JOHN BRAUN**

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Thirty-Sixth Edition

## A Time for Choosing on Learning Loss

### Bottom line up front

Two full academic years have passed since Washington's governor belatedly ended his pandemic-related closure of the state's public K-12 classrooms.

Data from the state's latest assessment of Seattle high school students shows those at more affluent schools are close to the pre-pandemic scores of their peers. The opposite is true for students with lower incomes, especially those attending high schools in lower-income areas.

Those who have spoken loudest about equity and injustice in recent years seem less than serious about fixing this glaring public-policy issue, even though it is also at the core of the state's paramount duty to provide for education.

It is a time for choosing: Legislators must lift these children up now, or let them continue to fall.

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## A. 'A Situation Doomed to Failure'

Two months into the 2020-21 academic year, it was obvious that Governor Inslee's decision to close classrooms and switch to remote instruction was failing the vast majority of Washington children – academically, socially and emotionally. *Economic Sense #32* described it as a situation doomed to failure. <sup>1</sup>

In March 2021 the governor finally ordered schools to reopen the following month. He described the multiple, overlapping effects of continuing school facility closures on Washington children and adolescents as constituting an emergency of its own and acknowledged "the lack of in-person learning and other school-based supports *may result in gaps* in students' learning and development that *may last a lifetime* (emphasis added)." <sup>2</sup>

Despite this admission, the governor vetoed legislation to have a legislative agency – the Joint Legislative Accountability and Review Committee (JLARC) – analyze the in-person K-12 education restrictions put in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. <sup>3</sup>

Post-pandemic results of the state's leading student assessment, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), show the governor's remarks about learning gaps were an understatement. They also show why the economic and racial disparities resulting from extended remote instruction were labeled the equity issue of our time. <sup>4</sup>

This is evident from the latest (spring 2023) assessments of students in Seattle Public Schools. Comparing math performance for the Seattle high schools that draw from designated attendance areas, the learning-loss economic and racial disparities are wider now versus pre-pandemic. Nathan Hale is the lone outlier.

Percentage of Students Meeting Math Standard					
High School	2018-19	2022-23	Change	Change in Passage Rate	Low Income Share of Student Body
Ballard	66.6	64	-2.6	-3.9%	12.4
Roosevelt	62.6	59.6	-3	-4.8%	15.8
West Seattle	50.7	50.8	0.1	0.2%	19.4
Ingraham	59.5	43.8	-15.7	-26.4%	32.7
Garfield	63.6	46.2	-17.4	-27.4%	41
Cleveland	48.4	34.1	-14.3	-29.5%	57.1
Nathan Hale	38.9	32.6	-6.3	-16.2%	61.1
Chief Sealth	37.5	16.1	-21.4	-57.1%	63.1
Franklin	51.7	30	-21.7	-42.0%	65.8
Rainier Beach	21.6	16.3	-5.3	-24.5%	80.8

*(Lincoln High School scores from spring 2023 not included as it had not reopened when 2018-19 SBAC was administered)*

It is particularly inequitable that Black students in these higher-poverty schools are roughly 2/3rds less likely to be at grade level in math than they were pre-pandemic.

Percentage of Black Students Meeting Math Standard				
School	2018-19	2022-23	Change	Change in Passage Rate
Garfield	16.7	10.8	-5.9	-35.3%
Franklin	26.4	9.1	-17.3	-65.5%
Cleveland	27.3	6.7	-20.6	-75.5%
Rainier Beach	10.8	5.1	-5.7	-52.8%
Chief Sealth	12.2	4	-8.2	-67.2%

## B. Learning loss? What learning loss?

The state superintendent of public instruction is former Democratic legislator Chris Reykdal. Instead of openly advocating policies to quickly and intensely address the inequities and injustice reflected in the declining SBAC results, whether statewide or Seattle-specific, he has openly attempted to reframe the discussion and divert parents’ attention.

On the 2023 legislative session’s opening day, the state’s top education official went on the defensive, all but telling reporters to stop using the

term “learning loss.”<sup>5</sup> He publicly compared what happened to students during the 2021 and 2022 school years with what happens to a driver who is forced to pull over and deal with a flat tire – not viewing it as losing ground but as taking a pause.<sup>6</sup>

When the spring 2023 results were released, debunking earlier claims he made about the reacceleration of student learning, SPI Reykdal warned families, policymakers, and community members to be “cautious about viewing state assessment scores as the primary indicator of student learning and growth.”<sup>7</sup>

While admitting the test scores show opportunity gaps and students are not yet back to what they were pre-pandemic, he pivoted to the observation that “our students enter our school buildings each day and add new learning and skills to their toolbelt.”<sup>8</sup> This was described as cheerleading mediocrity<sup>9</sup> and offered no comfort to the parents of the Seattle 10th-graders who are struggling compared to their pre-pandemic peers.

Meanwhile, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction – the agency SPI Reykdal was elected to lead – is having its own performance issues.

In spring 2021 our state received a third appropriation of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding, this time from the American Rescue Plan. At least 20% of the \$1.85 billion in ARP ESSER money must be used for responding to learning loss. All of the money, which was handed directly to school districts, is to be spent by September 2024.<sup>10</sup>

A study by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee released in May 2023 found OSPI had failed to establish processes to monitor districts’ efforts to address the pandemic’s academic effects or the outcomes of emergency spending – meaning the ESSER funds.<sup>11</sup>

The agency collects expenditure data for ESSER funds, the legislative audit notes, but current expenditure categories do not provide sufficient detail to determine how much is spent on specific interventions. <sup>12</sup>

The lack of transparency identified by JLARC also caught the attention of the U.S. Department of Education. The audit it released in September found the public didn't have sufficient insight into how school districts planned to spend the money. <sup>13</sup> For instance, the plan Seattle Public Schools shared to OSPI about how it would use the 20% earmarked for learning recovery contained fewer than 50 words. <sup>14</sup>

Washington is just one of three states audited for its use of the money. A Georgetown University education-finance researcher noted the transparency concerns are more significant given there is less than a year to spend the ARP ESSER funds, which limits the ability of parents to weigh in on how the dollars can be best used to help their children. <sup>15</sup>

The Republican leader on the Senate Ways and Means Committee also has worked to find out where the federal aid is going. As JLARC secretary, she worked with the committee's staff to learn that as of September, only around 10% of the \$1.85 billion has gone toward afterschool programs, summer enrichment programs, and learning loss. <sup>16</sup>

### **C. A Plea for Education Interventions**

Intensive tutoring is among the most effective education interventions available. Legislation to establish it in Washington's K-12 schools stalled in 2022 and 2023.

Instead, lawmakers appropriated \$27.3 million in state funding and \$79.5 million in federal ESSER funding specifically to learning recovery and acceleration. <sup>17</sup> The governor vetoed that, basically putting OSPI in charge of following through on intensive learning supports. <sup>18</sup>

In September the Washington State Institute of Public Policy published an extensive analysis of the spring 2022 SBAC results. Besides detailing the largest test score declines, it put a price tag on learning loss, estimating the fall in test scores is on average associated with a \$32,000 decrease in future earnings per student. This supports the governor's March 2021 admission that the harm could be lifelong.

WSIPP added that due to variation in effects across grades, students in middle school during the pandemic may experience a greater loss in future earnings than elementary and high school students.<sup>19</sup>

This association of learning loss with economic harm gives the legislative branch new reason to mandate meaningful educational interventions that restore the instructional opportunities students lost.

Such interventions should include tutoring, summer school programs, and "double-dose" classes, which can be funded using the federal learning-loss prevention dollars already in hand. These funds should be targeted to school districts with a higher portion of low-income students, and students of color, with methods of accountability built in so the public can track the effectiveness of these expenditures.

## Conclusion

Learning loss is real. Washington students lost countless opportunities to learn during the pandemic and do not deserve to forfeit future earnings and experience other lifelong harm simply because of choices made by adults.

While public-safety concerns and Washington's affordability crisis must remain top priorities, legislators have a duty to students and their families to intervene in meaningful ways against the academic inequity and injustice that is clearly holding students back. This is particularly true for lower-income students, and those in less affluent schools or school districts. Parents also need to know how funds meant for learning recovery and student supports are spent.

It is time for legislators to choose.

## Footnotes

1. <https://johnbraun.src.wastateleg.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2020/12/Economic-Sense-32-We-Are-Failing-Our-Children-Literally-and-Figuratively.pdf>, p. 8
2. [https://governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2023-01/21-05\\_Children%27s\\_Mental\\_Health\\_Crisis\\_%28tmp%29.pdf](https://governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2023-01/21-05_Children%27s_Mental_Health_Crisis_%28tmp%29.pdf)
3. <https://crmpublicwebservice.ofm.wa.gov/bats/attachment/vetomessage/f617073c-cbb4-eb11-81b9-005056ba1db5#page=1>
4. <https://johnbraun.src.wastateleg.org/braun-reacts-governors-veto-covid-related-provision-racial-equity-analysis-bill/>
5. <https://tvw.org/video/state-superintendent-chris-reykdal-press-conference-2023011065/?eventID=2023011065>; 1:30 mark
6. Id., 4:43 mark
7. <https://medium.com/waospi/students-are-accelerating-in-math-recovery-according-to-state-test-scores-53fcad15cf33>
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9. <https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/editorials/cheerleading-mediocrity-is-not-good-enough-for-was-education-department/>
10. <https://ospi.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/2023-08/2021-06-washingtonstate-arp-esser-state-plan-template-final-web.pdf>
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13. <https://specialeducationaction.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/USDOE-OIG-ARP-ESSER-Plans-and-Spending-Report-for-Washington-State.pdf>
14. <https://www.seattletimes.com/education/lab/federal-audit-finds-flaws-in-was-handling-of-pandemic-aid-for-schools/>
15. Id.
16. E-mail exchange between Sen. Lynda Wilson, R-Vancouver, and JLARC staff
17. <https://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2023-24/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/Senate/5187-S.SL.pdf?q=20231017155237>
18. Id., p. 1305
19. [https://www.wsipp.wa.gov/ReportFile/1773/Wsipp\\_Student-Achievement-and-the-Pandemic-Analysis-of-Test-Scores-Earnings-and-Recovery-Interventions\\_Report.pdf](https://www.wsipp.wa.gov/ReportFile/1773/Wsipp_Student-Achievement-and-the-Pandemic-Analysis-of-Test-Scores-Earnings-and-Recovery-Interventions_Report.pdf)