

K-12 Funding Q+A

Responses to commonly made statements from legislators

The purpose of this document is to help education advocates to avoid common pitfalls in conversations with legislators.

Legislators tend to have “go-to” arguments on most topics. This is efficient in order to be able to respond quickly to recurring questions asked or issues raised. They will use these arguments as long as they are “working” for them.

The purpose of the responses below isn’t to score imaginary debate points but rather to truly get legislators to question their own standard responses and move beyond them to deeper engagement with the issue of school funding.

This document could be shared with individual legislators, because if we can stop these arguments from being made in the first place, much will be won and the conversation will benefit from it.

1. Where should we take the money from?

[sometimes expanded by naming specific areas such as healthcare for children, the legislator thinks are important to the advocate asking]

Comment: This question is part dare/bluff, part powerplay. Legislators expect that most advocates will neither be comfortable nor knowledgeable enough to identify cuts to state programs.

R1: What parts of the budget would you be comfortable taking it from?

If the legislator isn’t willing to make cuts anywhere in the budget, why are they asking advocates to identify some?

If the legislator is suggesting certain policy areas, we will work with them to identify potential cuts in that area.

R2: If you could share the current draft of the legislative budget with us, Oregon PTA has offered to go through it with you to identify potential funding sources.

Current budget process is a mess. There actually isn’t a draft legislative budget that could be shared or criticized. In the last session LFO identified over 100 individual bills with significant impact to the budget [[Source](#), Appendix G]. This is in addition to existing legislation or statute directing funding to programs. The reason it is so difficult to identify cuts is because the legislature has made it difficult to comprehend the budget at all.

This response puts the onus back on the legislator to provide some framework in which we can suggest budget reallocation and highlights the futility for advocates to engage in an intransparent state budget process.

Note: There definitely are opportunities for discussions around reasonable budget adjustments e.g.

- Pork Bowl: Lawmakers Propose to Spend at Least \$43.5 Million in Last-Minute Appropriations on Sports - The biggest beneficiaries: the privately owned Hillsboro Hops and Oregon State University, which just won a windfall in a Pac-12 lawsuit. [[Willamette Week](#)]
- Errors in Deloitte-run Medicaid systems can cost millions and take years to fix [[Oregon Capital Chronicle](#)]
- State Invoices Show Oregon's Favorite Fixer Playing a Key Role in Mopping Up Measure 110 [[Willamette Week](#)] [There might be a connection between underfunding the education system and having to hire out-of-state consultants?]
- Oregon spent \$23M on legal fees to defend state foster care system before reaching settlement [[The Oregonian](#)]
- Raymond Parenteau Built a Fortune From One of the Fastest-Growing Government Programs in Oregon - But state officials believe Parenteau should never have been allowed to grow his company here [[Willamette Week](#)]
- DAS seems to apply standard rates for out-of-state travel for state agency positions regardless of whether the work requires out-of-state travel.
- ODE proposes to spend \$30M more on its finance and IT department (Office of Finance and Information Technology, \$120M) than it does on summer learning for all students in the state (\$90M)

2. We simply don't have enough revenue.

How much revenue would be enough?

Between 2005 and now 2025, General Fund revenue more than tripled from 12.4 billion dollars in 2005-07 to 37.3 billion dollars in the 2025-27 GBR. That's an almost 25 billion dollar difference. Additionally, the state is now receiving about 2 billion dollars in lottery fund revenue, and 3.2 billion dollars from the corporate activity tax.

How much revenue would be enough?

3. We have so many needs.

R1: Have you tried more accountability and transparency? That is what school districts are told to do with the many needs they have.

R2: Schools are one of the most effective ways to address societal issues comprehensively. Investments in schools today are savings of tomorrow.

We have invested in many programs outside of the State School Fund

The Legislature's own committee, the Joint Committee on Public Education Appropriation, agrees that the State hasn't adequately funded public education - in- or outside the State School Fund - to achieve the student outcomes desired by the Legislature.

Only 17% of Oregon voters have kids in public school. / Education is not a priority for voters because only a small % have kids in school. It's not on their radar.

1. Data shows an overwhelming majority of Oregonians care about public education. Regardless of whether they currently have kids in public school or not. Surveys dating back to 1992—"consistently show a strong consensus among Oregonians regarding the value of public education, transcending typical demographic and psychographic divisions." (Source: [OVBC](#))
"When considering the values and priorities that guide K-12 education, Oregonians overwhelmingly share an overarching view that all students, regardless of their background or circumstances, deserve access to well-rounded and rigorous learning opportunities, as well as safe and inclusive learning environments." (Source: [OVBC](#))
2. There are more parents and grandparents in Oregon than there are registered Democrats or Republicans.
Additionally there are 831,000 children living in Oregon, and about 300,000 young adults who attended a school less than 5 years ago.
So, almost 60% of Oregonians either are children, live with children, are grandparents of children or were children themselves less than 5 years ago. This doesn't even include aunts, uncles, or couples planning to have children soon.
So it is no surprise that an overwhelming majority of Oregonians care about public education.
[About 687,000 adults live in households with children under 18, another estimated 500,000 Oregonians are grandparents, additionally there are 831,000 children living in Oregon].
3. Funding something adequately has nothing to do with numbers of voters affected. Between 2000 and 2021 less than 1% of people in Oregon were directly exposed to wildfire ([Source](#)). That doesn't mean we shouldn't care about wildfires.

Just like wildfires affect the livability in the whole state so does the state of our public schools.

Voters care more about homelessness and mental health issues we see in the streets than they care about K-12 funding.

1. Oregonians know these issues are not unrelated.
2. A significant share of the housing crisis is related to a missing educated workforce. Funding education will help create the builders, tradesmen, architects, and city planners we need to find ways out of our housing crisis.
3. Adequately funding public education to support our students in fulfilling their potential as adults might be the best prevention we have to address mental health issues earlier or stop our fellow Oregonians from slipping from their path.

Parents have to educate neighbors and friends about the importance of education funding.

And then what? How many neighbors and friends do we need to educate before you as legislators act?

Surveys show (see above) that Oregonians already overwhelmingly support public education.

Oregonians don't want to increase taxes.

At this point, we could fund the QEM completely within existing revenue.

We gave them the 10.2 billion that they asked for.

1. Advocates and districts asked for 10.3B not 10.2B. That is a 100 million dollar difference - about three times as much as the state spends on summer learning annually.
2. It's also disingenuous to suggest that the legislature would have allocated more, if advocates had asked for more, because where would the money have come from and if there was more money, why didn't the legislature allocate 10.3 instead of 10.2? Republicans had a bill for a higher appropriation that failed with the Democratic majority.
3. Yes, given the unusually high inflation environment we experienced in 2023-25, the 10.3 number turned out to be wrong. But it is worth noting that

- a. every other estimate about school CSL (DAS, Governor's office) was even worse off than the number from advocates
 - b. basically everybody in the nation from the president and the federal administration down was surprised by high inflation. The state economist for example got state revenue estimates wrong by over 6 billion dollars. In a challenging forecasting environment advocates did a better job than anyone else to identify cost drivers for school districts.
4. The quality education commission recently recalculated what in hindsight the state budget allocation should have been to maintain 2021-23 service levels. They estimate that the 10.2 allocation was in fact a 500 million cut to schools below what would have been necessary to simply maintain 2021-23 service levels.

It's about how we spend it, not how much.

This argument implies various things:

- a) *School districts are wasteful in their spending.*
R: School districts are highly transparent about their spending decisions. Wasteful spending is and will be criticized by the community including our 197 school boards.
- b) *School districts aren't focused on the most "efficient" spending ("efficient" is a flexible term here and typically means whatever educational strategy the speaker is trying to promote.)*
R: While investing in "xyz" might be efficient, please explain which areas you would cut funding from, if xyz is supposed to be covered from existing funding and not additional dollars.
- c) *The distribution between school districts is inequitable and that should be corrected.*
R: While there definitely are districts that have higher needs than others, please explain what the "currently overfunded" school districts should cut funding from, if funding is reallocated from them to others instead of providing additional funding to the higher need districts.

We are actually a high-effort state/spending more than the national average

Comments like these are typically referring to studies that compare education spending to state GDP (e.g. https://www.schoolfinancedata.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/profiles24_OR.pdf)

There are a number of issues with these comparisons.

1. There is no correlation between the size of a state's economy and the needs of the students in a state. Just because a state has a smaller economy (like Oregon compared to e.g. Washington or California) does not mean that Oregon students have less needs than students in California or Washington. Note: Both CA and WA, which are considered "low effort states", spend more money per student than Oregon, just less compared to their much bigger overall state GDP.
2. These studies typically compare states to the US average. As a number of states especially with Republican legislatures have recently cut their state education spending, states like Oregon rise in the rankings as long as cuts in Oregon aren't as dramatic as in other states. This does not mean Oregon should follow other states in cutting education spending.
3. A significant part of the difference in Oregon's higher spending per student compared to other states is simply an expression of the different approaches to the state's social safety net/benefits (e.g. PERS, health insurance plans, paid family leave benefits). A school district in Oregon will spend more on benefits than a district in a state like Mississippi. These are decisions made by the state legislature, not individual school districts.
4. These studies also typically do not adjust for any differences in mandates around e.g. curriculum, or student population e.g. percentage of students with disabilities.
5. Also, GDP is based only on economic activity, not wealth. As school funding across the nation is often rooted in property taxes, it is noteworthy that Oregon's effective property tax rate (0.77%) is lower than for examples Missouri's (0.82%) and half of the one of Texas (1.47%). [Source: [Tax Foundation](#)]

We need more accountability

"The bottom line is this: When a district's numbers show failure for their students, there will be help and attention – not voluntarily requested, but required." (Governor Kotek)

If there are things school districts could do better within existing limited funding, the state should not wait to tell districts but should be very vocal about it. Districts can't fix what they might be unaware of.

Between public school board meetings, widely publicized test results for individual grade levels in a school, school site councils, frequent internal testing and assessments, and general family advocacy, districts and schools are held accountable by their leadership and the community every day.

School districts seem to be more transparent and more accountable than any state agency.

Finally the question remains, how more accountability and the changes identified from it can be implemented without additional funding.