

Electricity Costs and Salmon: Finding a Balance

The Impacts on Education

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I begin my testimony by sincerely thanking the House Water and Power Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify this morning on the impacts to public education as brought on by salmon recovery efforts in the Northwest. The celebration of our national independence, our nation's 230th birthday three days ago serves to remind us all that we are a nation governed of the people, by the people and for the people; your presence at Columbia Basin College today validates our democracy in action. Thank you once again.

The complex issue of salmon recovery in the Northwest is one in which most sides in the debate are holding dear their passionate arguments for their particular viewpoint. I am not an expert on the management of the infrastructure of the northwest electricity power grid, but I do know how to flip on a light switch and operate a few power tools. I am not an expert on salmon, but I do possess a few photos at home of me with one or two that "didn't get away". I am a school board member, serving eight years on the Pasco School District Board of Directors and I also serve as a member of the Board of Directors for the Washington State School Directors Association. I am here today to share with you the impacts on the future of our children's education in light of the salmon recovery efforts.

Article 9, section 1 of the Washington State Constitution reads as follows:

It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste, or sex.

Our state legislature passed the Education Reform Act (HB 1209) in 1993 that set the present course to meet this charge. Since that time education reform has had a number of successes. The Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) is our assessment tool that informs parents, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Congress as to how we, local school districts are performing. Academic achievement trend lines show that we are getting better at preparing our students to meet the challenges that life will bring. Examples of these successes:

- In February 2006, Washington State was recognized by the College Board as one of the top three states in the nation to mark the strongest increases in proportion of students taking Advanced Placement exams. 1
- In May 2006 Washington State earned higher scores than the national average in the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 4th and 8th grade. 2
- Washington state students scored an all time high in math and verbal portions in the SAT and also scored above the national average in 2005. 3
- Locally, Pasco High School was recognized by Newsweek magazine as the 905th best high school in the United States in May of 2005. 4
- The Kennewick Reading program is a national model for improving education; its goal of 90% of students in 3rd grade reading at grade level was achieved this year. 5

Education reform is working in Washington State; the evidence for this fact is broad and deep. We should all be proud of the effort of our students, our teachers and our administrators. Yet challenges remain before us and it is fair to say that these challenges possess costs outside of local control that are constantly rising.

In public education our three largest challenges are (1) preparing the class of 2008 and future graduating classes to successfully pass their 10th grade WASL; preliminary results indicate that approximately 54% of this year's sophomore class (Class of 2008) passed the math portion of the WASL. 6 The WASL passage is a Washington State mandate; (2) The federal law "No Child Left Behind" imposes a large number of requirements on local school districts with many associated costs absorbed using existing resources 7; (3) the federal law "Individuals with Disabilities Education Act" has not been fully funded by congress and again, school districts must use existing resources to meet the requirements of this law. 7 Public education shares expenditures similar to other public and private entities such as rising fuel costs (Pasco school busses travel more than a million miles annually), rising health care costs (The Pasco School District is the largest employer in Franklin County) and of course, electricity.

In the past five school years the Pasco School District has paid approximately 5.7 million dollars in electrical costs. Twenty percent of our electric bill goes towards salmon recovery. 1.1 million dollars in five years. As I briefly outlined, public education has mandates to meet and funding issues to resolve. The point of my testimony can be summed up in one sentence: the further out a school district's dollars move away from the classroom, the more difficult the task of educating our children becomes.

1.1 million dollars could have paid for four or five teachers for each of the past five years. We need math coaches (teachers) and reading coaches (teachers). Our new teachers need seasoned mentors (teachers) to help them succeed. Our expected result: children receiving a better education and being more prepared for adulthood.

1.1 million dollars could have purchased approximately 226 computers for each of the past five years. The cost of initiating and maintaining a computer program in a school district is high and ever-increasing. In this age of technology we have to not only provide students information, but the abilities to use it.

1.1 million dollars could have purchased approximately 2600 math and science text books each of the past five years. School districts across the state have or are exploring the changing of curriculum to better meet the grade level expectations. Updated researched based texts and the proper instruction are key in helping students learn.

These are three examples of from a long list of programs and activities many districts are not able to fund, or if they do reallocate existing resources, they do so at the expense of other promising interventions for students. All day kindergarten, extended days for learning, reducing the Achievement Gap, staff development, reduction of class sizes, dropout prevention and teacher pay and benefits are other areas that school districts could address, however time does not permit me to go into an in depth discussion on the needs of school districts to meet the mandates from our state legislature and Congress.

Salmon recovery is an important goal, not many would argue the point; however it is also important to remember that education dollars that stay close to the classroom are more effective in our children's' education. Like everyone else, we pay for the electricity we consume. We do need the electricity to operate our schools but the twenty percent on that cost used to pay for salmon recovery, the 1.1 million dollars over five years, those are education dollars that are very far removed from our classrooms. Put another way, any increase in electricity dollars going to the recovery of schools of fish adversely effects the schools of our children.

I hope my brief testimony helps you better understand the impact of electrical costs and salmon recovery to the Washington State public school system. The world we are sending our children into upon graduation is far different than the world we entered when we received our high school diploma. Education reform in Washington State is on the right path; it takes time and resources to meet the requirements of our legislature and Congress and more importantly, to prepare our students for their future.

I thank you once again for this opportunity to speak to the subcommittee on this issue today.

Work cited

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