

Using the K-12 Funding Workshop as an Educational Tool

The K-12 Funding Workshop is a ready-to-use civic education resource that helps young people understand how public schools are funded, investigate real district-level data, and translate what they learn into informed civic participation. Although its examples focus on Washington State, the workshop's core approach, learn the system, examine a local case, and communicate a position, can be adapted for classrooms, youth programs, libraries, after-school clubs, and community events.

Why this workshop works as an educational tool

School funding is often presented as a technical topic reserved for policymakers. This workshop makes it concrete by connecting funding formulas to familiar student experiences: class size, counselors, nurses, transportation, instructional materials, special education services, and local programs. The sequence moves students from foundational knowledge to independent inquiry and finally to public communication. That progression supports civic literacy, data literacy, critical thinking, research, and speaking skills within one lesson.

The workshop is especially useful for grades 6-12, though facilitators can simplify the terminology and research expectations for younger learners. It can support civics, government, economics, social studies, mathematics, data science, debate, journalism, and leadership curricula. It is also well suited to multilingual and immigrant-family programs because it explains a public system that can otherwise feel difficult to access and gives participants clear pathways for making their voices heard.

Learning objectives

By the end of the workshop, students should be able to:

1. Describe the major state, local, and federal sources of Washington public-school funding.
2. Explain the basic purpose of the prototypical school funding model and identify at least one benefit and one limitation.
3. Use a public data tool to interpret selected information about a school district.
4. Distinguish between an observation supported by data, an inference, and a policy opinion.
5. Develop a concise civic message that combines personal experience, evidence, and a specific call to action.

Suggested lesson structure

1. Prepare the learning environment (before the session)

Review the slide deck and open the linked data and agency resources in advance. Decide whether students will investigate their home district, compare two districts, or choose from a short list. Because public data sources and legislation change, verify time-sensitive claims, especially bill status, annual funding levels, and district figures, before teaching. The deck should be treated as a starting point for inquiry, not as a substitute for current primary sources.

Set discussion norms that welcome disagreement while requiring evidence and respect. School funding can be personal: students may have experienced program reductions, staffing shortages, unmet disability-related needs, or unequal access to opportunities. Invite students to share, but never require them to disclose personal or family circumstances. Make clear that the learning goal is not to produce one preferred political conclusion; it is to reason carefully and participate constructively.

2. Build background knowledge (15-20 minutes)

Use the opening slides to introduce the three-part structure and the basic funding landscape. Explain the McCleary case as historical context for Washington's duty to fund basic education, then use the hypothetical 500-student school example to make the prototypical model visible. Ask students what may be gained by using a common formula and what local realities a standardized model might miss. A useful comprehension check is a quick "source-to-service" exercise. Name a service—such as transportation, special education, a new building, or an after-school activity—and ask students which level of funding might support it and what additional information they would need. Emphasize that real budgets are complex and that funds can carry restrictions.

3. Conduct a district data inquiry (20-30 minutes)

Students then use the workshop's funding tracker or another verified public source to explore a district. Rather than asking them to collect every available number, give them a small inquiry frame:

- What is one important fact about this district's students or context?
- What are two funding or spending figures that stand out?
- How does the district compare with a relevant benchmark or another district?
- What might explain the pattern, and what cannot be concluded from the data alone?

Students should record the source, year, unit, and definition for each figure. Encourage them to check whether a value is a total, a percentage, or a per-student amount. If two sources disagree, treat the discrepancy as a learning opportunity: compare years, definitions, and methodologies. Students can report their findings in a one-minute briefing, a shared chart, or a short written claim-evidence-reasoning response.

4. Move from analysis to civic communication (15-25 minutes)

The advocacy portion gives students an authentic reason to synthesize their learning. They may prepare a school board comment, legislative testimony, a letter to an elected official, or a two-minute reflection speech. A strong response includes four elements: a clear position or concern, a brief personal or community connection, one or two verified pieces of evidence, and a realistic call to action directed to the appropriate decision-maker.

Before students speak, allow rehearsal in pairs. Listeners can provide feedback using three questions: Is the main point clear? Does the evidence actually support it? Is the request specific and within the audience's authority? Participation can remain instructional rather than public; students should choose whether to share outside the classroom, and minors should follow school or program policies for public engagement.

Facilitation options and adaptations

For a 45-minute session, teach one funding concept, complete a guided district example as a whole group, and end with a 100-150 word exit response. For a 60-90 minute workshop, use the full sequence above. For a multi-day unit, add comparisons among state funding models, interviews with district staff or community members, budget simulations, and revision of testimony after peer review.

Support access by defining terms such as levy, apportionment, allocation, per-pupil, and inflation in plain language. Provide a note-catcher, sentence starters, and printed screenshots when internet access is unreliable. Multilingual learners can first discuss ideas or draft testimony in the language they know best. Students who are uncomfortable speaking may submit a written comment, infographic, audio recording, or annotated data display. Avoid ranking districts as simply "good" or "bad"; focus attention on context, needs, resources, and outcomes.

Assessment and evidence of learning

Assessment should measure the quality of students' reasoning, not whether they support a particular funding policy. A simple four-part rubric can evaluate: accuracy of funding concepts; responsible use and

citation of data; recognition of uncertainty or alternative explanations; and clarity, organization, and feasibility of the civic message. A quick exit ticket can ask students to name one thing they learned, one question the data did not answer, and one action an informed community member could take. Possible final products include a district profile, a comparison poster, a claim-evidence-reasoning paragraph, a recorded public comment, or a revised piece of legislative testimony. For a stronger project-based learning extension, students can present their findings at a civics fair and include a short methods note explaining where their data came from and what its limitations are.

Responsible and nonpartisan use

Present the resource as an invitation to investigate, not a finished verdict on school finance. Clearly separate established facts, interpretations, and advocacy recommendations. Use current official sources for legal requirements and budget figures, and label illustrative numbers as examples. When students use generative AI, require them to verify every factual claim against an identifiable source, disclose meaningful AI assistance, and retain responsibility for the final analysis and wording.

Facilitators should also protect student privacy. Do not ask students to enter personal information into unfamiliar tools, publish identifiable stories without consent, or assume that a student's school experience represents an entire district. If work will be shared publicly, review citations, remove sensitive details, and confirm that students understand the audience and permanence of publication.

Recommended closing

End by returning to the workshop's central idea: public education funding is not only a budget question; it is a civic question about how communities define needs, distribute shared resources, and hold institutions accountable. Ask each student to complete the sentence, "One question I can now investigate, and one way I can participate, is..." This preserves curiosity while connecting knowledge to agency.

Used in this way, the K-12 Funding Workshop is more than a presentation. It is a scaffold for inquiry: students learn how a system works, test broad claims against local evidence, listen to different experiences, and communicate with the people responsible for public decisions. Those habits are transferable well beyond education policy and form the foundation of informed civic life.

Core resources in the workshop

- K-12 Funding Workshop slide deck:
https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1V9EV5UByzEFz2qNf5Z_EJ1uLUnlo5RSADyCwOPSVSA
- Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction: Understanding Public School Funding
- Washington K-12 funding tracker and district-level data resource referenced in the workshop
- Official legislative pages and current bill text for any legislation discussed