

Understanding the K–12 Budget Cuts from the 2026 Legislative Session

By Dr. David Knight

Our state’s budget analysts are projecting a shortfall of [over \\$10 billion](#) in the [next four years](#). The budget crunch comes after the state already enacted cuts during the 2026 legislative session. The largest cuts for K-12 were made to the **Transition to Kindergarten (TTK)** program and **Local Effort Assistance (LEA)**.

As a professor of education finance and policy, and a parent of two children attending Shoreline Public Schools, I care deeply about the stability of our public school system, and its ability to deliver equitable outcomes for students. This article describes which districts were most impacted by the 2026 K-12 budget cuts and why that matters for students.

LEA is Washington’s tax base equalization program that helps put districts in lower property wealth areas on more even footing when generating revenue through local taxation. TTK is an early learning program for four-year-olds, which has grown rapidly over the past five years to 6,500 children in 2025-26, filling [early learning access gaps](#) in Washington’s mixed-delivery early childhood education system.

A total of 136 and 74 districts are impacted by the 2026 cuts to LEA and TTK, respectively, averaging about \$50 per student for each program. These cuts amount to about half of one percent in state funding for the typical district, which for districts operating large budgets on tight margins, can contribute to introduce new budget challenges.

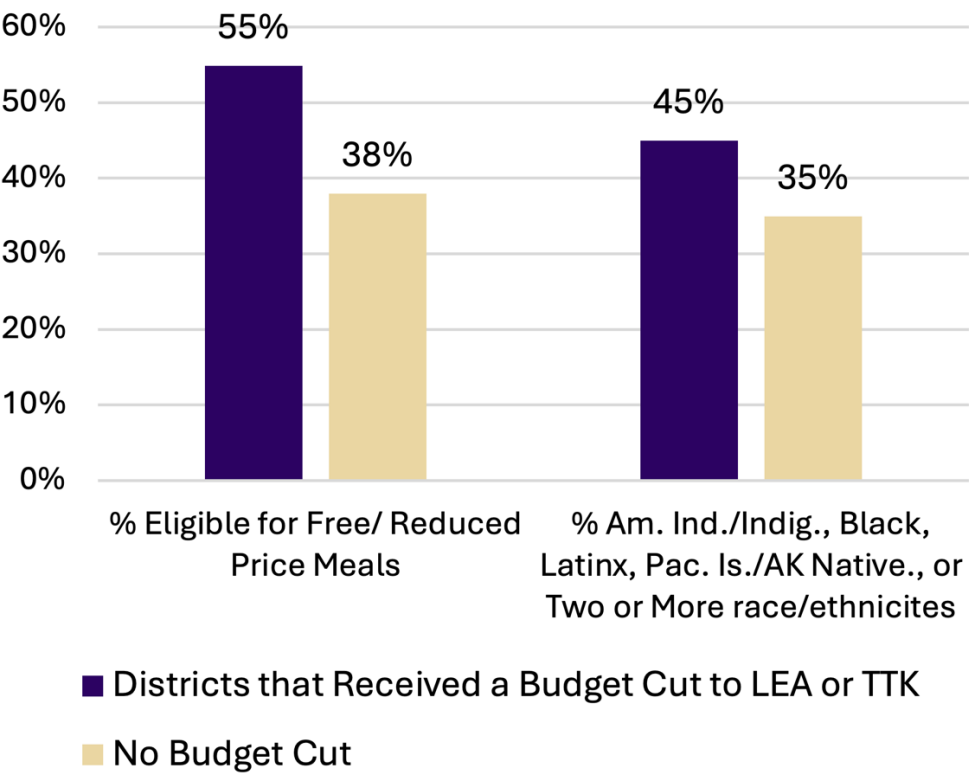
But these cuts do not affect all districts and students equally. The design of both programs influences the student populations they serve. LEA targets lower-wealth districts, which on average enroll a more racially diverse student population and a greater share of lower-income students. TTK similarly has grown in [childcare deserts](#) that cluster in lower-income areas.

Figure 1 shows the student demographics of districts with cuts to LEA or TTK, compared to districts not impacted by cuts. The figure shows that 55% of students in districts receiving cuts to LEA or TTK are eligible for free/reduced price lunch, compared to 38% for districts not receiving cuts. Impacted districts enroll a greater share of students who identify as American Indian/ Native, Black, Latine, Pacific Islander/ Native Hawaiian, or two or more races, 45%, compared to 35% in districts not receiving cuts.

While state budget cuts to K-12 services that are considered outside basic education are sometimes difficult to avoid, targeting those cuts to early learning programs and to higher-poverty and more diverse student populations is not an effective or evidence-based strategy for reducing the budget, and belies the moral obligation and constitutional duty to support a public education system that serves for all children.

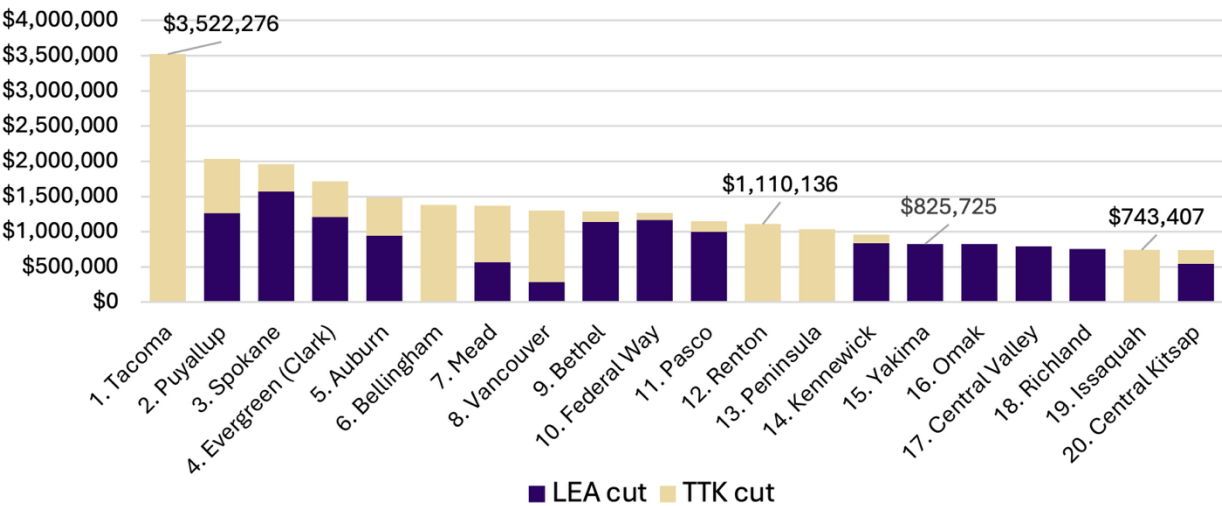
As we move into the 2027 session, restoring funds for these programs, and avoiding any further cuts, will be critical for ensuring that students in our state have equal educational opportunities.

Figure 1. Student enrollment characteristics among school districts impacted by 2026 cuts to LEA and TTK and districts not impacted by cuts



Source: Authors’ calculation based on OSPI data. Note. LEA = Local Effort Assistance; TTK = Transition to Kindergarten

Figure 2. Top 20 School Districts with the Largest Cuts to Local Effort Assistance and Transition to Kindergarten



Source: Authors’ calculation based on OSPI data. Note. LEA = Local Effort Assistance; TTK = Transition to Kindergarten