

Our quarterly profile of educational leadership in Washington state.

Rep. Laurie Dolan

AWSP's 2019 Torch of Leadership Award Winner



We are thrilled to honor you with our Torch of Leadership award for 2019. We would love to know more about your professional experiences and why you got into politics in the past few years.

Our democracy has always depended on educated citizens and thoughtful, steady leadership. After retiring at 30 years in 2004, it was a fascinating change to become Gov. Gregoire's Director of Policy. I had been supervising school principals and special programs (Special Ed, Title I/LAP, Professional and Technical Education, etc) for the last 23 years in Spokane, and I had completed my superintendent's credential and PhD in organizational leadership. It was delightful fun to take my skill set into a new venue. In 2009, after a second stem cell transplant for multiple myeloma, I "re-retired" for seven years and traveled the world with my family. When Chris Reykdal left his legislative seat, friends suggested that I run. I was 63 years old and frightened that the *McCleary* discussion was heading in a direction that could take away the best of K-12 funding, blaming salary schedules for inequities between districts. I also yearned to restructure the tax system in Washington with more progressive taxes.



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School funding has radically changed in the past two years. Many districts report a decline in resources and have tighter parameters on those resources while at the same time managing large increases in salaries. In addition, principal salaries in 2018-19 were strictly limited to a 3.1% increase which has led to a narrowing gap between teacher and principal salaries (and in some cases teachers making more per diem than principals). What do you see as potential fixes for the continued disparities in education funding?

Since 2017, an additional \$13 billion has been directed to K-12 education as part of the *McCleary* fix. K-12 education is the paramount duty of the state, yet prior to *McCleary*, the state had failed for many years to fund K-12 education adequately, relying too much on local levies. With *McCleary*, however, there was so much focus on generating additional state funding, that the pendulum swung away from the importance of

locally elected school board members, and the fact that our citizens expect their schools to deliver a lot more than the "prototypical model of basic education." Consequently, the initial *McCleary* fix not only broke some of the structural funding mechanisms that had kept the K-12 system sustainable, but it took away local money for local decision-making by putting such a strict lid on local levies.

In my experience, principal salaries are always bargained after teacher salaries, and can easily fall behind where they should be. The discrepancies need to be brought to superintendents, school board members and the legislature in a concise, clear message shouted in a single loud voice representing kids, parents, teachers, administrators, and school boards. The quality of K-12 education depends primarily on great principals and teachers, and they will leave the profession if their salaries can't remain competitive. Losing highly qualified educators is heartbreaking.

School leadership is second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning, according to research done by the Wallace Foundation. Describe your vision of the role of school principals in schools today.

What is the role of principals today? It would be easier to ask “What isn’t the role of principals today?” Here are just a few of my favorite answers:

- Instructional leaders: Our craft of educating students is one of the more complex jobs in the world. Training new teachers takes place over several years, depending on the level of mentoring that is available. In schools with strong instructional leaders in the principal’s office, kids learn more.
- Ambassadors to parents, community members, and most importantly, to students. Good principals, as often as possible, are in the hallways with students and parents whenever class is not in session, and in classrooms whenever possible.
- Social workers for helping those students in most need and connecting them to community resources when appropriate.
- Counselors for staff, students and parents: the art of cognitive coaching is essential. In my experience, the only behavior I can change is my own. My ability to ask the questions that help an educator figure out their own “best path forward” is essential.
- A sense of humor and enjoying people (both little ones and big ones).
- Flexibility: A school day can change on a dime.
- Consistent, clear management of people: Kids need to know what to expect. So do staff.

Many principals find joy and satisfaction in their work. But according to the 2014 report “Churn: The High Cost of Principal Turnover,” by the School Leaders Network, approximately 50 percent of principals leave their jobs after only three years. Why is there such high turnover and what are some solutions for stopping the churn?

There is nothing easy about being a school principal. Like teaching, mentoring is critical in the first years of becoming a principal. Leadership can feel lonely at times, particularly when you are brand new. Connecting new principals to some of the best experienced principals is a lifeline. Having an administration in place that honestly listens to principal feedback is also critical. Principals are in the classrooms where our most important work takes place. Their feedback and suggestions need to be honored. Salaries that keep up with inflation (and teachers salaries) are also an important element of long-term career satisfaction.

Principals are concerned with the shortage of teachers and substitutes. In our statewide survey from the fall of 2017, 73% of principals who responded reported that they had to cover a class in the past week because a substitute was not available. 84% of principals stated they were “struggling” or “in crisis” to find certificated/qualified teachers. What are your suggestions for helping to solve the teacher shortage?

Many educators and legislators have worked hard the past couple of years to pass HB 1139 - Addressing the Teacher Shortage Crisis. The legislation is filled with a multitude of strategies to increase our supply of trained teachers, both in small

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and large districts; and to train paraeducators, as well as those who are leaving other careers, to become teachers in a common sense program that skips the “busy work” some of us had to endure. The crucial job now is to keep funding this legislation in both higher ed and K-12.

School safety is an ongoing concern for principals, teachers, students, and families. What one or two specific solutions for this issue do you propose and what steps will you take to work toward making them happen?

One of the bills I am most proud to have sponsored and passed is HB 1216 - School Safety and Student Well-Being. This legislation was the result of the many groups who care about K-12 education and student safety coming together to write one bill. It was my honor to set the table for the work. Much research went into writing HB 1216. We learned that most mass shootings take place in white, suburban communities. We learned that when students who are a “danger to themselves or others” are expelled from school, the problem doesn’t go away. Too often that same student will go home, steal their parent’s gun, and return to school. Through the school safety centers set up in our nine ESDs, we will be able to deliver training in even our smallest districts in threat assessment, student mental health and suicide prevention and eventually, Medicaid match. In 2019 we passed the

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foundational bill with the threat assessment position. The intent of everyone involved is that we will work to obtain additional funding in 2020 for the other positions.

Principals are concerned with the lack of mental health resources for students. What specific kinds of support and/or solutions would you offer around mental health resources and what steps will you take to make this happen?

There is a great deal of energy from K-12 advocates to add one more mental health position to the prototypical school model. With more progressive revenue, this might be possible. The resources that we are dedicating to school safety centers also give schools an additional avenue to access training, crisis intervention help when needed and for coordinated services with community based mental health resources.

What do you see as the Legislature's role in helping students in the state of Washington find success?

We need to pass more progressive taxes and to turn our regressive taxes more progressive as we did with the Real Estate Excise Tax (REET). My personal goal is to get a capital gains tax into state law before I leave this job. We also need to keep refining structural funding in order to fix what we broke with the initial *McCleary* fix. Finally, there is a lot of work to be done to get rid of the damage left over from "No Child Left Untested" federal and state laws. HB 1599, delinking high school graduation requirements from standardized tests, was an essential step forward. I am excited about focusing on "High School and Beyond" plans that will actually help our students walk across the stage at graduation with a real path forward. And there is huge work ahead for developing multiple

pathways to graduation through dual credit, Advanced Placement courses and completion of career and technical education courses. Our students are uniquely different, and we need a system that allows them to succeed in different ways.

Who was/is your favorite principal and why? (Could be yours, could be one of your kids', etc...)

Ray Clift, my first principal when I started teaching first grade in 1973. He was such a great combination of expertise and knowing when to let you try it yourself. He had a great sense of humor which was essential in a school with 97% free lunch students. Some of my best education experiences were in Bancroft Elementary, and my favorite "kid stories" are from that experience. ■

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