

PTA calls 4 school districts `at risk`

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Four south King County school districts are being called ``at risk" because their students have too many needs and there's not enough money to meet them. A Washington State PTA study released Wednesday also says eight of the state's least-funded school districts are in King County. The at-risk districts -- Kent, Renton, Tukwila and Highline -- are among 17 that the PTA says receive less than average funding in comparison with other districts around the state.

The list of the least-funded school districts included Federal Way, Kent, Auburn, Renton, Snoqualmie Valley, Highline, Issaquah and Tahoma. The at-risk districts of Kent, Renton, Tukwila and Highline have a higher than average number of students with extraordinary needs such as disabilities, inability to speak English and poverty. They also have a large number of students with failing scores on the fourth-grade mandatory state exam, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning.

The study, ``Washington State School Finances: Does Every Child Count?," looked at 174 of the state's 296 school districts and their finances in the 2001-02 school year. The 17 identified as at risk have teacher-experience levels that are below the state average, and rates of poor and minority students that are above average. Jean Carpenter, executive director of the state PTA, said the results of the study illustrate the need for immediate change in the way the state provides for the educational needs of children.

``If you don't have the resources kids need to get them where they need to be, then we're all failing," Carpenter said. ``Something has to change here ... every child in the state of Washington should have an opportunity to succeed." In part, the study examined the amount of money school districts receive from local, state and federal sources. Most districts receive between \$6,300 and \$7,500 per student each year. The average is \$6,906 per student. Funding was \$615 to \$1,055 less per student in the 17 at-risk districts.

The study doesn't have an answer regarding the reason certain districts receive less funding, but it points out that all 17 districts had higher-than-average costs for personnel. And because most of the 17 districts have teachers with less education and experience than the average, the districts receive less than the average state allocation for teacher salaries. The study also says that these districts don't lack funding from any one source. Rather, they receive lower overall funding from local, state and federal resources. ``In these (at-risk) districts at least, we think something has to be done now," Carpenter said. ``There are kids in schools right now that can't wait for this stuff, for somebody to decide that they can have more resources in their school." The study also estimated that it would take an additional \$179 million to \$2.1 billion to get all students to meet the state academic standards.

Renton schools Superintendent Dolores Gibbons said while she applauds the effort of the PTA in conducting the study, the information is not a revelation. Studies about adequate funding are important, but the real problem is that the money just isn't there to give. Issaquah School District spokeswoman Mary Waggoner said it's important to figure out how much it will cost for students to be able to meet new standards requiring students to pass standardized tests. The tests are increasingly important, as high-school graduation will be based on those tests and schools face sanctions if test scores are low.

``In a time when all school districts are being held accountable for student learning, we've never examined what it will cost to meet those standards. We're operating in a new world of accountability based on old funding factors." In some ways, Waggoner said the PTA study tells a story people in her district already know -- some districts are disadvantaged by the way the school funding system is designed. Issaquah schools have a lower levy lid than some other districts, which means they can collect fewer local dollars. They have fewer socioeconomically disadvantaged students, so they collect less money from the federal government, making Issaquah a ``very poor school district within a very wealthy community." The study ``validates what we have wrestled with in trying to provide a quality education program, recruit and retain the very best staff when we are neighbors to districts that can pay their staff more, provide more curriculum support and staff training than we're able to do," Waggoner said.

The PTA study released Wednesday is the first component of a three-part project studying school funding. In the second phase, the PTA will study two of the 17 at-risk districts, one in Eastern Washington and one in Western Washington. That study will include detailed teacher, parent and administrator interviews to ask what resources they think are needed for student success. In the third phase, a report will be issued regarding those interviews and what research shows must happen in order for academic improvement to occur.

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