



Education Lab

After 'dire predictions' of budget shortfalls, how many Washington school districts laid off teachers?

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By [Neal Morton](#)

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Months after school districts in Washington lobbied for a financial lifeline, the painful budget cuts and staff layoffs they anticipated largely have not come to pass.

Much of the relief comes from last-minute agreements during this year's legislative session to boost the [state's spending](#) on special education and to [relax limits](#) on how much districts can collect from local property-tax levies starting in 2021. But drops in enrollment, costly salary hikes and fewer retirements — all factors outside of the control of lawmakers — did prompt layoffs in districts such as [Edmonds](#), [Evergreen](#) and [Tacoma](#).

The state's largest district, Seattle, sent notices to 10 teachers and counselors, and six assistant principals. At Spokane Public Schools, the district with likely the most layoffs, one in 12 employees could lose their job by the next school year, [local media reported](#).

Still, there don't seem to be widespread reductions in force, said Joel Aune, executive director of the Washington Association of School Administrators, which represents superintendents. Rather, Aune has heard that most districts will trim their budgets by not filling positions as staff resign or retire and not creating new positions to match increased enrollment. And some districts, [such as Tacoma](#), plan to dip into their cash reserves to balance the budget gaps that remain.

"Some of the outcomes of the recent legislative session were helpful," Aune said. "But pretty much every school district is still in some form of expenditure-reduction mode."

Some districts, such as Federal Way, Lake Washington, Northshore and Puyallup,

avoided issuing pink slips to teachers and other certificated staff in advance of a May 15 deadline entirely. Some of them attributed that stability to cuts they made to the central administration and school support staff.

The Washington Education Association, the statewide teachers union, has tried to tally how many teachers received pink slips. As of Thursday, spokesman Rich Wood didn't have a firm estimate, and he noted it's difficult to track formal notices given to teachers with job protections in their contracts versus beginning teachers who can be let go at any point and for any reason.

Regardless, Wood said there have been far fewer reported layoffs than originally predicted.

"The dire predictions that a lot of school districts were making, I don't think have come true," he said.

In 2017, lawmakers overhauled the state's K-12 budget to settle a long-running school-finance case known as McCleary. A Washington Supreme Court ruling in that case required the state to increase its spending on public schools to end districts' reliance on their local levies to pad their budgets.

But as lawmakers pumped billions into district coffers to pay for teacher salaries, they also capped local property-tax collections, which many districts blamed for their projected budget shortfalls. Still, school boards bargained double-digit raises for teachers, even as [district leaders knew](#) they would exceed their budgets to cover the increased pay.

In most years, districts typically rely on higher-paid, veteran teachers to retire each year and save them some money on salaries. But with the recent raises, superintendents have told Aune that they're seeing declines in retirements as older teachers decide to work longer to collect future pension payments based on the higher salaries.

"If I were a schoolteacher and just got a \$15,000 raise last year and could retire today ... that's a significant amount of change to leave on the table," Aune said.

Evergreen Public Schools, meanwhile, in Southwest Washington, expects outgoing staff will help bring back the 19 instructional staffers who received reduction-in-force (RIF) notices.

“More than half of those individuals have already had their RIF notices rescinded due to retirement/resignations the district has received,” spokeswoman Gail Spolar said in an email. “It is anticipated that all of the individuals will have their RIF notices rescinded by the start of the school year.”

Similar shifts statewide should happen throughout the summer, Wood predicted.

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