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Call for Community Action & Alignment for a Thriving Winston-Salem Forsyth County Schools

For Immediate Release

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The Issue

Currently Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools (WSFCS) is confronting a \$20 million dollar budget shortfall that threatens the elimination of more than 300 hundred staff - and the wellbeing of our most historically marginalized students. While the current deficit reflects years of ineffective budgetary practices and decisions at the district level, it is most accurately the result of systemic barriers that have constrained the district's ability to equitably and sustainably fund schools. More than ever, immediate and intentional collective action is needed to avoid exacerbating systemic inequities and accelerating the dismantling of public education.

The Context

The recently released WFSFCS Auditor's Report identifies several instances of inconsistent financial oversight that have contributed to the current budget crisis. However, the report falls short in addressing the deeper and more harmful consequences of chronic underfunding in our public schools. For example, while it notes the impact of declining student enrollment and the expiration of temporary ESSER funds, it fails to contextualize these issues within the broader reality of systemic disinvestment. By overlooking the structural barriers that public schools face due to long-term resource shortages, such reports risk reinforcing a narrative that blames school systems for failures that are, in fact, symptoms of sustained underfunding and policy neglect.

The report identifies the unaccounted decrease in student enrollment as a contributing factor to the current budget deficit.¹ However, it fails to address one of the key drivers behind this decline: the expansion of private school voucher programs. As public investment in the Opportunity Scholarship Grant Program continues to grow - redirecting taxpayer dollars to subsidize private school tuition - public schools are left with fewer

¹ Source "State Auditor Rapid Response Special Report" retrieved from <https://www.auditor.nc.gov/rr-2025-wsfcspdf-0/open>

resources to serve an increasingly high-need student population.² According to Carolina Demography, student enrollment in public schools is projected to undergo significant shifts over the next five years, with increased private school enrollment cited as one of the primary factors driving the decline. By omitting this context, the report misses a critical piece of the broader funding and enrollment crisis facing public education.

The report also references the loss of temporary ESSER federal funds as a contributing factor to the financial shortfall. However, it is imperative to point out that these funds were never meant to be permanent solutions - necessary due to the COVID -19 pandemic; while only further highlighting already deep and persistent funding inequities in our public school system and their impact on our students. The decades-long disinvestment of public schools and the denial of students' constitutional right to "a sound basic education," as affirmed in the *Leandro* case, has resulted in a loss of millions to public schools.³ If the comprehensive remedial plan (developed by WestEd to comply with the constitutional mandate affirmed in *Leandro*) were fully implemented, districts would have the necessary resources to adequately fund essential personnel, professional development, curriculum materials, and other critical services for public schools.⁴

The highlighted funds played a vital role in promoting equitable access to education for our students facing the greatest needs: Black, Brown, those classified as exceptional and those facing economic disadvantages. Now, as budget cuts loom, historically marginalized communities - particularly students of color and those from low-income families - stand to lose the most. Research makes it clear: systemic barriers like bias and unequal access to qualified educators and critical resources already place these students at a higher risk of dropping out, cutting them off from future educational and economic opportunities. Eliminating these essential programs won't just reduce support - it will deepen long-standing inequities and jeopardize the future of our most vulnerable student population.

It is easy to see these budgetary shortfalls as solely the actions of an individual school system, but if we continue to take this position, we risk condemning our students to inequitable access to educational opportunities and the resources needed to thrive.

² Source "Analysis forecasts possible drop in North Carolina public school enrollment" retrieved from [North Carolina public school enrollment to drop due to vouchers - EdNC; Dollar-report.pdf](#)

³ Source "Everything you need to know about the Leandro litigation" retrieved from [What is the Leandro court case? - EdNC](#)

⁴ Source "Budget Impact Analysis Tool" retrieved from [Communities for the Education of Every Child NC | Every Child NC | Leandro Impact](#)

Recommendations

If we want our students and community to thrive, we must lean on the wisdom of our ancestors and collectively work towards building systems that are community centered and community driven.

As we continue to wrestle with the immediate impacts of the budget crisis we must take immediate action to foster long-term solutions to address broader systemic barriers to an equitable education system. WSFCS' upcoming search for a superintendent offers a unique opportunity to develop a structure that allows for every student to thrive. We outline that in the following recommendations.

Commitment to a Thriving Winston-Salem Community

In order to achieve a thriving Winston-Salem community, the WSFCS must have the capacity to maintain and expand investments in programs and practices that address student and staff wellbeing. This financial deficit has highlighted the continued need for WSFCS to implement policies and procedures that foster systemic change and embodies a Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model, which centers students and emphasizes the role of the community in supporting the school, the connections between health and academic achievement and the importance of evidence-based school policies and practices.⁵

Strengthening Community Partnerships

The implementation of this model will require the strengthening of intentional community partnerships that ensure that the voices of students and families represented in the district and most impacted by district decisions are at the table. By strengthening these partnerships, new practices for effective family engagement can be developed, including English Language Learners, which will be imperative in shrinking the achievement gap, reducing exclusionary disciplinary practices, and making our schools safe for students, their families, and staff.

Conclusion

We can no longer continue the narrative that the marginalization of children is a “them” problem. We must continue to address the immediate needs of our community and create structures that foster wellbeing and justice for students and our community by addressing systemic inequities. By implementing these structures we create an united and coordinated effort to create a system that not only educates our students but builds a system that leads to lifelong learning.⁶

⁵ Source “Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Student” retrieved from [Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child | NC DPI](#)

⁶ Source “Vital Conditions for Health and Well Being” retrieved from [Vital Conditions - The Rippel Foundation](#)