

This is KPTZ FM 91.9 in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Rachel Perkins, bringing you news and commentary from the Jefferson County *Beacon* for Wednesday, April 15, 2026.

On April 10, Port Townsend School District Superintendent Linda Rosenbury sent a difficult letter to district families, explaining that the district is facing a cascade of budget cuts driven by reduced state funding for high-poverty programs, the expiration of federal grants, and the growing weight of unfunded mandates from Washington State. The budget and program reductions for the 2026 and 27 school year will be tangible. The most significant hit comes from a \$180,000 reduction in State Learning Assistance Program funding, which is tied directly to lower rates of families completing the Free and Reduced Lunch form. As a result, intervention staff who provide targeted academic and behavioral support will be eliminated at Blue Heron Middle School and concentrated at Salish Coast Elementary.

Other state cuts target specific programs. A \$140,000 reduction in Transition to Kindergarten funding means the district will continue to offer two classes, but one will now have to be funded through local levy dollars rather than state support. A \$90,000 cut to Outdoor Learning, which historically paid for overnight environmental education trips, means fourth-grade families are now being asked to cover those costs through fundraising or tuition.

On the federal side, the district has lost a \$70,000 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration grant for place-based learning, and a \$10,000 Title IV grant for student support. To absorb the Title IV cut, the garden teaching program at Salish Coast Elementary will be folded into the library program to ensure students still learn from a certified educator.

Though just two months ago voters passed Proposition No. 1, a bond to renovate Port Townsend High School and OCEAN K-12 School, the superintendent's email notes that Washington State law prohibits using bond funding for daily operating costs. The \$99.25 million approved by voters is legally restricted to physical construction and cannot be used to restore a teaching position or save an outdoor education trip. At the heart of the district's struggle is a concept that rarely makes headlines but bleeds budgets dry: unfunded mandates. The Washington State School Directors' Association is currently tracking over 100 education-related bills, at least 20 of which impose requirements on school districts without providing the funds to implement them. These range from specific new safety protocols to complex reporting requirements. One example currently in the legislature is House Bill 2160, which would make substitute teachers eligible for benefits after 630 hours of work but provides no state funding to cover those benefits, leaving districts to pay the bill.

The most chronic unfunded mandate, however, is special education. Washington State has a legal obligation to serve students with disabilities, but it reimburses districts for only a fraction of the actual cost. Port Townsend, like every district in the state, must pull money from its general fund to cover the difference. This practice directly reduces dollars available for classroom teachers and programs. State Superintendent Chris Reykdal has warned that the Legislature is not intending to fully fund K-12 education this cycle, noting that the share of the state budget dedicated to schools has dropped from 51.6% in 2019 to just 42.4% in the current proposal.

A pattern of federal disruption has become familiar to state budget writers. Last July, more than three months after Congress approved the fiscal 2025 federal budget, the Trump administration declined to release nearly \$7 billion in formula funding that lawmakers had specifically allocated for K-12 schools. Then, last May, the administration proposed eliminating more than 40 separate grant programs for education, including nearly all programs serving K-12 schools. Congress rejected those cuts. Now, the administration is proposing to zero out

the same programs again. But for all the frustration in superintendent Rosenbury's letter, it ended with a call to action for district families: complete the Free and Reduced Lunch form every year, regardless of whether your family needs meal assistance. The data from that single form directly unlocks the \$180,000 in Learning Assistance Program funding.

The school district encourages district families to attend School Board meetings, participate on the Finance Committee, where budget priorities are actually set, and to visit <https://www.waschoolfunding.org/> to learn more about the 101 unfunded mandates.

Reporting on this story by Rachael Nutting.

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon and 5 Tuesday through Thursday, partnering on Wednesday to bring you stories from jeffcobeacon.com. This is Rachel Perkins. Thanks for listening.