

HB 1215 would provide families \$7,000 Education Scholarships for their children

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February 2021

Key Findings

1. **HB 1215 would provide families a \$7000 state scholarship to educate their children.**
2. **These scholarships could be used by parents to buy textbooks, pay the cost of private tutoring, and tuition and fees at private schools.**
3. **These scholarships would give families access to education choice, and to a quality education for their children.**
4. **These scholarships would help families hurt most by the COVID school closures.**
5. **These scholarships would liberate families from having to send their children to failing schools, and end the system of reserving the best education programs for the wealthy.**
6. **These scholarships would save the state of Washington about \$5,000 on average per student, and \$15,000 on average for every special needs student.**
7. **Fiscal analyses show that state finances would be improved by programs similar to HB 1215's Education Scholarship program, and that these programs deliver more resources to students who remain within the public school system.**

Introduction

Representatives Vicki Kraft (R-Vancouver) and Jesse Young (R-Gig Harbor) have introduced HB 1215, a bill to “provide parents and their children with more choices for a quality K-12 education through the K-12 Education Scholarship program.”¹

The bill would allow parents to apply to the Education Scholarship Council for a \$7,000 scholarship for the education of their children. Parents would be allowed to use these scholarships to buy textbooks, pay the cost of private tutoring, curricula, and tuition and fees at a private K-12 school in Washington state.

The bill would provide scholarships for 130,000 students. Twenty-five percent of the funds would go to children in foster care, homeless children, children with special needs, and low-income children. Remaining scholarships would be geographically distributed on an equal basis to students across the state, without regard to race, color, economic status, or sex.

Education Scholarships would offer families education choice

HB 1215's Education Scholarships would reduce inequality in the system of standardized public education. Most families must send their children to a public school based on zip code, even if the nearby public school is not a good fit for their child. This restrictive and inequitable system limits learning and career opportunities for students.

1 House Bill 1215, An Act Relating to providing parents and their children with more choices for a quality K-12 education through the K-12 education scholarship program, Washington State Legislature, Introduced on January 15, 2021, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billssummary?BillNumber=1215&Initiative=false&Year=2021>.

Washington state ranks 48th among states on measures of educational choice. Compared to other states, families in Washington have very limited access to education alternatives. Powerful unions and administrators consistently erect regulatory obstacles and block legislative proposals which would allow students to leave their assigned public school and seek better alternatives.

As a result, only 0.2 percent of Washington's students attend a public charter school, only 1.7 percent are homeschooled, and only 6.7 percent attend private school.²

The effect of this restricted educational environment is that private and homeschool education options are reserved for elite families with money. HB 1215's Education Scholarships would correct this problem by offering families a state scholarship so everyone can exercise the same freedom of educational choice more affluent families enjoy.

HB 1215 would allow students to leave failing public schools

Tens of thousands of students in Washington State are assigned to schools that fail to provide a quality education. Washington State has 117 state-identified failing schools. Together, these schools fail to educate 44,000 students to the minimum levels set by the state.³ These schools are among the lowest five percent of low-income (Title I) schools in the state, based on academic achievement and lack of student progress. Many of these schools are located in Washington's large urban districts, serving mostly low-income, minority children.

The families assigned to these failing schools know their children are being denied a quality education. The language of HB 1215 describes the profound obstacles these families face:

- 2 "U.S. States Ranked by Educational Choice Share, 2020," by Drew Catt, Engage, by Ed Choice, accessed February 2, 2021, at https://www.edchoice.org/engage/u-s-states-ranked-by-educational-choice-share-2020/#.YBmIg_8ytwo.twitter
- 3 "ESEA Priority and Focus Schools, 2017-18," Washington Office of Public Instruction, accessed [DATE] at <https://www.k12.wa.us/policy-funding/school-student-performance/every-student-succeeds-act-essa-implementation/elementary/priority-schools>.

"Parents with means can enroll their children in private schools, forego an income to provide home-based instruction, or move and enroll their children in better school districts."

"At the same time, there are many parents who do not have the means to choose the option that is best for their children. This increases inequity in the education system with the parents and children with the least means, but the most need, trapped in a failing school or a school that does not otherwise meet their needs."⁴

HB 1215's Education Scholarships would liberate families from having to send their children to these failing schools, and end the system of reserving the best education programs for the wealthy.

Education Scholarships would help families hurt most by the COVID school closures

A June 2020 report from McKinsey and Company shows the COVID school closures have worsened existing achievement gaps between minority children and their peers.⁵ As this report reveals, before COVID the average black or Hispanic student was roughly two years behind the average white one, and low-income students were underrepresented among top performers.

The COVID shutdown has caused Hispanic, black and low-income students to lose 9.2, 10.3 and 12.4 months of learning, respectively.⁶ This sharp decline in learning

- 4 House Bill 1215, An Act Relating to providing parents and their children with more choices for a quality K-12 education through the K-12 education scholarship program, Washington State Legislature, Introduced January 15, 2021, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billssummary?BillNumber=1215&Initiative=false&Year=2021>.
- 5 "COVID-19 and Student Learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime," by McKinsey and Company, June 2020, at <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Industries/Public%20and%20Social%20Sector/Our%20Insights/COVID-19%20and%20student%20learning%20in%20the%20United%20States%20The%20hurt%20could%20last%20a%20lifetime/COVID-19-and-student-learning-in-the-United-States-FINAL.pdf>.
- 6 *Ibid.*

is characterized by McKinsey as a “hurt that could last a lifetime.”

Education Scholarships are a way to give families the resources they need to give their children a quality education. Providing additional resources to the public schools has failed to eliminate existing achievement gaps. Despite doubling school funding from \$13.5 billion in 2011-13 to \$27.2 billion in the 2019-21 state budget, the stubborn achievement gap persists in Washington’s schools, imposing an unjust burden on children from low-income families.

Education Scholarships would save Washington State \$5,000 per student, and increase funding for other students

Providing \$7,000 Education Scholarships to students would provide substantial savings to the state of Washington. Washington state currently spends \$12,300 on average per student. Local and federal funds add to this sum, bringing the total education spending in 2020-21 to \$15,700 per student.⁷

The learning choice scholarships proposed by HB 1215 would save the state of Washington about \$5,000 on average per student. Parents accepting these Education Scholarships would be required to release the state from the responsibility of educating these children. Federal and local funding would remain in the student’s residential district, increasing funding for students who do not use the scholarships.

Families of special needs children who use these Education Scholarships would provide additional savings to the state of Washington. In 2021, the state provides districts an additional \$10,158, over and above the state grant of \$12,000 for each student, for the education of each special education student.⁸

So under HB 1215, the state would save about \$15,000 a year on average for each special needs student.

Fiscal analyses show that state finances would be improved by programs similar to HB 1215’s Education Scholarship program, and that these programs deliver more resources to students who remain within the public school system.⁹

Conclusion

The children most in need of a quality education in Washington State have been hardest hit by the COVID school shutdowns. Many of these children are now behind in their learning. The full effect of the school shutdowns on the lives of the children are not yet completely understood, but many children have already suffered severe and profound effects.

The paramount duty of state officials is to make “ample provision” for the education of each child in the state. Scholarship programs, like that proposed by HB 1215, would further the state’s duty to provide for the education of every child living within its borders.

HB 1215 would give families the resources they need to make up the learning losses children have suffered during the COVID school shutdowns. It would also provide significant savings to the state budget for schools, and increase funding for students who do not apply for a scholarship and remain in the public school system.

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Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body.

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7 In School Year 2019-20, state funding per student was \$12,293. See “Citizen’s Guide to K12 School Finance, 2020,” Senate Ways and Means Committee, page 31, at <https://leg.wa.gov/LIC/Documents/EducationAndInformation/Citizens%20Guide%20to%20K-12%20Finance.pdf>

8 “Citizen’s Guide to K12 School Finance, 2020,” Senate Ways and Means Committee, page 12, at <https://leg.wa.gov/LIC/Documents/EducationAndInformation/Citizens%20Guide%20to%20K-12%20Finance.pdf>.

9 “Fiscal Analysis of An Education Savings Account Program in New Jersey,” by Ed Choice, October 2020, at <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/NJ-Fiscal-Brief-1.pdf#page=7>.