

HB 1615, to provide state-funded Education Savings Accounts to open new learning opportunities for children

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

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Key Findings:

1. **HB 1615 would create a program establishing Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) for students in need of support.**
2. **Eligible for assistance would be families whose children are assigned by zip codes to failing public schools, families who are low-income, and families with special needs children.**
3. **Families of eligible students would receive nearly \$11,000 in an Education Savings Account, and an additional \$10,000 if their child is special needs.**
4. **Eligible ESA expenses would include private school tuition, fees, textbooks, and uniforms; tutoring; exam fees; homeschool curriculum; education-related therapies; postsecondary education and other learning services.**
5. **Thirty-two states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico offer families school choice programs similar to HB 1615.**
6. **The WEA union collects \$47 million a year in dues from teacher salaries, and has a financial incentive to oppose school choice programs like HB 1615.**
7. **Washington state lags the nation in offering families school choice, yet polls show that nationally 72 percent of respondents support giving families access to school choice.**
8. **School choice is now a normal, non-controversial part of a modern public education system in most states.**

Introduction

HB 1615 is a bi-partisan bill to allow families to use their share of state education funds to gain access to private or home-based education. The form of assistance would be the Education Savings Account (ESA) model used in many other states. The prime sponsor of the bill is Rep. Carolyn Eslick (R-Sultan).¹

HB 1615 would create the “Students First” program to fund Education Savings Accounts for individual students. The program would provide fully-funded ESAs primarily to special education students, students from low-income families, and students who have been automatically assigned by zip code to a failing public school.

This Legislative Memo provides a brief overview of the bill, gives examples of popular ESA programs in other states and identifies the primary opponent to allowing children have access to more learning choices.

Text of HB 1615

Under HB 1615 the families of eligible students who request it would receive nearly \$11,000 in state funding for home-based learning or to attend a private school that best meets their needs. Special education students would be eligible to receive an additional \$10,000 in aid. The program is voluntary – no family would be required to participate, and families that choose not to participate would remain eligible for all other public education services.

As a financial control, families participating in the ESA program would receive a debit card that can only be used for

¹ House Bill 1615, Creating the students first program which establishes education savings accounts for students in need of support, introduced January 26, 2023, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=1615&Initiative=false&Year=2023>.

education-related expenses. This is the same model that is used to deliver EBT cards and other social program benefits.

Eligible ESA expenses would include private school tuition, fees, textbooks, and uniforms; tutoring; exam fees; homeschool curriculum; education-related therapies; postsecondary education and other learning services. The account's transactions would be subject to state audit, and parents would be required to keep records of education-related purchases.

The text of HB 1615 explains why the sponsors believe an ESA option is needed, and express lawmakers' frustration that large increases in public education spending have not yielded positive results for students. The bill says:

- “While the legislature has spent years increasing funding to the public school system, the legislature finds many students have been left behind. National test scores have been trending down over the last decade and, after extensive school closures, state test scores are down to the lowest they have been since administration of the smarter balanced assessment began. Over 62 percent of Washington’s students did not meet grade level standards in math and about half did not meet grade level standards in English.”
- “The legislature further finds the effects from the school closures disproportionately impacted students with the most need, specifically those from underrepresented communities. Students with disabilities who were eligible for special education services were delayed in getting their needed supports for too long.”

In a statement explaining the bill, Rep. Eslick refers to the legislature's paramount constitutional duty to provide a good education to every child living within the borders of Washington:

“We have a constitutional mandate to provide for the education of all children in Washington state. This program would empower parents to do what is best for their child regardless of income level or zip

code while meeting the state’s moral and constitutional obligation to put students first.”²

The success of school choice programs in other states

School choice programs are voluntary. Under the principle of choice, families that are satisfied with the traditional public school in their zip code area are not required to make a change in the education of their children.

Still, school choice programs are popular. Recent polls show that nationally 72 percent of respondents support giving families access to school choice. Black respondents (70 percent) and Latinos (77 percent) express high levels of support for school choice programs, according to polling.

School choice also enjoys broad bipartisan support. A large majority of Republicans (82 percent), and clear majorities of Independents (67 percent) and Democrats (68 percent) support it.³

The nearly-two year lockdown of public schools in 2020 – 2022 contributed significantly to the already-high level of school choice support. Popular support for school choice rose 10 percent in response to COVID school shutdowns.⁴

Today there are 76 different school choice programs offered in 32 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, serving

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- 2 “Rep. Carolyn Eslick introduces ‘Students First’ program to empower parents, improve students’ educational outcomes,” by Daniel McDonald, Public Information Officer, Washington State House Republicans, January 30, 2023, at <https://carolyneslick.houseRepublicans.wa.gov/2023/01/30/rep-carolyn-eslick-introduces-students-first-program-to-empower-parents-improve-students-educational-outcomes/>.
 - 3 “New Poll: Overwhelming Support for School Choice,” by American Federation for Children, June 28, 2022, at <https://www.federationforchildren.org/new-poll-72-support-for-school-choice/>.
 - 4 “POLL: Support for School Choice Spiked 10 Percent among Public School Families during COVID Shutdown,” Mairead Mcardle, *National Review*, September 23, 2020, at <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/poll-support-for-school-choice-spiked-10-percent-among-public-school-families-during-covid-shutdown/>.

over 600,000 students.⁵ The public benefit is described in findings by The American Federation for Children:

“The vast majority of studies show that school choice programs improve academic outcomes, for program participants and also for students in the public schools. School choice programs save taxpayers money. They also reduce racial segregation.”⁶

State-level school choice programs typically take one of four forms:

- Education Savings Accounts (ESAs), which average \$11,000 per student a year;
- School vouchers, which average \$6,000 per student a year;
- Tax credit scholarships, which average \$3,700 per student a year;
- Individual tax credits and deductions for approved educational expenses.

Here are examples of two popular state-level ESA programs:

Arizona - In July 2022, Arizona lawmakers created a universal school choice program. Every family can ask to receive up to \$7,000, or 90 percent of per-student state funding an Education Savings Account in the form of an Education Savings Account. Thirty-two thousand families have signed

up for the program.⁷

West Virginia – In 2021 lawmakers created the Hope Scholarship ESA program, a universal school choice program that provides families who ask for it up to \$4,300 per child in financial assistance to pay for private school tuition and other educational expenses.

School choice in Washington state has been blocked by the union

Washington state lags the nation in offering school choice programs. In 2022 lawmakers introduced four school choice bills similar to HB 1615. Opponents on the Senate and House education committees, however, blocked the bills from consideration.

The powerful Washington Education Association (WEA) union collects \$47 million a year in dues from teacher salaries.⁸ The union was active in the legislature in lobbying against the four school choice bills. Mandatory dues are the primary source of the union’s income, thus union officials have a strong incentive to prevent families from gaining access to a school choice program in Washington state.

In the current session it is expected that the WEA union will seek to block HB 1615 as well.

Conclusion

As American society becomes more complex and sophisticated, and as new

5 “School choice makes homeschoolers and private schools more safe from government---not less,” by Dr. Greg Forster, Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, February 1, 2022, at <https://www.ocpathink.org/post/school-choice-makes-homeschoolers-and-private-schools-more-safe-from-government-not-less>.

6 “Research shows favorable impact of private school choice,” by American Federation for Children, at <https://www.schoolchoicefacts.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/AFC-Growth-Fund-School-Choice-Research-Summary.pdf>.

7 “Not quite universal, but families flocked to universal voucher program,” by John Brown, *Cronkite News*, December 10, 2022, at <https://news.azpm.org/pl/newsc/2022/12/10/214078-not-quite-universal-but-families-flocked-to-universal-voucher-program/#:~:text=regardless%20of%20need.,The%20Arizona%20Department%20of%20Education%20said%20about%2032%2C000%20schoolkids%20applied,the%20state's%20general%20education%20fund.>

8 Washington Education Association, “IRS Form 990, 2019,” accessed November 18, 2022 at https://pdf.guidestar.org/PDF_Images/2020/910/460/2020-910460645-202111939349301196-9O.pdf?_gl=1*1oIarem*_MTQzMzk2MjkyNi4xNjY2MjE0MDEw*_ga_5W8PXY_YGBX*MTY2ODc5MjEzOC4yLjEuMTY2ODc5MjE3OS4xOS4wLjA.&_ga=2.269179953.191700404.1668792142-1433962926.1666214010&_gac=1.46418261.1666214029.CjwKCAjwwL6aBhBLEiwADycBIBORluZtIAmNPAV8z_xG2nM3eZh05jEr5LV3Fjy8Gi3bLLYr80KFhoCNWAQAvD_BwE.

technologies provide ever-wider choices and access to information, there is a natural movement by parents to want more choices in education. For many families the 19th-century model that seeks to deliver education like a government utility based on zip codes is no longer adequate under today's modern conditions.

For that reason there is growing trend of parents seeking more control over education options for their children, which has recently propelled the creation or expansion of school choice programs. Family access to choice is now a normal, and in most states non-controversial, part of a modern public education system. Passage of HB 1615 would serve the public interest and help the legislature fulfill its constitutional duty by giving children wider access to educational opportunities.

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