

SB 5054, to cut classroom learning time in schools by four hours a week

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

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Key Findings:

1. **SB 5054 would reduce classroom learning time by four hours a week by changing the legal definition of “instructional hours” to which students are entitled.**
2. **The proposed cut in instructional hours comes as schools are receiving record levels of funding, over \$18.8 billion in education spending.**
3. **SB 5054 is being proposed as the level of academic achievement provided students in the public system is falling.**
4. **On the 2022 Smarter Balance state tests public schools failed to educate 62 percent of students adequately in math, and failed to educate 49 percent of students adequately in reading.**
5. **SB 5054 would set a precedent of filling classrooms with unqualified district staff to teach.**
6. **The declining performance of the public system is one reason 46,000 families have withdrawn their children, and sought learning elsewhere.**
7. **SB 5054 would deny Washington’s students the education they have been promised, at a time when school funding and teacher pay are at record-high levels.**

Introduction

The sponsors of SB 5054 say the purpose of their bill is to “promote and facilitate the

use of professional learning communities.” The text of the bill, however, indicates its effect would be to reduce classroom learning time for public school students by four hours a week.

Current law, RCW 28A.150.220, requires that each of Washington 295 school districts provide students a certain guaranteed minimum of classroom instruction time with a certified teacher.

School officials are to provide at least 1,080 hours of classroom learning time for students in grades nine through 12. School officials are to provide at least 1,000 hours of classroom instruction time for students in grades one through eight, and they are to provide at least 450 hours of classroom time for students in kindergarten.

Most school districts fulfill these requirements by providing six hours of instruction every weekday for students in grades nine through 12, for a total of 180 school days a year.

This Legislative Memo provides an overview of SB 5054 and reviews how its provisions would cut student learning time in Washington’s public schools.

The text of SB 5054

The text of SB 5054 proposes to re-define the meaning of “instructional hours” in state law to include the time they spend with non-certificated school district employees. During that time their regular teachers would be absent and meeting in groups as newly-formed “professional learning communities.”

The effect of the bill would be to cut instruction time for students by four hours

a week, from 30 hours to 26 hours. This is a reduction in learning time of a little over 13 percent, or the equivalent of six 40-minute lesson periods.

The bill would contribute to inequity in education. Students attending private schools and charter public schools would continue to receive full instructional time with fully-qualified teachers.

Cuts in classroom instruction time

Teachers are referred to by law as certificated staff, for holding a qualified teaching certificate. Teaching aides, who do not hold a teaching credential, are referred to as noncertificated staff.

Here are the two passages in SB 5054 which would cut the classroom time students spend with their teachers by four hours a week. The provisions involve a change in the legal definition of quality “instructional hours” to which students are entitled:

“Instructional hours’ include hours students are engaging in educational activities under the supervision of noncertificated school district staff while certificated staff participate in professional learning communities as defined in RCW 28A.415.434.”

“School districts are encouraged to promote and facilitate effective and collaborative professional learning by establishing a school calendar that provides at least four hours each week for certificated instructional staff to engage in professional learning communities during the school day.”

Policy Analysis

SB 5054 is a revised version of SB 5735, the bill introduced earlier by Senator Dhingra to reduce classroom instruction time by 20 percent. In response to objections from parents, SB 5735 was defeated in the Senate Education

Committee.

SB 5054 would adopt a similar policy, by redefining an “instructional hour” to include time spent with a classroom assistant or other lesser-qualified district employee.

The proposed cut in instructional hours comes as schools are receiving record levels of funding, over \$18.8 billion in education spending. Average teacher pay and benefits is \$126,000 annually for a ten-month work year. Public school per-student spending is \$18,200, more than the tuition at most private schools.

SB 5054 is being proposed as the level of academic achievement provided to students in the public system is falling. According to the state’s Smarter Balance test, public schools failed to educate 62 percent of students adequately in math, and failed to educate 49 percent adequately in reading.

The declining performance of the public system is one reason 46,000 families have pulled their children out of Washington’s public schools and sought learning alternatives elsewhere. Educators know that students learn as a result of time spent on task. The more in-person instructional minutes or hours are devoted to a particular lesson, the better children learn, especially for low-income students and students of color, who will be hardest hit by cuts in classroom time.

Conclusion

SB 5054 would lower the hours of classroom instruction provided to students by four hours a week – a 13 percent cut. It would hurt the education of Washington’s 1.1 million K-12 students by denying them access to a quality education.

In addition, the bill would set the precedent of filling classrooms with district staff who are not qualified to



Liv Finne is the Director of the Center for Education at Washington Policy Center and is the author of numerous studies related to Washington state's education system. Liv holds a law degree from Boston University School of Law and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Wellesley College. She retired from civil litigation practice to raise two children and work as business partner for a small business she owns with her husband.

teach. The bill would result in lower academic standards and would deny students the public education they have been promised, at a time when school funding and teacher pay are at record-high levels. Both trends would work to encourage more families to lose confidence in public education and to transfer their children to other schools.

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