

HB 2933, to create an Education Choice Scholarship for Washington school children

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Key Findings:

1. Many families are satisfied with their public schools, but others have serious and valid complaints.
2. In response, some lawmakers have proposed to allow parents access to a publicly-funded Education Choice Scholarship to pay private school tuition, and serve the state's mission of educating children.
3. The Education Choice Scholarship would be in an amount equitable to the funding the state provides for basic education, which in 2019-20 is \$11,300 per student.
4. This sum is \$4,300 below the level of public funding to which students are entitled, but enough to expand educational choices available to families.
5. Traditional public schools would gain \$4,300 for each student who chooses an Education Choice Scholarship, because these sums would remain in public school budgets.
6. Twenty-nine states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico offer parents access to a variety of 66 different private school choice programs.
7. Education Choice Scholarships and similar programs deliver benefits to students and provide powerful incentives for traditional schools to improve.
8. Polls show strong public support for providing state aid directly to families to help educate children.

Introduction

Many people in Washington are satisfied with their local public school, but in many communities, families find that their children are underserved by the traditional schools operated by district officials. Examples of the poor services provided by officials in some school districts include:

- Low academic achievement levels and low graduation rates, especially for students from low-income families. According to state officials, about 55,000 children are assigned to failing public schools each year.¹
- Poor teaching standards and one-size-fits all programming that lacks variety and fails to engage students in the excitement of learning. Children with attention deficits, dyslexia, autism and other learning handicaps are neglected or underserved, leaving parents with few alternatives.

¹ "Washington School Improvement Framework shows more money has not improved schools," by Liv Finne, Policy Note, Washington Policy Center, January 2020, at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/library/doclib/Liv-PN-School-Improvement-Framework-FINAL.pdf>.

- Bullying, threats and even sometimes abusive behavior by teachers are tolerated or ignored, due to union cover-ups or fear of public scandal. Instructional days and class hours are cut, leaving children with fewer services and less time for learning.
- School officials are often unaccountable for public spending. Public salaries and benefits rise while academic standards and dropout rates worsen or remain flat. Public schools now receive more money than private schools, and teacher salaries on average are higher than those of the typical taxpaying household.
- Ongoing public conflict over budget shortfalls, controversial programs, which include the new sex education bill passed this year, testing standards and student discipline policies make many public schools a tense and difficult environment for children.
- Frequent teacher strikes, walkouts, “sick outs” and other school closures due to union action. Parents find that powerful local unions are given more deference and respect within the system than families and children.

Parents seeking alternatives for their children

Given the structural problems in many traditional school districts, parents are increasingly seeking alternative ways their children can access a good education, as is consistently promised to them by school officials, politicians and elected state leaders.

In response to this need, Representative Vicki Kraft (R-Vancouver) introduced HB 2933 in the 2020 legislative session, a bill to create an Education Choice Scholarship program to help parents and families gain access to learning alternatives that work best for their children.

The bill is co-sponsored by Representatives Jesse Young (R-Gig Harbor), Larry Hoff (R-Battle Ground), Bill Jenkin (R-Walla Walla), Brandon Vick (R-Battle Ground), Bob McCaslin (R-Spokane Valley), Robert Sutherland (R-Mt. Baker), Carolyn Eslick (R-Mt. Baker) and Bruce Chandler (R-Sunnyside).

Text of HB 2933

HB 2933 would create a learning program that is voluntary and would offer families a “comprehensive opt out of public K-12 education through the Education Choice Scholarship.” Families that choose to participate would submit a scholarship application to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to enroll the student in a certified private school or to comply with state requirements for home-based instruction.

Once the application is approved, the state would fund an Education Choice Scholarship for the student in an amount that is equitable to the funding that the state provides for the basic education of children.

In 2019-20, the state is providing per-student funding of \$11,300 for basic education.² Under HB 2933 an approved child application would receive an Education Choice Scholarship of about the same amount. This is below the level of funding to which children are entitled, but is enough to greatly expand the educational choices available to families. For example, average private school tuition in Washington state is \$10,052 for elementary schools and \$12,665 for high schools.³

Any additional education expenses could be supplemented by contributions from parents or other family members.

HB 2933 provides that only parents or legal guardians would be able to withdraw money from a child's account. This account could only be used to pay for:

1. Tuition, fees, and textbooks at a qualified private school;
2. Tutoring services accredited by a state, regional or national accrediting organization;
3. Books, lesson materials and other learning supplies;
4. Tuition and fees for a private online learning program;
5. Fees for a nationally standardized norm-referenced achievement test, an advanced placement exam, or any exam related to college or university admission;
6. School uniforms, athletic gear or other equipment needed for school;
7. Fees for career guidance and technical education.

This account could not be used for computer hardware or other technological devices, for the transportation of the student or for consumable educational supplies.

Parents participating in the Education Choice Scholarship program could not enroll their student in public school, and must release the public school and district from all obligations to provide their child an education.

Freeing funds to fund traditional schools

Education Choice Scholarships would not include all public funds to which children are entitled by law. The amount would not include state funds for non-basic services (\$1,100 per student), federal funds to school districts (about \$1,000 per student) or local voter-approved school funding (average \$2,250 per student).

Since Scholarship applications would be voluntary, parents would be free to decide whether foregoing these funds while gaining access to more school options would best serve their children's learning needs.

2 This figure is based on the 2019-21 state budget of \$24.879 billion for Basic Education, as reported in "A Citizen's Guide to Washington State, K-12 Finance 2020," Senate Ways and Means Committee, page 15, at http://leg.wa.gov/Senate/Committees/WM/Documents/Publications/BudgetGuides/2020/K-12%20Booklet_2020%20Final%2020191219.pdf. Student enrollment is estimated to be 1,095,700, as shown for 2018-19 in the Statewide Workload/Staffing/Finance Table, at <http://fiscal.wa.gov/K12.aspx>.

3 "Private School Review, Washington State," accessed March 2020, at <https://www.privateschoolreview.com/washington>.

Since the choice program would be funded with less public money than children are entitled to on a per-student basis, each Educational Choice Scholarship would free up money (about \$4,300 per child on average) to fund traditional school budgets. This policy answers the objection of critics who say that family choice programs “drain” money from traditional schools. Actually, traditional schools would gain funding for each student who participates in the program.

Serving the mission of educating children

The objection is further answered by the fact that the mission of the state’s program of public instruction is to provide children with access to a good education, not primarily to fund and maintain pre-existing school districts and powerful education special interests.

In addition, the Educational Choice Scholarship program would be entirely voluntary. Parents who are satisfied with their local school needn’t do anything, since federal, local and state funding would continue as before.

School choice programs are common in other states

While the concept is stoutly resisted by established interests in Washington, private school choice programs are common in other states.

Giving families direct aid to attend a private school is popular. As of January 2020, officials in 29 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, give families access to private school choice programs.

In all, these 29 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico offer 66 private school choice programs that are varied and diverse. They include Education Savings Accounts, tax credit scholarships, education vouchers, and individual tax credits and deductions.

Some of these programs, like that proposed by HB 2293, are open to all children in a state. Other programs serve specific populations, like students with disabilities or low-income children. Together these programs serve 1.4 million children, helping parents find options outside the traditional public school system.⁴

Specifically, HB 2933 is similar to the Education Savings Account programs offered by the states of Arizona, Florida, North Carolina, Mississippi and Tennessee.

In these five states, parents can apply for a funded account for their children that is reserved solely for education. Parents are then able to customize the education program to meet the needs of their individual child, by paying for instruction from licensed private schools, learning centers, online programs or accredited tutors.

Research shows access to private school choice benefits children

Extensive research shows that funded programs that allow access to private school choice benefit students in ways that best fit their needs. At the same time, choice

⁴ Education Savings Accounts benefit 21,000 children in the five states of Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina and Tennessee. Eighteen states offer 23 tax credit scholarship programs to 299,000 students; nine states and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico offer voucher programs to 213,000 students, and nine states offer individual tax credits or deductions to pay the cost of private school tuition, helping 844,000 students.

programs create powerful incentives for traditional school systems to improve, as district administrators respond to underserved families that have access to alternatives.

An academic review of 100 independent studies concluded school choice policies have a variety of beneficial effects.⁵ Students gain individually from having school choice, and nearby traditional schools improve services to children.⁶

A recent study by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) finds that Florida's expansion of a private school choice program improved test scores, lowered classroom absenteeism and reduced suspension rates of students in the public schools, with students from low-income families benefiting the most.⁷

Two recent surveys show strong public support for providing state aid directly to families to help educate children.⁸ Young people in particular support allowing families to use tax-funded vouchers for private school. The surveys found that all respondents reported higher levels of trust for private schools compared to traditional public schools.

A November 2019 poll from Washington Policy Center poll shows widespread, bipartisan support for Education Savings Accounts for special needs families. The idea of giving families with special needs children who struggle in a typical classroom setting these special accounts so they could purchase specialized education services from private tutors was popular among Democrats, Republicans and Independents alike.⁹

Conclusion

The Education Choice Scholarship program proposed by HB 2933 would serve the public interest by giving Washington families access to learning choices that have a record of demonstrated success in other states.

Policymakers in these states make allowing children to have access to a good-quality education, by whatever means, their highest priority, rather than protecting powerful interests, like unions or district administrators, within the traditional public school system. HB 2933 would create the same positive outcomes in Washington state for those families that choose to participate.

After four decades of trying to create better schools with more money, more testing, and more rules, policymakers have found that top-down mandates have not worked in improving public education. It turns out that centralized bureaucratic public school

5 "A Win-Win Solution; The Empirical Evidence on School Choice," by Greg Forster, EDChoice, May 2016, at <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2016-5- Win-Win-Solution-WEB.pdf>.

6 "Choosing to Learn," by Joseph Bast, Jason Bedrick, Lindsey Burke, Andrew J. Coulson, Robert C. Enlow, Kara Kerwin, and Herbert J. Walberg, CATO Institute Commentary, March 12, 2014, at <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/choosing-learn>.

7 "Effects of Scaling up Private School Choice Programs on Public School Students," by David Figlio, Northwestern University, Cassandra Hart, UC Davis, Krzysztof Karbownik, Emory University, National Bureau of Economic Research, February 2020 at <https://www.nber.org/papers/w26758>.

8 "Re: School Choice Survey Research Results," by Beck Research, January 10, 2017, at <http://www.federationforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/AFC-Beck-NationalSurvey-Results-1-10-17.pdf>. "Survey: Millennials hold complex views on education," by Greg Toppo, USA Today, September 11, 2017 at https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/09/11/surveymillennials-hold-complex-views-education/655696001?mc_cid=d2d332c6de&mc_eid=f124bd9549.

9 "Poll: Education Savings Accounts receive majority support from Democrats, Republicans and Independents," by David Boze, Press Release, Washington Policy Center, February 6, 2020, at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/detail/poll-education-savings-accounts-receive-majority-support-from-democrats-republicans-and-independents>.

systems are deeply resistant to change. States that allow family choice in education, however, have found that wider choices in the private sector prompt public schools to respond by improving the quality of education services they offer students.

Fear of disruption to existing power relationships should not be used as a reason to deny learning options to children and families, especially in communities that are being underserved by traditional schools. As noted, each year district officials in Washington send some 55,000 children to state-identified underperforming schools. State officials have promised a good education to every child. Parents have a right to seek alternatives when state-funded services in their area fail to deliver.

Private school choice programs are popular and successful. These programs help individual students get access to a quality private education. Creating a voluntary Education Choice Scholarship program would help children in Washington's underserved families gain access to the quality education they have been promised.

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