

Bill would provide families \$5,000 a year for education

By Liv Finne

“You just want to see your child succeed, you just want to see them do well...”

-Katie Swingle, school choice advocate and public school parent

As lawmakers in Olympia toil on the state budget in the final weeks of the legislative session, and as students across the state embark on the final weeks of the school year, a new bill offers hope to families with children struggling in failing public schools.

SB 6079, introduced by Senator Michael Baumgartner (R - Spokane), would allow families the choice to receive up to \$5,000 of the average \$7,400 in public money the state spends for each child’s education. Parents could use the money to access educational services for children at public or private schools. SB 6079 would save money and would help lawmakers fulfill the key purpose of education funding as ordered by the state supreme court’s McCleary decision. The court has said lawmakers must do more to meet their paramount constitutional duty to provide for the education of every child residing in the state.

The idea of providing direct assistance to families is not new or untested. Many states have programs that let parents access a portion of their children’s public education funding. Sixteen states and the District of Columbia allow parents to receive part of the public money allocated for their children’s education.

In all there are 51 different family choice programs, including education vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, education savings accounts (ESAs) and family tax credits. Family choice provides education funding directly to parents; the only adults in the system who are the most deeply committed to the education of their children.

Family choice is popular with parents. In 2014, 314,000 students enrolled in family choice programs nationwide, a 21% increase over 2013. A Friedman Foundation survey of Washington state voters found strong support for school vouchers (55% approve), education savings accounts (57% approve), and tax-credit scholarships (59% approve).

SB 6079 would encourage parents to get involved in local schools, by making fundamentally important decisions that help children learn. Parents who like their current public school would not be required to participate, but for families that choose it, an education voucher would allow parents to seek a better alternative.

Katie Swingle is a Florida mom who receives an education voucher for her seven-year-old autistic son under a state choice program. She reported to members of her state’s Education Committee that she was able to give her son access to a high-quality program at a private school. After one semester her son progressed from the level of an 18-month old, unable to talk, to being able to write. She tearfully told lawmakers,

“You just want to see your child succeed, you just want to see them do well...and to be happy. I want the rest of the country to watch this [choice program]...because the rest of the country should be watching.”

The purpose of public education money is to educate children, so it makes sense for some parents to access part of their child’s education funding, as a \$5,000 voucher, and choose better

Liv Finne
Director, WPC’s Center for
Education

April, 2015

[washingtonpolicy.org](http://www.washingtonpolicy.org)

services for their child. Currently, public money goes only to school districts and union dues, where the financial interests of administrators and union executives are often in conflict with what is best for children.

With family choice, schools would be at lower risk of labor conflict, like the strikes that closed schools in Tacoma, Kent, Bellevue and Marysville, and a threatened strike in Seattle that would have closed classroom doors to 50,000 students. Family choice means schools would be less subject to crowded classrooms, political controversy or entrenched bad teachers. Parents of children faced with these problems could use the \$5,000 voucher to find a better school.

Vouchers are clearly not for everyone, but low-income parents especially know that access to a good education is the best path out of poverty for their children. Family choice would help these parents with the most important job in life, preparing their children to make the most of their talents and abilities, and in their turn to become responsible citizens and caring adults.