

POLICY NOTE

Citizens' Guide to Initiative 1351

To Reduce Class Sizes

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September 2014

Key Findings

1. *Seventy-one percent of new staff hired under I-1351 would not be classroom teachers.*
2. *The WEA union would profit by \$7.4 million a year under I-1351.*
3. *I-1351 would let school districts increase local property taxes by \$1.9 billion through 2019.*
4. *State and local spending under I-1351 would increase by up to \$6.6 billion.*
5. *I-1351 provides no funding. Education money diverted to it would make it harder to pay good teachers more.*
6. *Diverting money to I-1351 would make it harder to fund the McCleary decision.*
7. *I-1351's one-size-fits-all requirement would make it harder for teachers to use new technologies.*
8. *I-1351's narrow focus on class size is unlikely to improve the quality of education in Washington's public schools.*

Provisions of Initiative 1351

Initiative 1351 would seek to reduce class sizes to 17 students in Kindergarten through 3rd grade, and to 25 students in 4th grade through 12th grade. In high-poverty schools, Initiative 1351 would seek to set class sizes at no more than 15 students in Kindergarten through 3rd grade, 22 students in 4th grade, and 23 students in 5th grades through 12th grade.

Initiative 1351 would also require school districts to create 25,561 new staff positions. The majority (71 percent) of these would be non-teaching positions, including 17,081 additional support staff and 1,027 additional administrators. The remaining new positions (29 percent) would be filled by 7,453 teachers.

Fiscal impact of Initiative 1351

Initiative 1351 includes no funding, so its provisions would be funded with existing state and local revenues, if state and local lawmakers choose to redirect money from other programs.

If funded by the legislature, Initiative 1351 would cost an estimated \$4.7 billion in state funding through 2019. In addition, the Initiative would grant local school districts the authority to increase local property taxes by a combined \$1.9 billion through 2019. Together, state and local spending under Initiative 1351 would increase by as much as \$6.6 billion over four years.

Unions would profit by about \$7.4 million from Initiative 1351 spending

In Washington state union membership is not voluntary for certain job classifications. In the field of education, public school teachers must join the Washington Education Association (WEA) union as a condition of employment; failure to do so is cause for dismissal.

Each new teacher hired under Initiative 1351 would pay the WEA union about \$1,000 a year. WEA executives spent about \$350,000 to place Initiative 1351 on the ballot. If the measure passes and once 350 new teachers are hired and paying dues, the money the WEA spent to sponsor the initiative would be paid back in the first year.

A further 7,103 public school teachers would be hired under Initiative 1351, adding another \$7.1 million in payments to WEA executives in

their first year of employment. Overall, passage of the initiative would add about \$7.4 million a year in new-employee dues, a roughly 21 percent boost in the union's annual collections of about \$33 million.

Most school employees hired under Initiative 1351 would not be teachers, but many job classifications in public education require union membership as a condition of employment. As a result, executives at other unions would receive up to \$18 million a year under the initiative, from current state and local education programs or other areas of the state General Fund budget.

The current class-size reduction program

Washington policymakers have been pursuing a policy of reducing class sizes for many years, and the student/teacher ratio has declined by 20 percent since 1974. Today the state is funding average class sizes of 24 students in elementary schools and 28 students in middle and high schools.

The legislature is continuing this policy of reducing class sizes. In the 2013-15 budget, lawmakers provided \$119 million to reduce class sizes for kindergarten and 1st grade to 20 students in high-poverty schools. The legislature plans to reduce class sizes further by 2018.

Initiative 1351 funding might not be used to reduce class sizes

Initiative 1351 contains a waiver provision that allows schools districts to use funding for purposes other than reducing class sizes. Because it is unlikely districts have the space or the funding to provide enough additional classrooms to accommodate these reductions in class size, it is likely many districts would seek waivers. This means that Initiative 1351 funding might not be used by districts to reduce class sizes.

Class-size reduction has not improved student learning

Supporters of Initiative 1351 say that reducing class sizes is essential for improving student learning, closing the achievement gap and reducing the dropout rate.

Extensive research, however, shows that reducing class sizes is not the most important factor in improving student learning. Researchers at the Center for American Progress, the Brookings Institute and the Hoover Institution at Stanford University have found no improvement in student learning from class-size reductions.

Researcher Eric Hanushek of the Hoover Institution reviewed 277 education studies on the effects of reducing class sizes. He found that only 15 percent showed statistically significant benefits for students from reduced class sizes, while 13 percent of studies found student achievement became worse, and 85 percent showed class-size reduction had no effect at all.

In the 1990s, California and Florida embarked on large-scale programs to reduce class sizes. The efforts did not succeed in improving student learning. In California, the class-size policy forced district administrators to hire unqualified

teachers, causing the quality of classroom instruction to fall. Overall, the billions of dollars spent in the two states on class-size reduction efforts failed to yield positive results for student learning.

Teacher quality, not class size, is most important in student learning

Any benefit that might be gained from reducing class sizes is minimal compared to the demonstrated educational benefit of giving every student access to a high-quality teacher.

Research shows that a good teacher provides about a year and a half of learning to students, while ineffective teachers provide only half a year of learning over the same time period. The difference between a good and a bad teacher is one whole year of learning. Students assigned to the class of a bad teacher three years in a row may never catch up.

Reducing the number of students in a class does not transform a bad teacher into a good one. Initiative 1351, even if implemented as planned, would do little to improve academic performance if students are assigned to the same teachers.

The lack of effectiveness of reducing class sizes has been recognized in states that adopted a class-size mandate. School districts in California and Florida have obtained waivers from class-size rules. In Florida lawmakers passed legislation in 2011 exempting school districts from class-size caps.

Passage of Initiative 1351 could actually reduce teacher quality in classrooms. Any funding the legislature re-directed from the education budget to hire the 25,561 new teachers, administrators and support staff called for by the initiative would reduce funding available for increases in the salary, benefits and training of current teachers.

Retaining and rewarding good teachers is the key to maintaining a high-quality instructional staff. Education funding diverted to Initiative 1351's class-size reduction program would make retaining good teachers more difficult.

Effect on *McCleary* decision funding

Initiative 1351 would make it harder for the legislature to comply with the state supreme court's 2012 *McCleary* ruling that it is the legislature's paramount duty to provide adequate funding for the education of all children living in the state. The legislature is already facing problems in providing additional funding for the program of basic education.

Effect on local school budgets

Initiative 1351 would impose an unfunded mandate on local school districts, requiring districts administrators to divert money from existing instructional programs. Initiative 1351 may lead district administrators to increase local capital levies for more classroom space and expanded facilities to meet the class-size reduction mandate.

The same mandate may prevent local schools from pursuing innovative modern building designs that accommodate student computer use and online learning. For example, some schools in Arizona have created spaces where large numbers of students learn at computer terminals for part of the day, and later break into small group sessions with teachers for extra help. Computers and online learning have significantly cut operating costs for many schools. Initiative 1351's one-size-fits-all classroom requirements would make it harder for educators to take advantage of new technologies.

Washington does not rank 47th in class sizes

Supporters of Initiative 1351 say the measure is urgently needed because, "Washington ranks forty-seventh out of fifty states in the nation in the number of students per class."

This claim is incorrect. The "ranks 47th" number comes from a 2012 publication of the National Education Association union and is based on earlier, outdated school data.

The claim does not include Washington's current class-size reduction program or the \$119 million in class-size reductions the legislature has funded in the 2013-15 budget. The "ranks 47th" number is more than three years out of date. The ongoing class-size reduction program means Washington's average class size had declined significantly since then.

Conclusion

Initiative 1351 is intended to improve the education of Washington school children by reducing the number of students in each class. The proposal contains no budget or revenue source, however. If passed it might not be funded, and any funding it receives might not be used to reduce class sizes. Research shows that any class-size reductions that do occur would do little to help children, compared to providing every student access to a high-quality teacher.

While the academic benefits of Initiative 1351 are doubtful, the financial windfall to union interests is concrete. Most public-sector workers in education must join a union or be fired. As a result several unions would profit by as much as an aggregate \$25 million a year under Initiative 1351, with the measure's main sponsor, the WEA union, receiving some \$7.4 million a year.

The face of public education is changing, as more ways to access learning beyond the traditional classroom setting are becoming available. A number of charter schools are opening in Washington, giving families greater choice in public education. Many school districts offer online courses, allowing children to learn at their own pace. Many Washington families are receiving free tutoring and free transportation to better schools under the federal No Child Left Behind law, and some states are giving low-income families flexible school choice, allowing children to transfer to better-performing schools.



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As more education alternatives become available, Initiative 1351's narrow focus on reducing class sizes in traditional classrooms is unlikely to improve the quality of public education in Washington's public schools.

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Published by
Washington Policy Center
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