

## HB 2058, to weaken families by displacing parents as the primary providers of daily nourishment for children

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

January 2024

### Key Findings

1. HB 2058 would create a new mandatory welfare entitlement program in K-12 public schools.
2. The bill would weaken families by inserting the state between parents and their children in the provision of food.
3. This bill would send the message to parents that the state does not trust parents to be the primary caregivers of children.
4. Creating an all-students welfare program would undercut the paramount duty of the state to focus on providing for the education of all children residing within its borders.
5. The bill is based on the unfounded premise that most parents are unable or unwilling to care their children. It implies that the bill's sponsors do not trust parents to feed their children during weekdays.
6. This lack of trust in and respect for parents is fueling the exodus of students leaving the public schools.

### Introduction

On December 28, 2023, Representatives Marcus Ricelli (D-Spokane), Skyler Rude (R-Walla Walla) and 33 other Democrats

introduced HB 2058 for consideration in the 2024 legislative session.<sup>1</sup>

### Text of bill

HB 2058 would create a new mandatory welfare entitlement in K-12 public schools in Washington. Private schools would be exempt. The bill would require that all public schools to provide all students breakfast and lunch without charge. The bill would place all public school children in a welfare program, even if their families are financially independent and do not need public assistance.

Section 1 of the bill provides:

*“The legislature finds that providing all public school students with access to meals served without charge each school day will support academic success and promote student well-being. The legislature, in support of students, families, and productive learning environments, and in recognition of financial challenges that can create barriers to academic achievement, declares that no student should ever experience hunger or food insecurity within a public school. The legislature, therefore, intends to provide all requesting students with access to school meals that are served without charge.”*

### Policy Analysis

Parents are a child’s primary and essential caretaker, providing the nourishment and sustenance and love necessary to sustain a child’s life since the day he was born. This

<sup>1</sup> “HB 2058, An Act relating to increasing student access to free meals served at public schools,” introduced December 28, 2023, sponsored by Representatives Ricelli (D-Spokane, Rude (R-Walla Walla), Leavitt, Ramel, Berry, Duerr, Slatter, Morgan, Simmons, Reed, Ormsby, Fey, Peterson, Callan, Macris, Gregerson, Chopp, Stonier, Goodman, Berg, Thai, Alvarado, Steet, Lekanoff, Paul, Fosse Doglio, Santos, Timmons, Reeves, Hackney, Tharinger, Shavers, Pollet, Kloba, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=2058&Initiative=false&Year=2023>.

principle is public policy in Washington and is sanctioned in state law.<sup>2</sup>

HB 2058 would extend a mandatory welfare program to all school children and impose the state between parents and their child in the provision of daily nutrition. This bill would displace parents as the primary caretakers of children and make meal services, not academic instruction, a primary purpose of the state's 295 public school districts.

The bill's provisions are based on the unfounded premise that most parents are unable or unwilling to provide for the daily needs of their children. It implies that the bill's sponsors do not trust parents to feed their children during weekdays. The bill assumes, without evidence, that parental neglect of children is a widespread problem, that school children typically experience daily hunger, and that a state government program must supply this need instead.

The bill would also send a message to students that they should not look to their parents to meet their nutritional needs every day, that this need will be supplied by local school employees instead. This bill signals to students that their school would be responsible for feeding them, and that the school will decide what meals to offer and when. An outcome of this policy is that students would no longer have to respect the decisions of parents regarding daily nutrition and diet, that direction over a child's nutritional health has now be transferred to school employees.

### **Public policy that divides families and undermines parents**

Currently there is widespread concern over public policies that show disrespect and undermine parent rights. A primary indicator of this concern are the 454,000 people who signed Initiative 2081, a popular measure from the people to the legislature to uphold parental rights in public education. The measure received more than 100,000 more signatures than needed to qualify and is now under consideration by the legislature.

This lack of trust and broad suspicion of public educational institutions has led to a recent exodus of students from public education, a rising trend that is occurring in state across the country. Since 2019 the parents of more than 44,520 students have pulled their children out of public schools.<sup>3</sup> Placing all public school children in a free welfare meal program is likely to contribute to this trend, as parents seek way to retain daily direction and guardianship of their children.

### **Lowering academic services and student achievement**

The central purpose of the public schools is to educate children, not to feed them. The state constitution provides that the paramount duty of the state is to provide for the education of all children residing within its borders. In response state lawmakers increased property taxes and now devote over \$19,000 per student, more than tuition at most private schools, to public school districts. Adding a new welfare all-student program in public schools serves to pull focus and resources away from for student learning.

The spring 2023 administration of the state Smarter Balance tests show that public schools failed to education 61 percent students adequately in math, and failed to educate 49 percent of students in English. By objective measure public schools are currently doing a poor job at educating each child adequately to state standards. Diverting resources and attention to operating free restaurants will not improve academic learning in public schools.

### **Conclusion**

SB 2058 would create new welfare entitlement for every student in Washington public schools. The bill proposes to displace parents as the primary caretakers and providers of food and nourishment to their children, creating division and strain within families. The provisions of the bill would send a message that the school system does not trust parents to feed children and that a state-funded meal program must intervene instead.

The success of students in the K-12 schools depends upon a close and cooperative

2 *Troxel v. Granville*, 530 U.S. 57 (2000), accessed at <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/530/57/case.pdf>.

3 "Common Schools Enrollment," Caseload Forecast Council, at <https://cfc.wa.gov/education/common-schools/enrollment>.

partnership between the schools and parents. This bill erodes the trust at the heart of this partnership, sends a negative signal to parents that they are not essential in meeting children's basic needs, and undercuts the paramount duty of the state to provide a good public education to every child.

*Liv Finne is the Director of  
the Center for Education.*

*Nothing here should be  
construed as an attempt to  
aid or hinder the passage of  
any legislation before any  
legislative body.*

*Published by  
Washington Policy Center  
© 2024*

*Visit [washingtonpolicy.org](http://washingtonpolicy.org)  
to learn more.*