

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5797

As Reported By Senate Committee On:
Education, February 24, 1999
Ways & Means, March 3, 1999

Title: An act relating to improving class size.

Brief Description: Improving class size.

Sponsors: Senators McAuliffe, Eide, B. Sheldon, Fairley, Kohl-Welles, Shin, Gardner, Fraser, Snyder, Prentice, Patterson, Goings, Bauer, Winsley, Thibaudeau, Rasmussen and Spanel.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Education: 2/17/99, 2/24/99 [DPS-WM].
Ways & Means: 3/2/99, 3/3/99 [DPS (HIE)].

SENATE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5797 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators McAuliffe, Chair; Eide, Vice Chair; Bauer, Benton, Brown, Finkbeiner, Goings, Hochstatter, Kohl-Welles, Rasmussen, Sellar, Swecker and Zarelli.

Staff: William Bridges (786-7424)

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5797 as recommended by Committee on Education be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass.

Signed by Senators Loveland, Chair; Brown, Vice Chair; Fairley, Fraser, Honeyford, Kline, Kohl-Welles, McDonald, Rasmussen, Rossi, B. Sheldon, Snyder, Spanel, Thibaudeau, West, Winsley, Wojahn and Zarelli.

Staff: Bill Freund (786-7441)

Background: In response to a court case declaring the state's system of financing public schools unconstitutional, the Legislature passed the Washington Basic Education Act of 1977. The act provides funds for basic education that include a funding formula of minimum staffing ratios. In 1987, the Legislature improved the statutory staffing ratios by requiring a minimum funding ratio of 49 certificated instructional staff per 1000 full-time equivalent students in grades K-3, and a minimum ratio of 46 certificated instructional staff per 1000 full-time equivalent students in grades 4-12.

Through the appropriations act, the Legislature has provided more than the required 49 certificated instructional staff per 1000 full-time equivalent students for grades K-3. Since

1991, the appropriations act has provided up to 54.3 certificated instructional staff per 1000 full-time equivalent students for those districts that are actually staffed at this ratio. Districts with lower K-3 certificated instructional staff ratios are funded at their actual ratio, or 49 certificated instructional staff per 1000 full-time equivalent students, whichever is higher. Up to 1.3 units of the enhanced certificated instructional staff ratio may be used for classified staff for those districts that have actual ratios at or above 51 certificated instructional staff per 1000 full-time equivalent students.

Basic education programs have constitutional protection from arbitrary reductions. Any reduction in basic education funding requires legislative findings based on studies or other evidence. The enhanced funding in the appropriations act is not considered basic education funding.

Summary of Substitute Bill: The Basic Education Act is amended to enhance the funding ratio for kindergarten through grade three and for grades four through five.

Kindergarten Through Grade Three Staffing Ratio. The K-3 staffing ratio enhancements currently contained in the appropriations act are enacted as part of the Basic Education Act.

Grades Four Through Five: The current staffing ratio of 46 certificated instructional staff per 1000 full-time equivalent students is increased to 48.36. If the district's actual ratio is lower, then the district is funded at its actual ratio or 46 staff per 1000, whichever is higher. Districts may use additional certificated instructional staff in grades K-3 if already at 48.36 staff per 1000.

Sections 1 and 2 of this bill amend the current RCW 28A.150.260. Section 1, the intent section, and Section 2, the enhanced allocation formula, take effect on September 1, 1999. Section 3 of this bill places the enhanced allocation formula in a version of RCW 28A.150.260 that is scheduled to take effect on September 1, 2000. This future version of RCW 28A.150.260 is identical to the current law, except that requirements for classroom contact hours is removed. The future version of RCW 28A.150.260 only takes effect if a school accountability and academic assessment system is in place by September 1, 2000.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill: The intent section is revised to emphasize that improving the funding formula gives school districts the flexibility to decrease class sizes by allocating more staff or by improving student learning in other ways. The funding ratio for grades 4-5 is clarified so that districts with actual ratios below 48.36 are funded at their actual ratio or 46 staff per 1000, whichever is higher.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: Sections 1 and 2 take effect on September 1, 1999. Section 3 takes effect on September 1, 2000. However, Section 3 shall not take effect if, by September 1, 2000, a law is enacted stating that a school accountability and academic assessment system is not in place.

Testimony For: Funding is enhanced for grades four and five so districts can use results of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning to target areas where students need help. For example, enhanced funding can be used to hire more reading or math specialists, depending on the needs of the district. The enhanced funding will be an important first step in relieving overburdened teachers and classrooms. If the Legislature does not do something about crowded classrooms there will be a "silent September" someday. A significant problem with overcrowded classrooms is that teachers must spend an inordinate amount of time with a few difficult students. Districts need money to hire more teachers so they will not have to shift teachers around various classrooms. This bill is a step in the right direction, but many more steps are necessary. Codifying the funding formula will provide stability. School administrators are not the problem in the debate over classroom size; districts simply need more money for classroom teachers.

Testimony Against: In 1995 dollars, state funding for public schools has increased nearly 400 percent from 1955 to 1995, yet the educational capabilities of our students have declined. Class sizes of around ten students may be effective, but lowering class sizes from 21 to 20 will have little effect on learning. Class size is a problem the Legislature should deal with in the future; higher pay for teachers and funding the new accountability system is more important now. If the Legislature is serious about class size, then it should find additional revenue and do something about the 601 limit. The public does not understand that increasing the funding formula will not guarantee smaller classes. Therefore, the bill should guarantee that any enhanced funding will be spent on more classroom teachers. The intent section in the bill should be removed along with all the provisos in the funding formula. If you want to lower classroom sizes, give districts the money and untie their hands. Many school districts have unusual grade configurations so they cannot take advantage of the enhanced funding. In addition, many school districts do not have the space to reduce class sizes, while other districts lack enough students to qualify for funding to add at least one classroom teacher.

Testified: PRO: Senator McAuliffe, prime sponsor; Karen Davis, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (with concerns); Chris Helmholtz, Bellevue; Lisa Howard, Bellevue; Jim Keene, Superintendent, Clarkston School Dist. (with concerns); Lynn Lawrence, Medina; Bob Maier, WA Educ. Assn. (for concept); Doug Nelson, Public Schools Employees of WA (pro and con); Linda Reichenbach, Bellevue; Kay Rice, Bellevue School Dist.; Keyo Tocchini, Bellevue; Barbara Mertens, WA Assn. of School Administrators (concerns); Barbara Casey, WA State PTA; **CON:** Lloyd Gardner, Auburn; Dwayne Slate, WA State School Directors Assn.