
Education Committee

SSB 5828

Brief Description: Regarding digital or online learning.

Sponsors: Senators Eide, McAuliffe and Kohl-Welles.

Brief Summary of Bill

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Describes programmatic and funding requirements for courses offered through digital technology to students who are taking the courses outside the schoolroom walls. |
|---|

Hearing Date: March 17, 2005.

Staff: Susan Morrissey (786-7111).

Background:

A number of school districts offer students the option of taking online or digital courses. Some of the courses are available to students who live in different districts or are enrolled in the school district only for the purpose of taking the online courses.

Under current law, school districts may offer alternative learning programs for students who have learning needs that can best be met outside a traditional classroom setting. Under the rules currently in place for these programs, participants must be enrolled in the programs full-time, spend at least part of their time on the school site, and have a learning plan. During an audit of the Federal Way Internet Academy, the state auditor found that the digital courses offered by the Academy should be operated under the rules for alternative learning programs. However, the auditor also found that the district was not in compliance with some of those rules. As a result, the district faced a potential loss of funding for its internet courses. The Legislature adopted a budget proviso that permits these types of programs to continue operating until June 30, 2005. It also directed the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) to study alternative learning programs, including digital programs, and make recommendations on their operation and funding.

The JLARC reviewed digital or online courses during the first phase of its study. The JLARC found that 38 alternative learning programs, enrolling over 1,700 students, rely substantially on internet-based curriculum. Some of the programs offer classes to students who either live in different school districts, or are home-schooled for some or all of their education. The two largest programs found were those operated by the Federal Way and Evergreen School Districts. Other school district programs used electronically-mediated curriculum or courseware programs such as NovaNet or Plato.

The JLARC recommended that the Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) revise its rules for digital programs to waive the requirements for face-to-face contact, permit course syllabi to be used as part of a student's learning plan, and base a student full-time equivalency (FTE) on the estimated weekly hours of learning identified in a student's learning plan. The JLARC also recommended that alternative learning programs include self-evaluation components and be approved by school boards. In addition, it recommended that school districts report to the SPI on their programs annually. Finally, the Committee suggested that either the SPI amend its rules to adopt its recommendations, or that the Legislature adopt the changes in law. By law, the SPI needs the approval of the legislative fiscal committees before it may adopt rules that change the basic education formula, so any rules that change the definition of an FTE must have the approval of the fiscal committees.

Summary of Bill:

The SPI must revise the definition of a full-time equivalent student to include students who receive instruction through digital or online programs. The SPI must also adopt rules to implement the revised definition. The rules pertaining to digital or online learning programs must include, but are not limited to, the following requirements:

- define a full-time or part-time equivalent student;
- adopt and annually review written policies for each program and provider;
- report programs to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction annually;
- document student's physical residence;
- certified instructional staff must supervise, monitor, assess and evaluate the programs;
- comply with classroom staffing ratios;
- develop learning plans for each student in the program;
- document the weekly hours by each student in the program;
- assess the educational progress of enrolled students;
- direct weekly personal contact between students and staff;
- accredit schools whose primary purpose is to provide digital or online learning;
- align digital or online learning with the state Essential Academic Learning Requirements;
and
- inform student's parents who are home schooled of any difference between home-based education and digital or online program selected by the student.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.