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Senate and House advance improved school staffing bills

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Student mental health and the lack of school nurses and other professionals focused on student social and emotional health has been the topic of work sessions, public hearings, and executive action during the first two weeks of this 60-day session.

On Friday, the House Education Committee advanced a substitute to [HB 1664](#), improving the staffing ratios for school nurses, school counselors, psychiatrists, and social workers, starting with next school year. The bill was further amended by Rep. Jim Walsh, R-Aberdeen, who secured a majority vote in the committee to require a school nurse and counselor in every school building. Speaking against the amendment, Rep. Steve Bergquist, D-Renton, and Rep. Monica Stonier, D-Vancouver, didn't argue with the need, just the fact this would be a significant unfunded mandate. They also questioned the impact and consequence on smaller school districts, in particular. The bill was sent to House Appropriations, where that requirement is expected to be removed.

The Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee voted the Senate version, [SB 5595](#), out last week with all three Republicans voting No, without recommendation. In speaking with one senator about his vote, he said he was concerned about the ongoing fiscal impact of the staffing ratio change. The [fiscal note](#) indicates a cost of about \$174 million for the current biennium, growing to \$600 million in 2023-25 and \$700 million in 2025-27. The challenge, for example, is that it boggles the mind that a district with 18,000 students spread over 25 buildings only generates state funding for 2.8 nurses. Every district has its own skewed ratios, and that information is needed now more than ever to show the disconnect between state-funded positions and what it actually costs to operate a school, particularly under the pandemic. The burden for additional staff has always fallen on school district levies and the incremental increase, while welcome, won't solve the problem.

Checking in on enrollment stabilization

With [HB 1590](#) still not scheduled for a hearing in House Appropriations, Senator Lisa Wellman decided it was time to move her enrollment stabilization bill. [SB 5563](#) passed out of the Senate education committee with Senators Brad Hawkins, R-Wenatchee, and Jim McCune, R-Graham voting No; Senators Mark Mullet, D-Issaquah, and Perry Dozier, R-Walla Walla, voted No, without recommendation. The bill advanced to the Senate Ways & Means Committee.

Some legislators have argued that a bill isn't necessary, which may explain the sluggish approach in the House. And they'd be right – stabilizing enrollment can be done easily in the operating budget, much like it was done last session. However, both bills also include an important reference to allowing school levies to continue to be collected in calendar year 2023 and 2024 at the 2021 rates as long as enrollment for the 2019-20 school year was greater than the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school year average annual student enrollment and the district was open to in-person learning by the beginning of the 2021-22 school year.

The narrative against stabilizing enrollment is that districts should have been planning for student enrollment decline and question how long it will be necessary to cover district costs for students who have gone elsewhere or are staying home. The argument against that narrative is that districts make staffing decisions in the spring of the prior school year based on the best information they have. Most districts planned for lower student returns this fall but, in most cases, are experiencing even greater declines than projected. To reduce apportionment mid-year will force districts to rely on levies, reserves or ESSER funds to cover the cut. The system needs stability and predictability and shouldn't be worried about how to balance this year's books.

What we're watching

Washington State PTA is monitoring and testifying on bills in various committees, not just the education committees. In addition to dual credit, HiCap, school meals, high school graduation, financial literacy, and safe storage of guns and medications, we're keeping an eye on bills regarding youth mental health, assault weapons, a new grant program for seismic retrofitting, making post-secondary education more accessible and affordable, climate change, and digital equity. Check out the bill list and next week's schedule for more information.

Advocacy in Action

- Thank you to everyone who signed in Pro for [HB 1226](#) and [HJR 4200](#) – simple majority for bonds. The Pros outranked the Cons on the sign-in sheets. Unfortunately, the bills were pulled from a vote in House Education. That's a signal that it's unlikely the bill had enough Republican support to advance on the floor. To move a bill that will ask voters for a change to the Constitution requires 60% of each chamber – 31 Senators and 66 Representatives.
- Speaking of simple majority for bonds, Advocacy Committee member Melissa Stone testified in favor of WSPTA's long-standing position in support of simple majority for bonds. She [urged legislators to pass](#) HB 1226 and HJR 4200 to build a foundation that supports student success.
- On Monday, Martin Luther King Jr., Day, it was fitting for Dr. Gwen Loosmore to [testify in favor](#) of [SB 5217](#), urging legislators to adopt a common sense approach to reduce and prevent gun violence. The issue remains one of WSPTA's top legislative priorities this session.
- Natalya Yudkovski [testified in favor](#) of [SB 5719](#), a bill that would help make dual credit courses affordable for all students. Natalya also recommended that the bill be a starting point for funding the maximum credit price of \$65, and that the committee consider amending the bill to create a roll up plan that would expand the program to allow more students at other incomes to qualify.
- Samantha Fogg, Seattle Council PTSA, [testified in strong support](#) of [HB 1808](#), a bill that would adjust school transportation funding to support students who are homeless, in the foster care system and students with disabilities. The bill is a starting point to fixing the underfunded STARS pupil transportation funding formula.
- At the request of Washington State PTA, two students testified January 18 in favor of financial literacy ([SB 5720](#)) in the Senate Early Learning & K-12 Committee. Jackson Adams is a student in the Walla Walla School District and Kellen Hoard is a student in the Northshore School District.

Hear their testimony [here](#) and [here](#). Both students participated in the Student Panel last fall during Legislative Assembly and brought strong student voice to this important issue.

- Former WSPTA President Michelle Nims [kicked off a panel of speakers in favor of HB 1699](#) in the House Appropriations Committee January 20. The bill is designed as a short-term approach to helping address the serious workforce shortages facing our schools.
- Safe storage of firearms and medications is the topic of [HB 1759](#). Dr. Gwen Loosmore [testified in favor](#) of the bill and encouraged the Legislature to adopt the measure that will help districts share information with students and families through websites and social media on this important topic.

The Week Ahead

(Schedule subject to change)

Monday, January 24

Early Learning & K-12 Education (Senate) - Virtual - 1/24 @ 1:30pm

- SB 5878 - Public Hearing - Clarifying visual and performing arts instruction. (Remote testimony.)
- SB 5902 - Public Hearing - Concerning the implementation of high school graduation credit requirements. (Remote testimony.)
- SB 5925 - Public Hearing - Establishing the outdoor school for all program. (Remote testimony.)

Health & Long Term Care (Senate) - Virtual - 1/24 @ 1:30pm

- SB 5892 - Public Hearing - Establishing pilot projects for utilizing high school student nursing assistant-certified programs to address the nursing workforce shortage and promote nursing careers in rural hospitals. (Remote testimony.)

Appropriations (House) - Virtual - 1/24 @ 3:30pm

- SHB 1153 - Public Hearing - Increasing language access in public schools. (Remote testimony.)

Tuesday, January 25

Education (House) - Virtual - 1/25 @ 8:00am

- HB 1611 - Public Hearing - Advancing equity in programs for highly capable students. (Remote testimony.)
- HB 1760 - Public Hearing - Expanding access to dual credit programs. (Remote testimony.)
- HB 1867 - Public Hearing - Concerning dual credit program data. (Remote testimony.)
- HB 2078 - Public Hearing - Establishing the outdoor school for all program. (Remote testimony.)

Public Safety (House) - Virtual - 1/25 @ 8:00am

- HB 2037 - Public Hearing - Modifying the standard for use of force by peace officers. (Remote testimony.)

Transportation (House) - Virtual - 1/25 @ 3:30pm

- HB 1969 - Public Hearing - Authorizing the limited use of automated traffic safety cameras for speed violations outside of school speed zones. (Remote testimony.)

Wednesday, January 26

Environment, Energy & Technology (Senate) - Virtual - 1/26 @ 8:00am

- SB 5842 - Public Hearing - Concerning state laws that address climate change. (Hearing is on the Proposed Substitute.) (Remote testimony.)

Thursday, January 27

Education (House) - Virtual - 1/27 @ 1:30pm

- HB 1900 - Public Hearing - Improving school districts' responses to complaints of discrimination, harassment, intimidation, and bullying. (Remote testimony.)
- HB 1941 - Public Hearing - Prohibiting active shooter scenarios for school safety-related drills. (Remote testimony.)
- HB 1955 - Public Hearing - Creating uniformity in education requirements for students who are the subject of a dependency proceeding. (Remote testimony.) (Support/Low)

Appropriations (House) - Virtual - 1/27 @ 3:30pm

- SHB 1723 - Public Hearing - Closing the digital equity divide by increasing the accessibility and affordability of telecommunications services, devices, and training. (Remote testimony.)

Friday, January 28

Health & Long Term Care (Senate) - Virtual - 1/28 @ 8:00am

- SB 5790 - Public Hearing - Strengthening critical community support services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. (Remote testimony.)

Education (House) - Virtual - 1/28 @ 10:00am

- HB 1942 - Public Hearing - Concerning the provision of the paraeducator fundamental course of study. (Remote testimony.)

Behavioral Health Subcommittee to Health & Long Term Care (Senate) - Virtual - 1/28 @ 10:30am

- SB 5829 - Public Hearing - Concerning appropriations for behavioral health. (Remote testimony.) (If measure is referred to committee.)