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It's just talk, so far, in meeting school funding deadline

By [Jerry Cornfield](#), Herald Writer

Democratic and Republican lawmakers are finding themselves once again falling down a rabbit hole in their Sisyphean efforts to cure the real and perceived ailments of the state's public schools.

And now they face a deadline of sorts to figure a way out.

Four days before lawmakers began this year's session, they received a [stern warning](#) from the state Supreme Court to pick up their pace of fully funding Washington's education system.

The high court in its McCleary decision a couple years back gave the Legislature until 2018 to cover the full freight of a basic education for a million students, including the books they read, the buses they ride and the teachers they learn from.

And justices, who are tracking lawmakers' progress, decided in January that the Legislature isn't going to make it.

So they ordered legislators to come up with "a complete plan" for what they will do each school year in order to meet the deadline. They want this detailed blueprint no later than April 30.

On Tuesday, House and Senate members from both parties and Gov. Jay Inslee sat around a table in the governor's conference room to start the task of writing that "complete plan."

Inasmuch as this marked the first formal sit-down, no one arrived with an agenda to follow, or expectations to achieve.

They went around the table and each person, beginning with Inslee, outlined what they thought should be highlighted in their response to the court.

It didn't take long to see the partisan differences on the meaning of McCleary and the task before them.

Democrats said the plan should specify how they will pump in more money each year and make a few more reforms as needed. Republicans said it's about making additional reforms now and, yes, injecting a good chunk of additional money.

Democrats want to focus on getting those dollars from means such as a swap of property tax levies with school districts or getting new revenue from closing tax breaks or increasing taxes.

Republicans want to redirect existing tax dollars away from non-education programs and into schools. After that, any new revenue can be used to backfill those programs.

Disagreements are deep enough that as many as four plans – one from each caucus – could be sent to the justices. Right now, participating lawmakers hope they can find a way to cover all their philosophical and political bases in one document.

In all, lawmakers and the governor conversed for 45 minutes. They agreed to meet again. They didn't set a date for doing so.

“We were all in the same room talking. That's a good thing,” said Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup, a onetime school board member. “We have got to find a path forward.”

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