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Lawmakers say they're not delaying school dollars

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Washington state lawmakers are under more pressure than ever to improve education a year after the state Supreme Court ordered them to put more money into the system. (File photo)

By DONNA GORDON BLANKINSHIP — Associated Press

SEATTLE — A group of Democratic lawmakers say they are not trying to push back the deadline for implementing school funding reform.

Despite statements to the contrary last week, they say they want to see the state fully pay for basic education, as ordered by the Washington Supreme Court in the McCleary decision, in time for the 2017-2018 school year.

At a committee hearing in Olympia on July 31, Rep. Jaime Pedersen, D-Seattle, asked what exactly did the Supreme Court mean when it set a 2018 deadline in the school funding lawsuit. Does it mean Jan. 1, 2018? Does it mean fiscal year 2018, which begins July 2017? Or does it mean the 2018-2019 school year, which begins in Sept. 2018.

Senior Assistant Attorney General Dave Stolier said the court has not been clear on what the deadline means. He noted that the ruling mentions several pieces of education reform legislation that was equally vague about the deadlines the Legislature set for itself.

"We have met the enemy and he's us," Pedersen said during the meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Article IX Litigation, which is assigned to report back to the Supreme Court by Aug. 29 on progress toward fully paying for basic education.

The Supreme Court ruled in January 2012 that the state isn't meeting its constitutional obligation to amply pay for basic public education. In the ruling, the court ordered the Legislature to make yearly progress reports on its efforts.

In an email sent Monday, the four Democratic members of the committee, including Pedersen, clarified that they had no intention of putting off their constitutional and moral obligation to fully fund basic education.

Rep. Pat Sullivan, D-Covington, said Tuesday no one is trying to delay the work.

"We have to get it done," Sullivan said, acknowledging, however, "The problems and difficulty will be equally challenging in the next biennial budget, unless there's a miracle and our economy recovers at a surprising rate."

Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Poulsbo, said last week's discussion led her and others to recognize that because of the way the Legislature creates the state budget their deadline really is months earlier than the start of the 2017-2018 school year.

"We have to ramp it up a year faster, which is really good news for the kids and it's a bigger challenge for the Legislature," Rolfes said.

Rep. Gary Alexander, R-Olympia, said the Democrats weren't the only lawmakers who found the McCleary deadline vague.

The 2017-2018 school year was the deadline he's always had in mind, "but I wasn't totally confident about it," Alexander said.

He called the Democrats' statement concerning the McCleary deadline for school funding an acknowledgement of the Republican Party's leadership on the state budget.

"They want to let their constituencies and groups know that they're just as committed as Republicans in meeting that obligation," Alexander said.

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