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DeBolt to lead Capital Budget committee

Lawmakers tout progress on school funding

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The Temple of Justice in Olympia is the meeting place of the Washington State Supreme Court. (TONY OVERMAN/Staff Photographer)

TONY OVERMAN — The Olympian

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State lawmakers have made progress on a court mandate to fully fund public schools, but they have a long way to go.

A report lawmakers issued Tuesday to the state Supreme Court makes that clear. Now it's up to the court to decide whether the progress is enough.

In what's known as the McCleary case, the high court handed down an order last year faulting state government for falling short on its duty to fully pay for basic education. The court took the rare step of overseeing how its ruling is followed.

In response, the Legislature reached a deal in June that would put almost \$1 billion in additional money into basic education. Tuesday's progress report explains the details of that infusion.

"I think we made amazing progress," Rep. Susan Fagan, a Pullman Republican, said after a bipartisan committee unanimously approved the report. "No one here has said our work is done. We're just beginning."

Opinions differ as to how much more money lawmakers must add by the court's deadline of 2018, but it could be as much as another \$3.5 billion on top of the \$982 million added this year.

The court demanded "steady progress" in 2013 and told lawmakers to report back with a "phase-in plan." Lawmakers tried to detail some of what's left to do, even though they disagree on where funding should go.

Tuesday's report describes, for example, how the state is now kicking in more for school districts' basic operating costs such as books and supplies, increasing state funding per student in that category to more than \$781 in two school years, up from \$560.

But it says the new funding amounts to just 33 percent of what's required by the 2015-2016 school year, which is the deadline the Legislature gave itself in 2010 for fully funding those operating costs.

Lawmakers also have self-imposed deadlines – further off – to reduce elementary-school class sizes and expand full-day kindergarten. They started on both categories this year.

Clearer progress was made on school bus funding. The 2010 law promised full funding, and the report says lawmakers added enough money to fulfill that goal in the 2014-2015 school year.

"I didn't want to downplay the positive, but I didn't want to sugar-coat the negative," said Sen. David Frockt, a Seattle Democrat on the committee.

Frockt, who supports raising more tax revenue to fund education, doesn't see this year's infusion as sustainable. "Whether it fulfills their mandate or not, that's up to the court," he said.

Lawmakers mostly avoided tax increases or cuts to social services, with some exceptions. They also pulled down federal money and raided an array of state accounts. The report notes they transferred money from an account that makes infrastructure loans. They also continued a years-long suspension of state contributions to cost-of-living raises for school employees.

Lawmakers had met behind closed doors to hash out disagreements on the report, such as Democrats' demand to mention the canceled raises.

Republicans wanted to mention policy changes, but those were largely omitted from the final report. Democrats wanted to ask the court to clarify its order in several ways, but those requests were also left out.

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