



2 lawmakers push for class-size improvements

The Legislature is lagging on a key aspect of the state Supreme Court's mandates for meeting constitutional requirements to support schools.

By John Stang

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McCleary ain't moving fast enough for some legislators.

Companion bills on school class sizes have been introduced in the state House and Senate to speed up the Legislature's efforts to comply with a major part of the "McCleary" ruling, a 2012 decision by the Washington Supreme Court ordering ample support for schools. A key part of the ruling requires the state to reduce teacher-student ratios in grades K-3, as well as increasing instructional hours in high schools and making some other improvements by mid-2019.

The bills by Rep. Roger Goodman, D-Kirkland, and Sen. Marko Liias, D-Mukilteo, address the teacher-student ratios envisioned in the McCleary ruling. In fact, Goodman and Liias' bills go beyond the McCleary ruling by tackling teacher-student ratios in grades K-12, instead of just K-3.

In other words, the bills would lock in the schedule of the biggest piece of the McCleary fix-it measures with a new law. And it would expand the teacher-student ratio issue from grades K-3 to grades K-12.

On Thursday, both lawmakers cited the Legislature's slow pace in complying with the McCleary ruling. The Legislature must spend an extra \$4 billion to \$4.5 billion from 2013 to mid-2019 to comply with the court's ruling. That time period consists of three budget biennia. The Legislature appropriated \$982 million for 2013-2015. That means an additional \$1.5 billion to \$1.75 billion will be needed each for 2015-2017 and 2017-2019.

A coalition of 24 Senate Republicans and two Democrats, which controls the Senate, has a different vision for education reform than the Democrats — and has adopted a less expensive reform agenda that has put a major chunk of the McCleary mandate on a back burner. However, the Supreme Court recently declared that efforts to meet the McCleary requirements are inadequate, zeroing in on the funding shortfall by the Legislature last year.

Realistically, Goodman and Liias' bills will face likely overwhelming opposition by the majority coalition that controls the Senate. But, Liias said, "You can't pass a bill through the Senate without introducing one."

Here is what the two bills are supposed to do.

A few years ago, a bipartisan "Quality Education Council" set up by a 2009 law set targets for teacher-student ratios. Its target of one teacher per 17 students in grades K-3 is the

basis of the McCleary ruling's class size order. This year, the actual classroom ratio is one teacher per 25.3 students for grades K-3 in a non-poverty school.

In grades 4 to 12 at a non-poverty school, the target ratio is 1-to-25, but schools are actually being staffed at 1-to-27 to 1-to-28.7. Both the current and target ratios for high-poverty schools are slightly lower than the non-poverty ratios.

Goodman's daughter recently had 33 students in her third grade class. "If you cram so many kids in a classroom, a teacher cannot give individual attention to each kid," said Renton parent Katherine Jones, who attended the Goodman-Liias press conference.

Washington ranks 47th in the nation in teacher-to-student ratios. "We all agree that 47th in the nation is not good enough for our kids," Liias said.

No calculations have been made yet on how much extra money would be needed to put Goodman and Liias's bills into action. Also, funding sources — likely taxes — have not been identified. Liias said, "You have to explain the need to the public prior to explaining how we get there."

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