



State Senate unveils a budget: Sorry, Teachers

The Senate appears united around on a small increase in school spending with no cost-of-living raise for teachers. Gov. Jay Inslee still wants to give teachers a boost in pay.

By John Stang

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Two key numbers were unveiled Monday: \$38.3 million for court-ordered school improvements. Zero dollars for teacher cost-of-living raises.

Those figures are from the Senate's proposed supplemental budget for 2014, which the Republican and Democrat budget writers from the upper house of the Legislature announced Monday. The proposal call for \$38.3 million for technology upgrades in schools to help the state comply with a 2012 Washington Supreme Court ruling that Washington lags in its constitutional obligation to provide a basic education for students.

These are figures that Gov. Jay Inslee believes are not good enough. The House's lead budget writer, Rep Ross Hunter, D-Medina, said he has not had a chance yet to study the Senate's proposal.

The supplemental budget is a measure to fix glitches in the middle of a two-year state operating budget. July 1, 2014, begins the second year of the 2013-2015 biennium. A recent flat state revenue forecast has translated to no major budget challenges expected for 2013-2015, except for the work to deal with the state Supreme Court's McCleary ruling.

Overall, the Senate proposal would add \$96 million — minimal in Olympia's terms — to the state government's current \$33.6 billion operating budget for 2013-2015. "This is not a second bite at the apple," said the Senate Majority Coalition Caucuses lead budget writer Sen. Andy Hill, R-Redmond, dismissing the idea of larger mid-term changes in the 2013-2015 budget.

The McCleary ruling calls for \$4 billion to \$4.5 billion in extra money from 2013 to mid-2019 for educational upgrades, with the biggest chunk targeting reductions in teacher-student ratios in grades K-3. That translates to roughly \$1.3 to \$1.5 billion each in the 2013-2015, 2015-2017 and 2017-2019 budget biennia. So far, the Legislature has allocated \$982 million for 2013-2015. The \$38.3 million for technology upgrades is for preparations to improve teacher-student ratios. And it would bump up the 2013-2015 McCleary allocation to \$1.02 billion.

That would then translate to a need for an additional \$1.5 billion to \$1.75 billion in extra money each of the following biennia, 2015-2017 and 2017-2019.

Inslee wants \$200 million to \$400 million in the supplemental budget — \$200 million for routine budget adjustments, and up to another \$200 million for teacher cost-of-living raises and McCleary improvements, with the Supreme Court work taking about two-thirds of that total. "I urge the House to make a more substantial investment in education — one that

does more to provide our students with the classroom tools they need and restores cost-of-living raises for our teachers," Inslee said in a written statement.

The Senate and House alternate being first on unveiling budgets, and it is the Senate's turn this year. The House proposal could come at any time.

Inslee wants to provide 1.3 percent cost-of-living raises for the state's teachers, and a bill is in motion in the House to do so. Washington's voters passed an initiative several years ago to require that cost-of-living increases be given to teachers annually, based on a formula using inflation. However, recent legislatures have routinely suspended that cost-of-living raises as a budget-balancing measure. Restoring the cost-of-living raise would be expected to cost up to \$70 million in 2014-2015 -- an obligation for which no specific funding sources have been identified.

The House has one bill in motion with an education-funding-targeted closure of a tax break -- \$41 million for five state oil refineries. The Senate majority coalition of 24 Republicans and two Democrats plus the House Republicans have wanted to keep this tax break on the books. Closing this tax break is not in the Senate's supplemental budget proposal. At a Saturday town hall meeting in Redmond, Majority Coalition Leader Rodney Tom, D-Medina, said he personally supports closing that tax break, but also indicated that is not a priority for him this session. Tom has been reluctant to go against the majority positions within the coalition that he leads.

On Monday, Republican Sen. Hill and the minority Democrats' lead budget writer Sen. James Hargrove, D-Hoquiam, said they immediately removed the teacher-cost-of-living issue and most of the McCleary spending matters from their negotiations to simplify the Senate's budget talks.

"We did it without cutting the social safety net. ... That was one of [the Democrats'] priorities," Hargrove said.

The Democrat added, "Is it a bipartisan budget? You'll have to wait for the votes ... I expect it will be." The Senate will vote later in the week.

The proposed Senate budget calls for \$163.2 million in new spending of which the \$38.3 million McCleary allocation is the biggest chunk, and from \$111 million in spending cuts -- all scattered in small amounts across numerous activities. The state employees' health insurance program took the biggest cut at \$36.5 million.

The additional expenses include \$5 million to implement the DREAM Act that will allow Washington high school graduates whose parents are undocumented immigrants to apply for state college aid. Inslee is scheduled to sign that bill into law on Wednesday.

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