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House Democrats' budget adds school funds, gives teachers raises

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OLYMPIA – Democrats in Washington's House of Representatives on Wednesday unveiled a supplemental budget package that seeks to restore cost-of-living increases for teachers and puts additional money into education while closing four tax exemptions, including one that grants a sales tax break to some out-of-state shoppers.

The more than \$200 million proposal was released in two pieces. The underlying \$173 million budget has \$60 million for books, technology and supplies in K-12 classrooms, and \$10 million to improve community mental health services, including \$8.2 million in response to a settlement that requires the state to expand mental health services for children.

The supplemental budget makes adjustments to the \$33.6 billion, two-year state operating budget approved by the Legislature last year.

"It's a modest budget," said Rep. Ross Hunter, the main budget writer for House Democrats.

But separate legislation also announced Wednesday seeks to spend about \$51 million to restore teachers' voter-approved cost-of-living raises, which have been suspended for the last few budget cycles, and also looks to spend an additional \$16.5 million on early learning programs. Though not listed in the spending plan, Hunter said those measures will be part of the budget that is expected to be passed by the House next week.

The additional spending would be paid for, in part, by \$100 million that the state would gain by eliminating four tax exemptions, including the out-of-state sales tax, another on timber product waste claimed by oil refineries and one on sales tax on bottled water.

Majority Leader Pat Sullivan said that with the state Supreme Court's latest order telling lawmakers to submit a complete plan by the end of April detailing how the state will fully pay for basic education, "it really changed the way we moved forward."

“That court order said we needed to make additional progress,” he said.

The proposal comes just days after the Majority Coalition Caucus in the Senate proposed a supplementary budget that looks to put additional money into education, but also would create or expand several tax exemptions, not close them.

Sen. Andy Hill, a Republican from Redmond who is the key budget writer in the Senate, said both the House and Senate budget proposals prioritize education. He said that while the discussion on tax exemptions and cost-of-living raises may be difficult with only a few weeks left in the session, on the underlying supplemental budget, “We’re not that far off.”

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