

# Deadline looms on state budget plan for schools

## Supreme Court wants school funding plan by April 30, but houses disagree on whether an actual bill is needed

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(Steve Bloom/staff photographer) STEVE BLOOM — The Olympian

Washington lawmakers say they are still working on a school funding plan they can give to the state Supreme Court by April 30. The question is: what kind of plan? And will it only be one?

With just over 10 days left in their regular session, the state House and Senate are far from agreement on whether to pass formal legislation that outlines exactly how the state can invest up to \$5 billion more into public schools by 2017-18, or whether just to send a letter to the court before its deadline.

And, if lawmakers send a letter, will it contain one plan, two plans, or more?

House Speaker Frank Chopp, D-Seattle, said Friday that Democrats' intention is "to have a plan that passes in bill form." He is assuming lawmakers finish their work by March 13, the last scheduled day of session.

Republicans controlling the Senate also expect to wrap up work by March 13, but they have other ideas on how to meet the court's demand for a plan. They don't believe a bill is necessary to go along with whatever letter the Legislature sends the court.

"I think there'll be a plan. It doesn't say it's one plan," Republican Sen. John Braun of Centralia said last week in reference to the court's latest order in January. That order followed up the high court's landmark 2012 decision that said the Legislature was failing to meet its paramount duty under the Washington Constitution to "amply" fund basic education, in part by relying too heavily on local funds.

Braun is one of three Senate Republicans who are part of the special working group that Gov. Jay Inslee set up recently — with three members from each of the Legislature's four partisan political caucuses — to look for consensus on a plan to send the court. Braun acknowledged that on the school funding question lawmakers do need to identify revenue they would invest.

"We just have to show we have ways to get there," Braun said. "We may not all agree on the (revenue) source. Reasonable people can have different opinions about that. But each of these reasonable people does have to have a plan — let's put it that way."

The court's order said lawmakers made progress last year by increasing the state's investment in K-12 schools by nearly \$1 billion over the two-year budget cycle, which is nearly half over. But justices, who spelled out teacher compensation and school construction costs in their letter, said they need to see more action in order to reach goals by 2017.

"We have no wish to be forced into entering specific funding directives to the state, or, as some state high courts have done, holding the (L)egislature in contempt of court. But, it is incumbent upon the state to demonstrate, through immediate, concrete action, that it is making real and measured progress, not simply promises," wrote Chief Justice Barbara Madsen in a stern nine-page order signed by eight of the court's nine justices.

"Toward that end, it is hereby ordered: the (s)tate shall submit, no later than April 30, 2014, a complete plan for fully implementing its program of basic education for each school year between now and the 2017-18 school year," Madsen said.

Asked about Braun's comments about the potential for multiple plans, Chopp said he had "heard that notion," but he quickly added that he doesn't know that will happen. The speaker said he still doesn't know what Senate Republicans actually plan or propose, yet he thinks there is enough time to develop an agreement for funding education before adjourning on schedule.

Toward that end, Chopp expects the House to pass bills that repeal \$100 million worth of tax exemptions, provide 1.3 percent cost-of-living raises for teachers, and finance a crash course in classroom construction — all things the speaker described as "tangible" gains.

Gov. Inslee also is holding out for more revenue. The Democrat said last week he still wants lawmakers to approve \$200 million in new tax revenue this year by closing tax exemptions that could produce \$400 million in the next budget cycle.

But the majority Democrats of the House and minority Democrats in the Senate are eyeing a lower target in an election year.

“Everyone’s focused on the tax exemptions, but we have got to have a plan,” said Sen. David Frockt, D-Seattle, who also is participating in Inslee’s school funding group. Frockt said he is still waiting to see what the GOP offers.

Senate Republican Caucus chairwoman Linda Evans Parlette of Wenatchee was dismissive of the House’s proposals for new revenue until the full chamber actually votes on them. “Until they pass, they are not real,” Parlette said.

In a bid to force the hand of the Senate majority, Democrats in both chambers introduced legislation last week that aims to put the state’s funding plan into law. The Democratic caucuses also introduced their bills to close four tax exemptions — hitting oil refiners, buyers of bottled water, out-of-state shoppers and re-sellers of prescription drugs — to raise the \$100 million.

The Democrats’ school funding plans are based on previous legislative reforms, which the court singled out in its order. These set specific mileposts — or target dates — for the state to fully fund all-day kindergarten, reduce class sizes in grades K-3 and improve other staffing ratios in all levels of the K-12 system.

Despite the differences over how to answer the court, there are signs that Democrats and Republicans are looking for ways to work together on school funding.

In a show of bipartisanship, the Senate voted 41-8 on Thursday to approve a supplemental operating budget that increases K-12 funding by more than \$38 million in the next year.

On the same day, Democrats and Republicans in the House Capital Budget Committee were voting unanimously for a plan to issue bonds — backed by lottery proceeds — for school construction.

The bonds idea was authored by Democratic Rep. Hans Dunshee of Snohomish and Republican Rep. Drew MacEwen of Union, political opposites on many issues.

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