



Lawmakers move toward setting education fixes in stone

A committee Saturday approved a bill that would legally codify recommendations from the state Supreme Court, which has ruled Washington isn't fully funding K-12 education.

By John Stang

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With little debate, the Washington House Appropriations Committee voted 18-13 along party lines Saturday to recommend approval of a bill that would convert the Washington Supreme Court's McCleary requirements into a state law. Among other things, the measure would require that lawmakers fund the transition to smaller K-3 class sizes with three equal annual appropriations and that both teacher and non-teaching staffer salaries would be increased every two years. That bill now goes to the full House.

In a Saturday hearing, educators and others testified unanimously in support of the bill.

"This is a giant step forward," said Charlie Brown of the School Alliance.

The so-called McCleary ruling is a 2012 Supreme Court decision that declared Washington is not meeting its constitutional obligation to provide basic K-12 education. Using a 2009 state law as a template, the court ordered that teacher-student ratios in Grades K-3 be improved from one-to-25 now to one-to-17 by mid 2019 and that required credits for graduation and annual high school hours of instruction be increased slightly — all by the 2018-2019 school year. Other improvements were also included in the court order.

The price tag to implement these improvements will fall between \$4 billion and \$4.5 billion — a number that does not include the long-dormant cost-of-living raises for teachers that Democrats have been trying to revive this session. (Republicans remain opposed to cost-of-living raises.) Even without cost-of-living raises, lawmakers will still need to find \$1.5 billion to \$1.75 billion in the 2015-2017 and 2017-2019 budgets.

In January, the Supreme Court declared that the Legislature lags far behind on keeping up with its McCleary obligations, and ordered legislators to come up with a catch-up plan by April 30.

In response, House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan, D-Covington, introduced the bill — the subject of Saturday's hearing — to convert the court order into law. "I believe we need to put this into a statute so we have a clear path forward," he said.

"This will make significant progress in meeting the state's obligations," said Julie Salvi of the Washington Education Association.

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