

Legislature ends on time with basic ed funding unresolved

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House Bill 2797 and Senate Bill 6483 have a lot in common. Both increased funding for K-3 classroom construction, both had bipartisan sponsorship and both failed to reach the governor's desk.

In *McCleary v. Washington*, the state Supreme Court ruled the state was not sufficiently funding basic education. Earlier this year, the court ordered legislators to quicken the pace of funding to meet *McCleary* obligations — including K-3 class size reductions. According to the National Education Association, Washington state is fourth worst in the nation for classroom sizes.

House Bill 2797 would have sold \$700 million in lottery-backed bonds to fund K-3 classroom construction, and passed out of the House 90-7 with bipartisan support. It failed to make it to the Senate floor after State Treasurer Jim McIntire said lottery-backed bonds were too risky.

"We couldn't get traction for it over here. There was too much opposition," said Sen. Karen Keiser, D-Kent, prime sponsor of SB 6483. "This was kind of a work-around to see if we could get support, but we're still not there."

SB 6483 would have sold \$825 million in general-obligation bonds — as opposed to lottery-backed revenue bonds — to modernize STEM facilities, fund all-day kindergarten and reduce K-3 class sizes.

After the bill failed to pass out of the Senate Rules Committee Wednesday morning, Keiser said: "We'll see. Miracles do happen, but I wouldn't hold my breath."

Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup, who is a member of the Senate Rules Committee, voted to put the bill on floor, but said it was a matter of timing.

"I think there's a strong feeling that those are very good topics and that concept is resonating with the Legislature," he said. "But to make that kind of decision that impacts four biennia with two days left in a short session—it's not the best way to make that policy."

Several bills failed to make it out of the chambers this session, including bills to fund teacher cost-of-living adjustments, close tax exemptions for basic education and amend teacher evaluations to maintain the federal waiver for the No Child Left Behind act.

"The problem, I think, we see somewhat similarly, it's the solution that is very different," Dammeier said.

"So to assume that we'd be able to reconcile these two approaches and get the Legislature to agree — not in two days. Not in two weeks. Probably not in two months," he said.

The House Democrats proposed a supplemental budget earlier this year that included a bill that would raise \$100 million for basic education by closing tax exemptions. Leaders in the Senate Majority Coalition Caucus said that education funding discussions would be better suited for next session when the 2015-2017 biennium budget is on the table.



Sen. Karen Keiser — Image Credit: Courtesy Photo

"We'll probably be looking at this for next year," said Rep. Drew MacEwen, R-Union, co-sponsor on House Bill 2797. "I think later this fall, we can sit down and hammer out something that both chambers can agree to."

The court called for more money to pay for existing reforms—including teacher cost-of-living adjustments, additional funding for schools, and a plan to fully fund basic education by April 30. According to lawmakers and education officials, the state needs to find \$5 billion for basic education by 2018.

The \$155 million supplemental budget enacted last Thursday allocated \$58 million for K-12 materials and operating costs, but included no provisions for K-3 class size reductions.

"If we go out another year, it puts us in more of a crunch," MacEwen said. "We'll definitely have to work harder to get it addressed sooner."

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