

## Lawsuit's namesake avoids limelight

Stephanie McCleary unsure of proper course to boost school funding



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Plaintiff Stephanie McCleary, with her children Kelsey, 20, and Carter, 15, right, behind, is embraced outside following a Sept. 3 hearing before the state Supreme Court in Olympia. The court ordered lawmakers to explain why they haven't followed its orders to fix the way Washington pays for public education. (Elaine Thompson/AP)

By Associated Press

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CHIMACUM — For the most part, Stephanie McCleary tries to keep a low profile.



The named plaintiff in Washington's education lawsuit spends most of her time back in Chimacum, where she works for the school district office as an administrative secretary.

But every once in a while, like last week when the McCleary case was back before the Washington Supreme Court, she comes back into the limelight.

"It goes in waves," Stephanie McCleary told the Peninsula Daily News.

"It's present in my life for a short while, and then it's gone and I'm in the background for several years and then it comes back," she said.

A coalition of teachers, parents, students and community groups won the lawsuit in King County Superior Court in February 2010.

In 2012, the Washington Supreme Court agreed that the way the state pays for education is unconstitutional. The court gave the Legislature until the 2017-18 school year to fix the system by paying for the reforms lawmakers had already approved and cutting reliance on local levy dollars to pay for basic education.

The court ordered the state back to court last week for a hearing to help the justices determine if they need to take further action to push the Legislature toward meeting the requirements of their McCleary decision.

McCleary was in Olympia for that hearing, along with her two children, who are also named in the lawsuit.

When the case began, Kelsey, 20, and Carter, 15, were in middle and elementary school, and McCleary joined the effort to directly help them. But they will be done with public schools by the court's funding deadline.

The Supreme Court justices are considering a range of possibilities, including calling the Legislature back for a special session to finish making a plan for paying for education reforms by the deadline.

"I'm not sure that it makes sense to bring them back into session to deal with this, but I'm also not sure that anything will be different in another year," said McCleary, who has come a long way since the lawsuit was first presented.

Attorney Thomas Ahearne calls her brave and notes that McCleary used to be terrified of speaking in public.

"But her conscience overrode her fear, and she found her voice," Ahearne said.

McCleary said she still tries to maintain a low profile and doesn't let people know she is "that McCleary," preferring if they assume the lawsuit originated in the town of the same name.

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