

Editorials

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Editorial: State Supreme Court's contempt ruling makes point on education, not obstacles

The Supreme Court's pragmatic decision puts the state Legislature's emphasis where it should be — on fixing the school-finance system.

Seattle Times Editorial



THE state Supreme Court found an elegant way out of the problem it created when it handed the Legislature a near-impossible order earlier this year. Thursday, the court found the state of Washington in contempt in a high-profile school-funding case — but before it metes out punishment, it will give lawmakers a chance to resolve the issue.

The court's pragmatic decision underscores the point that lawmakers cannot duck their responsibility during the 2015 legislative session. After all the worry about what the court might do — about constitutional clashes and warfare between the branches — the decision was the best the court could have made, short of deciding that no contempt had occurred in the first place.

Now lawmakers must not squander the opportunity to do the hard work that lies before them between now and June 30.

In its contempt order, the court recognized the important distinction between its 2012 ruling in *McCleary v. State of Washington*,

the landmark school-funding case that has become the state's top challenge, and the narrower issue that prompted the contempt citation. The 2012 *McCleary* ruling pushes lawmakers to increase state funding for basic education — by \$4 billion or so, according to some estimates — by the 2017-2018 school year. They have met every deadline — \$1 billion so far.

Yet, in January the court declared the Legislature was not moving fast enough and demanded a detailed financing plan by April. Lawmakers reasonably argued that the court went too far by demanding the Legislature essentially write a budget years in advance.

The contempt finding, written by Chief Justice Barbara Madsen, shows a proper respect for the boundaries. Lawmakers can't expect to get off scot-free when they violate a court order.

But by giving them enough time to make good, the court avoids prescriptions that would limit their creativity. It permits the possibility of a "grand bargain" on reforms to educational programs and on building a sounder tax structure. And it reminds lawmakers that they should get to it, or the court would make them sorry. Not a bad solution at all.

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