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Governor announces \$2.3 billion education plan

By Donna Gordon Blankinship, Associated Press

SEATTLE — Gov. Jay Inslee has a plan for putting \$2.3 billion more into preschool through college education and workforce training and for meeting Washington state's obligation to the state Supreme Court a year early.

But he won't say where he's going to get the money until Thursday, when he releases his full budget proposal.

On Monday evening, he announced his education policy initiatives at a town-hall style meeting in person in Bellevue and on video screens in Moses Lake, Spokane and Tacoma.

In 2012, the Washington Supreme Court ruled that lawmakers are not meeting their constitutional responsibility to fully pay for basic education and that they were relying too much on local tax-levy dollars. The court gave the Legislature until the 2017-18 school year to fix the problem.

"We have a very solid, fiscally sound, secure and stable way of financing everything I've talked about today," the governor said in response to a question from Spokane at his town hall meeting. "I can tell you it's a real financing plan. It is not based on indebtedness."

Inslee's ambitious agenda includes money for all-day kindergarten and smaller classes in the early grades by the 2016-17 school year, plus money to finish paying for classroom materials and supplies.

In answer to questions about improving graduation rates, the governor said an investment in early childhood education is one of the best things the state can do.

In addition to budget plans related to the education lawsuit, the governor is proposing:

Two more years without a college tuition increase.

Raises for public school teachers, adding up to more than half a million dollars.

More money for college scholarships, including a big investment in Opportunity Scholarships for students interested in technology or health care fields.

Dollars to help students who need things like clothing, meals and medical care.

Drop-out prevention in both middle and high schools.

Another \$78.8 million to add 6,358 more spaces for low-income children in state-funded preschools, which would increase the program's reach to 70 percent of eligible kids.

More than \$14 million for job training, basic education and pre-apprenticeship work at community

colleges.

Inslee's budget fully funds the overlap between the class size initiative passed by voters last month and previous class size reductions approved by the Legislature: paying to shrink kindergarten through third grade classes to an average of 17 kids.

That would cost the state nearly half a million dollars over two years for hiring more than 7,000 new teachers. But the initiative called for decreases in class size at every grade.

Money to pay for more classroom space to house those extra teachers will come later, in the state building budget for the next budget cycle, said David Schumacher, director of the Office of Financial Management.

Republican lawmakers are not happy with what they have heard so far of the governor's education plans.

They want to see the governor's plan for answering the Supreme Court's criticism of the state's overreliance on local levy dollars to pay for education. They think the governor is not showing leadership on what to do with the class size Initiative 1351, a measure that at least a few lawmakers in that caucus say they support suspending for the next budget cycle. And they don't think new revenue sources are needed for education.

"We're tired of our children being held hostage for the next tax increase," said Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup. "We need a thoughtful and comprehensive solution for our schools. I have not seen that in the governor's proposal."

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