

Legislature gets ready to work on education

With no progress visible on session's biggest job, leaders are quietly hopeful

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March 15, 2015



Lauren Dake/The Columbian Under the state constitution, lawmakers have until April 26 to meet one of their most pressing tasks: adequately funding the state's public schools. (handout)

More than halfway through the legislative session, the most pressing issue continues to loom over the Washington Legislature: how to satisfy the requirements of McCleary.

"It's always in the back of our minds," said Sen. Ann Rivers, R-La Center.

Yet, although discussion of the McCleary v. Washington case dominated in the months leading up to the session, talk of how to adequately fund the state's public schools has since been relatively quiet.

What dialogue has been public echoes talking points and positions formed long before lawmakers were in the same building.

This week, a key policy deadline passed, and a shift of focus to the budget is expected. Parents, educators, Washington Supreme Court justices and many rank-and-file lawmakers are waiting for the House budget writers to unveil a proposal shedding light on how they propose to meet the constitutionally mandated "paramount duty" of providing for public school children.

"I think progress is being made," said Rep. Jim Moeller, D-Vancouver, who is speaker pro tempore of the House. "What do I have to point to that? (Leaders) are meeting in the same room. They are face-to-face."

The clock is ticking. Under the state Constitution, lawmakers have until April 26 to finish the state's business without calling a special session.

Democrats are bracing for a tax fight. Many on the left have touted the governor's proposals to tax polluters and institute a capital gains tax as ways to boost the state's K-12 budget.

"It's not difficult to look at the numbers — it's black and white — to see there would have to be some draconian cuts in order to fully meet our obligation to fund education," said Sen. Annette Cleveland, D-Vancouver.

But Republicans continue to push back and point to an uptick in the economy and increased revenue.

Rep. Paul Harris, a ranking Republican, said nobody is talking about McCleary because Democrats don't have the votes they need to raise taxes.

"If they could play the card, they would play the card. ... Is there a tax fight coming? I don't feel like it, and I'm being honest," he said.

But travel across the aisle, and ask Rep. Sharon Wylie, D-Vancouver, the same question: Is a tax fight brewing?

"Yes," she said.

It's the same narrative told to editorial board meetings and on the campaign trail: Democrats call for new revenue and Republicans point to increased revenue.

"First problem is defining the problem," Moeller said.

Democrats cite estimates that \$1.5 billion a year will be needed to satisfy McCleary, where Republicans have tossed out numbers closer to \$700 million to \$900 million.

In an unprecedented move, the state's top court held legislators in contempt in September, but held off on any sanctions, so long as lawmakers detail a plan by the end of this session to fix the funding by the beginning of the 2017-18 school year.

In the lawmakers' corner is an unusual sense of bipartisanship that seems to have spread through the chambers.

"It's very different than two years ago, I think it's a direct reflection to how tight the numbers (between parties) are," said Rep. Brandon Vick, R-Felida. "Two years ago, there were a lot of controversial bills that came out of the House and they came out on party lines. ... This year, that didn't happen as much."

Sen. Rivers is confident the McCleary requirements will be met this session.

"I was trying to articulate this before and for me, it's like not *if* we are going to eat dinner tonight but *what* we're having," she said. "It's not *if* we're going to address McCleary, it's *how*."