

We can achieve full funding of basic education

By Randy Dorn
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I have developed a complete plan to meet our state's constitutional and moral responsibility to fully fund basic education for every student in the state.

For years, our state has struggled with its paramount duty to fully fund basic education and has made few real improvements. This special session is the Legislature's last chance to avoid a major constitutional showdown with the Supreme Court.

In 2007, a group of parents and school districts filed a lawsuit known as the McCleary case, alleging the state was not meeting its constitutional obligation to amply fund a uniform system that ensures all students have equal access to basic education.

This goes beyond being an educational issue. It is a civil rights issue.

During the regular legislative session, the House and Senate offered proposals that would have helped achieve full funding, but none of them have yet passed.

Now let's finish the job.

I have worked with my staff and have conferred with experts and education stakeholders to develop a plan showing how the state can achieve full funding of basic education.

The plan acknowledges enormous challenge of overcoming years of chronic underfunding. It makes two significant modifications to current law regarding full funding: It reduces class size in grades 4 through 12, but not as much as voter-approved Initiative 1351; and it extends the timeline for achieving full funding from 2018 to 2021. The extension allows for a realistic timeline to hire more teachers and build more classrooms to accommodate the new class-size limits.

The plan is comprised of seven major elements. The state must:

- Complete the funding of House Bill 2776. In its McCleary decision, the state Supreme Court requires the state to fund HB 2776, which includes statewide full-day kindergarten; lower K-3 class size; materials, supplies and operating costs; and transportation. The House and Senate budgets proposals would make significant progress on this.

- Reduce class size in grades 4–12. This plan recommends reducing class size to 24 in grades 4-6 and 27 in grades 7-12. I-1351 would require class size in those grades to be at 25.
- Hire additional support staff. The Supreme Court also cites the need to increase the number of para-educators, librarians, school nurses, guidance counselors, office and technology support, custodians and classified staff to keep students safe.
- Fund more teachers, more classrooms. As class sizes decrease, we must ensure we have high-quality teachers prepared to enter the profession and space for them to work.
- Reform the compensation system. The state must fund the salaries and benefits for all staff who provide basic education. Eliminating the use of levy funding should lead to a system of statewide collective bargaining, rather than local bargaining, and include regional cost-of-living adjustments.

In addition, we should provide K-12 health insurance through a statewide benefit program similar to the plan now used by state employees.

- Reform the levy system. Legislation is needed to clearly define the appropriate uses of local levy funds and redefine supplemental contracts. The cost of providing an equitable, high-quality basic education to all students is a state responsibility. Passing off this obligation to districts puts a burden on local taxpayers that is unfair and inequitable to districts, making it more difficult to close achievement gaps.
- Review and update education provisions regularly. We need to create processes to design a better system to recruit and retain teachers, and to monitor the evolving definition of “basic education.”

This plan totals \$2.2 billion in new spending for the 2015-17 biennium. That total, however, could be partially achieved by decreasing the amount residents pay for local levies and increasing revenues to the general fund.

The Supreme Court is not likely to tolerate further delay in the development of a real comprehensive plan to fully fund all schools, and neither should the people of the state of Washington. Now is the time to finally meet the state’s paramount duty.

Randy Dorn is the state superintendent of public instruction.

Read more here: http://www.thenewstribune.com/2015/05/10/3782694_we-can-achieve-full-funding-of.html?rh=1#storylink=cpy