

Lawmakers blue due to a lack of green as they search for ways to fund education

By James Casey Peninsula Daily News

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OLYMPIA — It's not just about the money but the color of the cash.

That's actually a metaphor for the source of funds that would support state education, but it's as easy a way as any to understand the issue.

The Legislature finds itself about midway through a special session but still at stalemate over how to satisfy a state Supreme Court order to fund K-12 schooling under its 2012 McCleary decision.

The court said local levies no longer can be schools' main financial foundation.

Think of local tax dollars as greenbacks, so to speak, and state sources of revenue as bluebills.

The court, in effect, has said bluebills raised by state real estate taxes, sales taxes, B&O taxes and capital gains taxes must send Washington kids to school.

Greenbacks can't fund education.

"It's changing the color of the money, if you will, so it's coming from the state instead of the locals," said state Sen. Jim Hargrove of Hoquiam last week.

Of course, all residents sometimes pay some taxes somehow, be they green or blue.

Hargrove and Reps. Steve Tharinger and Kevin Van De Wege, both of Sequim, represent the 24th District that includes all of Clallam and Jefferson counties and most of Grays Harbor county. All are Democrats.

Hargrove said leaders of the Republican-run Senate and the Democrat-dominated House had about finished their respective blame games, had cleared up some deep misunderstandings, and had "actually started meeting."

They've scheduled all-day negotiating sessions today and Tuesday, he said.

"Hopefully we'll see some larger moves put forward by both sides," said Hargrove, who although he is a minority party senator still wields clout acquired from serving in the House from 1985 to 1992 and holding his Senate seat since 1993.

"I'm in the minority that's talking to both sides, encouraging them to get along and stop staring at each other," he said.

The House Appropriations Committee this week will consider competing funding schemes, including Hargrove's proposal of a one-tenth of 1 percent hike in the capital gains tax that he says about 7,500 Washington residents would pay.

Keeping to the metaphor, this tax — like Tharinger's proposed revisions of the B&O tax — would generate bluebills.

Senators and representatives agree on some areas for funding schools, on which the court has said the state Legislature must show progress or face contempt sanctions at the end of the special session.

They've mostly settled on the size of the package — \$1.3 million — to cut class sizes in grades K-3, provide all-day

kindergarten, and buy supplies, Hargrove said.

However, they're mired in the Legislature's 30 years of leaving teacher compensation to local levies, which the Supreme Court has said is unconstitutional.

"We need to provide resources for compensation for teachers," Hargrove said.

"Otherwise, we're still going to be in contempt because of our constitutional requirement that the 'paramount duty' of the state is to provide education."

Politics entangle the teacher pay issue like blackberry brambles.

The Washington Education Association has called for "rolling walkouts" by teachers that educators in Port Angeles and Sequim will join May 18 and Chimacum teachers will join May 15.

Republicans have charged the tactic is an education association power play, but teachers feel especially sore about promised but unpaid cost-of-living adjustments, or COLA.

The Supreme Court, Hargrove noted, didn't rule that Washington teachers were inadequately paid. In districts such as Everett, they earn up to \$80,000 a year.

"What we're looking at, I think, is some limits on what local levies can be used for," Hargrove said.

"We can't have basic-ed compensation coming through levies.

"That's the big hook here."

Reporter James Casey can be reached at 360-452-2345, ext. 5074, or at jcasey@peninsuladailynews.com.

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