

A summer of special sessions?

By The Herald Editorial Board
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Remember those heady days earlier this month when — word was — state House and Senate budget negotiators had struck a tentative deal on the size of the state budget and a conclusion to the second special session might be just days away? That we might avoid a costly and unnecessary partial government shutdown at the end of the month that could shutter state parks, stop payment on college aid grants, reduce ferry service and halt the state lottery? That we might see legislators agree to a plan that would convince the state Supreme Court and the general populace that showed they understood how to meet their obligation to fulfill the state's "paramount duty" to amply fund basic education?

We were so much younger and optimistic then.

Randy Dorn, the state superintendent of public instruction, may never have been that optimistic. He still isn't.

Dorn, in meeting with The Herald Editorial Board last week, said he expects to see the Legislature run out the clock to the end of the month before a budget is agreed to.

No one is saying this is a simple task. Passing budgets in any year, particularly with a divided Legislature, requires compromise and bargaining. This year, and in following years, it's complicated by the court mandate, and a 2018 deadline it imposed on itself, that it show significant progress in fixing a broken system of education funding.

It is going to require more than increased funding, though that's a big part of it. Currently, Dorn said, Washington state ranks around 40th to 42nd in the nation in spending per pupil. Not only is that not "ample," it's not even average.

Getting to "ample," Dorn said, may involve more funding than legislators are aware of or want to acknowledge. Looking at the laws passed by legislators and voters, including last fall's class-size reductions in I-1351, could require spending of more than \$9.2 billion for the 2020-22 biennium.

But there are other moving parts that must be fixed.

As the state takes nearly full responsibility for paying salaries, that will require a change in how teacher contracts are negotiated, moving the bulk of talks from the school district level to the state level.

A reluctance in the past by state officials to take full responsibility for funding basic education resulted in local school districts going to the voters to approve levies that have paid an increasing share of the wages and benefits of teachers and other school

employees. And that meant that some districts, specifically those with higher property values and voter support, could provide more funding for their schools than other districts, creating an unequal and unjust education system.

Reforming the levy system — in other words finding a way to fairly shift the revenue from local districts to the state — isn't going to see a fix this session. Even after a budget is passed, Dorn said, he would like to see the governor call yet another special session, this one to address levy reform. Dorn is convinced very few lawmakers understand the complexities involved. That's not necessarily a slight directed at legislators; the current funding system is a tangle of shifted responsibilities.

Legislators have enough in front of them to pass operating and capital budgets and give the Supreme Court some indication that they understand the problem before them. And they have about two weeks to do it.

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