

A bold reach for school equality in Washington

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Demonstrators advocate for more state spending on education prior to a hearing before the Washington Supreme Court Sept. 3, 2014, in Olympia. The court ordered lawmakers to explain why they haven't followed its orders to fix the way Washington pays for public education. Lawmakers, the governor and others say the court needs to be patient and give the Legislature more time to fulfill the orders from the 2012 McCleary decision. ELAINE THOMPSON — AP

A week ago Thursday, four state senators showed what bipartisanship looks like.

Republicans Bruce Dammeier and Ann Rivers sat at a table with Democrats Christine Rolfes and Jim Hargove, calmly explaining to reporters how their jointly crafted new bill would help offer equal educational opportunity to Washington's schoolchildren.

The legislation, Senate Bill 6130, is a testament to political cooperation in pursuit of children's welfare.

So far, most of the Legislature's efforts to comply with the state Supreme Court's 2012 McCleary decision have focused on putting more money into the state's public schools. Spent right, money can help buy quality. But money alone cannot buy equality.

The state now runs a privilege-driven funding system that nurtures schools in wealthy districts and starves schools in poor ones. The Legislature created the monster by

failing to fully fund basic education over many years, instead forcing districts to rely on local school levies.

Property-rich schools districts can raise a lot of money with levies even with relatively low tax rates. But with high tax rates, poor districts often can raise only a fraction as much. Bellevue, for example, raises \$2,854 per student with a rate of \$1.25 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation, according to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Yakima, in contrast, raises \$900 per student with a rate of \$3.13 per \$1,000.

In other words, Yakima must tax at more than twice the rate of Bellevue to get a quarter of the money. The Legislature attempts to mitigate the difference with “levy equalization” money, but it doesn’t get close to equality.

The state’s 295 school districts are rife with such inequities. Teacher pay is the single greatest disparity. Property-rich districts often offer teachers high “supplemental” salaries — upwards of \$15,000 or even \$20,000 in some cases. Property-poor districts can’t begin to compete.

The Washington Constitution mandates a “general and uniform system of public schools.” A system in which the quality of education varies wildly by zip code is the opposite of uniform.

SB 6130 is the boldest step we’ve ever seen toward educational equality. It would ratchet down school levies, ratchet up legislative funding for salaries and require districts to open their books on the Web to prevent them from illegally supplementing teacher pay with local money.

It’s a complex bill confronting an even more complex problem. Wringing the inequalities out of the system will be like untangling a blackberry thicket, largely because so many people benefit from the status quo.

Teachers unions don’t want to give up the practice of extracting extra pay from local levies. Communities at the top of the food chain won’t necessarily be enthusiastic about losing their advantage.

The biggest problem of all will be finding a way to fund the shift from levies, which the bill’s sponsors estimate will cost \$3.5 billion.

Part of the compromise embedded in SB 6130 is a Republican acknowledgement that new revenues — not money siphoned out of existing state services — will be needed to escape the tangled status quo. The bill’s Democratic supporters are telegraphing their willingness to take on the Washington Education Association.

This bill won’t happen in the current special session. But if the Washington Supreme Court follows its own McCleary logic, it will order lawmakers to fix the funding

disparities. The court has the power to end the injustices built into Washington's levy system; it should use it.

Read more here: <http://www.thenewstribune.com/2015/06/20/3847272/a-bold-reach-for-school-equality.html#storylink=cpy>