

# Yakima Valley school officials: State budget leaves funding gaps

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School officials and teachers in the Yakima Valley said Tuesday they were relieved a budget deal had been reached in Olympia. But they agreed that big gaps in education funding remain.

The biennial budget will add an additional \$1.3 billion over the next two years into K-3 class size reduction, all-day kindergarten, maintenance, supplies and operating costs.

What's more, teachers will get their first pay raise from the state in six years. Under the proposal, K-12 employees will receive a 3 percent cost-of-living adjustment over the next two years, followed by a one-time 1.8 percent increase set to expire in two years.

Steve Myers, Educational Service District 105 superintendent, said local administrators welcomed some of the good in the budget.

"I think all of our superintendents are glad there won't be a government shutdown tomorrow," he said. "They're thrilled to death that our professional educators are getting a COLA (cost-of-living adjustment). It's been way too long."

There are restrictions to the COLA increase, though. Teacher pay will only go up for those whose wages are funded by the state and not funded through local levy funds.

The news did not sit well with state Superintendent Randy Dorn, who issued a statement Monday night.

"Rather than address the unconstitutional use of levies to fund our schools, their budget actually increases reliance on levies," Dorn said. "The budget includes a long overdue cost-of-living adjustment for teachers and other staff, but only for personnel funded by the state. School districts will be forced to use levy dollars to provide similar increases to staff funded with local funds."

Dorn said the budget would continue the inequity caused by the uneven distribution of taxable property among schools, creating rich and poor districts.



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Elaine Beraza GORDON KING/Yakima Herald-Republic

Yakima Superintendent Elaine Beraza agreed.

“You can’t measure student success by ZIP code,” said Beraza, the day before her official retirement begins.

Yakima and other local districts just cannot generate property taxes as large as in some districts west of the Cascades, and it puts them at a fiscal disadvantage, she added.

And then there’s last year’s Initiative 1351. The K-12 class-size reduction measure was approved in November by voters; legislators, though, ignored funding options this session for grades 4-12.

“They did not come close to funding 1351,” Jamie Downing, president of the Grandview Education Association, said. “There’s nothing for 4-12 or higher ed, which is a shame. I don’t know how that will keep them out of contempt (with the state Supreme Court).”

Downing was referring to the state Supreme Court order under McCleary, ordering the Legislature to fully fund education or face sanctions.

The Washington Education Association, meanwhile, said the budget fell short. It “effectively cuts educator pay, increases class sizes for most students and fails to fully fund K-12 public schools as required by the state Supreme Court’s McCleary decision,” the association said Monday.

“Legislators may claim they’re fully funding education, but educators know the truth: This budget falls far short of fully funding smaller class sizes and professional, competitive educator pay and benefits,” said President Kim Mead in a statement.

Because levy reform and Initiative 1351 were not addressed by the budget, Beraza believes the two chambers “don’t have a clue” how to meet McCleary and are just taking a short-term approach.

Myers noted that the court said the Legislature can only avoid sanctions if a plan to address McCleary is in place, which is not. “We are all sitting back anticipating what the Supreme Court does next since (lawmakers) don’t have a plan,” he added. “The Supreme Court will do something the next 30 days because there isn’t a plan.”