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## EDUCATION

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# Senate Republicans look to hold down taxes in future, too



by John Stang

One Comment

Senate Republicans plan to stick to their no-new-taxes stance in 2016 and 2017, when the Legislature is expected to enact a bipartisan bill for a proposed \$3.5 billion overhaul of the Washington school levy system.

That's what Senate Majority leader Mark Schoesler, R-Ritzville, and GOP education budget chief Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup, said at an end-of-session GOP Senate press conference Thursday.

Dammeier is co-author and lead sponsor of a bipartisan Senate bill (<http://app.leg.wa.gov/billinfo/summary.aspx?year=2015&bill=6130>) to overhaul Washington's school levy system by increasing the burden on the state, while decreasing the burden on local school districts. The bill would require an estimated \$3.5 billion in new state revenue.

In broad strokes, the bill would start a four-year, \$3.5 billion shift in 2018 from local school districts' tab for paying for basic education – mostly teachers' basic salaries – to the responsibility of the state government. The details on accomplishing this shift are extremely complicated, but a key concept is reducing local property taxes for schools in the state's 295 school districts while

meant to end the inequity of richer school districts spending more for teachers and smaller class sizes than poorer districts can.

The bill aims to help meet the mandates of a 2012 Washington Supreme Court decision – the so-called “McCleary” ruling – that called for a drastic improvement in teacher-student ratios in Grades K-3. The ruling also called for the Legislature to improve how education funding is handled and ensure that an overhaul’s effects are permanent and provide equity of funding for students statewide. This bill primarily aims to tackle that second obligation.

In a few weeks, the court will decide whether the Legislature has done enough to meet the McCleary obligations, so it can avoid yet-to-be-determined sanctions for dragging its feet on complying with the 2012 ruling.

On Thursday, Dammeier said shifting property taxes from local districts to the state will be enough to provide the extra \$3.5 billion over the four years starting in 2018. “That should be sufficient,” he said.

The bill’s language also says that if not enough money is found to take care of the \$3.5 billion obligation, the law would automatically become void. Consequently, Democrats and Republicans might find themselves in a new revenue source battle in 2016 and 2017 if the shift alone does not provide \$3.5 billion.

Dammeier, Sen. Ann Rivers, R-La Center, Sen. James Hargrove, D-Hoquiam, and Sen. Christine Rolfes, D- Bainbridge Island, co-wrote the bill, which was introduced in June. But they intended it to be studied and modified between June and January 2016 in order to provide a better version to tackle in the 2016 legislative session. Hargrove and Rolfes could not be reached for comment late Thursday regarding Dammeier and Schoesler’s stance on tax revenues.

When the bill was introduced in June, Rolfes told the Senate Ways & Means Committee: “We will mostly likely have to fund it with a variety of sources.”

Schoesler said that the legislature so far has managed to fund massive McCleary obligations without new taxes. However, the GOP agreed to closing several tax breaks for 2103 through 2017. But most times, the GOP equates closing tax breaks to raising taxes – a

Rep. Reuven Carlyle, D-Seattle and the House Democrats' tax guru, noted in several Thursday tweets that the GOP agreed to closing \$480 million worth of tax breaks to raise new revenue for 2015-2017.

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