

Legislature touts extra school money in McCleary report to Washington Supreme Court



The lead plaintiffs in the McCleary education funding case hail from the Chimacum School District, pictured here on June 24, 2014. | Dean J. Koepfler The News Tribune

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The Olympian
July 21, 2015

State government will spend 33 percent more on the average student next fiscal year than it did before the state Supreme Court ruled schools are underfunded.

But the state has yet to show how it will fully take over the cost of basic education in Washington from the local property taxpayers who now help cover that cost.

State lawmakers approved an annual compliance update to the court Tuesday that highlights both the increases and the differing opinions about how to finish the job.

The court will review legal briefs due Monday from the state and groups that sued it in the McCleary case. Justices will decide whether the efforts are enough to lift a contempt-of-court order against the state, and if not, whether the court should order some kind of sanctions to ramp up the pressure.

The Legislature says it has fulfilled the promise of laws passed in 2009 and 2010, after assuring the court that 2015 would be the “most critical year” for progress.

“The 2015 Legislature responded by meeting its statutory implementation obligations en route to full constitutional compliance,” a draft of the report says.

To comply with those laws, the two-year budget Gov. Jay Inslee signed June 30 includes money to cover the cost of school supplies by this fall and all-day kindergarten for all participating schools by the 2016-2017 school year.

It reduces class sizes in kindergarten through third grade, although most schools will have to wait until the next budget and the 2017-18 school year before classes in those grades drop to 17 students as promised. Lawmakers didn’t find the money to shrink class sizes in all grades as required by a 2014 voter initiative.

Outside of those laws, the Legislature increased school employees’ salaries by 3 percent this year and 1.8 percent next year — a portion of which is temporary — after six years of no across-the-board increases in the state share of their salaries.

The result is planned state school spending of \$18.2 billion, \$4.8 billion more than before the 2012 court decision and 48 percent of the state’s main budget, a share not seen in decades.

Enrollment increases account for part of that extra funding, but state spending per student also is rising. It will go up more than a third from before the court decision to \$9,024 in the 2016-2017 fiscal year — or by more than a quarter to \$8,333 in the 2016-2017 school year, as Inslee’s budget office counts it.

“There are other states that are still cutting education funding. Our state’s at least going in the right direction,” Tom Ahearne, an attorney for the plaintiffs in the McCleary case, said last week.

But Ahearne isn’t satisfied. He said elected officials still seem to be evading the court’s demands, comparing them to officials in the South who once resisted court-ordered school desegregation.

The big task left for the Legislature could be the most expensive one of all: fully paying for teacher salaries that now are partly covered by school districts using local property taxes. The local role has helped make both tax rates and salaries vastly different from one district to another.

The state would need to find \$3.5 billion in new revenue, according to one estimate by a bipartisan group of senators working on the issue. Any plan to do it is likely to raise taxes for some and lower them for others as part of restricting local levies.

“I think that the court case asks the Legislature not only to address what is funded, but also how it’s funded,” State Board of Education executive director Ben Rarick said, “and I think they made progress this year on the first question, but they didn’t necessarily change anything about that second question.”

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