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GENERAL

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Legislature writes own report card for court



by John Stang

No Comments

Is the Washington Legislature getting the job done on fixing its overcrowded classroom in Grades K-3? No one really knows. Many legislators have admitted that.

On Tuesday, a Senate-House special committee sent a report on its school-improvement efforts to the Washington Supreme Court.

The report is an annual requirement in which the Legislature must convince the Supreme Court that it is meeting its obligation to dramatically reduce teacher-student ratios in Grades K-3 by 2018, as ordered by a 2012 court ruling. So far, the state has lagged in meeting that obligation.

The Supreme Court has threatened yet-to-be-determined sanctions against the Legislature if the actions outlined in Tuesday's report do not show the justices that the state is sufficiently catching up to its constitutional duty to provide adequate basic education to all students.

billion in its main budget to specifically comply with the 2012 court ruling, plus another \$811 million to build new classrooms to the extra teachers in 2015-107.

The 2012 court ruling also called for the Legislature to improve how education funding is handled, to ensure that an overhaul's effects are permanent and provide equity of funding for students statewide. In June, Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup, introduced a bipartisan bill aimed to tackle the mandate for equity.

In broad strokes, Dammeier's bill would start a four-year, \$3.5 billion shift in 2018 from local school districts' tab for paying for basic education to the responsibility of the state government. That is meant to end the inequity of richer school districts spending more for teachers and smaller class sizes than poorer districts can. The GOP and Democratic Senate bill writers want to collect feedback on the proposed legislation over the next few months and then tackle passing it in 2016.

The question is whether the Supreme Court will believe the introduction of that bill at the end of the 2015 session is sufficient to head off sanctions while hoping for passage in 2016. Sen. David Frockt, D-Seattle and a member of the special report committee, said the issue that should have been tackled in depth earlier in the 2015 session and legislation passed.

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. Where the \$3.5 billion will come from is the question.

Rep. Ross Hunter, D-Medina and member of the special report committee, said that question will likely have to be answered in the 2016 session. "I think the court is going to make us," he said.

Earlier this month, Dammeier and Senate Majority Leader Mark Schoesler, R-Ritzville, said decreasing local property taxes while raising state property taxes by a corresponding amount would easily provide the entire \$3.5 billion. Gov. Jay Inslee and Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge Island and a member of the special report committee, soon countered that raising the entire \$3.5 billion solely through shifting property taxes would lead to increased overall property tax bills for many Washingtonians.

special report committee, speculated that the \$3.5 billion would have to be raised by a combination of the property tax overhaul plus finding new funding sources.

“This is a major change in tax policy,” Hunter said.

Potential new sources include reviving a stalled capital gains tax proposal and a stalled carbon emissions tax proposal – both proposed in 2015 by Democrats and generally opposed by Republicans, especially in the Senate.

A wrinkle is that the 2016 session will be a 60-day “short sessions” in an election year, which is a time that legislators try to avoid having their names attached to taxes. Hunter speculated that the 60-day session in 2016 could go into overtime on the \$3.5 billion funding matter.

Tuesday’s special report to the Supreme Court also listed statistics to show the justices that the Legislature is making on progress on reducing class sizes.

In 2012, the teacher-to-student ratio in Grades K-3 in high poverty schools was 1-to-24.1. The ratio in other schools for those grades was 1-to-25.3. The Supreme Court mandate’s target ratio is 1-to-17 in all four grades.

In the 2016-2017 school year, the ratios in the high-poverty schools are predicted to be 1-to-17 in kindergarten and first grade – meeting the target one year ahead of schedule. The ratios for high-poverty schools in Grades 2-3 is predicted at 1-to-18.2. The 2016-2017 ratios for the rest of the schools are predicted to be 1-to-19 in kindergarten, 1-to-21 for first grades and 1-to-22 in Grades 2-3.

The state will have to hire roughly 4,000 new elementary school teachers by the 2017-2018 school year to meet the final, across-the-board 1-to-17 target for all of Grades K-3.

The numbers boil down to Washington having 3,300 such teachers today, and needing 7,200 for 2017-2018. With teachers retiring and otherwise leaving, the Washington Legislature figures it will need to hire 4,000 new K-3 teachers by that school year.

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