

Editorials JULY 25, 2015

Lawmakers still fail on K-12 funding



Portable classrooms are aging and the asphalt playground is cracked and in need of replacement at Arlington Elementary School in Tacoma. | **Dean J. Koepfler** - Staff photographer

The Olympian

There's no polite way to say this. Washington's Legislature deserves censure by the state Supreme Court over its chronic failure to fix the public school funding system.

No matter how the blarney is parsed, the nine justices on the high court know that local, voter-approved school levies still subsidize basic education. Levies make up more than 30 percent of K-12 education costs in some districts.

A major tenet of the court's 2012 ruling in the landmark McCleary case was that the state was violating the state Constitution's mandate to amply fund public schools. It also said funding for basic education needed to be uniform and reliable, ending the long-standing disparity between tax-rich and tax-poor districts that occurs due to subsidies from local levies.

Funding is neither uniform nor reliable as long as levies are relied upon and local voters can vote yes or no.

Lawmakers will tell the court Monday – and anyone else who'll listen — that in their record-setting 176-day sessions this year that they ponied up \$1.3 billion in new funding for K-12 specifically to address issues raised in the McCleary case.

Yes, they did that. They provided funds a full year ahead of schedule for full-day kindergarten and some class size improvements in early grades. They had set a schedule in legislation passed in 2009 and 2010.

But in raising pay for teachers and K-12 staff by 4.8 percent over the next two years, they slightly enlarged the inequity burden for some local districts — diametrically opposed to the court's intent. Employees paid by federal money also want raises, and rich districts can more easily supplement that pay and other benefits using local levy money.

Of course, lawmakers can point out that total K-12 and early childhood education funding was boosted by more than \$2.8 billion, compared to the preceding two-year budget cycle. That's true.

But costs for everything are going up — and so are enrollments.

Lawmakers can also point out that their capital budget forks over hundreds of millions of dollars for classroom construction, which includes space for extra classrooms needed by 2018 when student-to-teacher ratios must be lower in K-3 grades. The court has said this is a piece of the puzzle.

But lawmakers waited about 90 days into their first session before anyone — and some credit is due here to Republican Sen. Bruce Dammeier of Puyallup — stepped forward with any plan to shift local levy costs onto the state's shoulders. Other good-faith plans surfaced in the waning days of that session from House and

Senate Democrats. But it was clear lawmakers had so much to do on a basic budget and a transportation tax package that they could not also climb the policy mountain on levies.

One political barrier was that Dammeier's plan, which appropriately blocked local property taxes from being used for salaries and other basic education costs, increased taxes overall by a net \$700 million a year. The burden fell mostly on urban areas like Seattle.

Any increase in taxes was unpopular with Dammeier's own tax-averse Republican colleagues. And Democrats from richer districts such as Seattle's did not like the way it shifted property tax burdens onto their homeowners without giving a net increase in dollars to those largely urban schools.

In the end, everyone punted on a way to pay the freight. Our hope now is that lawmakers revisit this in January's 60-day session, and spend time in the intervening months identifying a workable revenue source.

But for this failure, and to serve as a prod, lawmakers need to be held accountable. Some kind of financial penalty for legislators should not be ruled out.

Brad Shannon for the editorial board.



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