

In Our View: Levies Must Be Addressed

Issue should continue to be a point of emphasis in school-funding debate

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They buried the lead.

When the Washington Supreme Court ruled last week that the Legislature remains derelict in its duty of funding public education, the justices included an inexplicable footnote: "We offer no opinion on whether full state funding of basic education salaries must be accompanied by levy reform"

This is in sharp contrast to the 2012 ruling in *McCleary v. Washington*, the case in which the court established its annual review of legislative action. At that time, justices highlighted the problems inherent with the state's system for funding education: "Districts with high property values are able to raise more levy dollars than districts with low property values, thus affecting the equity of a statewide system. Conversely, property-poor districts, even if they maximize their local levy capacity, will often fall short of funding a constitutionally adequate education. All local-level funding, whether by levy or otherwise, suffers from this same infirmity."

While the Supreme Court did not let lawmakers off the hook this year — they have levied a fine of \$100,000 per day until the Legislature devises an adequate plan for school funding — they were wrong to ease up on the levy-reform issue. Any long-term solution to Washington's school funding will require a change to the levy system, providing more state money to schools but easing the local burden on taxpayers.

At issue is a system that has been decades in the making and will require years to remedy. The state constitution declares that the Legislature's paramount duty is to fully fund basic public education. As lawmakers have neglected to do so, individual school districts have established levies to cover items the state fails to pay for — in many cases that means teacher salaries, transportation and school supplies. Because districts have inherent inequities in their tax bases and because voters in certain districts are better equipped or more willing to approve levies, this generates vast differences in the educational experience from district to district. For example, in 2012-13, the Camas School District collected \$2,231 per pupil from local taxpayers — not including state and federal money — while the Woodland School District collected \$1,728 per pupil in local money.

The court is not saying that wealthy school districts with supportive taxpayers should be unable to pass levies. It is saying that such levies should go toward the bells and whistles of the educational system rather than the basics, which must be funded by the state. Conversely, the theory goes that as the Legislature increases public funding for schools, then the local levy burden upon taxpayers can be reduced.

It should be noted that spending money does not always correlate with a good education. According to data compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau for Fiscal Year 2013, Washington ranked 24th in per-student spending for K-12 schools, yet the state

consistently ranks among the top 10 in terms of quality of education. And it should be emphasized that schools — like all taxpayer-funded institutions — must be diligent about how they spend the public's money. Nationally, 34 percent of K-12 spending goes toward "support services," and in Washington that number is 37 percent.

While many debates can — and should — be held about how to improve education throughout Washington, sooner or later the Legislature must address the question of levies. Three years ago, the state Supreme Court made that a point of emphasis; it should be more than an afterthought now.