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Inslee, lawmakers meet to discuss court sanctions



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Associated Press

SEATAC, WASH. —

Gov. Jay Inslee on Monday encouraged legislative leaders to work with him on coming up with a plan to comply with a Supreme Court order on education funding. But he said there's no timeframe yet to call lawmakers into special session until they reach an agreement that could quickly be passed by both chambers.

Inslee met with Democratic and Republican leaders from the Senate and House and Attorney General Bob Ferguson at SeaTac City Hall to discuss the latest development in the McCleary education funding lawsuit that has resulted in sanctions against the state of \$100,000 a day.

"The state and our kids deserve an answer, they deserve a step forward, they deserve a plan that will solve this problem," Inslee said after the hourlong meeting.

Inslee said that lawmakers will go back and speak with their colleagues on potential actions, and that Inslee would hold another meeting with leaders in the coming days.

On Thursday, a unanimous court said the state would be sanctioned until the state comes into compliance with the court's requirement for a full plan on education funding. The money will be put into a dedicated education account, and the governor's office has said that only the Legislature has the authority to create that special account dictated by the court.

"We cannot write a check to an account that doesn't exist today," Inslee spokesman David Postman said, saying that they will just keep count of the fine and that when the Legislature returns to session, they'll have to create the account and decide where the money comes from.

"In the big picture, whether it sits in an account since last Thursday or is held on the books, we are losing \$100,000 a day," he said.

Last week's ruling was the latest development in a long-running impasse between lawmakers and the justices, who in 2012 ruled that the state is failing to meet its constitutional duty to pay for the cost of basic education for its 1 million schoolchildren. The lawsuit against the state was brought by a coalition of school districts, parents, teachers and education groups. It's known as the McCleary case for the family named in the lawsuit.

In its original ruling, and repeated in later follow-up rulings, the justices have told the Legislature to find a way to pay for the reforms and programs they had already adopted, including all-day kindergarten, smaller class sizes, student transportation and classroom supplies, and to fix the state's overreliance on local tax levies to pay for education.

If Inslee and the Legislature choose to ignore the court's order until the next scheduled legislative session begins Jan. 11, 2016, the state would end up paying about \$15 million in sanctions — a small amount compared with the current two-year \$38 billion state operating budget that includes more than \$300 million in reserves that can be tapped by lawmakers.

"I don't know that a special session is necessarily necessary at this point," House Republican Leader Dan Kristiansen said after the meeting. "Making sure that we do this right, rather than quickly, I think that's what needs to be the priority."

Earlier this year, the Legislature approved what it called a \$1.3 billion down payment toward fully paying the cost of basic education, an amount critics said fell billions of dollars short.

While the court acknowledged that progress was made by lawmakers during this year's triple overtime legislative session that ended just last month, it said the state failed to provide a plan for full compliance by the 2018 deadline.

Inslee said that his office's reading of the court order is that it's not necessary for the Legislature to adopt any particular revenue source for any plan at this point. However, Inslee noted that ultimately complying with the order could cost about \$3 billion a biennium, which he called "an enormous sum."

"It will either take spectacular economic growth of relatively unprecedented dimension or some additional revenue source," he said. "That's the best assessment we can make right now."



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