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## Inslee: Special session possible if group finds education solution

By Rachel La Corte

Associated Press

OLYMPIA — Gov. Jay Inslee said in a letter Friday to the Legislature that if a bipartisan group of lawmakers can reach a consensus by mid-November on how to address a current contempt order by the state Supreme Court on education funding, he'll call a special session at that time.

The letter noted that the workgroup he's created will hold a meeting later this month. However, Inslee wrote that he wouldn't call a special session over another Supreme Court ruling that found the state's voter-approved charter school law unconstitutional. He noted that the state attorney general would be filing a motion for reconsideration in that case, but wrote: "I do not believe it is in the best interest of the state to call a special session to attempt to cure the constitutional concerns with the current system."

Inslee also said that he doesn't want charter schools to be part of the workgroup's discussion on the overall education funding issue. A meeting of the workgroup, which has representatives from each of the four caucuses of the Legislature, is set to meet on Sept. 24 in SeaTac, Washington.

Last month, the high court ordered the state to pay \$100,000 a day in sanctions for its lack of progress toward fully paying the cost of basic education. The money is supposed to 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.

That 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.

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.

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.

Meanwhile, late last week, the court said that charter schools, which voters approved in 2012, do not qualify as "common" schools under Washington's Constitution and cannot receive public funding intended for those traditional public schools. The chief executive of the charter schools association, an

advocacy group for the schools, has said that all nine current charter schools have committed to remaining open for the year, even if that means relying on private donations. The schools are in Spokane, Tacoma, Kent, Highline and Seattle.

“I opposed the initiative that created charter schools because I did not believe that public money belongs in schools that lack public oversight and accountability. That remains my position,” Inslee wrote. “My focus will remain on basic education.”

Inslee wrote that some families, frustrated with their local public schools, have looked to charter schools as a solution.

“The answer is to remain committed to improving our public K-12 system and making sure every child has a local public school that meets his or her needs,” he wrote.

Inslee said that he wouldn't set any deadlines for the workgroup. But if there was consensus by Nov. 19, when the Legislature is already schedule to be at the Capitol for Assembly Day meetings, he will call a special legislative session “to get this work done.”

If no action is taken before the regularly scheduled legislative session that begins Jan. 11, 2016, the state would end up paying about \$15 million in sanctions — a small amount compared to the current two-year, \$38 billion state operating budget that includes more than \$300 million in reserves that can be tapped by lawmakers.

Inslee wrote that while the fines weren't much compared to what lawmakers must spend on education, he said he believes the fines “cost us in our standing with Washingtonians who expect we will support public education and live by the rule of law.”

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