

State must act on education funding, not just plan

Originally published December 20, 2015 at 4:01 pm



Gabriel Campanario / The Seattle Times

The governor and the Legislature is playing a game of chicken with the state Supreme Court over its McCleary ruling.

By [Seattle Times editorial board](#)

The Seattle Times

THE state Legislature has known since 2012 that it must rebuild its education financing model from the foundation up. That year, the Supreme Court's landmark McCleary ruling included a scorching analysis of the state's decades-long trend of foisting off too much of the cost of basic education — defined constitutionally as its “paramount duty” — onto local school levies.

The drop-dead deadline to fix this glaring, but complicated, problem is the start of the 2017-18 school year. The clock is ticking and no viable fix is in sight because of a leadership vacuum on both sides of the political aisle.

For the state to assume full costs of basic education, it will need to spend an estimated \$3.5 billion more per biennium. That's a whopping figure — for comparison, the 2015-17 education budget is \$19.2 billion — and it comes loaded with political and logistical complications. But the Supreme Court's pressure means it is a matter of when — not if — the Legislature reforms education financing. It also is a moral imperative because the existing structure is grossly inequitable, with the losers tending to be students in poorer, rural school districts.

So what is the plan in Olympia?

The plan is to plan to write a plan.

A bipartisan working group convened by Gov. Jay Inslee is finalizing a proposal that would commit the Legislature to fixing this problem by the start of the 2017-18 school year.

As currently conceived, that plan does not explain how to pay for this \$3.5 billion obligation shortfall. That's the real problem, which would be left for the 2017 Legislature to solve. It is not a coincidence that lawmakers and Inslee want to kick this enormous can down the road until after the November election.

There is blame to share across the political spectrum. Inslee campaigned against a plan to fix this problem with a so-called "levy swap," which would have the state take on more of the funding responsibility with a significant property tax hike. His 2016 supplemental budget, released this week, contains no alternatives.

Republicans, who have a majority in the state Senate and are gaining power in the House, generally also have great heartburn about a property-tax increase. But their best plan would fall disproportionately on the left-leaning Seattle and Bellevue taxpayers. Not surprising, that plan has little traction among urban Democrats.

The Democrats in the Legislature prefer to take the edge off the \$3.5 billion bite with a capital-gains tax, an option that The Seattle Times editorial board has supported. But Democrats also balk at other necessary structural reforms — including statewide collective bargaining for teachers — that logically flow from the state assuming local

school-levy obligations. Democrats' biggest campaign donor, the state teachers union, doesn't like that idea.

So the plan is to plan and kick the can to 2017. That plan comes with the risk that the Supreme Court will grow even more aggressive. The court already has imposed \$100,000-a-day fines on the Legislature for failing to comply with the McCleary order.

Those fines have been largely ignored. Justice Charles Wiggins was recently asked at an editorial board meeting what the court's options might be if the state doesn't act. "A couple of states have ordered schools closed until the Legislature appropriated the money," he said matter-of-factly.

Facing a \$3.5 billion problem, voters need leaders in Olympia willing to face a politically difficult task. Instead, the governor and legislative leaders are conspiring to delay the pain and are playing chicken with the Supreme Court.

That's not good enough.

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