

# On state education funding, what's taking so long?

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Gabriel Campanario / The Seattle Times

**Washington state legislative leaders are taking too long to study the state's education crisis. They need to find a solution soon.**

By [Seattle Times editorial board](#)

*The Seattle Times*

WASHINGTON state is at the cutting edge of analyzing big data collections.

Pick a village in Zambia and we can sift through the terabytes and tell you how many kids have been vaccinated for malaria.

Yet after 30 years of studying, analyzing and debating the state's school-funding shortfall, legislative leaders on both sides of the aisle now say they need another year, another task force and pricey consultants to assess funding in its 295 school districts.

The assertion is untenable, yet that's the [bipartisan plan being floated in the Legislature, which convenes Monday](#), five months after [the state Supreme Court imposed a \\$100,000-per-day fine](#) for repeatedly failing to present a plan to fix the funding mess, as

required by its 2012 McCleary ruling. That follows the court's action of holding the Legislature and the governor in contempt in September 2014.

This is the state's civil-rights crisis. Under its constitution, Washington must adequately fund basic education, ensuring that every student across the state has an equal opportunity to learn and succeed. Instead, there's a patchwork system supplemented by local levies, providing unequal educational opportunity for children depending on where they live and the wealth of their communities.

Legislators should proceed carefully, but without delay. The fix is expensive — billions more are needed — and the state can't throw money blindly at the problem.

The McCleary lawsuit pushing for a schools fix originally called for the state to determine how much the fix will cost and how it will be funded.

Ironically, the state in 2011 successfully convinced the Supreme Court that more studies were unnecessary because it had enough cost data, recalled Tom Ahearne, a lawyer for the coalition of education advocates pressing the case. He welcomed the state's renewed interest in determining costs.

Studies are done, but before difficult funding decisions are made, "Most of the legislators are gone and you have a new crop that comes in and says 'good lord, that's a big number, let's do a study and make sure we're doing this right,'" Ahearne said.

Diligence is appreciated, as is hard work that's led to progress on education in recent years.

Legislative leaders appear to have a consensus that they can finish the job in 2017, meeting a deadline for the 2017-2018 school year. That's cutting it awfully close, especially considering their record and the partisan split in Olympia.

Gov. Jay Inslee didn't help the situation last year when he vetoed a budget proviso that would have revised school accounting rules and made it easier to figure out how districts handle compensation. Leaders from both parties now say that delayed their work.

But really, [lots of data are already on hand](#). Every fall, districts file reports on all staff salaries, including breakdowns of state-funded base pay and local supplements. This goes to the [state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction](#), along with enrollment counts used to calculate the ratio of students to staff — a key metric for measuring the adequacy of school funding.

Since lawmakers are dead-set against making the hardest decisions about fully funding schools this session, before fall elections they should at least break the cycle of perpetual studies. Instead of seeking a report, they should take a cue from the tech industry and build an online console for continuous reporting of school finances. This tool should make it easy to visualize and analyze school spending, including compensation and the mix of local versus state funding.

Some legislators are committed to working overtime on a school-funding task force through the coming year. But it shouldn't have taken this long to finish such a critical task.

*Editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Ryan Blethen, Brier Dudley, Mark Higgins, Jonathan Martin, Thanh Tan, Blanca Torres, William K. Blethen (emeritus) and Robert C. Blethen (emeritus).*