

The 4 things the Legislature must tackle now — and 1 thing to sideline

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The Capitol building in Olympia (Ellen M. Banner/The Seattle Times)

Besides education financing reform, Washington lawmakers should also focus on progress in mental health, charter schools, ending incarceration of noncriminal juveniles and wildfire prevention.

By [Seattle Times editorial board](#)

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BETWEEN Monday and March 10, when the Legislature's short 2016 session ends, Olympia requires a tight focus on pressing problems.

First on lawmakers' list is the systemic reform of the state's education financing, as the Supreme Court had demanded in its 2012 McCleary ruling. [See the editorial](#)

[board's Sunday editorial about that](#). But here are four other issues that should also be put on the front burner — and one that should be deferred.

- **Mental health:** Despite a \$104 million boost in the 2015-17 budget, Washington's mental-health system is still dysfunctional. Western State Hospital is such a mess that it couldn't open new, fully funded wards because staffing shortages endanger patient safety. The crisis has also delayed a court-ordered plan to get mentally ill defendants out of county jails more quickly.

Gov. Jay Inslee's supplemental budget request includes \$30 million to lure more psychiatrists and nurses. But Western State Hospital's problems go beyond money. Democratic and Republican leaders in the Senate note that Eastern State Hospital, near Spokane, does not have similar woes.

Last week, Inslee's human-services chief, Kevin Quigley, unexpectedly announced he was leaving. If the Inslee administration can't quickly fix what ails Western State Hospital, the Legislature should use its power to confirm Quigley's successor as leverage to demand a coherent plan from the executive branch.

- **Charter schools:** The Supreme Court in 2015 overturned the new charter-schools law, imperiling the state's nine charter schools. Lawmakers need to enact a fix that hews as closely as possible to the intention of the voter-approved initiative. The schools need flexibility and autonomy. The good news is two bipartisan proposals emerged last week, and the Senate is likely to pass a bill. Leadership in the state House needs to make sure the bill gets heard and voted on.

- **Youth homelessness:** The state's resources that intervene with runaways were eroded by budget cuts during the Great Recession. The Legislature should give its network of secure group homes and youth shelter beds enough money to intervene in these kids' lives, and not just provide a bed and a meal.

Lawmakers should read a recent [Seattle Times editorial series](#), "Young and Homeless," and be galvanized to act on a startling statistic: Washington leads the

nation, by far, in jailing youths for noncriminal offenses, like running away and skipping school. State task forces are often a waste of money, but not in this case.

- **Firefighting:** Fighting last year's massive wildfires cost Washington about \$164 million, double the previous record year. Legislators must come up with \$137 million in unpaid firefighting costs.

With more hot summers likely, lawmakers also need to begin shifting their mindset toward prevention. Inslee's budget request doesn't do enough to make that shift. Public Lands Commissioner Peter Goldmark rightly wants a larger boost to prevent or lessen forest fires.

- **Initiative 1336:** Lawmakers should save their precious time on this one. With elections looming, some are itching to capitulate to this new voter-approved law. Sponsor Tim Eyman designed I-1366 to strong-arm the Legislature into amending the state constitution to require a two-thirds majority for tax increases. If not, major tax cuts will be triggered, wreaking havoc with the budget.

Voters' frustration should not be ignored. But fulfilling Eyman's mandate should not be a priority. I-1366 is in legal limbo and likely will be invalidated by the state Supreme Court midway through the session. A court ruling might not happen until February. With inevitable appeals, the legality of I-1366 probably won't be clear until the 2017 legislative session.

A bigger reason to hold off on I-1366 is because a two-thirds tax rule would impede progress on the state's top priority — resolving the education-funding crisis. A fix for that enormous problem will require hard, complex decisions about taxes.

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).