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Inslee spans issues in State of the State address

HIGHLIGHTS

Education fixes and teacher shortage top priorities

New minimum wage initiative for \$13.50 an hour

Mental health facilities, wildfire emergency funds also addressed

BY RACHEL LA CORTE

The Associated Press

Gov. Jay Inslee says that it's "absolutely necessary" for lawmakers to develop a framework for paying for the state's basic education system during the current 60-day legislative session.

In his annual State of the State speech Tuesday, Inslee didn't mention the state Supreme Court contempt order Washington is currently under, but said the state will be ready to take final steps ahead of a 2018 deadline.

"We're not going to just fix a few potholes — we're going to finish the job," Inslee said. "That means actually financing these critical investments so our kids and grandkids get the education they deserve."

The state's high court ruled four years ago that the way the state pays for education is unconstitutional. The Legislature is currently working under both the contempt order and a daily \$100,000 sanction, levied since August, until they finish responding to the so-called McCleary decision.

Lawmakers last year added more than \$2 billion to the state's education budget — setting aside more money for all-day kindergarten, smaller classes in the younger grades, pupil transportation and classroom supplies and equipment, but still need to address the state's overreliance on local levies. Under a plan proposed by a work group convened by the governor, a solution has been promised, but not until next year.

"Our next deadline requires the Legislature to fully fund basic education in the

2017 legislative session, and there's no reason we can't do that," Inslee said.

Other issues Inslee mentioned in his address included:

MENTAL HEALTH: Inslee noted that his supplemental budget proposal unveiled last month includes money for four new, 16-bed triage facilities and three new mobile crisis teams to help the mentally ill. He says more staffing is needed at the state's psychiatric hospitals as well.

"We need to ensure we have enough doctors, nurses, social workers and treatment staff so that everyone is safe — patients and staff," he said.

A federal judge issued a permanent injunction last year saying the state is violating the constitutional rights of its most vulnerable citizens by forcing them to wait in jails for weeks or months before receiving competency evaluations or treatment to restore their competency.

WILDFIRES: Inslee wants to use \$180 million in emergency funds account to help pay the costs of battling last year's huge wildfires in Washington state.

In noting that more than 1 million acres were burned and more than 300 homes were destroyed, the Democratic governor also said he wants to use \$29 million from the Disaster Response Account to help towns still recovering from last years' fires and to prepare for the upcoming fire season.

Three firefighters were killed battling the 2015 fires. The men perished in August after their vehicle crashed and was engulfed in flames in the Methow River Valley. Tom Zbyszewski, 20, Andrew Zajac, 26, and Richard Wheeler, 31, were fighting the Okanogan Complex wildfire in August, which burned about 470 square miles.

TEACHER SHORTAGE: Inslee told lawmakers that Washington needs to hire about 7,000 more teachers. Under a proposal unveiled last month, Inslee says he would raise beginning teacher salaries from about \$36,000 a year to \$40,000 annually. He also wants to give a minimum 1 percent raise to all teachers and add more funding for a teacher mentoring program.

It would cost about \$100 million dollars a year, something Inslee says can be done if four tax exemptions are closed or limited.

“Because it doesn’t matter if we have the best mentors for our teachers, or the smallest class sizes in the nation. If nobody is standing in front of the classroom, we have zip,” Inslee said.

After the speech, House and Senate Republicans said that talk of closing current tax exemptions was premature.

Rep. Dan Kristiansen, the House Republican leader, said that while many of Inslee’s goals are similar to those of Republicans, “it’s the route we take to attain those goals that is going to be the difference.”

MINIMUM WAGE INITIATIVE: Inslee said he supports a new ballot measure filed this week that seeks to incrementally increase the state’s minimum wage to \$13.50 an hour over four years starting in 2017, as well as provide paid sick leave to employees without it. Washington’s current minimum wage is \$9.47 an hour, but the rate is adjusted each year for inflation as measured by the Consumer Price Index for the past 12 months.

“I stand on this rock-solid belief: If you work 40 hours a week, you deserve a wage that puts a roof over your head and food on the table. Period. And you shouldn’t have to give up a day’s pay if you or your kids get sick,” Inslee said.



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