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Proposal in Legislature to fix state school funding runs into mostly doubt, some backing

By Walker Orenstein
The Associated Press

OLYMPIA — The plan announced by Washington lawmakers in early January that seeks to fix the way the state pays for education was met with much criticism and some qualified support in its first public hearing Monday.

Many spoke against Senate Bill 6195 for not saying how the Legislature will reduce its reliance on local school levies to pay for basic education, only making a commitment to try and solve the issue next year.

“It creates the appearance of action when it is in reality a way to avoid the obligation of the governor and legislators to fully fund basic education,” testified Dan Grimm, special assistant to state Superintendent Randy Dorn.

The state Supreme Court ruled four years ago that the way the state pays for education is unconstitutional.

Lawmakers have been trying to respond to the so-called McCleary decision since then and have added more than \$2 billion to the state’s education budget.

But according to the court, the Legislature hasn’t met some requirements of the McCleary ruling, such as shrinking its reliance on local levies. The court is fining the Legislature \$100,000 a day until lawmakers complete their obligations.

Some lawmakers say they can’t fix overreliance on levies until they figure out how much of that levy money is going toward basic education. The bill heard Monday demands data from school districts on how they use local levy money.

The bill provides money for analysis of that data and creates a new task force to look at the data and other issues related to the Supreme Court’s ruling.

Sen. Christine Rolfes, a Democrat from Bainbridge Island who is one of the sponsors of the bill, said it was a “pretty big set of compromises” between the Legislature’s different factions.

She prefers the bill to be called “a plan for coming to a solution” rather than a plan for a plan, as many have dubbed it. The bill was pieced together by a bipartisan group of lawmakers that have been meeting since the 2015 legislative session.

Many at the hearing said they appreciated the work that went into creating the bill, even if it didn’t meet every expectation.

“The politics are very difficult. I understand that,” said Alan Burke, executive director of the Washington State Schools Directors’ Association. “But the reality is it’s going to be incredibly challenging to try to take care of the entire levy compensation issue in one year.”

Two bills that extend the date of the “levy cliff,” a 2018 deadline that would reduce school districts’ ability to raise money through local levies, were also heard in the Senate Early Learning and K-12 Education Committee on Monday.

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