

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT JANUARY 17, 2016 1:41 PM

# Why do lawmakers say they need more data to fix school-funding crisis?

## HIGHLIGHTS

At the Legislature, election-year politics plays a role

Lawmakers also cite difficulty sorting out what local property taxes pay for

Education supporters say it's just an excuse to stall until after elections



BY MELISSA SANTOS

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Lawmakers have convened at least six work groups in the past twelve years to analyze the way Washington state pays for education, a system the state Supreme Court has said is unconstitutional.

Now, facing a 2018 deadline to fix those problems — along with mounting court sanctions — lawmakers say they need to create yet another task force, because they still don't have the data they need.

It's a plan that state schools superintendent Randy Dorn criticized this week as "no plan" at all, and that has also left school district officials wondering whether lawmakers simply don't have the courage to take tough votes during an election year.

"The frustrating thing is that with all the reports in the past 10 years — Washington Learns, the Basic Education Finance Task Force, the Joint Task Force on Education Funding — all those different education groups and studies, they've collected data. More than what the Legislature probably needs," said Dan Steele, lobbyist for the Washington Association of School Administrators, which represents about 1,600 school superintendents and administrators.

"We're a little frustrated," Steele said. "To put it simply, we think it's a stall tactic."

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**ALL THOSE DIFFERENT EDUCATION GROUPS AND STUDIES, THEY'VE COLLECTED DATA. MORE THAN WHAT THE LEGISLATURE PROBABLY NEEDS. ... TO PUT IT SIMPLY, WE THINK IT'S A STALL TACTIC.**

Dan Steele, government relations director, Washington Association of School Administrators

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Rep. Chad Magendanz, R-Issaquah, said it's true that the politics of 2016 — when most lawmakers and the governor are up for election in November — are part of why the Legislature can't overhaul how the state pays for schools this year.

“In an election year, passing what would probably be the largest tax increase in state history is probably not a viable strategy for either party,” said Magendanz, one of several lawmakers working on a school funding plan.

But beyond that, Magendanz and other lawmakers also say the Legislature genuinely lacks some of the information it needs to finish fully funding education as ordered by the state Supreme Court.

## **WHAT LAWMAKERS SAY THEY NEED**

In the McCleary school-funding case, the court ruled in 2012 that the state is shirking its constitutional duty to cover basic education costs, and must correct the funding problems by 2018. The state is now in contempt of court over lawmakers’ failure to deliver a plan to meet the 2018 funding deadline, with the court imposing sanctions of \$100,000 a day.

Yet the plan floated this month by a bipartisan group of lawmakers doesn’t propose how the state should take on the cost of school employee salaries that are being borne unconstitutionally by local school districts, the biggest remaining part of the McCleary decision.

Instead, the bill would create a new task force and hire a consultant to gather more data about the problem, while committing to fixing it all next year.

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Rep. Chad Magendanz, R-Issaquah, who has been working on school funding plan

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Legislative leaders say that although previous work groups examined some aspects of teacher pay and compensation, none did so with the detail needed to help the state take on basic education costs that are being paid through local property tax levies instead of by the state.

House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan, D-Covington, said lawmakers know how much school districts are paying overall in salary costs, and it's clear that local levies are making up some of the difference between what the state pays and what it actually costs to hire teachers and other employees.

But it's not clear what portion of the salary bumps provided through local levies are paying for basic education services — such as instruction in math, reading and writing — versus extracurricular programs or added class periods that the state doesn't consider its responsibility, he said.

“It's not broken down in an effective way to figure out what's basic education and what's not,” Sullivan said. He said the task force lawmakers are proposing would also look to “clarify what is basic education, and what is an enhancement.”

“In some cases, I don't know that we know the answer to that question,” Sullivan said.

## **SOME LAWMAKERS QUESTION PAST ESTIMATES**

While school districts report basic education expenditures using a specific code in their annual financial reports, they aren't required to list what type of money — state or local — pays for which services, said JoLynn Berge, chief financial officer for the state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).

Nor are districts required to file separate reports specifying what's included in the supplemental contracts they use to compensate teachers above and beyond what the state pays, Berge said.

Lawmakers from both parties say they need that information to make sure the Legislature knows exactly how much it will cost to solve the remaining problems outlined in the McCleary case.

Previously, OSPI has calculated how much the state is underpaying in salaries in a different way: by taking what districts report as their basic education salary costs, and comparing that to what the state pays to hire employees in each district, Berge said.

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**WE NEED THAT INFORMATION TO MAKE ACCURATE DECISIONS, BECAUSE THAT'S A DIFFERENCE OF A BILLION OR MORE DOLLARS WE COULD BE NEEDING, OR NOT.**

House Majority Leader Dan Kristiansen, R-Snohomish

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Berge said the “vast majority” of the \$2 billion in local levy money school districts spend each year goes toward supplementing what the state pays for employee salaries, not paying for extracurricular activities or programs outside of basic education.

She called 90 percent of what districts report as their basic education salary costs “rock solid.”

“Most of it is for straight-up, straight-out instruction,” Berge said.

Yet House Minority Leader Dan Kristiansen, R-Snohomish, said last week that OSPI’s figures are far from accurate.

“As we started reaching out to specific districts, we started finding out that number was, in many cases, substantially less,” Kristiansen said.

“We need that information to make accurate decisions, because that’s a difference of a billion or more dollars we could be needing, or not,” he said.

## **WHY THEY DON’T HAVE THE DATA ALREADY**

As to why they don’t already have the information, lawmakers last week each accused members of the other party of getting in the way.

At their weekly press conference, Republican leaders noted that last year, Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee vetoed a provision of the state’s current two-year budget that would have directed OSPI to start collecting the data.

Inslee’s budget director, David Schumacher, said the governor vetoed the provision at the request of OSPI, which said that the Legislature wasn’t providing the \$500,000 in funding required to carry out the data-collection work.

Meanwhile, Sullivan said the Democratic-led House approved a measure last year that would have started gathering the data, but the bill later stalled in the Republican-controlled Senate.

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## **EVEN IF THE LEGISLATURE WANTS A GREATER LEVEL OF DETAIL TO MAKE SURE WE END UP AT THE APPROPRIATE AMOUNT, THEY SHOULD START INCREASING FUNDING FOR EMPLOYEE SALARIES NOW.**

Kristen Jaudon, spokeswoman for the state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction

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Yet the biggest reason the Legislature is only seeking this data now is because lawmakers have spent the past several years correcting other school funding shortcomings identified in the McCleary case, including boosting funding for all-day kindergarten, pupil transportation, school supplies and reducing class sizes in kindergarten through third grade, Sullivan said.

That has left the most complex part of the ruling — dealing with teacher salaries and local levies — until the last two years before the 2018 funding deadline, he said.

Others maintain that lawmakers could move forward with some aspects of improving teacher compensation now, if they wanted to.

“The State is currently vastly underfunding school district salaries,” said OSPI spokeswoman Kristen Jaudon. “Even if the Legislature wants a greater level of detail to make sure we end up at the appropriate amount, they should start increasing funding for employee salaries now.”

“It's highly unlikely they will err on the side of overfunding,” she said.

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### **PAST WORK GROUPS ON SCHOOL FUNDING ISSUES**

**2004:** House K-12 Finance Workgroup

**2006:** Washington Learns

**2007:** Joint Task Force on Basic Education Finance

**2009:** The Quality Education Council

**2011:** Compensation Technical Working Group

**2012:** Joint Task Force on Education Funding



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**Mary Raybell** · Pierce College

The WA St lawmakers were educated in our schools system; poor reading and math skills a result.

Like · Reply · 2 · Jan 18, 2016 8:05am



**Toni Froehling** · Seattle University

While it is certainly true that we are under funding schools, it's also true that we need to rethink some of our ideas about what works. Some of the common ideas that have taken on the role of gospel in education circles might not be the way to go, as evidenced by the lack of success we have in getting kids to learn. A good example is found in Shyamalan's book, "I got schooled". Time to get smart and stop worrying whose feelings are going to get hurt.

Like · Reply · 2 · 23 hrs



**Charles Hoff** · Penn State

What is also missing here is a real definition of what basic education should consist of. Much of what is in "Core 24" was put there by vested interests.

We should decide if we are running daycare/juvenile social halls for places of actual learning.

Like · Reply · 20 hrs



**Len Barrett** · Puyallup, Washington

Sadly, for some reason school employees have been allowed to organize into 3 distinct groups, teachers, superintendents and principals each one with its own agenda. The taxpayers of this state are being victimized by this divide and conquer agenda because the school funding gets clouded when no one on the outside is able to penetrate the financial cloud that has been deliberately created. It is time to scrap the current structure and let the legislature start over from ground zero and build a structure that fills the bill.

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