

EDITORIALS

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Legislature stumbling over its own low K-12 bar

The 2016 session began with a goal of adopting a plan for a plan for full funding of K-12 schools

But a 2017 target for having the actual plan is in doubt despite a Supreme Court order

A Senate committee voted on party lines last month to set a 2018 date; the House favors 2017

The Olympian Editorial Board

The education-funding bar was set pretty low for the Washington Legislature this year. So low there was a danger that lawmakers might trip over it. That appears to be happening.

We weren't happy to see such an unambitious goal at the start of session, which was – in essence – to adopt a plan by which lawmakers could adopt a real plan to finish the full funding of K-12 schools in 2017.

Republicans and Democrats said action had to wait this year, because they needed data showing exactly how much local levy money was going into staff salaries and other basic education costs at the district level. This was important, because lawmakers are under court orders to end the reliance on local levies for basic education costs such as pay.

At session's start, both Republicans and Democrats talked up how well they had been working together in an informal task force to move toward such a plan for a plan.

In retrospect it was naïve to expect much. But going into the short, 60-day session last month, there was some hope lawmakers could agree on a plan for school funding that might satisfy the state Supreme Court, which has found the Legislature in contempt for its failure to lay out a plan to fully fund basic education for 2017-18.

In response, the House approved [House Bill 2366](#) on a [bipartisan vote of 64-34](#). This bill creates a school funding task force that must find a way to replace school levy funding of basic education programs and salaries. Its deadline is by the end of the 2017 session.

That date makes a lot of sense because the 2017-19 budget would allow the state to begin getting money into the hands of local school districts for the fall of 2017.

But late last month, key Senate Republicans backed away from even that commitment in their version of the legislation, [Senate Bill 6195](#). A vote by the Senate education committee chaired by Sen. Steve Litzow of Mercer Island put in a 2018 date for reforming the use of levies – a full year later. It was a party-line vote.

Sen. Joe Fain, an Auburn Republican and moderate, said the intention remains to stick with a 2017 funding goal.

Fain has a record of fair dealings and we respect his intentions. But the effect of the GOP amendment is to remove even the loose teeth that were biting down on legislators' necks.

As generous as the 2015-17 budget was to K-12 schools, the failure to produce a credible long-term plan is why the high court found lawmakers in contempt of court last fall. Justices imposed \$100,000-a-day fines on the Legislature, money that would be put into a special fund for schools. Of course, that depends on whether lawmakers ever create such a fund and appropriate the money.

This may be an election year, but lawmakers need to buck up, find a little courage, and set firm deadlines for themselves – then meet them.

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