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State House, Senate agree on education bill

Having completed debates on the use of toilets and taxes, the Republican majority in the state Senate directed its attention Tuesday to a top item on this session's to-do list — education.

They pulled off a mild surprise by engineering [passage of a bill](#) that lays out lawmakers' next steps to amply fund public schools as required in the McCleary case.

And the surprise was the [bill approved by the Senate](#) is the [exact same](#) as one passed by the Democrat-controlled House. So now the House can stamp its approval on the Senate bill, deliver it to Gov. Jay Inslee for signing and cross the item off the list.

To recap, in the McCleary case, the [Supreme Court ruled in 2012](#) that the state was failing to meet its constitutional duty to amply fund public schools and set a 2018 deadline to get right with the law.

The bill passed Tuesday is an agreement to agree on the final funding pieces by the end of the 2017 session. It lays out the path lawmakers will take to get to the point where they can do just that.

It creates a task force to delve deep into how state tax dollars and local property tax levies get spent in public schools. The court ruling made clear the state must end districts' over-reliance on those levies to operate and pay salaries.

As bills go, it's pretty vanilla with its task force and study. Yet it had triggered a cold war between the two chambers.

What the House passed reflected the conclusions of [a bipartisan panel that met on McCleary issues last fall](#).

Republican senators didn't like it. They wanted to give themselves all of 2017 to reach agreement. They wanted to impose new accounting requirements on school districts. They wanted to start retooling formulas and practices for paying teachers.

And they didn't like a clause in the original House version they said put the state on the hook for paying to build hundreds of new classrooms.

At one point Sen. Steve Litzow, R-Mercer Island, chairman of the Senate Education Committee, infuriated Democrats with his assertion there was no support in the GOP caucus for the House bill.

Meanwhile, speculation swirled that GOP senators were holding the bill hostage until House Democrats acted on one of their priorities, a bill preserving charter schools.

On Monday, the education brain trust of the Senate Republican Caucus huddled to weigh their options and consider the political mood after stormy debates on taxes and transgender bathroom rights.

They knew the House had axed the worrisome clause on school construction. They recognized a McCleary bill would get done this session somehow and concluded it wasn't beating their heads against the wall any longer to get their desired provisions added.

They pushed out the bill. In the end 15 Republicans and 11 Democrats voted to pass it to the appreciation of Democrats.

"This is their out," said Rep. Kristine Lytton, D-Anacortes, who has been part of the bicameral negotiations. "I'm happy they honored the work of the McCleary work group."

Now lawmakers can get comfortable and wait to see what the state Supreme Court thinks of what they've done. If it's not enough, the court's options include the nuclear one of blocking the start of the 2016 school year.

"We hope this appeases them," Lytton said. "With divided government, this is what we can agree to."

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