

State Senate OKs compromise on plan to fix education system

Originally published February 16, 2016 at 5:44 pm
The Seattle Times

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Many lawmakers believe the bill will satisfy the state Supreme Court's order to finish the work it demanded in its 2012 McCleary decision.

However, the bill was panned by many in the Senate as doing too little to fix a problem that has been hanging over the state for years.

"The reality is there is no perfect bill. There's not one bill that's going to address every issue that we have in funding our K-12 education system," said Sen. Ann River, R-La Center, who helped negotiate the compromise.

Her partner in the compromise, Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge Island, agreed.

"The importance of this bill is it keeps all four caucuses at the table with a shared commitment to move forward," she said.

The bill passed the Senate on a vote of 26-23 but not cleanly along party lines. The measure is likely to be taken up again by the House.

The measure would set up a task force to find a solution to the state's overreliance on local school levies to pay for basic education. It also would ask school districts for more details about the way they spend their local tax money to help lawmakers determine how much of it is paying for things like teacher salaries that the state should be covering.

The levy issue is the last hurdle to bringing lawmakers into compliance with the Washington high court's McCleary decision, in which the justices said school funding was not adequate or uniform. It's also what lawmakers call the most challenging part of the work, and they have said they do not have the capacity or political will to finish it during this year's legislative session.

The Legislature has addressed other issues cited by the court, including putting more than \$2 billion into student transportation, all-day kindergarten, smaller classes and classroom supplies.

Both Democrats and Republicans spoke passionately for and against the measure before the Senate vote.

"The time for plans and promises and pledges has got to be over. I consider this bill to be essentially telling the court the check's in the mail," said Sen. Cyrus Habib, D-Bellevue.

Sen. Michael Baumgartner, R-Spokane, encouraged his colleagues to vote no, calling the measure the great bipartisan punt of the year. He asked lawmakers who vote no to come up with their own idea about how to solve the education funding problems.

The court has held the state in contempt over its failure to figure out the remaining issues about how the state can fully pay the costs of basic education, as the constitution requires, while ending its overreliance on local tax levies.

The governor convened a bipartisan group from both chambers that met over the summer and failed to work out a compromise on how to find the money to replace the local levy dollars and fix the teacher compensation system.

House Majority Leader Rep. Pat Sullivan, D-Covington, said the House is likely to expedite action on the Senate bill, which is identical to what the House passed last month.

Associated Press Correspondent Rachel La Corte contributed to this story from Olympia.