

Teacher shortage, levy bills pass chambers in Washington

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OLYMPIA, Wash. (AP) — Though many lawmakers vocally lamented that the state isn't funneling enough money into the state's public education system, a trio of education bills passed their first chamber on Wednesday, two aimed at reducing a perceived teacher shortage.

House Bill 2573, passed on a vote of 92-6 on Wednesday, would in part require the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to create a statewide plan to bring in more teachers. Senate Bill 6455 would allow, among other differences to the House measure, some retired teachers to be teachers or substitutes without hurting their pension benefits. It passed on a 45-4 vote.

The House bill would allow some retired teachers to be hired as mentors for student teachers for up to 630 hours per year.

Both aim to recruit teachers outside of Washington, but neither proposal increases salaries for teachers that some say are woefully low.

"It is not appropriate for us to actually require our teachers to be in the lowest income levels of our society," said Sen. Pramila Jayapal, D-Seattle, during a debate on the Senate floor.

Teachers don't enter the profession for the money, but for the love of working with kids, said Sen. Mark Miloscia, R-Federal Way. Simply raising salaries would not be a big help for the teacher shortage, but lawmakers should make sure teachers feel valued by schools and parents, he said. Both Miloscia and Jayapal voted for the bill.

The original version of the House Bill provided for an increase in teacher salary, but that portion was removed in committee.

The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction reports in a 2015 survey that 93 percent of 733 principals say they either struggle to find qualified teaching candidates or are in "crisis mode" searching for them. Forty-five percent say they couldn't fill openings with qualified teachers. The survey also found that finding substitute teachers was difficult.

About 35 percent of about 2,100 principals responded to the survey.

Also on Wednesday, the House passed a bill that would let state school districts raise money through local levies at their current rate for an extra year, until 2018.

House Bill 2698, passed 91-7, would delay the expiration of a 2010 law allowing districts to raise more money in local taxes. It will now be considered by the Senate.

A 2012 ruling by the state Supreme Court known as the McCleary decision said the state relies too heavily on local levies to pay for basic education. Bills passed in each chamber this year commit to fixing the issue next session, but districts have to be able to continue raising enough money to support schools until the state replaces revenue from levies, some lawmakers said during debate on the issue.

Meanwhile, the Senate late Tuesday night passed a bill that would add a second state option to help people save for college.

The proposal, Senate Bill 6601, would allow the group that runs Washington's prepaid tuition program to start a more traditional 529 savings plan. The bill was requested by the group that runs the prepaid Guaranteed Education Tuition program, or GET.

GET is currently frozen for up to two years. The GET committee hasn't decided yet whether to reopen the program for new accounts and investments. They want to start the new program by the beginning of 2017 and may run both savings plans side-by-side.