

2016 LEGISLATIVE SESSION | Legislature approves basic education bill



The Washington State Capitol Building in Olympia. — *Image Credit: Photo Courtesy Of Legislative Support Services*

by IZUMI HANSEN, Bainbridge Island Review Reporter
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OLYMPIA — In a maneuver Thursday that brought a Senate-approved basic-education bill to the House floor for debate, representatives reaffirmed their support of the measure. The bill now goes to Gov. Jay Inslee for his consideration.

SB-6195, called the basic education bill, establishes a task force to recommend legislative action on teacher salaries. It also requires the Legislature to reduce local reliance on school levies by the end of the 2017 legislative session.

Many legislators and outside education organizations believe the bill doesn't go far enough with resolving the underfunding issue, while some say they understand the bill is bipartisan progress and wish the bill could have done more.

The Senate bill advanced Tuesday on a 26-23 vote after being amended to include the same language as the House version, HB-2366, which the House passed last month. Typically, a bill must go through more public hearings after being passed by one chamber. The House suspended this rule in order to vote on the bill Thursday.

The Washington State Supreme Court ruled in the 2012 McCleary decision that the state was not fully funding basic education. Teacher pay was identified by the court as an underfunded part of basic education. The court also found that levies likely pay for part of basic education teaching, which is unconstitutional. The state is under a contempt order and a fine of \$100,000 a day since Aug. 13 for failing to produce plans to fully fund basic education.

"We know that progress sometimes takes time. We know that it is incremental, but we believe this is the right step forward in our state," said Rep. Kristine Lytton, D-Anacortes during floor debate. Lytton was part of the work group that created the House version of the bill.

SB-6195 passed 66-31 in the House. One member, Rep. David Sawyer, D-Parkland, was excused from the vote. HB-2366 passed 64-34 in the House in January.

Also Thursday, Gov. Jay Inslee said, "We all know the heavy lifting that will need to be done in the session of 2017 is now set up to be done."

Following the vote, on Twitter, he thanked the Legislature “for doing right by our students.”

State Schools Superintendent Randy Dorn has opposed both bills throughout the legislative process. He was not available for comment on the most recent passage of the bill.

Before the bill passed the Senate, it received numerous changes throughout the committee process, which highlighted tensions between parties about the intent of the bill. However, the bill was finally amended to include the House language on the Senate floor.

During House debate Thursday, Rep. Matt Manweller, R-Ellensburg, said districts use local levies to increase teacher pay, teaching enrichment days and additional program offerings, then sued the state in the McCleary court case to make the state pay for these items.

“With this bill, there’s nothing in here that provides statutory direction for us to avoid this exact same problem five years down the road,” said Manweller, who was not on the bipartisan work group that created the bill. Manweller voted against both versions of the bill.

“This is about funding education for the over one million kids across this state,” said Rep. Pat Sullivan, D-Covington, who was part of the work group. “The reasons why local districts are actually using local levy money to pay teachers ... to provide basic education programs are because the state is not living up to its obligation.”

He said legislators could propose constitutional amendments if they wanted to. He also acknowledged that funding education programs is necessary, so that the Legislature would not need to debate the same issue in the future.

The original work group needed to know how much local funds paid for salaries of basic education teachers, and produced this bill to have more time to do so. The newest work group will also need to look at local levies and ways to create competitive market wages, since both are ingrained in teacher salaries and keeping teachers employed.

Summer Stinson is a board member for Washington’s Paramount Duty, an organization formed to advocate in the Legislature for full funding of education. Though she believes that political pressure from constituents will result in more action, she took issue with the original bill and has continued to oppose it through the legislative process.

“This really delays so many hard decisions that the Legislature is going to make next year. It’s truly waiting to the last minute to get it all done,” she said after the vote Thursday. “It isn’t inspiring leadership and it also leaves our kids in the same position they are this year for next year.”

(Izumi Hansen is a reporter with the WNPA Olympia News Bureau. This story is part of a series of news reports from the Washington State Legislature provided through a reporting internship sponsored by the Washington Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation. Contact reporter Izumi Hansen at hansenizumi@gmail.com.)

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