

The Gristle

You Had One Job, Ctd.

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YOU HAD ONE JOB: With fewer than 20 days left in their short legislative session, a nearly paralyzed state House and Senate in Olympia passed watered-down education funding plans on razor-thin margins divided along extremely partisan lines hours before a cutoff deadline that would have stalled the bills in their houses of origin. No other legislation can be introduced. At a town hall meeting in Lynden last week, representatives of the 42nd District crowed about the achievement—but all of them voted against the bills.

The short legislative session was charged with a single urgent task: Determine a way to meet the funding requirements for basic childhood education as required by the state Supreme Court's *McCleary* decision. Since August, the court has imposed fines of \$100,000 per day for lawmakers' failure to provide a funding plan for the state's public schools.

Senate Bill 6195 would establish an education-funding task force and calls for analysis of how school districts pay for teacher salaries. Currently, local school district levies shore up about a quarter of this burden—in school districts fortunate enough to pass their property tax levies, that is.

In 2012, the Washington State Supreme Court ruled that the state must give more money to public schools, and that equally and sufficiently funding education was the “paramount duty” of the state.

Lawmakers introduced more than 1,200 bills and other measures this session, in addition to nearly 2,500 measures carried over from 2015. So far this session, only one bill has passed both houses of the Legislature.

SB 6195 passed the senate by a vote of 26-23. The bill was modeled after House Bill 2633, which passed that chamber in January on a vote 64-34. The bills were reconciled, and approved by a second vote of the House last week, 66-31. They move on to the governor's desk for signature.

Critics called the final product "a plan to make a plan."

The reconciled bills are toothless, and do little more than continue to study a problem the dimensions of which are well understood. They kick the can of *McCleary* down the road to 2017 and are likely insufficient to end the Supreme Court sanctions. Despite their toothlessness, Sen. Doug Ericksen and Reps. Vincent Buys and Luanne Van Werven joined their Republican caucus to vote against the bills out of concern they might actually establish a timetable to fix the problem.

Van Werven—who ran for the Legislature on a promise to address education—told listeners in Lynden the problem of funding basic education needs to collect more data. Yes; that was the purpose of the bills she voted against.

Kevin Ranker, the 40th District Democrat who chairs the Senate capital budget committee, stormed about the Legislature's failure on this singular task from the floor of the senate.

"This bill is barely better than no bill," Ranker said. "It does not solve the problem. We had a bipartisan proposal that would have actually addressed this problem, but in the end neither side had the votes. We did not have the votes because it talked about revenue, it talked about the simple fact that to fix this problem—this \$3.5 billion dollar problem—we've got to actually fund it.

"Elected officials at all levels need two things to do the right thing, and you can't have one without the other," the senator advised. "You need political cover and you need political pressure.

"We need people to come into our hearing rooms and into our offices and tell us, 'Yes, that is a great idea, please do that and I am going to be there supporting you if you are willing to do that.' But I also need those same people to come back with a bat, screaming and telling me that they are going to hold my feet to the fire if I do not do what's right.

"At this point in time, we have the political cover," Ranker said. "The people of Washington state are telling us that we need to do our job. The Supreme Court is telling us we need to do our job, and we have that political pressure. We have people screaming, saying, 'It's been years—fully fund education!'

Ranker and his colleagues in the 40th District voted to pass the bills.

“I’ve been in this chamber for eight years, and we’ve been talking about this for eight years,” he said. “For eight years, we’ve had that political pressure building and we still haven’t done our jobs.”

Superintendent of Washington schools Randy Dorn announced last week he is putting together a task force of his own to study legal action to force the Legislature to meet the state *McCleary* obligation to pay for improving public schools.

The central focus of his proposed legal action would be to convince the state Supreme Court to rule on the legality of continuing to use local levies to supplement teacher and staff pay. The court has already ruled that paying for essential parts of education is a state duty, not a local one. But local districts continue to collect levies that pay for basic parts of public school operations.

A ruling could block the use of levies to cover basic costs, which would set a hard deadline for when schools would start running out of money. That, in turn, could force the Legislature to act, Dorn said.

Voters in Whatcom County strongly supported their school levies in a special election last month, all districts easily achieving the 60 percent threshold required for a property tax levy. Voters are doing their job and strongly supporting their schools. Is it too much to ask the Legislature to do the same?