

Election time, so get serious on education funding

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The state Supreme Court should up the ante on sanctions to get lawmakers' attention on the unfinished work complying with the McCleary ruling.

By [Seattle Times editorial board](#)

The Seattle Times

CANDIDATES filed to run for the jobs of lawmaker and governor last week. When they show up on your doorstep in coming months, be ready to grill them about the state's failure on its most important issue:

What are you going to do to fully fund education?

If candidates are incumbents, they would probably say that the Legislature has upped spending on the K-12 system by \$4.8 billion since 2012, to pay for schools' transportation, supplies, all-day kindergarten and class-size reduction for lower grades.

True. But that's just the start.

What's missing is a plan for the state to fully fund teachers' salaries. The Legislature does not fully pay the bill, so schools dip into local levy funds and pay up to one-third of personnel cost. That creates inequity among rich and poor districts and leaves schools under-resourced.

The state Supreme Court's McCleary ruling in 2012 demanded the Legislature fill the missing hole, estimated at \$3 billion per biennium — perhaps even more. When the Legislature didn't comply, the court held the state in contempt last year and issued \$100,000-a-day fines, now totaling about \$28 million.

Legislative leaders recently gave justices the same line they've been plying since January. Their report trumpets a promise to come up with a plan to fully pay educators salaries ... next year.

The “plan for a plan” approach was a bad idea during the legislative session, and now that it is put on paper, and put before the Supreme Court, it looks worse.

This is not just on the Legislature. Gov. Jay Inslee has been missing in action on solutions for the teacher compensation gap. He campaigned against one solution in 2012, and now, heading toward a re-election campaign, Inslee still hasn’t offered a cogent plan. His leading Republican challenger, Bill Bryant, also has not offered a solution.

The strongest voice, instead, has been state Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn. In response to the “plan for a plan,” Dorn said lawmakers were trying to “kick the can for another year.”

Dorn urged the Supreme Court to impose “even tougher sanctions, possibly against specific lawmakers, to coerce them once and for all to come up with the plan the Court ordered.”

Dorn is right. The Supreme Court needs to up the ante. The fines haven’t worked; the Legislature ignored them. If the court is truly going to shake the tree in Olympia, it could prohibit school from starting, as courts in other states have. Or it could take an eraser to the state tax code, as Justice Charles Johnson speculated in open court.

The Legislature actually has the sketches of a plan to comply, drawn up in 2015 by a bipartisan group of senators. But the plan died. Now that can has been kicked into 2017 — right up to the Legislature’s self-imposed deadline of a fix by the 2017-18 school year.

The reason lawmakers and Inslee haven’t reached a deal is that the solution is politically daunting. It probably includes a huge property-tax increase, and should include discussions about a new tax source, like capital-gains taxes. It also will likely require a statewide collective bargaining system for teachers, an idea that makes the teachers union — big supporters of Inslee and most Democrats — irate.

When candidates show up at your door, remind them that the Supreme Court mandated a constitutionally adequate education financing system in 2012.

Kindergartners that year are now getting ready for middle school.

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