

Local school levies can no longer fund basic education

That's already been decided by the state Supreme Court. Now, school chief Randy Dorn aims to force the change with a lawsuit he filed Tuesday.

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Randy Dorn, whose days as the state Superintendent of Public Instruction are dwindling because he is not seeking re-election, is also running out of patience.

Irked by the Legislature's dithering for four years over how to fully fund basic public education, as mandated by the Supreme Court's McCleary decision, the state's school chief filed a lawsuit Tuesday aimed at forcing lawmakers to make wholesale changes in how education is funded at the state and local level.

Dorn's lawsuit, which names seven of the state's largest school districts including those in Seattle, Spokane and Tacoma, calls for the districts to stop using local tax dollars to supplement state educational funding by Jan. 1.

"Despite the court's holding, the State and local school districts continue to rely on local levies to fund basic education, including supplemental pay for teachers," Dorn's claim reads.

While lawmakers have promised to get it all sorted out next year, Dorn's legal move in King County Superior Court could be just what's needed to ensure the Legislature does get the job done — and done in a timely manner.

Lawmakers have been walking on eggshells — or saying nothing — in regard to the court's ruling that says relying on local voter-approved levies to fund a major portion of school funding is unconstitutional. It's a big issue that has pocketbook implications to their constituents.

In Walla Walla, for example, about 20 percent of the local school district budget comes from the local levy.

Nearly all school districts in Washington rely on that much or more local funding to make the budget balance.

The school districts named, as well as other districts in the state, aren't happy with the lawsuit as it could put them in a precarious financial situation depending on the outcome. It has the potential to tear down the current system and force a total revamp.

Given that lawmakers seem to be in denial about the need to overhaul or do away with local levies, this lawsuit — even if Dorn does not prevail — could be enough to get them focused on doing the necessary work. This will mean tinkering with property tax rates at the state and local level.

None of this is pleasant, but it must be done.

As the Legislature moves forward in restructuring how Washington funds basic education, it must overhaul the local levy system as the linchpin to the process.

Editorials are the opinion of the Union-Bulletin's Editorial Board. The board is composed of Brian Hunt, Rick Eskil, James Blethen and Alasdair Stewart