

EDITORIALS JULY 23, 2016 7:12 PM

# Our Voice: Schools chief targets key funding issue



BY THE HERALD EDITORIAL BOARD

While state lawmakers have spent the last several years tip-toeing around the McCleary school-funding case, one elected official fed up with inaction has decided to charge through the political minefield.

Washington State School Superintendent Randy Dorn is suing seven of the state's largest school districts on the grounds they use local property tax money to pay school employees. This, his lawsuit contends, is illegal because those salaries should be covered in the state budget.

He is right.

Although Dorn's approach is drastic, it emphasizes what must be done to repair the state's broken education funding system.

Using local money to support teacher salaries has become standard for communities that can afford it — including those in the Tri-City area — because the state has failed for years to fulfill its constitutional obligation to amply fund basic education.

But this practice has created an unfair system where significantly more public school money is spent in wealthy communities compared to poor ones, which is intolerable.

Funding school employee salaries solely from the state budget is at the heart of fixing this inequity, and state lawmakers know it.

But finding the extra billions of dollars to make it happen is a political nightmare. Dorn is not running for re-election, so he is in a better position to push for unpopular choices other elected officials can't seem to make.

An underlying issue is that if the state has complete control of teacher pay, then contract talks would no longer take place between individual school districts and local chapters of the Washington Education Association. Negotiations would have to happen at the state level.

Many legislators owe their seats to this powerful union, so it is no wonder they have been avoiding the issue for as long as possible. Perhaps Dorn and the courts together can force lawmakers to worry more about our children's education and less about their re-elections.

Legislators have known since the 2012 Supreme Court's McCleary decision that they must come up with a new education funding plan by a 2018 deadline. Time is running out and Dorn has been frustrated with the stalling.

And he is not the only one.

The state Supreme Court has ordered a hearing on the issue Sept. 7 where state officials are expected to provide a progress report.

During the last legislative session, lawmakers approved a bill that established a task force to study teacher pay and make a state legislative plan for their salaries. The legislation was criticized as simply a “plan for a plan” and Dorn said lawmakers were just postponing any real decisions for another year.

In order to push lawmakers, he has decided to set an example and sue Spokane, Tacoma, Puyallup, Seattle, Vancouver, Bellevue and Everett school districts for using school levy money for employee salaries.

He told The News Tribune in Tacoma that the practice “enables the Legislature to evade its duty.”

He also said it was not a step he wanted to take, but that “the state got sued, they weren’t meeting their constitutional duty, and guess what, they haven’t really done anything about it.”

Officials with the school districts being sued said they understand Dorn’s point, but disagree with his approach and that defending against his lawsuit will take money away from teaching kids.

But it is hard to hold the state accountable when school districts continue to break the law, allowing the inequitable system to continue.

The state has ignored its obligation to amply fund education, and local communities have been allowed to make up the difference for too long.

Dorn is taking a radical step to push for a solution and we applaud his tenacity. He understands that school levy reform is at the heart of ensuring a fair K-12 education system in the state, and lawmakers need to face that fact — no matter how politically challenging it may be.



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