

# McCleary saga returns before court

By DAILY RECORD EDITORIAL BOARD  
September 8, 2016

The ongoing McCleary ruling drama has become part of the educational landscape in Washington state. It's still there, but people don't notice it as much.

The fact that the case is back before the Washington State Supreme Court this week qualifies as big news, but it remains hard to determine if any further court action will make a difference.

The court has previously ruled the state is not in compliance with the McCleary ruling requiring the state fully fund basic K-12 education costs. The court has fined the state \$100,000 a day since last year with the total now over \$36 million.

The catch is the state Legislature has to allocate the money to pay the fine. The money to pay the fine is not in any current state budgets. The Legislature, which generally bristles at the court's intrusion into public education funding, is not inclined to approve fining itself.

The interest in this week's hearing before the court is what will the court do next? It could determine the state is making progress toward McCleary and lift the fines. One issue is there is disagreement over when the state is supposed to come into compliance with McCleary, with the plaintiffs stating the deadline is the 2017 and the Legislature citing 2018.

While it is easy to lose track of this ongoing drama, it is of critical importance to all state residents. From the bottomline standpoint, people want to know what it means to "fully fund basic K-12 education costs." Does that mean more or different taxes? Does it mean spending money on education rather than some other state service? All these decisions have financial impacts.

On the educational side, people can question whether McCleary levels the playing field for education across school districts. It's not a news flash that wealthier districts are better able to support local schools. But should parents and students be able to expect a baseline of funding and quality regardless of location of the district?

The idea behind the public education system is to give every child in the state an adequate education and preparation to succeed in life. Over the decades discrepancies have arisen among school districts. The Legislature may be annoyed at the court, but it was its own inactions over the years that led to the point where the court felt compelled to take action.

The problem is this is not a cheap fix. The state fine of \$36 million and climbing may seem like a lot, but it is a meager amount compared to the projected \$3.5 billion it would cost to comply with McCleary. That takes into account the \$2.3 billion the state has already spent in recent years.

The court heard arguments Wednesday but did not take action.

If the court feels the state is not making adequate progress and acknowledges the fines are not going to be paid, the question will be: What next?

This continuing saga does not seem fated to end soon. We will all just have to watch to see what the next installment holds.