

World Editorial Board | McCleary angst

By World Editorial Board

Sept. 12, 2016, 9:57 a.m.

If the Washington Legislature finds the will and the means to keep its promises, this frustrating drama scripted by the McCleary decision actually may end well. Washington's children may have a constitutionally adequate and uniform system of public education with ample funding now and in the future.

At last week's hearing before the state Supreme Court, the state's counsel, Deputy Solicitor General Alan D. Copsey, promised the justices that lawmakers were doing the best they could, and that the coming 2017 legislative session is likely the last chance to resolve the issues before the drop-dead deadline in 2018. But, the issues to be resolved are the most daunting — how to provide adequate pay for teachers and staff across the state, how to lessen inequity between school districts of urban rich and rural poor, and to provide a stable means to pay for it all. It was clear from the justices' questions and the plaintiff's arguments that there is extreme doubt as to whether this is possible. The track record of the Legislature is not reassuring. This is something never achieved in 40 years of squabbling, not even close.

The court has been a motivator of decreasing effect. The McCleary order eventually brought significantly higher appropriations for education. A contempt citation and \$100,000-a-day fines brought no acceleration as elections neared, the fines being mostly a paper-shuffling exercise. Now plaintiffs and backers call for constitutionally questionable escalation, perhaps an order suspending all tax exemptions, or closing schools. Justices are, and should be, wary of exceeding their powers. They are the judicial branch. They cannot legislate, appropriate, budget or tax.

Observers and skeptics say the court appears to be looking for an escape. They should consider the consequences carefully, and pray the Legislature we elect in November takes past promises and constant duties seriously, and finishes the job.

This is the opinion of The Wenatchee World and its Editorial Board: Publisher Rufus Woods, Managing Editor Cal FitzSimmons and Editorial Page Editor Tracy Warner.