

Randy Dorn Calls Out Large School Districts For Fighting McCleary

The State Superintendent of Schools says wealthy school are enabling inequality.

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Seattle Weekly

Wed Oct 12th, 2016 1:30am



Last Thursday, the state Supreme Court announced it would continued to impose a \$100,000-a-day fine on the state legislature for its failure to comply with its *McCleary* decision, handed down four years ago.

The 2012 decision found that the state was not adequately funding basic education in the state, instead forcing local school districts to use local levies to cover services. According to State Superintendent of Schools Randy Dorn, this has created an education system of “haves” and “have-nots” in Washington. Dorn blasted the court’s ruling, saying that it was too weak to compel strong action from lawmakers.

We chatted with Dorn on Friday about what he thinks the court should do, and where he sees the issue going after his term ends at the end of the year.

Did you feel the court had an option on the table that could have compelled action by the legislature? Yeah, I think they could have put a real stake in the ground and said as of September 2018, you no longer can use local levies for basic education. That would have forced the legislature to act very quickly. Now we have a ruling that says, “We’re going to see what you do.” It’s still just a status-quo statement. I don’t see where they put any more leverage on the legislature; where they put any more pressure on the legislature than they did last year, when the legislature basically did nothing

except to have another group to help plan something. So my concern is that basically we have a quality education system for probably about half of our students, and the other half of our students are getting shortchanged.

What specifically are you seeing in the state between the haves and the have-nots? Everett this year is going to pay a veteran senior teacher \$103,000 for teaching school 180 days. And if you go out to Darrington, which is like an hour away, they're going to pay \$69,000. So there is a difference of \$34,000 of doing the same job. That means Everett is going to be able to pick people from smaller districts, where Darrington is probably going to end up getting rookie-type teachers, and they'll train them to be real good, and then they'll go to a higher-paying district, and I think that's shortchanging the Darrington kids.

Where is the resistance to change coming from? You have education associations like the School Board Association; then you have the Superintendent's group. You think they'd be fighting these inequities, but they don't want to make the big districts mad, and the big districts like the status quo. [As far as the legislature goes] people aren't talking about it because if you really talk about it and you have a plan, you're going to have to pay for it. And it's going to take new revenue to do it. And nobody wants to run on "I want to raise your taxes" when they are running for election, that's not the hottest thing to run on.

Along with more taxes, you say McCleary will require putting local levies into a state pot to pay for schools across the state. I could understand why big districts might balk at that idea. It's a tough sell. So if people don't want to push the hard button, what you want to say is inequities are OK and let the wealthy people move to the districts that have the money and your kids get an advantage. That's what we're saying. We have to have legislators say, look, we're going to keep the "have" districts where they are at, but we're going slow down their growth and catch people up, but it won't be totally equal. There will still be some leeway there, you're going to have to have that. And we're not even talking about when you got to pass a building bond. There are some districts that they can just pass a five-, 10-year levy for building. Then there are some poor districts with buildings 50, 60 years old, and people have tried to pass bonds five or six times and they can't do it.

Do you think a tax increase for education is realistic? Seven years ago we passed nine billion dollars for transportation, and a year ago last summer we passed \$16 billion for transportation, and we have \$60 billion on the ballot for the mass-transit bill [ST3]. Yet we have not seen a tax increase for education, and it's supposed to be the primary duty of the state. So don't tell me that you can't pass new revenue, because they've done it over the last seven years, twice, and we're talking about two-and-a-half billion a year [for education] and they passed \$25 billion [for roads].

You mentioned that the two people running for your office this year, Chris Reykdal and Erin Jones, have both pledged to be collaborative in finding solutions to school funding. Are they referring to your more confrontational

style? People have said I've been somewhat aggressive, overly aggressive, toxic and stuff. I'm not going to disagree. I'm pretty rough. I can be pretty point-blank. If I get under people's skin, my job is not to make adults happy. My job is to advocate for 1.1 million students—not just half of them but all of them. That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to figure out in my mind what's helpful and I'm going to do it.