McCleary fix? Senate GOP wants to change teacher pay, how schools are funded

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By Joseph O'Sullivan
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OLYMPIA — Senate Republicans Friday released a sweeping education-funding plan that would change both how state K-12 teachers are paid and how schools are funded.

The Republican plan would raise money by shifting how state and local property-tax levies are used to fund K-12 education, which would impact each district differently. In
addition to those changes, the state would add $1.4 billion per two-year budget cycle to supplement education funding.

Sen. John Braun, R-Centralia and chief GOP budget writer, said he intends to find $1.4 billion in the budget without raising taxes.

Among other things, the GOP proposal would get rid of the school-funding allocation model, would cap local property-tax levy rates, and would move Washington to a per-student model of school funding.

Both the changes to the levy system and the per-student allocation model are generally based on the school-funding system used by Massachusetts, according to Braun.

Under the per-student funding model, at least $12,500 would be allocated for each student, Braun said.

The proposal would boost beginning teacher pay to $45,000 annually and provide bonuses to top teachers. It would also bar teachers from going on strike.

The plan includes a referendum clause, so voters would vote on it.

“This is an enormous change in how we tax our citizens,” said Braun.

The GOP comes after Gov. Jay Inslee and Democrats in the Legislature recently released their proposals for funding education and complying with the state Supreme Court’s McCleary decision.

The 2012 ruling said the state was underfunding K-12 public schools in violation of the state constitution.

The final unfinished piece of McCleary is figuring how the state will pay for teacher and school-worker salaries.

The court ruled that the state must pay for teacher salaries — but school districts pick up a big part of the cost through local property-tax levies.

While lawmakers have poured billions of dollars into the K-12 system in recent years, the justices have not been satisfied with the rate of progress. The court in 2014 held the state in contempt for not making enough progress toward a full education funding plan.

The justices upped the ante in 2015, slapping the state with $100,000-per-day fines, which remain in place.

The GOP plan comes after Inslee in December released his own McCleary proposal.
The governor’s proposed 2017-19 state operating budget would add about $4.4 billion in revenue, most of it for education spending.

About $2.75 billion of that — most of it phased in the second year — would provide for teacher and school-worker salaries to comply with McCleary.

To pay for it, the governor proposed taxes on carbon emissions and capital gains, and increasing part of the state business-and-occupation tax. Inslee also called for rolling back some state tax exemptions.

Along with the new tax revenue, Inslee’s plan would slash local property taxes for schools on three-fourths of the state’s households and businesses. No school districts would see a property-tax increase.

Democrats in the Legislature released their own plan earlier this month. It calls for funding teacher salaries and boosting starting salaries, reducing class sizes, and giving relief to school districts that rely on local taxes to recruit and keep educators.

That proposal also lists a capital-gains tax and carbon pricing as potential sources of new revenue.

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