

A comparison of Republican and Democratic ideas of how to fix Washington's schools



In this file photo, Peyton Pierce, from left, Abby O'Brien, Jace Rose and Sophia Singleton sing along with teacher Kathe Fettig during their kindergarten class at McKenny Elementary in Olympia on Feb. 21, 2014. Tony Overman Staff photographer

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Washington lawmakers have a long way to go before they agree on a way to fix how the state pays for schools.

In recent days, both Republican and Democratic lawmakers have released their plans to comply with a court order to fully fund basic education by 2018.

And quickly it became clear that neither side was thrilled with what the other proposed.

Republicans criticized [the Democratic plan](#) last week as focusing too much on boosting salaries for teachers, rather than meeting the needs of the state's 1.1 million schoolchildren.

Democrats, meanwhile, said [the Republican plan](#) would raise property taxes for too many Washingtonians without putting enough new money into education.

Both sides are working to comply with the [state Supreme Court's 2012 McCleary ruling](#), in which the high court ruled the state was failing to fully fund public schools.

Fixing the problem will require the state to take on the full cost of paying teacher and school employee salaries, which the court said are a state responsibility and can't be paid using local school district property tax levies.

Lawmakers have committed to putting a plan in place by the time they adjourn in 2017, and [the high court has threatened to impose harsh sanctions](#) if they don't follow through.

Here are some of the key differences between what Republicans and Democrats have proposed so far.

Taxes

Republicans: The Republican plan would rely on what is commonly known as a property-tax swap, sometimes called a levy swap. [The proposal](#) would implement a new statewide property tax of \$1.80 per 1,000 in assessed value, raising about \$2 billion in revenue over the next two years.

At the same time, the GOP plan would eliminate local school district maintenance and operation levies, which would reduce property taxes by about \$2.4 billion statewide.

To ensure all schools receive a minimum funding level of \$12,500 per student, the Republican plan would provide about \$1.4 billion in additional state payments to school districts that aren't able to raise that much money through the statewide property tax.

GOP leaders say the extra money for local school districts can be found in the state budget without imposing new taxes. But they haven't indicated where they'd find the money.

Republicans would send their tax plan to voters for approval in November, leaving open the possibility that it could fail and require lawmakers to go back to the drawing board.

Democrats: Democratic lawmakers haven't put forth a specific proposal for how they would raise the money to pay for school fixes. They have said they will need about \$1.6 billion in new revenue over the next two years to comply with McCleary and take on the full cost of paying school employees.

Democrats have suggested the state should look at several potential sources of revenue, including a carbon tax, a capital gains tax, ending tax breaks, adjusting the statewide property tax and changing the state's business and occupation tax system.

The Democratic plan wouldn't require voter approval.

The price tag

Republicans: About \$5.3 billion over the next four years.

Democrats: About \$7.3 billion over the next four years.

Pay for teachers

Republicans: The GOP would increase what the state pays for a beginning teacher from \$35,700 per year to \$45,000 per year. While many beginning teachers already make more than what the state pays, because of school districts providing extra money to boost salaries, the state Supreme Court has ruled that the state needs to pick up the tab.

The Republican plan would provide bonuses of \$25,000 to \$50,000 for the state's top-performing teachers, as well as bonuses of \$12,500 to teachers and other employees working in large districts with high-poverty levels.

The GOP plan would eliminate state-paid bonuses for teachers who earn national board certification, though local districts could still provide that benefit if they choose.

Unlike the Democratic plan, the Republican plan would not allocate funding based on a school district's number of adult employees. Instead, the GOP plan would provide money based on the number of students at each school, with extra funding allocated for students with special needs.

The GOP plan would provide a housing allowance of up to \$10,000 for employees working in school districts where rents are especially high. But it wouldn't specify that teachers receive cost-of-living raises each year. Instead, the GOP plan would adjust how much it gives each district per pupil to offset inflation.

Democrats: The Democratic plan would increase the state's allocation for beginning teacher salaries to \$45,500 per year. Additionally, the Democratic plan would require the state to pay teachers who have been working three years a minimum of \$50,500.

Where the Democratic plan departs most from the GOP plan is this: It requires the state to pay an average of \$70,824 per teacher by the 2019-20 school year. Democrats would also ramp up what the state pays to hire school administrators to \$117,159, and allocate \$54,084 for each classified staff member during that time frame.

Teachers — as well as school classified staff and administrators — would receive cost-of-living increases to keep up with inflation. The state would be required to adjust pay rates every six years.

The Democratic plan would require that the state payments be adjusted based on cost-of-living differences from region to region, while ensuring that no district would see its

level of state funding reduced. The specifics of the regional pay plan would be decided this year as the Legislature develops its new two-year budget, Democratic leaders said.

Local school district levies

Republicans: The Republican plan would eliminate all local school-district property-tax levies in 2019, when the plan's new statewide property tax would be fully phased in.

By 2020, school districts could enact new local levies at a much lower rate, but only to pay for extras that aren't part of the state's program of basic education.

At that point, school districts would be able to enact local taxes that amount to up to 10 percent of what they receive from state and federal sources.

That's much less than [the 28 percent levy lid](#) most school districts have now. Some school districts have higher levy lids, which have been grandfathered in.

Additionally, school districts would only be allowed to collect that local levy money with approval from the state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Districts also would be required to document how they spend local, state and federal money, and whether that money is paying for basic education costs or enhancements.

Democrats: Democrats would gradually lower the amount school districts can raise through local property tax levies, but not by a huge amount.

Under the Democrats' plan, school districts' ability to raise taxes locally would be capped at 24 percent of the total amount of money they receive from state and federal sources.

The Democratic plan wouldn't impose restrictions on how school districts can spend their local levy money, but would instead require school districts to report how they are spending those dollars.

Professional development

Republicans: Don't specify requirements for state-funded training days, but allow local districts to offer them if they choose.

Democrats: Call for the state to phase in money to pay for 10 training days for teachers and other school employees by the 2022-23 school year.

Collective bargaining

Republicans: Would limit how much school districts can spend on salaries and benefits to 80 percent of their total operating budgets. Money spent on teacher performance bonuses and housing stipends wouldn't count toward the limit.

The GOP plan would forbid teachers to strike, while giving school districts the ability to fire teachers who continue to perform poorly after receiving extra training and mentoring.

School districts wouldn't be allowed to pay teachers simply for having advanced degrees, unless those degrees relate directly to the subjects they are teaching.

Democrats: Wouldn't impose new limits on teachers unions' right to bargain over their contracts with local school districts, outside of requiring that contracts provide at least the minimum salary levels provided in the Democratic plan.

Students with special needs

Republicans: The Republican plan would give school districts more money for some students, which GOP leaders say would help districts accommodate those students' individual needs.

Extra money would be provided for students who are homeless, impoverished or learning English as a second language. Additional funding would also follow special education students, students who are highly capable, and those enrolled in career-and-technical education courses.

Democrats: The Democratic plan would pay for districts to provide an extra two hours a week of remedial tutoring services at each school by increasing money for the state's Learning Assistance Program. The Democratic plan would add about two hours of instruction at each school for students who are working to learn English, while boosting instructional hours for highly capable students.

The Democratic proposal would pay for one new parent involvement coordinator or guidance counselor at each school in the state.

Class sizes

Republicans: The GOP plan would repeal Initiative 1351, the measure voters approved in 2014 to reduce class sizes in all grades.

Democrats: The Democratic plan would incorporate a few aspects of I-1351, such as lowering the average class size in career-and-technical education classes from 26.57 students to 19 students by Sept. 1, 2020. Classes at skills centers would be reduced from 22.76 students to 16 students in the same time frame.

Democrats said they would most likely suspend the rest of I-1351 for at least two more years.

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