Senate taking right approach on compliance with McCleary

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The Washington state Senate has taken quick — though not easy — action on education funding, the heavy-lift issue of the 2017 legislative session. The Senate's measure serves as a substantive move toward complying with the state Supreme Court's 2012 decision that the state must adequately fund K-12 schools, and it is also one that strongly aligns with public sentiment.

The Republican-controlled Senate — its one-vote majority comes courtesy of a Democrat who caucuses with the GOP — on Wednesday pushed through its proposal on a 25-24 vote. The Senate measure uses existing revenues, the crux of contention between Republicans and Democrats, to add at least $2 billion a year to current outlays and reduce the reliance on local school levies to fund education. It would ensure that each school district has a minimum of $12,500 per student, with more money available for special-needs or high-poverty student populations. Districts would retain limited authority to raise levies for extra programs. The proposal would be subject to a public referendum in November.

Under the Senate plan, beginning teacher pay would rise from $35,700 to $45,000, top teachers would get bonuses, and teachers and staff in areas with a high cost of living would get a housing allowance.

The court has set a deadline of Sept. 1, 2018, for the state to fully fund education; to get the education apparatus moving toward compliance, a plan must be put into place this year. The state has boosted spending by $4.6 billion since the ruling to a total of $18.2 billion in the current biennium, with money designated for transportation costs and class size reduction in early grades.

But unresolved is how the state intends to cover the full cost of adequate salaries for teachers and other school employees. Local property taxes are used in many districts to supplement what the state provides, but that leads to inequalities that affect high-poverty districts; property-tax rich jurisdictions in the Seattle area can raise more money with a lower rate than can areas like the Yakima Valley.

The state recognizes this disparity with a practice called levy equalization, which gives property-tax poor districts such as those in the Yakima Valley extra state money. But it doesn’t result in equity, and those dollars are in jeopardy when revenue gets tight; that happened during the recent national recession, when cutting levy equalization was viewed as a way to balance the state budget.
The Senate-approved plan would institute a statewide uniform rate of $1.80 per $1,000 of assessed property valuation. By and large, wealthier westside districts have levy rates below that figure and poorer Yakima Valley districts above; with higher property values on the westside, the districts still raise more money despite the lower rate.

For example, Seattle’s current rate of $1.28 per $1,000 is lower than that of every Yakima Valley district except for Mt. Adams, which serves large swaths of Yakama Nation land. Several Yakima County districts fall under the $1.80 level — Mt. Adams, Mabton, Sunnyside and Wapato, all of which serve high-poverty populations — but most Valley districts have higher rates.

The wealthier districts — and the legislators who represent them — are wary of the Senate proposal, which would find property owners in districts like Seattle paying more per year. Democrats have put forward a competing plan that would increase spending by $7 billion over the next four years and would require tax increases whose specifics were not spelled out.

The public is not embracing tax hikes as enthusiastically as are Democrats. A statewide Elway Poll taken in late December found an almost even split of those supporting a business tax increase as opposed to funding education out of existing revenues. While voters must be persuaded about the need for new taxes, they do agree about the focus on education. The Elway poll found respondents ranked education to be the state’s top priority, by 2-1 over the economy, which was second. In 2016, voters also returned to office by comfortable margins three Supreme Court justices who supported the McCleary ruling; their opponents based their campaigns in part on objections to aspects of the ruling.

A competing measure will be considered this week in the House, where Democrats hold a narrow majority and are likely to insist on some of their provisions. They will want more money for teacher salaries than in the Senate plan, which is already quite generous, and they will argue that the extra expenditures are needed to address a teacher shortage. The differing versions are part of the process.

But Senate Republicans, after some grumbling in the past about what some considered court overreach, have put forth a plan with many strengths: It puts the state on the road to funding a plan approved by the Legislature, which is the court’s goal; it helps ensure statewide equity by reducing reliance on local levies; it assures money to poorer districts in the way levy equalization does not while building on the equalization precedent; and it doesn’t place extra burden on the taxpayer.

As this lengthy debate focuses on the mechanics of funding education, legislators also must keep in mind that education is about outcomes. The provisions for equitable statewide funding, and the recognition that high-poverty districts may need extra resources, are steps toward assuring better outcomes for our students. That, in turn, will result in better outcomes for our entire state.
• The Seattle Times’ Education Lab feature contains detailed information about the school funding issue. Education Lab is available at yakimaherald.com on the right side of our home page.

• Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Bob Crider and Frank Purdy.