

On McCleary budget, lawmakers must remember fundamental education objectives

Originally published March 24, 2017 at 2:48 pm Updated March 24, 2017 at 2:59 pm



The Seattle Times

The Legislature's budget negotiations begin with a Senate Republican budget that is innovative but flawed.

By [Seattle Times editorial board](#)

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THIS should be the historic legislative session when lawmakers end the inequitable and unconstitutional way Washington pays for public schools. Fulfilling the Supreme Court's McCleary ruling to fully fund education while improving students' outcomes is clearly job No. 1.

One must not happen without the other. At Wednesday's Seattle Times LiveWire event, "Set up to fail: The cost of not funding K-12 education," speakers talked about the importance not just of money but also of how it is spent.

Nathan Gibbs-Bowling, Washington's 2016 Teacher of the Year, has taught in affluent schools and those with scarce resources. Schools with higher numbers of students in poverty, who are learning English or whose families are homeless need more resources, he said.

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This is the challenge facing lawmakers — not only to satisfy nine justices who have held the state in contempt, but also how to ensure all children have access to a robust education sensitive to their needs. Also, the money must come with guard rails to ensure it is spent how the Legislature intends. Put the children first.

While McCleary addresses the K-12 system, inequities outside school classrooms also come into play. The Legislature should provide more graduation coordinators, counselors and teacher time with students.

Lawmakers must shore up, not shortchange, early learning, which research shows boosts academic success and reduces children’s chances of entering the criminal-justice system.

The Republican-controlled Senate passed a \$43 billion two-year budget in the wee hours of Friday morning. While parts are innovative, some are flawed. Especially troubling was an early GOP proposal to end an entitlement for early learning for 3-year-olds. The final budget backed off. Its bare-bones budget also makes some other shortcuts that could threaten the well-being of vulnerable students.

The Senate’s education budget starts the negotiations with a \$1.8 billion new investment and provocative reforms that need more scrutiny. The plan finally ends the inequitable reliance on local levies to pay teachers. The new funding model — which increases property taxes for Seattle, Bellevue, Mercer Island and other high-property value districts while cutting property tax rates in rural areas — is complex and needs more examination.

The Senate budget displays discipline in making an extra payment to an underfunded state pension system, which will pay dividends later.

The budget spotlights the need for big changes in how the state negotiates collective bargaining agreements with public employees. Gov. Jay Inslee negotiates those deals in secret with labor unions that are his biggest political supporters. The Senate budget does not fund the agreements, setting up a negotiating position that should lead to necessary reforms.

The Senate budget also responds to the bipartisan agreement among Inslee, Democrats and Republicans that the state’s mental-health system needs more spending — and reform. The GOP mental health plan is transformative, moving the state away from antiquated and dysfunctional institutions and pushing treatment options into communities.

It also makes unjustified cuts in welfare programs, including cuts in child-care subsidies for low-income working parents, and retreats from efforts to fully fund the State Need grant for college kids from those same families.

The Democrats' plan, due next week, will probably look very different — and cost more. Some of the GOP's proposed cuts are non-starters, and that may help make the case for additional revenue.

Lawmakers must remember their paramount duty is adequate public education, not budget cuts or happy taxpayers.

Editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Donna Gordon Blankinship, Brier Dudley, Mark Higgins, Jonathan Martin, William K. Blethen (emeritus) and Robert C. Blethen (emeritus).