State Legislature to head into special session to solve budget stalemate

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Overtime yet again.

In what has become more or less a yearly tradition, state lawmakers will use a special legislative session to finish writing a budget for the seventh time in 10 years.

The culprit this go round? An extended debate over how to meet a Supreme Court order to fix the way the state pays for K-12 schools.
Without agreement on how much money is needed for schools, or where that money should come from, lawmakers will continue talks on making a compromise budget past the 105-day deadline for a regular session.

While the Legislature hasn’t officially adjourned for the regular session — that is planned for Sunday — Gov. Jay Inslee told reporters on Friday he plans to call an overtime session to begin at 10 a.m. Monday.

“This job cannot wait,” Inslee said, adding he was frustrated that lawmakers hadn’t started formal budget negotiations.

“Both sides are going to have to move fairly dramatically in order to reach an agreement here,” the Democratic governor said.

“I’m doing everything I can humanly imagine to do, short of waterboarding, to get these folks to negotiate.”

In the McCleary school-funding case, the state Supreme Court ruled Washington needs to pay for the full cost of teacher and school administrator salaries that are unconstitutionally supplemented right now by local levies.

The majority Democrat House and the GOP-led Senate have put out competing budget proposals on paying for public schools that sharply differ on a few key aspects.

The House plan would implement a host of new taxes, including one on capital gains and a tax increase on high-earning businesses. Democrats would raise about $3 billion in new revenue in the next two years.

Republicans in the Senate are instead vying for a new statewide property tax to help replace local levies, which would raise about $1.5 billion in the next two years.

Unlike the House Democratic plan, the Senate GOP proposal would eliminate local school-district property tax levies for one year, then allow districts to start raising local levies again at more modest levels starting in 2020.

The House Democrats’ proposal would reduce school districts’ local taxing authority slightly, but not by nearly as much as the Republican plan.

Progress toward finding a compromise has been sluggish.

Since the two parties have been bickering back-and-forth in recent weeks over the legitimacy of the dueling proposals, formal negotiations have yet to even begin.

Republicans say they can’t start budget negotiations because House Democrats won’t vote on billions in new taxes in their spending plan. Democrats say the Republican tax
plan also relies on nonexistent money because it relies on voter approval to be implemented.

On Friday, Republicans took the debate one step further: GOP Sen. Dino Rossi introduced the Democrat tax plan into the Senate for a vote with full intentions of voting it down.

Inslee dismissed the move as a political gambit.

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