Editorial: Superintendent’s plan offers a way forward

In Our View

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By The Herald Editorial Board

Chris Reykdal, state Superintendent of Public Instruction, talks to reporters, Wednesday in Olympia. Reykdal outlined his long-term plan for the ongoing issue of funding public education in Washington state and said lawmakers must expedite their work on satisfying the McCleary court mandate to put more money toward basic education. (Ted S. Warren/Associated Press)

In outlining a six-year transformation of Washington state’s K-12 public education system, state schools Superintendent Chris Reykdal may have helped lawmakers refocus efforts on their immediate goal to resolve the state Supreme Court mandate to amply fund basic education and end the state’s over-reliance on local school levies.

The sweeping restructuring that Reykdal, a former legislator himself, calls for should help lawmakers put in perspective the task ahead of them to meet that mandate and
prioritize what they must do before June 30, a deadline that risks at least a partial
government shutdown if a budget is not passed.

A day after the Legislature began its second special session, Reykdal met with media
Wednesday to announce a six-year plan that looks at what should happen after
resolving the state high court’s requirements in the McCleary case, the now decade-old
lawsuit that found the state was not meeting the state constitutional requirement to
amply fund education and meet its paramount duty.

McCleary can’t be the last word on education funding, Reykdal said; and we agree, not
if the state wants to avoid more McCleary-like lawsuits down the line and not if it wants
to give the state’s 1.1 million school children the education they deserve and that the
state’s economy and society need.

“Our state does not have a long-term strategic vision for our education system,” Reykdal
said at the news conference, which can be viewed on TVW at tinyurl.com/
ReykdalTVW. “We’ve become too content with the idea that our objective is to merely
fund the basics, and it has taken a court case just to get to that question of what is
basic.”

Among the reforms Reykdal calls for in the next six years:

Provide universal pre-school for all 3- and 4-year-olds.

Redesign grades K-8 by expanding the school day by 30 to 60 minutes and the school
year by 20 days, with attention paid to later school start times and longer lunches and
recesses; and offer classes in a second language.

Redesign grades 9-12 to focus graduation credits on proficiency in grades 9 and 10 and
career and college pathways in grades 11 and 12; and move the junior year exam to the
sophomore year to better inform the final two years of study.

Improve technology to better allow parents and students to track student progress.

Develop a new salary schedule for educators that rewards skills, growth and
development and National Board certification; phase in an additional nine teacher
development days; provide more mentoring for beginning teachers; and offer bonuses
that attract and retain high-quality teachers, specifically in high-poverty and struggling schools.

Focus state school reform dollars on schools with performance gaps and gaps among student populations.

Develop a funding allocation model that combines the current prototypical school formula with a per-student model that provides additional funding for low-income, bilingual and highly capable students.

None of that will come cheaply, but Washington state, as one of the nation’s leaders in technology, trade and aerospace, has the capacity to provide for it.

Reykdal, in his report, notes that the state currently invests just under 3 percent of its Gross Domestic Product into public education, while the national average is 3.6 percent. Increasing that investment by six-tenths of a percent amounts to about $4 billion more each year than the state currently spends.

That’s a tall order, even within six years. But the recommendations Reykdal outlines should be kept in mind while the Legislature focuses on a budget for the next two years and on what needs to be done to satisfy McCleary.

The Legislature has slowly been addressing those requirements, increasing annual spending by about $2 billion each year. But to meet McCleary and get out from under a state Supreme Court contempt citation — which, by the way, continues to add $100,000 a day in fines and now totals $65.4 million — Reykdal and others say another $2 billion annually is necessary, and the state must agree on a definition of what constitutes basic education and how educator salaries will be met without reliance on local school levies.

That’s enough to settle before June 30, which means lawmakers should leave aside for now issues related to school funding formulas, teacher salary schedules, bargaining, how much local school districts can seek in levies and the rest of Reykdal’s six-year plan.

McCleary’s $2 billion additional per year, as well as future investments, won’t be met without new revenue solutions by lawmakers. But between Senate Republicans and
House Democrats, Reykdal said, proposals have outlined as much as $5 billion to $7 billion in different sources.

Nor can lawmakers use McCleary as a cover to cut funding elsewhere in the budget, particularly where it affects the state’s other social service obligations, including those that help low-income families and address homelessness, medical and mental health issues. Otherwise, the Legislature confounds its own efforts by putting children at a disadvantage elsewhere in their lives. That’s robbing Peter to pay Peter.

The framers of the state constitution had the foresight to establish education as the state's paramount duty — and not its only one — because they knew it was a requirement in building a society and economy that would make the state an example and leader for the rest of the nation.

Understandably frustrated, others (cough, The Seattle Times, cough) have thrown up their hands and told lawmakers to give up on resolving McCleary, instead telling them to pass a basic budget and turn the matter over to the Supreme Court.

Reykdal’s predecessor, Randy Dorn, last year advised the court to shut down schools altogether until the Legislature could come to an agreement. Neither option is necessary nor helpful.

It’s not too late, but lawmakers must immediately end their refusal to give ground. Again, we concur with Reykdal, who said that lawmakers will have to abandon their most ideological stances — on the right and on the left — and reach an agreement that provides the additional $2 billion and identifies the state’s core responsibilities for basic education.

Time is not up, but the clock is ticking.