In Our View: Plan for the Future

Once Legislature settles school funding issue, it must develop long-term vision

The Columbian

Published: June 2, 2017, 6:03 AM

Eventually, we must presume, the Legislature will arrive at a budget agreement that fully funds public schools and allows state services to continue. With lawmakers in the second overtime of this year’s session, they have until the end of the month to finalize a spending plan and avoid a partial government shutdown.

Regardless of the final outcome — and aside from the hope that it passes muster with the state Supreme Court — it will be essential for lawmakers to keep an eye on the future of schools throughout Washington. Putting forth a haphazard plan that adheres to the court’s ruling in McCleary v. Washington but fails to include a long-term vision will only invite future McCleary-like lawsuits and only exacerbate the issues that have plagued the Legislature since that 2012 decision.

To that end, new state schools Superintendent Chris Reykdal has provided a blueprint. “Our state does not have a long-term strategic vision for our education system,” Reykdal said last week in unveiling a six-year plan for bolstering public education. “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.”

That query is at the heart of ongoing negotiations among a group of eight lawmakers tasked with meeting the McCleary mandate. With the state constitution declaring that public education is the “paramount duty” of the government, the Supreme Court ruled that local levies should be used only for extras such as sport uniforms, not basics such as teacher salaries. Part of the haggling in Olympia this year has been over the definition of “basic” and how much money is needed — decisions that should have been made five years ago.

As the Legislature works against the clock, Reykdal has presented long-range targets to remake public education and position Washington students of the future for success. Among his goals:

• Provide universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds.

• Expand the school day by 30 minutes to 60 minutes and extend the school year by 20 days for K-8 students. This would be accompanied by later school start times and longer lunches and recesses.

• Redesign high school curriculums to focus upon proficiency in grades 9-10 and upon career and college pathways for juniors and seniors.
• Adjust the salary schedule for educators to reward skills and growth; increase teacher development days; and provide more mentoring and bonuses, particularly at high-poverty schools.

There are additional aspects to Reykdal’s ambitious plan, and the details are worth exploring (http://tinyurl.com/lwgd8ne). Yet they also are too complex for lawmakers to consider at this point.

That brings up the importance of the negotiations taking place among a group of lawmakers that includes Sen. Ann Rivers, R-La Center, and Rep. Paul Harris, R-Vancouver. They are attempting to find compromise between a plan from the Republican-led Senate that would remake the state’s property-tax system, and a proposal from the Democrat-controlled House that would raise new revenue. Either way, lawmakers will need to scratch together billions of dollars a year to fully fund public schools.

Ideally, the Legislature will devise a sustainable, comprehensive plan that provides secure funding and meets the court’s mandate. Then they can get to the serious business of considering Reykdal’s proposals and creating an educational system for the future.