Meeting a deadline doesn’t mean Legislature solved its McCleary challenge.

By Seattle Times editorial board
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THE Washington Legislature barely averted a calamitous government shutdown Friday while enacting sweeping education finance reforms. But at what cost?

Many lawmakers conceded they voted on the last-minute $43.7 billion budget deal without knowing exactly what was in it. Educators and advocates had no chance to vet the backroom deal to inform their representatives on its pitfalls.

While some of the changes are welcome, such as putting all education employees into the state health plan, others such as the distribution of the additional tax burden are confusing. There is also plenty of concern about whether the reforms will cover all the costs of basic education — superintendents fear special education and the salaries of paraeducators won’t be fully covered.
Most important: Will this plan be ample enough to eliminate the inequity that prompted the state Supreme Court to declare the state’s K-12 funding system unconstitutional in 2012?

All of these are crucial questions that will be answered in the coming days as people finally are able to sift through the complex budget. The state Supreme Court, which retained jurisdiction, also will give it a good scrub.

If it falls short, the governor should be prepared to call lawmakers back to Olympia to fix its shortcomings. And the Supreme Court might just move that along.

The Legislature’s historic budget added $7.3 billion to state education funding over four years, but about $3 billion of that replaces locally collected tax levies for education. The net gain to school budgets statewide is probably closer to $4.3 billion. Neither the state schools chief nor the lawyer for the McCleary coalition that sued the state think that is even close to what is needed.

The Washington Supreme Court should be forceful in its response to this year’s budget. If it doesn’t finish the work called for in the court’s 2012 McCleary decision, the justices should demand better before the 2018 school year.

Among the calculations that need to be made:

• What exactly will the new approach to local levies mean for schools? In general, districts will get more in state property taxes and less from local property taxes, but the formulas are complex and depend on the value and number of local properties as well as student populations. Just how much of the tax increase will flow back to heavily taxed districts like Seattle, Bellevue and Lake Washington is unknown.

• How can districts use so-called local “enrichment” levies? Districts can use those to ask taxpayers for more money but only for nonbasic education costs.

• Making the first steps toward regional pay for teachers and other school employees is a good move. But how this new approach will play out in real time is still unknown.

• More money for the learning-assistance program for struggling elementary school students is another highlight. But does the state do enough for struggling high school students? How will the budget help increase high school graduation rates?

• The education plan did not address the problem of thousands of crucial classified staff — including food-service workers, bus drivers, maintenance staff — paid by local levies, and not by the state. The Supreme Court should demand legislators fix that.

The new state budget does answer the question of who will pay: Local property owners, especially in high value districts around the Puget Sound.
In a surprise move, negotiators included a 40 percent cut to business taxes for manufacturers. Many of those same businesses in rural areas are also getting a property-tax cut.

Are homeowners paying higher property taxes to fund a business tax cut?

The budget also taps the state reserve fund for $1.5 billion. Washington’s sustained economic growth will end eventually, and the state will need reserves during the lean times.

Lawmakers who contributed to the delayed solution — which took a regular session plus three overtime sessions — owe their constituents an apology. And they should be prepared to be called back to Olympia this fall to fix any shortcomings they created.

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).