Has Legislature solved McCleary? Not so fast

School officials are still crunching the numbers, but many Washington school administrators suggest the state still won’t be paying the full cost of basic education.

By Seattle Times editorial board
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In court papers filed last month, lawyers for Washington state argue the state has met its obligation to amply fund public schools in response to the Washington Supreme Court’s 2012 McCleary decision.

Not so fast.
The Supreme Court should be reticent to pronounce “mission accomplished” on school funding reform until school officials have time to fully analyze the new system the Legislature passed in a whirlwind more than a month ago.

Lawmakers have made progress toward more equitable education funding that passes constitutional muster, but their work is far from finished.

School administrators are still frantically crunching the numbers in preparation for the new school year. But, in interviews, many from across the state suggest the state still will not be paying the full cost of basic education in their districts. As they dig deep into the state budget, unpleasant surprises keep popping up.

Sometime soon, the Supreme Court will judge the Legislature’s proposed solution to its 2012 McCleary ruling on school funding and decide if the state is now in compliance with the Washington State Constitution. Article IX calls for ample funding for a uniform system of public schools for all children living in the state. The justices should put that final decision on hold for another year, until school districts truly understand the implications of the reforms and the two-year budget lawmakers cobbled together behind closed doors, without time for public analysis and input.

The state budget process was so brazenly secretive and rushed, no one could possibly know yet if it meets the requirements of the McCleary decision.

The plaintiff’s lawyers will argue that the Legislature did not meet those requirements. Either way, the justices must retain jurisdiction until the financial results are clear. No one wants to bring this case back to life in another decade.

District administrators across the state told this editorial board they are concerned they won’t have enough state money to pay for special education. For years, they have been using local levy dollars to fill in the gaps not covered by the state budget for this essential part of basic education. The court specifically wants the practice of using local levies to pay for basic education to stop.

With the new legislation, lawmakers say all basic education will be covered by the state and school districts won’t need to — or be allowed to — fill in the gaps with local levies.

Just saying no to local levies is not good enough.

In Spokane, school budget officials estimate state dollars will still be between $2 million and $4 million a year short for covering special education. In Yakima, the district expects to be more than $5 million short. Seattle officials expect a gap of more than $50 million.

Besides special education, districts have other concerns about the way the state has answered the McCleary ruling. Taxpayers and parents should be concerned as well.
In Yakima, for example, Superintendent Jack Irion wants to know why the Legislature decided an adjacent school district should get to pay its teachers 6 percent more than teachers are paid at Yakima schools. Irion is scrambling to figure out how to get his teachers the same pay as teachers will earn in more affluent West Valley, where home prices are somewhat higher.

Spokane Superintendent Shelley Redinger says the district has been paying the salaries of about 300 employees with local levy dollars. Redinger is unsure how the district will continue to pay some staff, including extra reading and math tutors who support basic education.

School districts can ask tax payers to pass levies — but only for enhancements, such as sports programs, not for basic education. Redinger and other superintendents are concerned about how that will work and how voters will respond the next time they are asked to pass a local levy. The future is uncertain.

The Supreme Court should ensure more than a million Washington schoolchildren really are getting the ample and uniform education they have been promised by the state Constitution, before letting go of jurisdiction over the McCleary decision.

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).