

Editorial: High court should continue scrutiny of McCleary education funding

The Washington Supreme Court should be encouraged by state lawmakers' forward progress funding public education. Justices should also stay on top of the Legislature.

Seattle Times Editorial

THE state Supreme Court told the Legislature to spend more on K-12 public education. Lawmakers certainly did that and other important things to improve the quality of public education.

That's the truthful message in the Legislature's annual report to the court required by its ruling in *McCleary v. State of Washington*, which found the state was failing to provide adequate funding for education.

Justices should note positively the roughly \$1 billion allocated for schools in the most recent state budget. Funding increases for higher education and early learning, while not part of the court's purview, underscore a commitment to better educate this state's young people.

But more money isn't the answer alone. Investments must target specific goals and be backed by education reforms and accountability for getting results.

Lawmakers need to link the money with the goals it is paying for. The public needs to understand the return on its investment.

State and local education officials have talked compellingly about improving Washington's 76 percent high-school graduation rate. The state with the highest on-time graduation rate is Iowa at 88 percent. Washington could get to 90 percent of its students moving successfully through high school within four years. First the public would have to see a clear link between funding, school policies and graduation outcomes.

Similar logic can be assigned to class sizes. The court ordered the Legislature to fund basic education goals outlined in two major education-reform laws. Average class sizes is one goal. The targets call for 17 students per class in kindergarten through third grade.

Lawmakers acknowledge they did not make enough progress toward the goal. The current state budget pays for average class sizes of 20 students only for high-poverty schools and only for kindergarten and first grades.

The court should be flexible on how quickly lawmakers reach court-ordered goals and be open to revisions. For example, debate in the Legislature over class sizes is causing a legitimate evolution on the subject. Reducing class sizes by merely a couple of students is extremely expensive and should be weighed against other needs.

Justices should press the Legislature for a long-term education-funding plan. Budget writers in the last session relied on one-time sweeps of some state accounts. That will not help them next time.

Remember: the court wants a legislative blueprint showing how the funding of public schools will be shifted from local school-district levies to the state general fund.

Additional money for school buses, supplies, books and other materials last session was progress. The state's high court can, and should, push for more.