

In Our View: Move Forward on McCleary

Legislature's had 4 years to think about school funding; it must prepare to act

By

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It is time to move forward. Finally, frustratingly, fitfully, it is time for the Legislature to move forward. And as lawmakers put this year's minor budget skirmish behind them, having belatedly agreed to supplemental funding, it is time to deal honestly and forthrightly will the enormous task facing them in the coming 12 months.



That is because next year's legislative session marks the deadline for dealing with the state Supreme Court ruling in *McCleary v. Washington*, a 2012 decision that said lawmakers had violated the state constitution by not providing adequate funding for basic K-12 education. While much has been said and written about school funding over the past four years, lawmakers somehow have managed to whistle and twiddle their thumbs while staring at the ceiling.

Among the issues that gets turned into a political talking point is a law requiring a four-year budget projection. This says that if the current two-year budget — which must be balanced — is extended to four years, it still must match expected revenue. "One of the major sticking points is that House Democrats continue to want to get rid of the four-year outlook," state Rep. Paul Harris, R-Vancouver, said recently when House Republicans from Clark County met with The Columbian's Editorial Board. "Not only do we need to look at balancing the budget for two years, but we need to look out four years. There are ramifications of things we do today — McCleary is one — that will have huge impacts."

Yes, there are. And Harris is a thoughtful and straight-forward legislator. But the comment, which was echoed by other local Republicans, reflects the dissonance that has marked the Legislature's inability to deal with McCleary. The four-year budget rule has little to do with school funding, other than funding that has been approved or has been forecast as a down payment. In fact, when the rule was passed in 2012, K-12 funding was exempted — even though lawmakers knew the bill would be coming due. As The Olympian wrote editorially, "That's what makes the four-year budget rule a sham."

The McCleary decision instructs the state to increase funding to cover basic education, instead of placing school districts in a position where local levies must provide for items such as teacher salaries. Lawmakers increased funding during the 2013 and 2015 sessions, but much work remains, and estimates are that another \$3 billion or more will be required before the court's 2018 deadline.

Rather than approach that issue this year, legislators opted to form a task force to examine exactly how much money is necessary for basic education. Essentially, they planned to make a plan — something that should have been undertaken starting in 2012.

Meanwhile, as Republicans have clung to the four-year budget rule, Democrats have been busy proposing revenue increases without bothering to bring tax bills up for a vote. Rep. Liz Pike, R-Camas, said: "If you're really sold on something and you want to build a budget around a tax increase, you ought to have the courage to actually vote for them."

So, there are reasons to take issue with the approach from both sides of the aisle, even as the deadline for meeting the McCleary mandate draws near. As a whole, the Legislature has spent the past four years paying too little attention to its duty of providing levy relief for local school districts and for local taxpayers. That has gone on long enough; it is time for lawmakers to move forward.

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