

Education advocates fear McCleary compromise won't go far enough

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The state Capitol building in Olympia, where legislators continue to work on a state budget and a schools-funding plan. (Greg Gilbert/The Seattle Times)

With Washington lawmakers nearing their usual deadline for writing a state budget, some K-12 advocates fear that a compromise on court-ordered school funding won't do enough for the state's schools.



By Joseph O'Sullivan

Seattle Times Olympia bureau

OLYMPIA — As a handful of state lawmakers toil away in closed-door talks over how to fulfill court-ordered school funding, some education advocates fear that an eventual compromise won't put enough money into the schools.

The state Supreme Court in its 2012 McCleary decision ruled that Washington violates its own constitution by underfunding K-12 schools.

Since then, lawmakers have poured billions of dollars into education to comply with McCleary, but delayed the hardest part until this year — figuring out how the state will cover teacher and other school-worker salaries.

School districts currently pay a big chunk of those costs with local property-tax dollars.

Now, just three weeks remain before an impasse over school funding and a new state operating budget could cause a state government shutdown July 1 when the current fiscal year ends.

The court says lawmakers must approve a school-funding plan before they adjourn this year.

Gov. Jay Inslee recently nudged lawmakers toward a compromise, effectively taking off the table both a capital-gains tax proposal favored by Democrats and a Republican property-tax plan.

Summer Stinson, of education-advocacy group Washington's Paramount Duty, lamented Inslee's move.

For Stinson, the governor's original K-12 plan — which included the capital-gains proposal, a price on carbon emissions and an increase in part of the state's business-and-occupation tax — came the closest of three major education-funding proposals to satisfying the McCleary ruling.

"But he's backed off that," she said.

Stinson said she fears lawmakers might resort to short-term action, such as dipping into budget reserves, to scrounge up money for education.

“It feels like they’re trying to do anything they can to make the problem smaller,” she said, adding later: “The only way we can do this is by raising enough ample, dependable, progressive taxation.”

Tom Ahearne, attorney for the plaintiffs in the McCleary case, also remains pessimistic.

As far as the proposals made in public, “I have not heard or seen anything that would comply with the order yet,” Ahearne said.

Legislators attempting to negotiate a deal that can pass the GOP-held Senate and Democratic-controlled House say they remain confident they’ll meet the court’s requirements.

“We continue to work hard, especially on K-12, but also on the budget,” said Sen. John Braun, R-Centralia and chief GOP budget writer.

Braun dismissed criticisms by Washington’s Paramount Duty as “too one-sided.”

“Anything less than the most funding they could get is not enough,” he said.

Even with shelving the more ambitious McCleary proposals, “there are a lot of revenue options out there,” said House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan, D-Covington.

Some education-policy changes not tied to McCleary likely will have to wait for future legislative sessions, Sullivan added. He pointed to state Schools Superintendent Chris Reykdal’s proposal to revamp education over several years.

Still, education-advocacy groups have long lists of what they want lawmakers to accomplish.

Rich Wood, spokesman for the Washington Education Association, the state’s largest teacher’s union, said the Legislature must tackle teacher pay, as well as smaller class sizes and more funding for transportation, technology and school support staff.

“It’s clear it needs to be a major investment in our kids’ education,” Wood said.

Libuse Binder, executive director of Stand for Children Washington, another advocacy group, ticked off a set of policies lawmakers should pursue as they work at a McCleary solution.

They include getting rid of school “staff mix” ratios, a formula at the center of how much state money each district receives; spending more on learning assistance and dual-credit programs; and building an early-warning system to help identify struggling students.

“Success would look like having all these implemented,” Binder said.

But Sen. Michael Baumgartner, R-Spokane, a frequent critic of McCleary and its implementation, is skeptical of demands by education-advocacy groups.

“McCleary essentially becomes a hammer for whatever any interest group wants to drive,” Baumgartner said.

Inslee spokeswoman Tara Lee said it’s too early to pass judgment on the McCleary efforts in Olympia.

“It’s too soon; we haven’t seen the final budget,” Lee said. “Negotiations are still happening.”

Joseph O’Sullivan: 360-236-8268 or josullivan@seattletimes.com. On Twitter @OlympiaJoe