

NEWS

In tight budget year, pressure builds to boost WA school funding

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Lawmakers have begun another hard conversation on what it may cost the state to amply fund basic education in public schools as required by Washington's constitution.

A state Senate panel on Wednesday held a hearing on bills that would collectively boost funding for special education, transportation and operations by \$2 billion in the next budget, and bring the state closer to covering its share of the tab in those three areas.

Superintendents of school districts on both sides of the Cascades voiced strong support, saying they are forced to use local levy dollars to pay for programs and services that are the state's financial responsibility.

"Without a solution that addresses the true costs of doing business now and in the future, schools will face growing financial pain," Ben Ferney, superintendent of Cheney Public Schools told the Senate Early Learning and K-12 Education Committee.

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction is already keeping close watch on the finances of several cash-strapped districts.

Special education emerged Wednesday as the area where the gap is largest between what districts receive from the state and what they pay for with local dollars. There were two bills heard, each of which would increase funding by roughly \$1.5 billion in the next budget.

Senate Majority Leader Jamie Pedersen, D-Seattle, and Senate Minority Leader John Braun, R-Centralia, are the co-sponsors of one. It calls out special education as a component of basic education that the state has a duty to fund.

"These are kids in our public schools who have disabilities of one sort or another, and state and federal law require our school districts to provide them services. So in what world can we say with a straight face that that is not basic education," Pedersen told the committee.

Pedersen emphasized to reporters earlier in the week that it is a statewide concern. It will be expensive. Those costs come at a time when lawmakers are trying to solve a budget shortfall estimated to be around \$12 billion spread over the next four fiscal years.

“How much we can actually fund this year, I’m not sure,” he said Tuesday. “But every school district that I have talked to tells me that a significant amount of their extra resources that ought to be available for enrichment is now going to pay for the needs of kids with disabilities.”

In 2012, in the landmark case known as McCleary, the state Supreme Court ruled the state was not meeting its constitutional obligation to provide ample funding for basic education. It took the state six years to comply.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Chris Reykdal said recently that the state has backslid on its investments since then and is at risk of getting sued again.

Pedersen agrees, especially in the arena of special education.

“We are in a position already where we should expect to be sued if we fail to provide the money to amply fund education for kids with disabilities,” Pedersen said.

Breaking it down

Special education funding is distributed in Washington using two key guidelines.

First, there is a cap on the percentage of a school district’s student population that can receive extra dollars for special education services.

Under current law, the state only provides additional funding for up to 16% of a district’s student population. In other words, if 20% of a district’s population requires special education services, the district cannot get additional money for the remaining 4%.

Second, the state distributes an amount of money for each student enrolled in a school plus additional dollars for each special education student under a formula known as the multiplier.

Both Senate Bill 5263, Pedersen’s bill, and Senate Bill 5307, sponsored by Sen. Lisa Wellman, D-Mercer Island, would remove the enrollment cap and increase the multiplier in order to drive more dollars to districts.

Pedersen's bill also simplifies the formula used by the state to determine how much will be provided per student.

Both bills also look to make it easier for districts to qualify for additional special education dollars through a safety net program run by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Neither proposal is cheap.

The bill from Pedersen and Braun carries a \$1.64 billion price tag for the next two-year budget, according to a fiscal analysis. That grows to \$1.93 billion in the 2027-29 biennium. Wellman's bill, which Reykdal requested, would cost a little less — \$1.55 billion in the next budget and \$1.83 billion in the 2027-29 period.

The other stuff

In addition to special education, materials, supplies and operating costs — called MSOC in state budget lingo — are also weighing on districts' finances. These costs, which cover non-employee-related expenses tied to a district's daily operations, have been on the rise.

Sen. T'wina Nobles, D-Fircrest, has authored Senate Bill 5192 to increase the state's allotment for this line item by \$300 million.

And on student transportation, Wellman introduced Senate Bill 5187 to come up with a new funding model that pays districts an amount that more accurately reflects mileage and ridership.

Wellman, who chairs the Early Learning and K-12 Education Committee, said when lawmakers worked on getting the state in compliance with McCleary, it was understood that special education, transportation and MSOC are part of basic education.

"This has got to be our number one responsibility. It is the paramount duty of the state," she said. "We intend to honor that duty."

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