



Navigating a post-McCleary classroom

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After six years and \$9.5 billion in new spending, the Washington State Supreme Court ruled last week that the state legislature was finally in compliance with a 2012 decision ordering it to adequately fund basic education. Preceding the court announcement was a report from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealing declining student academic performance in the same timeframe.

While some state officials advocate more targeted spending within the new basic education funding model, others say the best way to improve student achievement is by expanding parental options for how they want to educate their children.

In their final report, the high court concluded that with the additional \$1 billion in state spending for teacher salary increases as part of the 2018 supplemental budget, the legislature was no longer held in contempt and the court's jurisdiction in the matter was terminated. The extra funding augments a new education funding model approved by legislators during the 2017 legislative session that, among other things, revised the previous seniority-based teacher salary and added money to certain programs.

Although the original 2012 court order states that “pouring more money into an outmoded system will not succeed,” the new spending over the past six years has coincided with lower NEP test scores, while high school graduation rates have increased from 76 to 80 percent.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Chris Reykdal said in a statement that the court case “concerned a previous model of education funding. That model relied too heavily on local property taxes and not enough on state resources, and this is why the Supreme Court found it unconstitutional.”

Reykdal added that “while the Legislature ultimately resolved the court case by increasing state resources spent on K-12 education, it did not fundamentally change how to support students and educators or increase student achievement. Even with the shift from local to state funding, Washington still invests less than other states. We know where additional resources are needed: to support students with disabilities, close opportunity gaps, build and maintain adequate school facilities, improve pathways to graduation, and provide professional development for educators, among other items.”

Elected in 2016, Reykdal last year released Washington's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan to identify schools requiring assistance. The criteria includes math and reading scores, along with student absences. High schools will also be scored in part by graduation rates.

Washington currently spends an estimated \$10.7 billion annually on education, \$11,500 per student. The per-pupil spending is slightly below the national average (\$11,762), but half the amount spent by the highest state, New York (\$22,000 per student). Utah comes in last, at just under \$7,000 per student.

However, Washington Policy Center Vice President for Research Paul Guppy says what's needed now isn't more funding, but system overhaul. He cites a brief passage from the original McCleary decision that declares "fundamental reforms are needed for Washington to meet its constitutional obligation to its students," though it doesn't list any specifics.

"What was neglected (during the McCleary fix) was structural reform that would have improved outcomes for children," he said. "That's reflected in the flat or declining test scores that you're seeing."

The 2016 Freedom in the 50 States study published by the Cato Institute, the D.C.-based think tank, ranks Washington 32nd in the nation. Though it praises Washington's fiscal policy, it notes that "educational freedom is substandard, with very harsh private school and homeschool regulations."

Guppy adds that academic change will occur when the state "creates options within the system when the current school is not working for them" such as charter schools approved by Washington voters in 2012.

With 10 schools and 2,500 students, the fledgling alternative education program has faced intense opposition from Washington public teachers unions. In 2013, the the Washington Education Association (WEA) filed a lawsuit against the charter schools, ultimately resulting in a state 2015 supreme court decision declaring them unconstitutional because they lacked a locally-elected school board.

In response, a bipartisan effort in the state legislature during the 2016 session allowed charter schools to survive. A second lawsuit filed by WEA is awaiting another high court decision after a May 17 hearing. Questions of impartiality have been raised after State Supreme Court Justice Mary I. Yu spoke at a WEA rally.

However, Guppy says there's more options than just charter schools which Washington can provide and that are already available in other states. Wisconsin and the District of Columbia have student voucher programs, while Arizona offers a tax free education savings account.

Guppy said: "These are all mechanisms – like a menu of options – which a parent can choose for their child. Many parents choose nothing; they're happy with their local schools and therefore they don't have to use any of the options."

"Everytime we see competition is introduced in the system, then quality tends to improve," he added.