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Editorial: Don't lift the levy cap on school funding

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In the annals of state lawmaking, Washington's plan last year to implement court-mandated education-funding equity — the McCleary fix, in popular shorthand — was hardly a pillar of rock-solid, unambiguous legislation.

Its foundation may have been a bit wobbly, compromises made without fully analyzing all possible consequences and without addressing every concern. But the statute met its fundamental goal — to fund basic education in a fair and equitable manner across the state, in compliance with a state Supreme Court ruling — by distributing billions from statewide property taxes to the 295 school districts while also capping local levy rates to prevent districts from asking unlimited sums from

taxpayers via ballot measures.

Now, less than a year after the Legislature finally made good on a 40-year-effort to reach funding parity, some are trying to take a chisel — really, closer to a cudgel — and chip away at the McCleary compromise, which might have the consequence of toppling this imperfect, but acceptable, piece of legislation and putting Washington school districts back on its hamster wheel of inequality.

Whom do we have to thank — or blame — for this uncertainty early in the 2019 legislative session?

The usual suspects: richer, westside school districts (namely, Seattle, the state's largest), aided and abetted by Gov. Jay Inslee and state schools superintendent Chris Reykdal.

In a blatant disregard for the McCleary dictates, Seattle Public Schools officials placed on the Feb. 12 ballot an operations levy proposal that is nearly double the limit of \$1.50 per \$1,000 in assessed property value allowed under the new law. Both Inslee and Reykdal have given Seattle's proposal the thumb's up — Inslee going so far as to say in several interviews, including one with the Herald-Republic editorial board, that school districts should be allowed to ask for what their residents can afford.

Peeling back the levy cap before it's had a chance to settle in and take effect would self-sabotage the McCleary fix and return us to the days when richer districts in high-income areas such as Bainbridge Island, Issaquah, Bellevue and, yes, Seattle reap school funds from voters with the financial means to provide it. And the rural, lower income areas, such as every single district in the Yakima Valley? It would mark the return of struggling to get by on state funds and modest voter-approved levies. As State Sen. Christine Rolfes (D-Bainbridge Island) told The Seattle Times recently, "You end up with those gold-plated school districts and nobody else able to catch up."

Seattle school officials insist they aren't thumbing their noses at the McCleary law. Their spin is that they want to be ready with funds already approved if the Legislature this session decides to repeal the levy cap. Some see the move as the school district trying to force the Legislature's hand, a way to say, Hey, our voters passed this generous levy and you're denying us money waiting there for us.

The Legislature, however, should not yield. It needs to give the levy cap a chance to play itself out over several years and see whether it remains the proper vehicle to reduce inequity among rich and poor districts. Certainly, there is much we'd like to see lawmakers address regarding funding in the next three months. Last year's basic-education bill did not provide funding for special education – an oversight that demands immediate resolution.

Many districts are reporting budget shortfalls, and we do not doubt that is the case. Some of it may be because administrators chose to allot much of the newly-infused cash to greatly increase teacher salaries. But it is true that, even without higher teacher pay, many districts cannot afford support staff such as school nurses and custodians. Perhaps the Legislature can revisit and expand the definition of "essential basic education" in doling out education funds, which makes up half the state's \$45 billion biennial budget.

We are not opposed to a remolding of the McCleary fix — laws should never be forever set in stone — and lawmakers from both parties agree the special education shortfall must be solved. But to abandon the levy cap at this early juncture is grossly premature and once again would adversely affect low-income districts. No one, we suspect, would want to see the matter back in the courts for the sequel, "McCleary II: This Time We Mean It."

- Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Bob Crider and Sam McManis

