



LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

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321 16th Ave S, Seattle, WA 98144 — 906 Columbia St SW, Olympia, WA 98501 — 360-943-0608

It's all about education funding

But the outcome of 2017 session's focus affects everything else, every one of us

The Washington State Legislature convenes today for 2017 and it's hard to recall a session set up to be so focused on a single issue. This year is expected to be the culmination—hopefully—of a five-year debate/standoff on how to fully and equitably fund the state's public education system.

Since the 2012 *McCleary* decision by the Supreme Court, legislators have been mandated not only to spend billions more on school funding, but also to accept the state's responsibility to do so after years of gradually shifting costs to local school districts' property tax levies. The state constitution is clear: "It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste or sex." (Oooh... "caste." Sounds like it was written by a bunch of socialists!)

The Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions have a tremendous stake in the outcome of this debate. We represent the interests of more than 500,000 rank-and-file union members, many of whom with children in this system and all of whom pay for it. We represent the teachers and other school employees whose low wages are repeatedly cited in the *McCleary* decision. And importantly, we represent other public service workers at the state and local government levels—the people who keep our communities safe, care for the elderly and disabled, protect our children, maintain our roads and transportation system, instruct and serve students at state universities and colleges, and provide other essential services.

This latter group are the people who will be targeted by some lawmakers to pay much more than their fair share. Legislators who say "fund schools first" but oppose raising the revenue necessary to do so are essentially saying they want to fix the school funding problem by cutting other services, laying off more public employees, and freezing/cutting the pay of those who remain.

That would be an extraordinary injustice to public service employees and the rest of us who rely on them to keep us safe and healthy. For decades, state legislators have neglected their school

funding responsibility, shifted it to local property taxpayers, and deferred billions in revenue by passing more and more business tax breaks. It was lawmakers who created this crisis, but all of us bear the responsibility to fix it. All of us. Not just the other state and local government employees and the most vulnerable among us who rely on their services most.

Ultimately, the progressive solution must account for our regressive state tax system. Today, the poorest people in Washington pay the highest percentage of their income in taxes than any other state in the nation. That's a fact. But it's also a fact that the richest among us, and major corporations doing business in Washington, have disproportionate influence on state government. It's the people and businesses with the most power who should be paying more to fix this mess, and naturally, they don't want to. That's why it's taking so long to solve this problem.

Our 2017 Shared Prosperity Agenda

Although legislators' focus will be on education funding, there are plenty of other policy issues important to working families that will be discussed and debated. The WSLC's 2017 Shared Prosperity Agenda outlines many of those issues (see wslc.org for a printable copy). You'll be reading about those issues, and others important to WSLC-affiliated unions, all session long in this newsletter. And it's important that you do. Our issues get less and less media attention as radio, TV and newspapers continue to cut news staff. So stay tuned right here with our regular weekly updates and daily news posted at The Stand at TheStand.org. You can subscribe to get these via email at wslc.org.

Also, make sure you check in with your local union! Many have information online about legislative issues specific to your trade/profession, and newsletters you can receive to stay updated. The Washington Federation of State Employees, AFSCME Council 28 (wfse.org), for example, has Lobby Days scheduled all this week and plans to pack public hearings related to funding their collective bargaining agreements.

And finally, don't forget to sign up for the WSLC Legislative Reception and Lobbying Conference in Olympia on Feb. 2-3. Register online or get more info at wslc.org.