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In Our View

State gets an 'F' for its effort on education spending

By The Herald Editorial Board

Even after state lawmakers agreed to put the matter off until next year by calling for more study, the issue of education funding won't go away.

It's largely why legislators went into special session after the scheduled 60-day session expired without a supplemental budget agreement. House Democrats, citing the statewide shortage of teachers, particularly in math and science fields, are [pushing to increase the state's share of starting salaries](#) for teachers from \$35,700 to \$40,000. Republicans have mostly balked, insisting supplemental budgets aren't appropriate for such changes in policy and should wait until next year.

Next year, the question won't just be starting teacher salaries, but how to resolve the state Supreme Court's McCleary mandate, which requires the state find a way to break its reliance on local school levies to fund teacher salaries and the other requirements of basic education.

Regardless of whether starting teachers see a pay boost this session, a recent study by the [Rutgers Education Law Center](#) shows the state has significant work ahead of itself to make Washington a leader in public education.

The center's report, ["Is School Funding Fair?"](#) is a national report card using data up to the 2012-13 school year.

The marks for Washington state aren't good.

Just on the overall measure of funding level, Washington moved up a couple rungs over previous years but [only rose to 28th out of 50 states](#), spending \$8,694 per student. That's compared to a high of \$17,331 per student in Alaska and a low of \$5,746 in Idaho.

The state also ranked last in terms of the percentage of children enrolled in early education programs at 68 percent. Washington, South Dakota, Arizona and Utah, were criticized in the report for the

percentage of low-income children enrolled in early childhood education.

To be fair, the rankings for the 2012-13 school year don't take into account [the \\$1.3 billion in education spending](#) allocated by the Legislature last session or the improvements it made to its early childhood education system. The Legislature's own report estimates its spending per student is now about \$10,000, but even if the other states' spending remained unchanged, that level of funding would boost its ranking to 19th.

Better, but not good enough.

The Rutgers report also looked at the competitiveness of teacher salaries as compared to other professionals in the same labor market of similar age, education level and hours worked.

Again, not taking into account a modest 3 percent pay raise last year, the first since 2008, Washington state ranked fifth from the bottom. Teachers just starting their careers made about 28 percent less than their peers in other fields. By age 45, teachers made 34 percent less than other professionals of the same age and level of education.

Most alarming, the state's worst mark in the Rutgers report was for effort. In comparing education spending to each state's economic productivity, Washington again ranked fifth from the bottom. Despite a gross state product that ranked ninth in the nation in 2009 dollars, its level of spending earned it a grade of "F," better only than Colorado, North Dakota, Arizona and Hawaii, and then only slightly so.

For a state that is doing as well as it has following the recession and recognizing the vital part that education plays in fostering that economic growth, it's clear, whether lawmakers start this year or next, Washington must significantly increase its investment in education.

The preamble for [Article IX of the state constitution](#) makes it the "paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children."

When we have the means to provide that, an "F" for effort falls far too short.