

Students finally get fair share of state budget | Sen. Andy Hill

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Sen. Andy Hill — Image Credit: Courtesy Photo

By Sen. Andy Hill

As Washington's K-12 and university students begin this new academic year they are no longer captive to a public-education system struggling to meet basic needs and receiving a declining share of the state budget. Instead, the recent legislative session made education funding a priority for the first time in years and put us on course to finally honor this state's primary constitutional commitment to students and schools.

However, when this year's session convened there was no guarantee any of that would transpire.

In past sessions, lawmakers repeatedly short-changed education by adopting unsustainable budgets. This year a projected \$900 million budget deficit, coupled with the state Supreme Court's decision mandating new education dollars, convinced many that nothing more

could be done to grow early learning, restore K-12 funding or stop double-digit increases in college tuition.

But a new bipartisan makeup in the state Senate offered a unique chance to escape bad habits of the past – short-changing education, skyrocketing tuition, accounting gimmicks and unsustainable budgets – and try a new way to achieve better results.

The question remained, though: could this bipartisan coalition hold together? Could we demonstrate that common-sense bipartisan efforts could succeed?

Most thought it would never happen, I'm sad to say. Prevailing wisdom held that the environment was simply too hostile, that any true bipartisan efforts at reform and re-prioritization would surely fail. Even some of my closest friends said they couldn't imagine us achieving our goals.

Did we succeed? Absolutely. As the Senate's chief budget writer – with a rigorous focus on re-prioritizing spending, living within our means and long-term sustainability – I was able to lead the effort to profoundly change how the state plans and spends taxpayer dollars.

Working across the aisle, we fundamentally shifted Olympia's budgeting priorities. With additional revenue from a growing state economy and a disciplined approach, growth in spending was re-prioritized 4:1 for education over non-education completely reversing the 1:2 ratio of the past 30 years and a critical step toward re-balancing and resetting state budget practices.

Children entering public schools this fall will benefit from an additional \$1 billion for basic education. College students aren't seeing tuition increases for the first time in nearly 30 years. And students on waiting lists for high-demand computer science and engineering degrees will have more opportunities because of an additional \$18 million to expand enrollment slots.

Once our commitment to education was met, we crafted a balanced budget that has the state living within its means – meaning no new general taxes. In fact, more than \$600 million of temporary taxes expired on schedule, surprising cynics who simply didn't believe a tax could be just "temporary" in Olympia.

Finally, we created a budget that balances over four years, instead of the usual 24 months. After years of deficits, our new budget projects a \$1.3 billion surplus in 2017. That's quite a swing, and

demonstrates a new way of doing business in Olympia. Our creditors agreed: in July two rating agencies upgraded Washington's credit outlook from "negative" to "stable," citing our balanced budget as one reason for their increased confidence.

Was this truly a bipartisan budget? Unquestionably. With 89 percent of the votes cast in the Legislature favoring the new spending plan, it received more votes than any budget in the past 20 years – a stark contrast to the usual party-line voting, and proof that bipartisanship can actually work.

I'm not a career politician. I sought office three years ago because I believed there was a need for common sense in our budget process and for bipartisan solutions to our most difficult problems. While some people in politics become cynics – occasionally with good reason – I choose to be an optimist, refusing to believe something is impossible simply because someone says it can't be done. And I believe we have now led Olympia toward a new way of thinking – one more in line with the priorities of the people who sent us there and one which puts the state's future on a more secure path.

Sen. Andy Hill represents the 45th Legislative District in the Washington state Senate, which includes Sammamish, Duvall, Kirkland, Redmond and Woodinville. He serves as chairman of the Senate Ways and Means Committee. He was the chief budget writer, negotiator and sponsor of the final bipartisan state budget.

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