



Education of Washington's students should come before corporate welfare

Guest Opinion: Wednesday's hearing before the state Supreme Court could be an opportunity to get our state's act together on education.

By Robert Wood

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On Wednesday, the Washington State Supreme Court will face off with the Legislature over fully funding public education under the 2012 McCleary decision. As the state grapples with the issue of education funding, residents are left wondering how such a prosperous state -- home to a number of the world's most iconic and profitable companies and individuals — fails to fully fund even basic education for Washington's children.

Ultimately, the answer lies in our broken and inefficient state tax system. Our state tax system is the most regressive in the nation, according to the Institute on Taxation & Economic Policy, and yet billions of dollars of taxpayer money underwrite tax breaks and subsidies each year to wealthy corporations that do not need them. This is starving our education system of even the most basic funding.

The only way to properly fund education at all levels, from early learning to college, is to repair our tax system and create new revenue streams for education.

The effects of our existing tax system and the resulting chronic underinvestment in our education budget are quite clear. Year upon year, studies indicate our state ranks poorly in preparing our citizens for college. A quarter of adults from the ages of 18-24 lack a high school diploma. Low-income families face inadequate access to affordable, quality early learning, effectively barring parents from the workforce and perpetuating a cycle of poverty.

And even when low-income families are able to overcome these barriers and their children make it to college, we fail in our commitment to fully fund the State Need Grant Program to support them through college. And, at the same time as the percentage of high-school graduates who go to college has increased in the U.S. over the past two decades, the percentage in Washington has actually fallen in recent years. This situation is unacceptable.

Our tax system rewards corporations that threaten to desert our state by showering them with billions in taxpayer dollars for tax rebates and reductions. When Boeing threatened to move some operations out of Washington last year, the Legislature granted an extension of subsidies that ratchets their total to nearly \$12 billion, setting a new national record for tax giveaways.

Taxpayers spend about \$2.3 billion a year — 15 cents of every dollar in the state budget — on "corporate incentive" programs. Put another way, that's \$1,350 for every child and college student in Washington diverted away from their education each year.

The clear and moral choice for funding education is clear. With the McCleary decision, the Supreme Court has mandated basic education must be funded. We now have an important choice to make in response. We could fund the constitutional requirement to provide adequate funding for K-12 by diverting funding from transportation, health, social services and higher education, and impact the communities who rely on these services.

Alternatively, we could view McCleary as an opportunity to work together toward the best solution: Repair our tax system, end corporate welfare and create new revenue streams to fully fund our entire public education system from birth to graduation. It is time for us to stand up for education in Washington state.

Robert Wood is a professor of atmospheric sciences at the University of Washington, president of the UW chapter of the American Association of University Professors and a member of the Stand Up 4 Education coalition, which recently released the report "Protecting Washington's Future: Revenue solutions for fully funding education from birth to graduation."

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