

Editorial: Creativity needed to address school funding in Olympia

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For years, school districts have turned to property taxpayers in communities around Washington state to fund local education budgets. As the gaps between district needs and state funding have widened, the reliance on local property taxes for basic services has grown. What started as a way to fund “extras” like supplemental programs has grown into something much more.

It is a practice that the Washington Supreme Court noted in the McCleary decision, telling the Legislature it needed to stop relying so much on local funding to pay for basic education and contribute more to the system.

“Reliance on levy funding to finance basic education was unconstitutional 30 years ago ... and it is unconstitutional now,” the court wrote.

The Legislature contributed \$1 billion more to K-12 education last year, which didn’t pass muster with the court. The Supreme Court held the state in contempt in September for not producing an adequate funding plan. Education funding will continue to be a hot topic when lawmakers begin work again in January.

Gov. Jay Inslee avoided the issue of levy reform in his recent budget proposal, focusing on other measures to increase school funding instead, such as all-day kindergarten, class size reductions, transportation and full funding for materials, supplies and operating costs. He said he decided not to tackle levy equalization because he felt his proposals would help big and small school districts equally, and offer extra money to struggling districts in low-income areas. His proposal puts \$2.3 billion more into preschool through college education.

Previous attempts to change the levy system ran into roadblocks because some districts had special agreements grandfathered in, and some districts, like Seattle and Bellevue, have more taxing power than other places in the state.

In Ellensburg, the district’s M&O levy pays for 22 percent of the school district budget. This includes the full-day kindergarten program, the highly capable program, community use of school facilities, student transportation, buildings and grounds maintenance, staff development and training, supplies for music programs, equipment for physical education, library services and book replacement, and extra-curricular activities. The

money funds teacher and staff salaries. The situation is similar in other Kittitas County school districts.

Where does that leave local taxpayers? It's hard to say. M&O levies usually pass in Kittitas County, though Ellensburg has had a tough time passing a bond to improve Morgan Middle School. Taxpayers have raised concerns about the overall tax load during recent votes on the middle school, a new fire station and a flood control district. The latest Morgan proposal — on the ballot Feb. 10 — was designed to reduce the burden on local taxpayers. There are other school facility needs that will need to be addressed in the future.

The catch with state levy reform is most proposals have involved a state property tax to pay for education with the money being redistributed in a more equitable way. That won't be an easy bill to pass in Olympia.

The whole situation emphasizes the need for creative solutions to address education funding shortfalls. No one likes to talk about school district consolidation or the Educational Service District system, but both are ripe for discussion. It's time for everyone to give more thought to how we fund K-12 education.