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Guest: No more excuses, the state must spend more on public education

The Legislature's primary task is to come up with a plan to amply fund education. And that plan will likely be varied, including use of existing revenue, further cuts, adding revenue and closing tax loopholes.

By [Christine Rolfes](#)
Special to The Times

ANYONE following the run-up to the 2015 legislative session will likely tell you it will be the toughest in recent memory. But with historic challenges come historic opportunities.

Politically, the Legislature is divided, with Republicans controlling the state Senate and Democrats in control of the House and governor's office. Practically, the state is facing billions in budget shortfalls as we address a chronically underfunded education system.

In September, the state was found in contempt by the state Supreme Court for not submitting a plan to amply fund public schools, it is obligated to do under the state constitution.

And why didn't the Legislature submit a funding plan last year?

Aside from it being an election year when no one wanted to talk about a budget shortfall, there are significant ideological differences when it comes to funding education in Washington.

You may have heard slogans like "reforms before revenue" and "fund education first." They're catchy, but they aren't solutions.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle believe we should fund education first, we just disagree on how to tackle our other responsibilities, too. Do we fully fund our K-12 obligations by taking money from our four-year colleges? Do we shift money from mental-health care or the prison system? Do we look for more revenue, even though no one wants to pay more taxes? Tough decisions need to be made in order for Washington to improve our public schools, and the fixes will not fit neatly into a one-liner.

As lawmakers return to Olympia on Jan. 12, I believe we should arrive open to all options. While we can't throw money at the problem, we have the opportunity to target education funding where we know it will have the greatest impact in the short and long term, including recent steps the Legislature has taken to improve the quality of education.

Since 2009, we've implemented a new teacher and principal evaluation system, improved standards for math and science, enhanced high school graduation requirements to make sure

students are ready for college or career, and committed to ensuring all kids can read before the fourth grade. However, due to massive cuts to the K-12 system during the Great Recession, these reforms were never fully funded, much less given the time to take effect.

To make up for these devastating cuts, voters were asked to pick up the tab by raising taxes in their local school districts. However, this has led to even more disparity between the “have” and “have not” districts, since poorer districts cannot raise enough levy dollars to pay a competitive wage to teachers or make improvements to school buildings.

This discrepancy has long-term effects not only on student success but it also increases the cost of government services in the long run. A good education increases lifetime earning potential, as well as decreases the need for state social services and reduces incarceration rates. The absence of stable state funding for schools is at the heart of what we call the opportunity gap. Several possible fixes are being considered to address the over reliance on local levies, but until the state has stepped forward to pay for market-based salaries and the number of staff needed to teach in every existing classroom, the gap will only continue to widen.

Washington’s constitution says education is our paramount duty, which is why it is the Legislature’s primary task in 2015 to come up with a plan to amply fund it. And that plan will likely be varied and include using existing revenue, making further cuts, adding revenue and closing tax loopholes. The governor has put forward a number of additional revenue options, including closing some targeted loopholes, implementing new taxes on polluters and adding a capital-gains tax targeting Washington’s highest income earners. All of which should be on the table for debate this session.

This will be a lot of work for a 105-day session. It will be tough. We will each need to make compromises. But just as your boss expects you to do your job, you expect us to do ours. And I see that as a wonderful opportunity.

State Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge Island, joined the Senate in 2011, after serving in the House since 2007.