

# Buckle up: Levy shake-up needed to fix school funding

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**Bold leadership and willingness to compromise will be required on both sides of the legislative aisle.**

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*Special to The Times*

THERE'S much to celebrate this year for our public schools, including the largest K-12 funding increase in state history. For those of us in the Legislature working to satisfy the Supreme Court's McCleary decision on school funding, however, there's still one very important task to complete: eliminating our reliance on local levies to fund competitive salaries for teachers and staff.

It's clear current state base salaries fall short of actual labor costs to districts. And while districts like Bellevue and Issaquah can fill the gap in state funding with local levies, districts like Highline struggle to do so. The Supreme Court has declared that's inequitable and unconstitutional.

Fortunately, nonpartisan research has concluded that with additional funding from districts, "total salaries are competitive in most of the state, and the fringe benefits appear unusually generous." While this research was published in 2012, it seems the issue still isn't primarily about the size of the pot, but the way it's being collected. If that's the case, why not simply shift collection of those necessary levies back to the state? Could it be that simple?

In a word, no.

The state's "common schools" levy rate has been declining for many years now thanks to Initiative 747, which capped growth at less than property value growth and inflation. Restoring the levy rate to where it was the last time we fixed school funding (in 1983) —

\$3.60 per \$1,000 of assessed value — yields about \$1.4 billion per year. For comparison, we anticipate at least \$1.7 billion per year will be needed to replace what districts are currently spending to supplement state salaries.

The political challenge is determining how to make up funding we can't (or won't) take from restoring the state's common schools levy. Republicans would prefer a statewide revenue-neutral approach that would make up the difference by further limiting growth in non-education spending. Democrats would prefer to make up the difference with new revenue. The property-tax shift has the effect of raising taxes in urban areas and reducing them in rural parts of the state — thus many urban legislators (mostly Democrats) support using a capital-gains tax as part of the solution.

Like the budget negotiations earlier this year, bold leadership and a willingness to compromise will be required on both sides of the aisle. We can start by recognizing the great thinking done this session on how to provide local labor-market adjustments based on regional costs of living and to improve transparency in accounting.

Democrats must resist temptations to make this a growth-of-government debate, and should consider volatility of any new revenue source as well as constitutional challenges if it's not fairly apportioned and uniform. In turn, Republicans must resist temptations to punish areas with high property values, decimate social programs or continue unsustainable property-tax-growth policies.

We must address this last critical piece in education-funding reform to put the McCleary case to bed and do what's right for our kids — goals we all share. The question really is whether the Legislature has the political courage to agree on a bipartisan compromise without even more prescriptive measures from the state Supreme Court.

In our opinion, the most practical intervention may be simply providing a hard, but achievable, deadline.

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