
Published: Sunday, October 4, 2015, 12:01 a.m.
Guest commentary / K-12 education funding

This is what Legislature needs to hear on school funding

By Jared Kink

This Tuesday, state senators come to Everett as part of a statewide listening tour about education funding. As president of the Everett Education Association, I welcome them to our community on behalf of the roughly 6,000 teachers and school staff working in Snohomish County's public schools.

I'm concerned that the senators continue to advocate for doing less than what is required to provide our students with the high quality education as guaranteed by our state's constitution. This is what I hope our senators will hear:

Embrace the McCleary decision. Our children's education is our future. Instead of narrowly defining their obligations, legislators should do everything they can to provide the high quality education every child deserves.

Their remaining tasks are much more than levy reform and compensation. Meeting McCleary requires that lawmakers focus on fully funding all elements of basic education.

This means lowering class sizes for students in grades 4 through 12, so that each kid, regardless of ZIP code, has the opportunity for more individualized attention needed to master today's tough standards. They should start in high poverty schools and then expand to all schools and grade levels.

This includes capital funding for classrooms, and not reliance on portables. "Portable" implies temporary, but many of our trailers have been in place long past their useful life. Lack of efficient heating and cooling affects kids' abilities to pay attention and learn. Long walks to restrooms disrupt learning time.

The Legislature must fully fund the cost of providing school counselors, nurses, librarians, teaching assistants, custodians and other school staff. Teachers do a lot, but we can't do it all, and each of these positions is critical for ensuring that our students get the supports they need to succeed in school.

Some children have more and different needs and the state has a special responsibility for meeting them. Kids in special education, or who don't speak English at home, or who have other needs, including gifted students, should be provided for by our state.

And yes, the state must offer competitive professional pay to attract and keep great teachers. Everybody says they want the best teachers, but the state's current salary schedules hinder our ability

to attract and keep them. Senators should establish a significantly higher starting salary for all school staff, not just teachers. Provide for a comprehensive mentoring process and encourage other strategies to attract candidates into the field.

Don't take away local control of our school districts in the name of levy reform. Our communities vary and so do our needs beyond the state-defined basic education. Local levies provide for enhancements over basic education. The reason senate Republicans think we rely on levies too much now is because they haven't met their obligation to fully fund the state's responsibilities.

There have been plenty of opportunities for the Legislature to listen. In 2012, the state Supreme Court ruled that funding was inadequate. The court retained oversight of the case to ensure legislative compliance, but still had to impose \$100,000 a day in fines to spur action. Voters approved smaller class sizes in 2014. Earlier this year, parents in 65 communities across the state, including Snohomish County, stood with educators in one-day walk-outs to demand better funding, smaller classes and improved pay for school employees.

I have to wonder: Will they hear us now?

Jared Kink is President of the Everett Education Association.

© 2015 The Daily Herald Co., Everett, WA