

May 19, 2012 in **Opinion**

Editorial: State must come up with money for schools

With the race to become her successor well under way, Gov. Chris Gregoire keeps trying to disabuse the contestants of the shared notion that they can increase education funding without raising taxes.

Democrat Jay Inslee and Republican Rob McKenna say they can find the \$1 billion-plus it will take to bring state support for education up to the mark with existing revenues, or the increases that will be forthcoming if Washington's economy gets more lift from the national recovery. Both also expect to find savings by reforming the state's health care system.

Inslee has also mentioned terminating some tax breaks, but one he mentioned early on was killed by the Legislature. And with a two-thirds vote of lawmakers required to raise taxes – or remove tax exemptions – a minority can check any move to increase revenues.

That was Gregoire's dilemma, and she had little success finding a solution. She did push through new taxes on candy, pop, bottled water and some services in 2010, only to have them resoundingly repealed before they raised much of anything except voter anger.

But the state's failure to put more money into its schools has sorely offended another constituency, the Washington Supreme Court.

In January, the justices ruled the state has not adequately funded K-12 education, as required by the state constitution. Seven of the nine justices decided the court will retain jurisdiction in the case, more or less putting themselves in the back seat as the legislative and executive branches search for a funding formula that meets constitutional standards as they interpret them.

As attorney general, McKenna and office attorneys continue to work with the court and the plaintiffs to determine what that jurisdiction might look like. New briefs were filed this week.

But as governor, either he or Inslee is going to have to perfect a trick that eluded Gregoire: providing ample education funding without shorting many important social programs. Last-minute compromises helped avert the worst this year, but few accounting sleights-of-hand remain, and reserves are dangerously low.

Meanwhile, Gregoire is negotiating 2013-2015 contract terms with state workers. If there are health insurance or compensation concessions to be had, she, not McKenna or Inslee, will be doing the bargaining. Unless the Office of Financial Management or the lawmakers reject the terms, the new governor will have to live with Gregoire's deal.

The state must come up with more money. Local taxpayers, to their great credit, have consistently supported local levies necessitated by shortfalls in dollars from Olympia. The \$1 billion Gregoire says will restore a proper balance with local contributions sounds about right.

We look forward to hearing more from McKenna and Inslee about where they think that money can be had.