



Snohomish County opinion

## State must take care of all its students

By Carol Whitehead

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Last month, Washington Learns released its final report after a comprehensive 18-month study of Washington state early learning, K-12 and higher education. Although this report provides a good blueprint for addressing key education issues, the state still has a long way to go in terms of meeting our students' wide-ranging needs. Despite good intentions from the committee, the report contains no specific recommendations to resolve persistent special-education-funding shortfalls.

It is no secret that Washington state is already failing to fully fund education for its children. We rank 42nd in the nation for basic education funding, falling behind states including Alabama, Texas, West Virginia and Kentucky. We must ensure that all of our children get the best possible education. An urgent need for the governor and our legislators to address the problems in special-education funding is why an alliance of 12 school districts from across Washington has launched a historic lawsuit against the state. More than 70 additional Washington school districts formally support the School Districts' Alliance for Adequate Funding of Special Education's belief that the state has failed to fully fund special-education programs. Together, these two groups serve more than 60 percent of Washington's students who receive special services.

Courts have already determined special-education services are basic for qualifying students. When the state fails to fulfill its constitutional obligations to adequately fund special education, school districts are forced to make cuts and to reallocate levy dollars that should be used to fund programs for all students.

In many ways, our state's entire education system is on trial. The state's failure to fully fund in any area hurts students in all areas. We are committed to honoring the rights and dignity of each student.

Everett Public Schools serves more than 18,500 students; approximately 2,200 are in special-education programs. Like most Washington school districts, we have trimmed because of funding shortfalls. For 2006-07, we had to cut \$4.5 million. In the past seven years, Everett Public Schools has cut supplies and materials; support, custodial and maintenance staff; district and school administrators; student athletics and activities; professional training opportunities for teachers, and some academic and after-school programs for students. At the same time, we have backfilled the state's special-education-funding shortfall.

Everett is not alone. Collectively, in 2004-05, the 12 alliance districts now suing the state backfilled the state's special-education-funding obligation by \$32 million. Across the state, Washington's 296 school districts backfill the state's obligation by more than \$200 million each biennium. Every student in Washington is impacted by the state's failure to meet its constitutional obligation.

I am pleased Gov. Christine Gregoire wants to use some of the state's \$1.9 billion reserves for education. By taking a strong stance in her proposed budget, she can send a clear signal that the state will take care of all of its students.

In January, when our legislators convene for the 2007 session, they should do the right thing by taking on our state's school-funding crisis. It is time for the governor and the legislators to provide hope for the future in this state. The education of our state's children is a priority that can no longer be ignored.

*Dr. Carol Whitehead is the superintendent of Everett Public Schools, one of the 12 districts suing the state of Washington over special-education funding. The other districts are Bellingham, Bethel, Burlington-Edison, Federal Way, Issaquah, Lake Washington, Mercer Island, Northshore, Puyallup, Riverside and Spokane.*

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