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to the editor

OBSERVATIONS

Education union holds state hostage

With the help of the Washington state Supreme Court, the public education industry continues to hold the state hostage. Now, I'm not a lawyer, and it is likely most who are can't explain the antics of this court. Suffice it to say, our state constitution says something to the effect that the state's paramount duty is to provide "basic education." While no one seems to know exactly what basic education is, the judges have determined that we aren't adequately funding it.

The issue isn't really that the system isn't sucking up enough aggregate dollars. Between state funding, local levies and federal money, we're spending roughly \$12,600 per student per year, and that doesn't include the capital budgets for buildings and equipment. Assuming 25 or so kids per class, that's \$315,000 per year. Deduct \$80-100,000 for the teacher and we've either got a Donald Trump sized margin or one whale of a lot of overhead, waste or both.

So, the court is essentially taking issue with where the money is coming from. They interpret the constitution to require that all of the costs for basic education (apparently everything other than music and sports) should be paid from the state's general revenue, with only non-essential programs eligible for local levy funding.

About 40 years ago, the court said it was unfair that districts that were successful in passing levies could afford to have broader programs and attract better teachers with higher pay. The Legislature responded by limiting the money from levies to 10 percent of state and federal dollars. That obviously created some squeezes – certainly not possible to reduce salaries or expenses.



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The solution was numerous exemptions and periodic lifting of the "levy lid." Today it stands at 28 percent.

Somewhere between the Legislature and the courts, it has been estimated that the state needs some \$4 billion more per biennium to replace the levy reliance. That's ridiculous. To comply with the court edict, the Legislature merely needs to come up with new state revenue to off-set the levy money, then district-by-district place a cap on levies so that the schools get the same money they would have had and the tax payers don't get double-dipped.

This, however, is nothing more than an opportunity for the education lobby to land a windfall. Of course, they want to increase rather than replace dollars, and we all know what they would be spent on – salaries for members of the union for whom about half the legislators in Olympia are lap dogs. It is particularly galling that there hasn't even been a pretense that this budget-busting largesse would do anything to benefit students or improve the abysmal performance of our public schools.

We can argue about statistics, but in round numbers, 25 percent of Washington students don't graduate from high school. Of those who manage

to graduate, a dismal percentage are neither college nor workplace ready. Is this solely the fault of teachers and the education bureaucracy? Of course not. I believe much, if not most, of the blame lies with society. Absence of a father in the home, drugs and a culture that disparages academic achievement are more significant contributors.

But, that doesn't change the fact that simply throwing billions more dollars at a failing system is lunacy. If I were king, I'd spend about half that \$4 billion on a voucher system that would allow parents of modest means to send their children to schools that had to compete for their business. I'd let them take their vouchers wherever they chose – Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, secular. Frankly, a few more kids getting rapped on the knuckles by nuns or inculcated with a little morality training wouldn't be a bad thing for this country.

Despite remarkable success in other states, for purely political reasons the likelihood of a voucher system in Washington is about zero. Next best thing might be an expansion of the charter school program. While they lack the experience, systems and in some cases the accountability of the parochial schools, they offer similar benefits of parental involvement and dedication to student achievement.

Regardless, all that is wishful thinking so long as the party of the teachers' union rules in Olympia. And so long as the majority of our Supreme Court pay obeisance to the same master, better just accept the fact that more our your tax dollars are going to be poured into "education." The ball is in the Legislature's court, and taxpayers can only hope the elected have the strength to hold out for necessary reforms and common sense spending.