

Skagit Valley Herald

Budget cuts that short education cloud the future

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When the fuel that feeds the flame in a hot-air balloon starts to run out, ballast must be dumped to slow the rate of descent.

The hot air in Olympia this past week hasn't lifted much of anything. And we seem to be about out of ballast.

Having failed to fully eliminate the deficit in the current state budget, legislators moved on to address the estimated \$5 billion deficit in the 2011-13 biennial state budget.

Isn't there something left undone?

Oh, yes. That. The \$226 million shortfall remaining in the current budget will be addressed after the March revenue forecast. Unfortunately, there is no optimism that the forecast will rescue legislators from making more painful decisions with immediate and painful impact.

The pain is already being felt by the working poor, children's health programs, early childhood education, the disabled and student aid, to name a few. Unfortunately many of these programs are part of the small percentage of the state budget that is discretionary.

Still, a Legislature that has fallen way short of meeting its constitutional responsibility to

public education ripped another \$60 million out of K-12 funding in the current budget.

School districts across the state are bracing for another possible \$2 billion in cuts to K-12 proposed in Gov. Chris Gregoire's 2011-13 budget.

The cuts to education are a sad statement about our priorities. We simply cannot continue to use education as a credit card to borrow against our children's future.

We must reset our priorities and structure our revenue system to meet the needs that most of us can agree are paramount. There is little disagreement that education should be our most important responsibility.

Yet we have failed year after year to provide the resources that meet even the minimal definition of "basic education." The state Supreme Court has ordered the Legislature to produce a more meaningful definition of basic education, but so far it has all been talking with little to show for it.

The state's business leaders are also worried about the state of Washington's schools.

Representatives of a nationwide group called America's Edge — including Anacortes Shell refinery Manager Sue Krienen — presented a report to

legislators last Thursday with some startling statistics.

Their report said that 10,000 jobs went unfilled at the height of the recession due to a "skills gap" that "poses a serious threat to the state's long-term economic prospects."

The business group urged legislators to put more money into "high quality early learning programs" to better prepare children for their academic and personal lives.

Yet early learning programs are hugely underfunded by the state. And the governor's budget for the next biennium would eliminate money for all-day kindergarten, which has shown substantial returns where it has been tried, including in Anacortes.

The governor and the Legislature have been nipping at the margins to whittle down the state's deficit. Neither has come to terms with the need for a dramatic overhaul of the state budget process.

We agree with those who suggest that education must be fully funded first, with other priorities trailing in an order to be discussed and agreed upon by the people and their elected representatives.

This state cannot afford a "skills gap," let alone the reality gap that has brought us to this