

**Christine Rolfes**

**Describe the pressures you will face as a legislator to reinstate the COLA?**

The voters passed this policy through an initiative, and yet it has been suspended year after year. Last session, all of the Senate Democrats signed onto a bill supporting payment of the COLA, but it didn't get a hearing by the Senate Republican majority. I hope we can at least have the discussion this year, if not action.

The fact is, you can't have a school without teachers and staff, and since the court made it clear that teacher compensation is inseparable from fulfilling our constitutional obligations, we have to do something about it. That could be reinstating the COLA, addressing our compensation system or both but something must be done.

**Describe the pressures you will face as a legislator to suspend the COLA to pay for other education expenses.**

Continuing to suspend the COLA every year exacerbates the "opportunity gaps" or inequities that have become ingrained in Washington's public education system. The fact is that when the state doesn't pay the COLA, many districts step in to make up the gap so as not to lose teachers, and the funding comes from local levies. Thus, the compensation system becomes reliant on local levies, the taxes for which are unevenly supported around the state.

There are big discrepancies in teacher salaries across the state (you can compare salaries online at a site set up by the TNT) which impacts ability to recruit and retain qualified professionals. Because legislators know that they can punt this responsibility to the local levies and consider it to be "locally determined" whether teachers should get higher salaries, the COLA has for the past decade has either been the last thing funded, or more frequently, not funded.

**What, in your opinion, are the chances the COLA will be reinstated?**

As I say, we have to address teacher compensation in some way. But as far the politics go, we're operating in a divided Legislature which makes it impossible to predict.

**The governor's office projects a \$2 billion shortfall, despite rising revenue. Randy Dorn at OSPI thinks, with the class size initiative, the real cost could be at least \$4.5 billion and possibly closer to \$7 billion for the 2015-2017 budget. Given the projected budget shortfall, is it realistic for the Legislature to discuss teacher/school employee compensation in the upcoming session?**

Compensation is part of funding education – you cannot separate the two. The teacher in the classroom, the school nurse, the counselors, the custodians, are the education system. It is simply unconstitutional to continue to make local districts bear the burden of teacher salaries. It is also important to point out that the Governor's budget includes COLAs as well as increasing the state's share of salaries, and Dorn's numbers include addressing compensation. Those

numbers don't omit compensation, they reflect a difference of opinion regarding how to address it. And that is what the Legislature needs to figure out, not if but how.

**In your opinion, why is/isn't compensation a compelling issue at this time?**

It is compelling. The reason this is a difficult issue is because the discussion has been inappropriately centered on teacher pay raises. Addressing teacher compensation isn't really about raises, it is about the proportion the state pays of existing salaries. School districts have increasingly been relying on local levies to make up for what the state isn't paying, even though we are constitutionally obligated to do so. We need to lift the burden off local taxpayers and give all districts, low or high income, the ability to hire the best and the brightest.

**Finish this sentence, "The problem with how the State of Washington pays teachers and other school staff is..."**

...the state is not paying their fair share, creating systemic inequality. Some districts can afford to supplement what they get from the state more than others. That creates a situation where higher income districts can more easily attract the best teachers and lower income districts can't.

**If you support a compensation reset for school employees, how should the Legislature pay for it?**

As you can see, the compensation system is limping along and will only get worse if we don't make some changes.

As far as how the state pays for it, this is tied into how we will pay for everything else. All our problems have solutions, but they won't be found in oversimplified slogans. Real solutions would likely include a combination of things like closing tax loopholes, using existing revenue, making targeted cuts and finding new revenue – like taxing corporate polluters.

**If you don't support a compensation reset for school employees, please comment on why.**

I do. I also want to add something else -

Our current salary system isn't tied to performance in the classroom. A few years ago, the legislature reformed our teacher certification system so that in order to stay in the classroom teachers have to show they are positively impacting student learning. However, the salary system was never aligned to the new certification system. We need a market based salary system that is tied to their certification.