

EFFICIENT EDUCATION

Running Start program deserves support, even in tough economic times

When public education is streamlined in Washington state, virtually every resident benefits.

Taxpayers love it when high school students take college courses. They know it means fewer public dollars spent on teachers, courses and classrooms in high schools as well as in colleges. Keep the product moving swiftly through the pipeline.

Parents of students love efficiency gains in public education because they, too, save money. For example, about \$30 million in college tuition savings was realized last year as a result of the Running Start program, which allows high school students to take college courses.

Teachers love streamlined education because it allows advanced students to proceed rapidly in the system, rather than the students being held back, taking courses they no longer need and being taught lessons they already know.

Finally, students love fast-paced learning because they more quickly reach their goals and realize their dreams. There's nothing definite about the "12" in K-12 education. For some children, 12 is not enough; for others, it's too long to prepare for college.

That's why the Running Start program has been so successful. Unfortunately, the program is being threatened by its own success. As Howard Buck reported in Wednesday's *Columbian*, more than 1,300 students are taking Running Start courses at Clark College. Even before graduating from high school, they're taking English, business, economics, history and math courses at the college level.

Clark has added more than 100 class sections for Running Start. Those students compose about 10 percent of the college's enrollment.

This is one of the many great services that Clark College provides our community. That's the good news. But because of inadequate attention from the Legislature, a funding gap has

developed. The state pays each college 93 percent of the K-12 full-time equivalent rate for each Running Start student. That means Clark receives about \$4,570 per Running Start student, but when all costs are factored in, Clark is losing about \$3,300 per student, in all about \$3 million each year.

Reducing Running Start opportunities, even in tough economic times, would be unwise. Clark and other community colleges are expected to take a 6 percent hit in the overall budget because of the state's projected deficit, but because Running Start benefits so many stakeholders, it deserves to continue and even grow.

State Rep. Deb Wallace, D-Vancouver, is among legislators who are pursuing solutions to this problem. One solution would be to allow "dual-credit" students to take college classes in their high schools, rather than at the college sites. That would reduce transportation and other costs for students.

Another solution could be counting students as college full-time equivalents. That would not only increase revenue for colleges, it would also help colleges obtain funding for construction and expansion. "To the extent that Running Start fills unused capacity, it is an advantage," to Clark College, according to interim vice president of administrative services Phil Sheehan. "When you start having to add sections, then it starts eroding services. There's a point when it starts to hurt. It's difficult to find where that pain threshold is, but we're probably coming up against it."

Those solutions, though, cost money — untold millions of dollars — and one perspective tells us this is the worst time to increase any state funding. But just because we're in an economic slump doesn't mean all planning should be shut down. Another perspective tells us that now is a great time to plan for improving Running Start. As Wallace wisely suggests, "I just want to put in 'subject to future funding' at the least."