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opinion

Downturn is the right time to invest

By Lynn Huizing and Liane Morrison
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From the halls of the Capitol to the pages of this newspaper, it is increasingly clear that many opinion leaders and policymakers have concluded it's time to start cutting public education.

It isn't.

A deep recession is exactly the wrong time to cut funding for our schools, colleges and universities.

The future belongs to the states and nations that invest wisely in education — preschool through higher education — during these difficult times. Colorado will not find its way back to economic prosperity by slashing teachers and faculty, growing class sizes, shuttering community colleges or eliminating career technical (vocational) education opportunities.

Unfortunately, cutting education funding appears to be the easiest option now, with K-12 being an especially inviting target. Proponents of

cuts note the sheer size of the K-12 budget (43 percent of the General Fund budget) and the fact that the K-12 budget continues to grow. Some paint a picture of well-funded schools that have enjoyed constitutional protections and that are overdue for budget pain.

But the realities in classrooms around the state tell a very different story. While it is true that the portion of the budget spent on K-12 has increased significantly over the past 20 years, that increase hasn't been available for new services, programs or student support. Rather, it's mostly been spent backfilling disappearing property tax revenue (an estimated \$1.65 billion annually), and paying for hundreds of thousands of additional students.

When voters approved Amendment 23 in 2000, their intent was to restore budget cuts made to K-12 funding during the prior 10 years, and to ensure a minimum annual funding increase. As such, nine years of Amendment 23 mandatory increases have only served to restore funding to 1989 levels in real dollars. Now even these protections are endangered, as state leaders, including Gov. Bill Ritter, have signaled a willingness to reinterpret Amendment 23 in a way that will allow the state to reduce K-12 spending by hundreds of millions of dollars.

Perhaps other states can afford education cuts. Colorado can't. As demonstrated by the chart to the right, which compares Colorado's per pupil funding with the national average over the past 30 years, Amendment 23 didn't fuel excessive increases in school funding over the past decade.

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To the contrary, Colorado's increases have been so modest that we are falling ever farther behind our neighboring states and national average.

After decades of budget stress, the cuts to schools, colleges and universities resulting from the budget "savings" currently contemplated would be permanent and irreparable. There are no "do-overs" for the first-grader who couldn't get individual attention because of growing class sizes and diminishing support services. Likewise, doors of opportunity will be permanently closed to thousands of Coloradans, if cuts make higher education less available or affordable.

Colorado's impressive progress in P-20 (preschool through higher ed) education reform provides an additional reason to prevent education cuts. In their recent op-ed in this paper, Gov. Ritter and Lt. Gov. Barbara O'Brien rightly point to Colorado's progress in meaningful education reforms in higher P-20 standards, compensation of teachers and school innovation.

But those changes will wither without a long-term plan for substantial and sustainable investment.

We know Colorado's budget situation is dire and that no one wants to undermine reform efforts or to cut school funding. But regret won't help public school and higher education students achieve excellence while educational opportunities are irreversibly slipping away. What will help them are courageous leaders who will consider all budgetary options to minimize cuts to education and other critical services in the

short term.

And in the long term, Colorado's students, present and future, need an electorate that will embrace long-term budget solutions to ensure great futures for them, our economy, and our state.

We stand on the shoulders of generations who made tough choices so that we could attain educational and economic heights they could hardly have imagined. Now, in the midst of this economic crisis, it is time for us to do the same.

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