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## Editorial | Follow the speaker

Perzel sends right message to legislators.

Statesmanship is not found in abundance in Harrisburg, where legislators too often are more interested in getting their share of perks than in creating preschool and improving public education.

The misplaced priorities have put boosting children's education, equitable school funding, and property tax relief on the back burner for years.

So those rare moments of statesmanship are worth applauding. House Speaker John M. Perzel (R., Philadelphia), had his moment Monday.

Perzel raised this challenge to lawmakers of both political stripes, who are stuck in a stalemate over the budget and whether to take up Democratic Gov. Rendell's ambitious agenda:

"The real mandate for the elections of 2002 is for the Republicans and Democrats to work together to move Pennsylvania forward.

"We have the same agenda: Create a positive and better jobs climate, strengthen our schools and ensure the best quality of life in our communities. Anyone who thinks we are just fine and need to do anything about those issues should depart public service."

Imagine that. One of the most - if not the most - powerful Republicans in the state declares that doing little or nothing to improve Pennsylvania is unacceptable.

To that, Pennsylvanians should say, *amen*. In fact, most are.

A poll released this week by Quinnipiac University shows strong support - 56 percent support to 36 percent opposed - for the governor's commendable proposals to "raise state income taxes in order to lower property taxes and increase aid to education." (The remainder had no opinion.)

Sixty-four percent said the governor and the legislature shared blame for the state not having a completed budget more than a month into the current fiscal year.

So, Perzel was on solid ground in chastising his own party. Though he emphasized he also was talking about the Democrats and the governor, his words seemed particularly aimed toward Senate President Pro Tempore Robert C. Jubelirer (R., Blair), and Senate Majority Leader David "Chip" Brightbill (R. Lebanon).

Senators are the ones who now seem most resistant to difficult but badly needed education and property tax reforms, and to legalizing slot machines at race tracks to raise money for some of those reforms.

They are the ones who seem most content with a status quo that holds Pennsylvania back from making educational and economic gains.

This has not been the smoothest of budget processes. Rendell's notion of presenting the legislature with a two-part budget plan, in which his education proposals would be in part two, backfired on him when the House and Senate hurriedly passed part one last March - a \$21 billion bare-bones budget that did nothing to move the state forward on a host of issues.

Rendell then vetoed about \$4 billion in education subsidies in the budget, prompting the current stalemate.

Perzel has led a bipartisan House to consider Rendell's plan to improve public education, including preschool and the early grades, and deal with equitably funding schools paired with property tax reform.

Compromises undoubtedly will be made between what Rendell and the House wants. But at least they now seem to be working toward the same goals.

The General Assembly has now left Harrisburg for the summer. Legislators have earned the public's scorn for going on vacation before finishing their work.

The unfinished budget means the state irresponsibly will miss the first 2003-2004 basic subsidy payments to 501 school districts this month. That is likely to force them to take out tax-anticipation loans to avoid cash-flow problems until a budget is finally approved.

But it also means an even more chaotic beginning to the fast-approaching school year, with district administrators not being sure of how much funding they have to work with. That is inexcusable.

Completing the budget - including reforming property taxes and school funding, and paying for the governor's education initiatives - is urgent enough for the governor to call the legislature back to Harrisburg for a special session. The Quinnipiac poll suggests Pennsylvanians would back that kind of dramatic action.

Some in Harrisburg still question whether Rendell has the mandate to push through his agenda. Considering his overwhelming election victory last November, it's clear that taxpayers want to see his vision guide the state's future.

Even still, talking about mandates is the wrong way to frame these negotiations.

The question is whether Pennsylvania can afford to continue lagging behind most every other state in the nation in so many important areas.

It can't.

And neither can Pennsylvania afford to have leaders unwilling to acknowledge or take up those challenges.