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From The Morning Call

Quality of schools shouldn't depend on the ZIP code

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Pennsylvanians care deeply about their public schools — one has only to look at the way we have allowed property taxes to rise to pay for education and the way parents volunteer in booster clubs to support sports teams, drama clubs and enrichment activities in all academic areas. The recent very impressive roster of school board candidates for the Allentown School District, many of them parents with children currently enrolled, speaks to the depth of commitment ASD engenders.



But while individual communities in Pennsylvania care deeply about education within their borders, public schools stopped being a priority for Pennsylvania a long time ago. The state's share of funding has dropped dramatically over the past 20 years, leaving local communities to pick up the burden.

The result is that the children receive different qualities of education depending upon where they live. The result is a state that young people abandon, leaving us the second oldest population in the nation. The result is a state that lags economically behind its peers.

As our economy becomes increasingly global, and the success of a business in Erie is increasingly dependent on what happens to a supplier from Allentown, we must re-examine our commitment to public education. If the future professional lives of children in Altoona are linked to those of children in Bucks County, does it not make sense for all communities to look at a bigger picture?

Pennsylvania needs to redefine "community." As the real Pennsylvania — parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles of public school children — we need to increase our support for schools in the entire commonwealth. If all of our children have the resources they need to learn, then they will all do better. That performance is what will expand Pennsylvania's economy and truly make the commonwealth great.

Currently, elected officials in Harrisburg disagree about how to make this happen. Will communities benefit by moving away from a property tax system to a local income tax system? Should there be a statewide tax on education? Are people really willing to pay more for education? Questions such as these haunt our Legislature, and they should. But as our representatives struggle with how they should represent us, it is our duty to tell them what we favor. We need to stand up for what we believe in.

This issue must transcend the borders of political affiliation. As voters and taxpayers, we cannot allow this incredibly important issue to become a political tennis match. And, we must let the legislators who represent us know we will settle for nothing less than the dramatic, results-focused solution essential to the well being of our children, the quality of life and future of state.

What are those solutions? We favor supporting proven educational practices, such as small class size and early childhood education. We favor giving resources first to school districts that need them the most, and then expanding these resources to all school districts when the state can afford to do so. And most of all, we are willing to pay a little more in taxes to provide a good education to all of the children in Pennsylvania.

Each day, 1.8 million children attend public schools in Pennsylvania. Will some of them continue to suffer in overcrowded classrooms while others receive the best technology has to offer to help them with their studies? Will we continue to allow a student's zip code to determine the quality of his or her education? Or, will we give all our children the best education possible?

To meet others who care about this issue you may wish to join Good Schools Pennsylvania at a rally for public education in Harrisburg on June 26. Demonstrate that Pennsylvania supports all of Pennsylvania's children, no matter if they live in your town or county or whether they live clear on the other side of the state. For more information, you may wish to refer to the Good Schools Web site at www.goodschoolspa.org.

Our future depends not only on what is happening in our towns and cities, but also on what occurs in rural, urban and suburban communities across the state. As citizens of this great democratic nation, the responsibility to tell our legislators rests squarely on each of our shoulders; my shoulders and your shoulders, no one else's.

Pennsylvania must stand up. Do not let a child's ZIP code determine the quality of the schools.

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