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## Editorial | Tick, Tick, Tick

Time's a-wasting for Pa. school reforms

It's September, and 2,784 public schools in Pennsylvania's 501 districts are running without more than \$4 billion in state subsidies that are tied up in a partisan stalemate.

Gov. Rendell used his line-item veto power last March to strike basic-education funding. That wasn't because he wanted schools to get less money; it was because he wanted them to get much more.

He hasn't been successful so far.

Rendell campaigned for a visionary but costly plan that would use an income tax hike and revenues from new legalized gambling to pay for overdue education and property tax reforms.

Lawmakers tended to like the part about cutting local property taxes, whose upward spiral earns them no end of grief from voters. But they choked on the price tag for Rendell's bid to improve early childhood education through state-funded preschool and smaller class sizes.

The General Assembly kept trying to limit the deal to property tax relief paid for with "easy" revenues that would come from legalizing slot machines at race tracks - while rejecting the idea of raising any state taxes.

Here's the problem: The only sound way to end Pennsylvania's overreliance on the unfair, regressive property tax to pay for education while also curing huge resource inequalities among school districts *is* to raise state taxes.

Most of this year was wasted on legislators clinging to the fantasy that they could find a magic bullet.

Meanwhile, Rendell's tactical veto of the school aid package - meant to increase the heat on lawmakers - ended up boomeranging on many classrooms.

The state's scheduled Aug. 28 subsidy payment to schools was not made, except for nine districts that asked for an emergency advance. The next payment is due at the end of October.

Timothy Potts, director of the Pennsylvania School Reform network, predicts that more than 80 districts will be seriously hurting once October rolls around.

Pennsylvania citizens and schoolchildren need this governmental logjam to clear. But that is not a call for recalcitrant Republicans and squeamish Democrats to retreat to the status quo by offering only a token investment in school reform.

The status quo has been preserved out of political convenience for too long in Pennsylvania, resulting in hardship for many older taxpayers and towns, a broken school funding system, and too many failing schools.

Rendell and legislative leaders must work out a compromise that does more than just offer property tax rebates. It

must repair unequal funding and make a substantial down payment on the investments in early education that the governor seeks.

The alternative is ugly, for students and families - and for politicians.

"If the second state payment to school districts due on Oct. 30 is missed, who looks good?" asks Steve Miskin, spokesman for House Majority Leader Sam Smith (R., Jefferson). "It sure as hell is not us. I don't think we're wrong and while the governor believes in what he's doing, he won't look good either... unless you want to do it for partisan reasons, and then you're screwing 1.8 million public schoolkids."

You have to like his candor.

Rendell says he's willing to trim back his call to raise the state's flat income tax rate of 2.8 percent (the lowest in the nation) to 3.75 percent. Republicans have got to stop dreaming that they can give their political base the property tax relief it demands purely through slots dollars, and call it a day.

First off, the estimate of \$800 million-plus a year in revenues is probably a pipe dream. Too much competition: Many other states have turned to legalized gambling to resolve their budget woes.

Plus, the Republican plan for distributing the tax relief is slanted to giving richer districts the bigger breaks. So it does little for equity.

Either the tax relief part of the package needs to be revised, or a separate fund to give rural and urban schools the additional aid they deserve would have to be created. And the early childhood reforms come on top of that.

One possible starting point for compromise is Smith's idea to target the early childhood reforms first to low-income and underachieving schools.

It should be massaged to make sure preschool subsidies are available to families with incomes up to 250 percent of poverty. The \$50 million funding he suggests won't get the job done.

Rendell's latest estimate of what it would take to get his early childhood program under way in a meaningful way - \$360 million - is more realistic.

So are you talking yet, legislators? Please start. Children need something done soon.