
Our Views

Still no school funds

Well, here we are in mid-October, and still the state has not passed an education funding package.

The state missed its first subsidy payment to districts. That wasn't much of a problem for most school systems. They had enough cash to get by while the General Assembly and Gov. Ed Rendell haggled.

But now some districts are getting nervous. Some school board members are ready to cut and run. Sure, tax reform would have been nice, they say — shifting some of the burden away from real estate levies that have created such a hue and cry among older citizens on fixed incomes. But they've got textbooks to buy, classrooms to heat, teachers to pay.

If the governor and state lawmakers can't act like adults, then just forget it. The status quo stinks, but at least it allows the schools to stay open.

The governor and legislators are feeling the pressure, too. They've ramped up their PR campaigns. Both sides sound defensive — even as they go on the offensive. That's because they know they're failing us. They're putting politics ahead of progress. Both sides desperately think they need a "win."

The Republican-controlled General Assembly — particularly the Senate — feels it needs to face down the Democratic governor and deny him a major accomplishment. Besides, giving in would essentially be an admission that lawmakers' position on public schools for the last decade (that free-spending school boards are to blame for sky-high property tax hikes) was a cop-out — scapegoating at its most cynical.

And Rendell, whose tenure 10 months into office has been tepid at best, needs a big resume-builder.

But what a travesty it would be if we'd come this far — forced our teachers to penny-pinch while lavishly paid and perked lawmakers dithered — and didn't come out with a "win" for citizens. Remember the citizens?

Sure we do, say **GOP** legislators. That's why we want to increase state funding for schools at a time when most other states are either cutting or holding the line. And we want to do it without raising state taxes through the roof.

But it's not enough, counters Rendell. It's not enough to just throw a few more percentage points at the schools and hope that shuts people up long enough to get re-elected. We need to do something dramatic to actually improve our schools.

This is not the time, with the economy down and many out of work, for major new initiatives, shoot back lawmakers. We just can't afford it.

But the truth is, we can't afford *not* to do something.

Have legislators seen the most recent school test scores?

They're nothing to brag about. And as the federal No Child Left Behind Act gradually increases expectations, many or most of our schools will be designated as failures. Granted, NCLB is an unrealistic mandate. But it's still the law. We have to deal with it.

And the best way to do that is by boosting early childhood education programs, as Rendell has proposed and is demanding as part of any compromise on tax reform.

Give in on this one, lawmakers. It's the right thing to do. Haggle out some of the details, give districts some flexibility in how they institute these programs, but allow them to move forward. Time is wasting, and the graduating class that NCLB expects to be 100 percent proficient in reading and math by 2014 is already in second grade.

In return, the governor will have to accept a less-than-perfect tax reform plan.

The plan passed by the state House is far from stellar. It's really just a warmed-over version of Act 50, but at least it would shift some of the school burden to income rather than the unfair real estate tax. Funding for these programs would also come from slot machines, the specifics of which are still being debated, and possibly a sales tax hike along with a grab bag of sin taxes and user fees.

We're not crazy about the House plan. It doesn't do enough to help growing school districts like those in York County — and we're hoping state Rep. Steve Nickol, R-Hanover, can get a measure addressing funding disparities included in the package.

But the Senate leadership appears unwilling to budge. Both sides really should compromise. But until there's a package on the table that includes both tax reform and education reform, the governor shouldn't budge either.