



Posted on Thu, Oct. 23, 2003

Editorial | Tax Reform in Pa.

Progress, at least

Leaders of Pennsylvania's Senate are still balking at doing anything to upset the educational status quo.

After all, why would they? Sure, Pennsylvania is being abandoned in alarming numbers by its college graduates. Sure, its school finance system places a crushing property tax burden on older citizens and communities, while cheating students in many school districts. Sure, the state has one of America's weakest preschool systems.

But, hey, why worry?

That's the settled opinion of state Senate President Pro Tempore Robert Jubelirer (R., Blair) and Senate Majority Leader David "Chip" Brightbill (R., Lebanon) as they work hard to foil Gov. Rendell's education reform and tax reduction plans.

It's not just a Republican/Democrat thing. The Republican-led House of Representatives took an important step Tuesday. A bill it passed would invest in the future of public education, set the table for property tax relief and restore some hurtful budget cuts made during last spring's budget war.

The bill pushed to a 104-to-95 vote by House Speaker John Perzel (R., Phila.) and Majority Leader Sam Smith (R., Jefferson) is imperfect. Not because, as Jubelirer and Brightbill suggest, it does too much. It still does too little for education equity and preschool education, and it spends way too much money on the incumbent-protection grants known as "walking around money."

Still, in a taxphobic capital, it took plenty of courage for the House majority to vote to increase the lowest flat income tax in the nation from 2.8 percent to 3.25 percent on Jan. 1. (The rate would roll back to 3.1 percent on July 1.) This would raise \$1 billion to close the state's lingering budget deficit, while providing at least a downpayment on Rendell's smart plans to bolster preschool, expand full-day kindergarten, reduce K-3 class sizes and improve teaching recruitment.

The amount earmarked for those reforms - \$250 million - is less than half what Rendell originally sought for the first year of a four-year reform agenda, before he got a taste of grim Harrisburg partisan reality.

Amazingly, the House put almost as much - \$200 million - into the pot for WAMS (on top of the usual \$100 million). This was done to secure votes for the tax hike. That's the reality. It's also true that some WAM grants go to worthy recipients - neighborhood groups, nonprofits and the like. But they are handed out on the basis of politics, not merit or need, with no accountability for results.

If some grown-ups in the legislature would cut down sharply on the WAMs and forego the cosmetic rollback of the tax rate, money would be available to propel the education reforms in a big way.

But let's not denigrate the House for getting partway there. The real problem is the Senate, where the leadership still seems to want to submarine the whole platform on which Ed Rendell ran and won a smashing victory in last

year's governor's race.

An end result that splits the difference between the House bill and the Senate leadership's do-nothing stance would be window dressing, not education reform. Rendell should not buy into that.

Still floating in limbo is the other, necessary piece of this package - relief for property tax bills. This smallish income tax hike doesn't do much of that. The big property tax relief program is now hinged on approval of slot machines at race tracks, another proposal that produces all manner of House/Senate squabbling.

The state Senate needs to improve what the House has wrought, not stonewall and chop it to pieces. The status quo that Senate leaders seek to preserve squanders the promise of a brighter future for Pennsylvania.

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