



Rendell's school funding proves to be a hard sell

Sunday, April 06, 2003

By Jane Elizabeth, Post-Gazette Education Writer

Holly Schaefer is 27, single with no children, lives in a Shadyside apartment, and recently was laid off from her tech job.

Scott Shaw works for Westinghouse, just bought a house in Penn Hills, is 37 and single with no children, and the only phone he owns is a cell phone.

They are two unhappy Pennsylvanians.

Schaefer, who admittedly is not in a good mood after unsuccessfully searching for a job since January, is on what she calls a "rant" about Gov. Ed Rendell's proposed budget, which overhauls the state's system of paying for schools.

"Is Rendell trying to make Pittsburgh a ghost town?" she said, referring to the governor's plan to increase state residents' personal income tax by a third, from 2.8 percent to 3.75 percent.

"Given the current economy and lack of employment opportunities, this will further Pittsburgh's demise. Sure we have CMU, Pitt and several other colleges drawing in the dollars from students, but what does this city have to offer them once they have completed their degrees? High taxes and lack of full-time gainful employment to tempt them to stay?"

"I think not."

Pennsylvania taxpayers have had a dozen days now to absorb the details of Rendell's proposal, and some are finding that it affects them a little too personally. Even Rendell and his supporters have acknowledged that his plan could be a tough sell to people such as Schaefer and Shaw.

The budget proposal was designed to equalize the way schools are funded in Pennsylvania and shift the burden from property owners to wage earners. The state's share of support for schools has plummeted in the past two decades, and now, districts get most of their funding from local property taxes. That has led to controversial inequities between schools in the state's rich and poor communities.

Rendell's proposal would give school districts additional state funds if they provide homeowners with a cut in local property taxes. If they go along, school districts also would get some of the \$1.5 billion called for in the governor's education improvement plan, which

includes adding pre-kindergarten, full-day kindergarten and numerous other programs.

The money would come from the increase in income taxes and a variety of other taxes and fees, including a higher tax on beer and a new tax on cell phones.

A single man's beef

Shaw is a homeowner who'd get a reduction in property taxes, but even that reduction, according to his math, wouldn't offset his income tax increase. He estimates he'd still pay \$102.50 more in taxes under Rendell's plan.

"Plus, a tax on cell phones and beer? All-day kindergarten and pre-kindergarten?" he added. "I went to kindergarten for a half-day and turned out fine. Why do we have to provide this now?"

"I have never understood why single people with no children have to pay taxes to support public education. I receive no benefits from the Penn Hills School District and will not in the future."

Talk about a tough sell.

Lynn W. Bachelor, a political science professor at the University of Toledo, has studied what she's called "the hostility of alienated voters," primarily in referendums for economic development.

Bachelor said she wasn't surprised by reactions such as Shaw's.

One reason for the backlash, she believes, is the current focus on testing students and measuring school effectiveness, and the results that indicate the education system is in trouble.

"People point to this and say, the schools are failing, so why am I paying for it?"

While there are moral reasons and philosophical arguments to support the idea that all members of society should help pay for children's education, Bachelor acknowledged that "it's very hard to come up with quantitative proof that it's in their economic interest to do this."

Taxpayers should understand that "you put your money into a pool and you pay for services," she said. "Do you ask, I'm paying for jails, and I don't have anyone in jail? Why am I paying for EMS when I've never used it?"

Pete Fritsch, a West Virginia resident who's preparing to move into the house he's building in Greene County, is happy to pay for education programs. He's simply opposed to paying more than some of his soon-to-be neighbors.

The tax reduction would be unfair, he said, because proportionately, more affluent homeowners would get a much smaller tax break. Because each homeowner would get the same dollar amount of property tax relief, homeowners who pay more in taxes get a tax

break that's proportionately smaller.

Fritsch figures he and his wife will get a \$502 school tax reduction, which doesn't offset his personal income tax increase.

"Looking at it right now, none of those things seems fair," Fritsch said. "We're just moving into Pennsylvania and it's just disturbing. ... We weren't expecting this."

Seeking support

Rendell and his staff are in the midst of statewide road trips to round up taxpayer support for his plan, which still must win legislative support.

The Republican-dominated Legislature already has approved the 2003-04 budget, but to force the Legislature to negotiate with him, Rendell vetoed the \$4 billion basic education subsidy. The move essentially reopens the budget and sets the stage for the administration and lawmakers to dicker over Rendell's proposal.

Legislators have made it clear that the key to Rendell plan's success would be getting the approval of the general public.

That's rarely an easy task, as educators and local officials in New Jersey know. Unlike Pennsylvania, New Jersey law requires taxpayer approval of school district budgets every year.

So on April 15, taxpayers in 550 school districts will go to the polls to vote on their districts' budgets. In past years, budget plans in about 60 percent of the districts have been approved, according to Frank Belluscio, spokesman for the New Jersey School Boards Association.

Last year, however, the approval rate was close to 80 percent. Board members have figured out a few things about getting voter support for education programs, even if it means a tax increase.

"The way you don't do it is inviting the community in for lunch two weeks before the budget vote," Belluscio said.

Selling a budget is a year-round job, said Belluscio, who recommends to New Jersey school boards that they make schools part of residents' everyday lives.

"Open the libraries, offer discounted tickets to plays and football games, hold a computer class for adults," he said.

Still, even after trying to be user friendly, he admitted, "With younger [voters], it's harder to get them involved. There's a real disconnect there."

Education, he tells them, "is a quality of life issue. One of the oldest and most essential services we provide is education, and even if you never have kids in school, it benefits the community to have a good education system and society in general."

Terry Madonna, a Millersville University professor and researcher, has conducted studies on taxpayer attitudes and has found wide support for better schools and more education programs.

But there's "an interesting dilemma," he said. "While they understand the value of a good education, they're reluctant to pay for it."

Taxpayer support for Rendell's plan comes down to "clearly a question of how it affects them personally. Are they winners or losers?"

Under the governor's proposal, childless single taxpayers who don't own a home could be among the "losers," he said, and among those most likely to resent paying higher taxes for the benefit of the local school district.

"It's not going to make everyone happy. There will be people who are disaffected," Madonna said.

She sees the value

Not all childless or single people are disaffected, however.

Doris Dick, who's working on her master's degree in social work at the University of Pittsburgh and works in the School of Dental Medicine, gives full approval to the governor's education plan.

"There is no greater investment in children, and not just select children, all children," said Dick, who is single and doesn't own a home. "I'm willing to pay more taxes for that, than for prisons or drug programs."

Much research has indicated that investments in education for younger children reaps benefits as they become older, and that's one of sales pitches Joan Benso uses to sell early education, one of the cornerstones of the governor's education plan.

Benso, executive director of the Harrisburg-based Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, cites a University of Pittsburgh study that showed preschool programs help keep children out of expensive special education or remedial programs when they're older.

And a good preschool program "saves at least \$2 for every \$1 invested" because of decreased spending on jails and prisons and welfare.

She understands the complaints from people with no children in schools.

"I think they have a legitimate concern," she said. "But public education is a public issue. As part of a civil society, we all need to support that, just like parks, just like hospitals. ... Just because I never drive through the Fort Pitt Tunnel doesn't mean I shouldn't help pay for it."

In his pitches to taxpayers around the state, Rendell uses similar analogies. And if that doesn't work, he throws out another:

"Look at your job," he said, speaking after an appearance in McKeesport last week. "How secure is it? Did your company move out of town last year?"

High-quality schools are essential to industries looking to move to, or remain, in a region, he said.

"People should stop being so short-sighted and start thinking about the future."

Staff writer Johnna A. Pro contributed to this report.

Jane Elizabeth can be reached at jelizabeth@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1510.

[Back](#)

Copyright ©1997-2003 PG Publishing Co., Inc. All Rights Reserved.