



The battle for control of Pa. public schools



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By Antony Davies & James R. Harrigan

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Gov. Tom Wolf and House Republicans have found significant common ground on property tax reform and that should be a warning that something terrible is about to happen. When “bipartisan support” emerges around a tax bill of any kind, it usually means that the power of the state is about to be expanded.

While they disagree on some of the details, both the governor and his GOP friends in the House agree on this: State income tax rates need to be increased in order to allow for a reduction in property taxes. And how does it help taxpayers to pay less to their local governments just to turn around and pay more to the state government? It doesn't. This plan has less to do with financing than with Harrisburg's taking local control of education away from communities.

As in most states, Pennsylvanians fund public schools mostly through local property taxes. One consequence of local funding is that some school districts are starved for funds while others have plenty of money. Shifting financial control to the state would result in districts having more equal access to funding. But here's the rub: There are at least two perfectly good reasons why some school districts are starved for money while others have plenty and, as usual, politicians see only one. The one they see is poverty. Unsurprisingly, poor areas do not have the tax bases their more well-off counterparts have and that means that they must scrape by with lower school budgets. The second reason — the one politicians steadfastly refuse to acknowledge — is that some districts are poor because parents choose to leave them. As people become wealthier they move. And people with children move to be closer to better schools. To put it simply, there is a market in schools and people go shopping to find the best ones they can afford.

Where people are shopping, there is market accountability. Good schools will be rewarded and bad schools will be punished. But instead of seizing upon market forces, Gov. Wolf and his Republican allies seek to negate them. And if there is one lesson economic history has made painfully clear time and again, it's that politicians who fight economic laws lose. Every time. Sadly, we all pay when they do.

By shifting school funding to the state level, the governor and House Republicans will take away the last vestige of market accountability from our public schools. No more will Pennsylvanians be able to reward good schools and punish poor ones by moving to good school districts.

On the upside, this means that struggling districts will have access to money they didn't have before. But the downside is likely more meaningful: Taxpayers will be forced to fund districts that have demonstrated that they can't compete; what little incentive those districts had to improve will be wiped away.

The governor's supporters will claim that the current system promotes inequality because rich families can afford to live in better school districts. That's a good argument. But the right way to address it is to allow parents to enroll their children in any public school, regardless of where they live, and have their tax dollars follow the students. This would both give poor families access to better schools and provide a direct financial incentive for schools to improve.

This is not now, nor has it ever been, about choice and quality. It is about control.

Antony Davies is associate professor of economics at Duquesne University. James R. Harrigan is director of academic programs at Strata in Logan, Utah.