

Tackling the catch-22 of school funding

Wednesday, June 16, 2010

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POTTSTOWN — The thing about a catch-22 is it's hard to know where to start.

Part four of four parts on the First Suburbs

Some say the quality of education and programs in Pottstown is slipping simply because the school district can't raise enough money from its crumbling tax base. Others say the taxes in Pottstown are too high, because of school district spending, which is why the town can't attract businesses to shore up the tax base.

The short answer is "yes." Both things are true; each affects the other. Each is both the beginning and the end of a problem.

And both are things with which the school boards in Pottstown, Norristown, Coatesville, Yeadon and a hundred other First Suburbs throughout southeastern Pennsylvania are grappling every day.

A Formula for Success?

The "adequate" funding of education is one of the three major initiatives of the First Suburbs Project, as was made clear last

week when a meeting that attracted more

than 300 people was hosted at the Montgomery County Community College West Campus in Pottstown.

"A strong economy is the best friend to public education," said Reed Lindley, who will take the helm at Pottstown School District next month.

"It has become the norm to continually pursue additional tax money to fund more programs and more people, in an effort to improve education," Lindley said.

"I come here not asking for funds to purchase additional programs, or to add additional staff, I come to speak to the need for adequate funding of the public schools in the Commonwealth," Lindley said.

One major victory for public education advocates in Pennsylvania was the implementation of the "costing-out" study which modeled successful school districts and applied those methods (and costs) to less successful districts, then outlined the measures (and funding) necessary to bring them up to par.

That resulted in a formula for "adequate" funding from the state, said Janis Risch, executive director of Good Schools Pennsylvania, one of the founding organizations of the First Suburbs coalition.

Left out of that formula was applying it to cover the real costs of special education, an item of particular concern for First Suburbs schools which have higher concentrations of students in need of special education services, which cost more than regular education.

A bill to close this gap, House Bill 704, is being pushed by First Suburbs, but has yet to reach the floor of the General Assembly for a vote, although Lindley thanked state Rep. Tom Quigley, R-146th Dist., for his support in the House Education Committee.

Of further concern are backroom attacks on the formula, he said.

Last year, as the state wandered through the wilderness in search of a balanced budget, the Pennsylvania Department of Education responded to lobbying from rural school districts and "adjusted" that formula ensuring these "low cost" districts would receive more state funding than they would have under the formula.

So even with legislation in place that should level the playing field for students across Pennsylvania no matter their zip code, politics can still shift the scales, said Risch.

As the next fiscal year's budget is put together in Harrisburg, the push and pull for funding may well endanger the formula on

which the very future of children may well depend.

That's why the state legislators who were present in Pottstown last Thursday were pledged not only to support policy and legislation that makes education funding fairer, but to "be our advocates" with state agencies, said Jacquelynn Puriefoy-Brinley of Yeadon Borough Council in Delaware County.

State Sen. John Rafferty, R-44th Dist., told the crowd that legislation will soon be introduced to "re-do the whole funding formula for education to drive money back into southeast Pennsylvania."

Burdening Those Least Able to Pay

Otherwise, things will go back to the way they have always been during the last 35 years of Lindley's career in education — "the less wealthy school districts will continue to be obligated to impose greater and greater tax burdens on those least able to pay."

A district's "local tax burden" should be taken into consideration when state education aid is divvied out, First Suburbs advocates insist.

"Just as education is key to an individual's success, the manner in which we finance education is critical to a region's success. ... Because of Pennsylvania's over-reliance on local taxes — of whatever form — to finance public education, the residents of many first suburbs pay local taxes that are 50-80

percent higher than residents in newer and wealthier communities," is how the problem is described by First Suburbs at www.sepafsp.org/

"The implications for our region are enormous. Residential and commercial developers avoid investing in the high tax first suburbs to instead build in fast-developing areas where school taxes are lower. Higher-earning families choose to move out to those same areas in order to pay lower local school taxes while receiving a higher value education. Immigrants and impoverished children are blamed for the demands they place on first suburbs' school districts. Pennsylvania's system for financing public education encourages sprawl, discourages investment in older first suburbs, increases demographic tensions, and fails to provide a quality education to too many of our region's children," the organization contends.

Pottstown could be the poster child for this self-repeating scenario.

"Pottstown has the lowest market value, the lowest personal income, and the highest millage in Montgomery County," Lindley said.

Squeezed by the vice of high millage and low property value, the Pottstown School Board this year cut 11 teaching positions, and 10 others, as well as funding for staff development — all while still raising taxes by 4 percent — to balance its budget.

"We cut all that and taxes still went up, and the root cause was not addressed," he said. "If we are faced with similar choices next year, we will have no choice but to cut into our ability to deliver a quality educational program."

That will inevitably lead to discussions about cutting "non-mandated" programs like music, athletics and art, he warned.

"In communities with a shrinking tax base, it is the state's constitutional responsibility to provide the leadership for equitable funding," Lindley told the crowd. "We are simply asking for support of a funding formula that recognizes the educational needs of the population and the ability of the local community to pay."