

Harrisburg Needs to End Reliance on School Property Taxes

By Office of State Senator Lisa M. Boscola

EASTON - The way Pennsylvania funds its public school system is wildly unfair. It should not have taken a public interest lawsuit to confirm to the General Assembly what I and many others have been saying for a few decades now... homeowners, school districts, teachers and most important students do not win with the way Pennsylvania pays for its public schools.

This has been apparent for several decades. In fact, in July of 2002, I was the first legislator ever to use a provision in the state Constitution to demand a special session to attack the problem of property taxes. It required at least 128 signatures from fellow members of the General Assembly, and I secured them. The result... In a cowardice move, the Governor at the time called us into session for a moment and Legislative Leaders gaveled us out almost immediately. The Governor and Leaders chose to do nothing all the while knowing that over half the General Assembly wanted to find a solution.

Perhaps now with the threat of a judicial order hanging over the General Assembly the Leaders will finally act. Maybe we can move on from local property taxes as the primary funding mechanism for public education to more balanced and equitable system. Could it be that we are on the precipice of moving towards a public education system where a hometown no longer dictates the quality of education? Such a shift starts with ending our reliance on local school property taxes to pay for public schools.

For too long leaders in Harrisburg have gone along to get along, paying lip service to the need for property tax reform but not actually doing anything about it. The solution will take compromise and courage, two things seemingly lacking in Harrisburg. Harrisburg has become a microcosm of Washington D.C. lately, with everybody sitting in their own echo chamber unwilling to do the hard work of solving tough problems, like what to do about property taxes.

When you step back and look big picture, Pennsylvania funds education decently. A 2023 report put out by World Population Review noted that Pennsylvania ranked 8th in terms of per pupil spending. However, a 2022 WalletHub report found that Pennsylvania ranked near the bottom for the equitable distribution of its education funds. You know why? Only 1/3 of the total education spend comes from the Commonwealth while the rest comes from local property taxes. So, the high per pupil spend rating is built on the backs of homeowners. Even worse, the bulk of that is on a select group of property owners in the eastern part of the state due to a provision in the law known as "hold harmless". This provision instituted in 1992 ensured that no school district would receive less funding than it did the year prior even when their student population shrunk. So, in school districts where student enrollment declined, their per pupil state funding continued to grow. Whereas, the school districts where population grew, they never received enough funding to cover the costs of growth. As a result, many school districts across this Commonwealth were forced to raise local property taxes regularly to make up for the states failure to provide.

The Commonwealth Court concluded that continued reliance on property taxes for the majority of school finances preserves the status quo of inequity and denies students an efficient education. The General Assembly knew that though. In 2016 the General Assembly actually enacted a solution, a new funding formula that sought to distribute education money in accordance with enrollment levels and student and district needs. But in typical Harrisburg fashion, it did not implement the solution. Only new money went into the formula, essentially allowing the hold harmless provision to remain intact.

Before we simply invest more tax dollars, we need to fix the structural issues with how we pay for our schools. Spending money to paint your walls, while the foundation of your house is rotting away makes little sense. The system is broken because the funding foundation is antiquated, archaic and inequitable, i.e., local school property taxes. Unless this stops, the inequities will persist.

In the mid-nineties, voters in Michigan demanded, through a constitutional amendment, that the State shift from a majority local property tax-based funding system to a broader based statewide system. The change came because reliance on local property taxes to fund schools created a wide disparity on the equitable disbursement of money spent on education. Sound familiar? Michigan used a mix of a sales tax increases and other statewide taxes to reduce the reliance on local property taxes and fund education more fairly. Michigan demonstrates that such a shift is possible.

It will take bold leadership in Harrisburg to make the needed changes. We are after all elected to be leaders. Too often lawmakers take the easy way out and avoid the hard, difficult choices that need to be made--- that is not leadership. The lawmakers that want to maintain the status quo or think there is no problem need to step aside. When it comes to education funding, the time is now for strong, solid leadership in Harrisburg to come together, stand tall, agree on a structural fix and have the courage to implement it, so everybody wins.



State Senator Lisa M. Boscola

The CHIPS and Science Act Rep. Wild Helped Pass Into Law Now in Motion

By Office of Rep. Wild

EASTON - Last year, I was very proud to help pass the CHIPS and Science Act into law – and now, I'm thrilled to see this law in motion, getting to work in support of American semiconductor production!

Starting this week, semiconductor production companies can request funding to support their microchip production here in the United States – which is great news for the Lehigh Valley, where we have a long and proud history of chip manufacturing. This is a big, important step towards strengthening American manufacturing, outcompeting China, and creating tens of thousands of jobs for American workers in places like PA-07.

BREAKING NEWS

DEPT. OF COMMERCE LAUNCHES FIRST CHIPS FOR AMERICA FUNDING OPPORTUNITY

As part of Implementing the Bipartisan CHIPS and Science Act, Department of Commerce Seeks Applications to Revitalize Domestic Semiconductor Industry and Bring Supply Chains Back to the U.S.

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