

Public schools need tax reform

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There isn't anything too complex for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to take and make more complex.

It's a talent we have. Correction: It's a talent our fine folks in the state Legislature have.

In this week's space, let's talk about property taxes and public school funding. Yes, that quagmire again.

Tell the truth – you thought the much-heralded Act 1 prevented school districts from raising taxes above a certain percentage without a community referendum. Power to the people!

Only it's not true. As we learned when Big Spring presented its budget two weeks ago, school districts need only to apply for a waiver to go beyond the Act 1 index.

Not that we're picking on Big Spring. Times are tough all over and the money has to come from somewhere.

Speaking of the Act 1 index, could it get more confusing?

Sentinel reporter Erica Dolson was charged with getting to the bottom of this legislation and reports that the index, which varies in each district, "is determined by the state average weekly wage, the federal employee cost index and the local socio-economic demographics of each district."

Huh?

We need to crunch all that esoteric data just so the computer can spit out some number determined to be a "fair" property tax for a given year?

It hardly makes sense, especially given that it isn't realistic anyway. The index is 2.9 percent in many districts – a low tax increase meant to reflect the current economic difficulties.

So those districts are forced to find the necessary funds from other sources. Take the Mechanicsburg Area School District. School directors there are raising recreation fees 15 percent.

So a family of four who relies on the low-cost township/school-sponsored rec department for education, entertainment and recreation is likely to pay substantially higher bills this year. But hey – your school taxes are being held to a 2.9 percent increase.

It's one of the fallacies of Act 1 – that we can clamp down on school spending simply by placing a ceiling on property tax hikes.

Our system of funding public education will never simplify until we own up to the fact that it takes a certain dollar figure to pay the bill and that money has to come from somewhere. Instead, we're

fed persistent Pollyanna notions of savings and exemptions and indexes.

In reality, that bottom-line number doesn't change. The only thing that changes is what pocket and whose pocket the money will eventually come from in this endless shell game.

What we need from Harrisburg is not more tax shifting masked as "reform." We need a leader who will step up and oversee real reform that make hard choices and doesn't sugarcoat the pain.

We're waiting.