

[Opinion](#)

School funding reform advocates have the right idea

Published: Tuesday, January 26, 2010

[No comments posted.](#) | [Email to a friend](#) | [Print version](#) | [ShareThis](#) | [RSS Feeds](#)

The burden of school taxes is all too well-known to property owners of the Pottstown tri-county area. The wisdom of reforming Pennsylvania's antiquated tax system for a more progressive form of education funding is also well-known to good schools advocates. Only state legislators seem to miss the point.

Some advocates — including a leader in the First Suburbs movement who formerly held a position in Pottstown borough government — are working to try to keep the conundrum of school funding and property tax reform on the front burner.

School budgets and school taxes have as much to do with economic revitalization as they do with standardized test scores in English and mathematics.

Other states have long understood that notion and have modeled statewide funding for public schools that doesn't decimate struggling communities. Not so in Pennsylvania.

Here, the outdated property tax method of school funding ultimately influences and can even determine the economic health of a community, particularly a community which, like Pottstown, has comparatively low income and high taxes.

Among those working to change that system is David Forrest, who, in 2002, left Pottstown as the borough's assistant manager to run the Delaware County borough of Lansdowne.

He is now the borough manager in Norristown and a board member of an advocacy group named the Southeast Pennsylvania First Suburbs Project which advocates, among other things, "that no community is overtaxed locally to provide what is ultimately a state-wide responsibility," according to its Web site.

Forrest tries to show the link between school taxes and revitalizing the state's older

boroughs, something he has seen again and again, from Pottstown, to Lansdowne to Norristown.

"A school official will tell me their taxes are high because the borough has not attracted enough commercial development and we'll respond that we can't attract commercial development because the school taxes are too high," Forrest said.

State funding for education, making it easier for challenged districts to provide quality education without overtaxing their residents, "is not just about education," said Forrest. "It's about local economic revitalization and providing basic municipal services. Every dollar the school district raises in taxes is one less dollar I have to put a police officer on the street."

"The current system for financing education in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is grossly unequal," writes First Suburbs on its Web site. "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% higher than residents in newer and wealthier communities.

"At the same time, the school districts in many first suburbs often have greater resource needs because these communities have greater concentrations of poverty and immigrants. ...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. "

Pottstown is the ultimate example of the state's failures in funding. The borough's property tax rate is more than double Lower Merion's at the other end of Montgomery County, but its rate only yields about \$9,300 per student, while Lower Merion's produces \$23,117 per student, according to an analysis by Good Schools Pennsylvania.

The position of Good Schools Pennsylvania and the First Suburbs project make sense to towns like Pottstown and to the betterment of all of Pennsylvania.

One might think the Legislature would embrace such a notion and change the way schools are funded for the future of all communities.