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OUR VIEW

Colossal budget battle

The symbolic washing of one's hands has been used throughout the ages as a way to absolve oneself — before contemporaries, if not future generations — of responsibility for some particularly loathsome act.

The most memorable example is that of Pontius Pilate who, in Matthew's Gospel account, gave in to those calling for Jesus of Nazareth's crucifixion by saying, in effect, "OK, but don't blame me."

Pilate was a politician, of course, the governor of Judea serving at the pleasure of the emperor and, presumably, the legislative leaders back in Rome.

Two millennia later, Pilate wouldn't seem out of place — except for the toga, perhaps, although one cannot be sure — in another Senate, meeting not in the curia in the Forum, but in the Capitol Building in Harrisburg, where the motto *istaxicus, spendicus, non possumus*. Translated loosely from the Latin, that means "no funds for wildlife preservation." Actually, *non possumus* means "not possible," which is the state Senate's answer to almost everything that requires money — education, for example.

Public education in Pennsylvania doesn't date quite back to the Roman Empire, just to Gov. George Wolf, of Easton — the man for whom, incidentally, Penn State's Wolf Hall is named. The 1834 Common School Law established for the first time a system of publicly financed schools in the Keystone State.

That Wolf was a Jacksonian Democrat doesn't fully explain why today's pack of Senate Republicans seem intent on repealing the school act.

Before you send those daggered e-mails — *Et tu, liberal!* — we know they're not trying to abolish public education, just reign in spending for it. To that end, they lopped off \$400 million from the proposal set forth by Caesar ... er, Gov. Ed Rendell. Now they're negotiating, with the Ides of March — in the form of the June 30 budget deadline — only five days away, after which the governor has said he will furlough nonessential prefects and praetors and shut down the Appian Way.

It costs money to educate our young plebeians — lots of it. Rendell's budget calls for \$5.2 billion for basic education (an increase of \$291 million), with expanded access to preschool and \$15 million to develop a series of tests to be required for graduation. Senate and House Republicans, on the other

hand, propose a \$173 million increase for basic education, but no money for expanded preschool and the tests.

The graduation tests, frankly, we can do without, but Democrats in the General Assembly say they will accept nothing less than the entire package — *aut Rendell aut nihil*. That package includes a revamped funding formula that would increase state spending by \$2.6 billion over six years, with more going to districts that have high property tax rates but relatively low revenues.

Leading up to reconciliation talks on the \$28 billion total spending plan, however, the Republican-controlled Senate approved a \$240 million tax-cutting package designed to help the working poor and provide incentives to businesses. Those are worthy goals, certainly. So are paying teachers for the essential and professional work they do, buying books for students, paying for gasoline to transport them to and from school, maintaining buildings and helping our youngest and most vulnerable students get a head start on learning. And the legislators who vote for election-year tax cuts know this — but more voters' ears are lent to “we cut your taxes” than “we spent your money for what we all know is necessary.”

But with less coming from the state than is needed, local school boards will have to raise the difference through property taxes or cut back — on teachers, classroom aides, books, educational programs, music, art, physical education, field trips and building maintenance and construction.

Meanwhile, the consuls in Harrisburg can wash their hands — they didn't raise taxes, after all, they cut them. Blame the school boards.

History, we should note, has not been kind to Pilate.