



Senate hopefuls get low marks on education

Intelligencer Journal

Published: Apr 04, 2008

01:31 EST

Lancaster

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If I were a teacher, I'd make some of the local [Republicans](#) running for state Senate stay after school.

Their remarks at Lancaster [Rotary Club](#) this week suggest they haven't done their homework.

If you want to be a state lawmaker, you ought to know something about Pennsylvania's blemished record on funding public [education](#).

But remarks by [Steve McDonald](#), [Bill Neff](#) and [Lloyd Smucker](#) make me think they've been playing hooky when they should have been hitting the books.

Here's the Cliffs Notes synopsis of Pennsylvania's problem: Despite a mandate in the state constitution that Pennsylvania provide a "through and efficient" school system, the state's roughly 2 million school-age children receive vastly unequal opportunities for a sound [education](#).

When one school district in the Philadelphia suburbs can spend \$17,184 per pupil but a district in Erie County can afford only \$6,805 per student, something is wrong.

When Pennsylvania ranks 47th in the country in school funding fairness, something is wrong.

Accounting for poverty

When in 2003 Pennsylvania's fourth-graders ranked 26th in the country in reading and math and eight-graders ranked 28th, something is wrong.

When in 2004 the state ranked seventh in enrollment but 29th in student-teacher ratio, something is wrong.

When [Education Week](#) in January gave Pennsylvania only a C-plus for student achievement, something is wrong.

When 33 percent of [McCaskey](#) High School students drop out, something is wrong.

None of this is news. But asked at the forum to comment on school funding, the three candidates sounded woefully uninformed.

What the state spends on schools "is downright plenty," Neff huffed. He added, "I don't have my hand out. They should not, either."

Let them eat cake!

Smucker wasn't much better. "If additional (school) funding is the answer," he said, "then Philadelphia ought to have the best schools in the state."

Oh, really? Philadelphia in 2006 spent \$9,947 per student, only \$435 more than the state average, and yet 27 percent of Philadelphia schoolchildren live in poverty, meaning thousands face such challenges as homelessness and poor nutrition that interfere with learning.

Smucker should get his facts straight.

Finally, McDonald said, "When the conversation of [education](#) starts with funding, I think that's where the problem begins."

So it's a problem to point out inequities in school funding across Pennsylvania? McDonald has his head in the sand.

Global competition

Pennsylvania's performance in [education](#), when ranked against other states, is mediocre. Maybe for these candidates, mediocrity is OK. [Education](#), after all, isn't a state's only priority.

But before we settle for "average" among the 50 states, let's think about this: Pennsylvania graduates compete for good jobs not only against students from New York and California. They also face competition from graduates in Japan, Germany and Finland.

Finland? Yeah, Finland.

Every three years the Program for International Student Assessment measures the academic performance of 15 year olds in more than 50 countries. In 2006, Finland placed first in science, second in math.

And the United States? We placed 29th in science, 35th in math — behind such countries as Slovenia and Azerbaijan.

I'm not sure how strong an advocate of public [education](#) [Paul Thibault](#) is. He, too, is running for state Senate, and he made no mention of funding disparities.

But he did say: "Obviously, [education](#) is one of the keys to the prosperity of this country, and we have to provide for the highest quality of [education](#) possible."

So, unlike the other candidates, Thibault gets partial credit in my grade book.

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