

PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC EDUCATION REFORM GOALS

Introduction

Public schools in Pennsylvania cost the taxpayers almost \$20 billion per year. After adjusting for the cost of living, our State ranks **third** in spending per student at **\$11,000 per year**. Our teachers' salaries, excluding benefits, average **\$51,000 per year** - **highest** in the nation. Yet our state ranks in the **bottom five** in the nation on the SAT college entrance exams. Furthermore, in York County, performance on the PSSA tests has stagnated over the last 4 testing cycles, even though costs have increased at 8 to 10% per year.

To retain its strong manufacturing base and meet the demand for knowledge workers in the 21st Century, Pennsylvania and York County schools must reverse this trend. To compete successfully in the global economy, our schools must demand more and spend less. Their curricula must concentrate on challenging academics, citizenship, and self-reliance. Our standard of living simply cannot be sustained if public schools continue to graduate students who can't add a column of numbers, read beyond the 6th grade level, or understand and live by the principles upon which our nation was founded.

Spending more money each year is obviously not the answer. Over the last 30 years, the annual constant dollar cost per student has gone up 70% while quality has declined as measured by standardized tests. These cost increases have been piling up two times faster than inflation – and two times faster than the growth in our incomes. We are not receiving an adequate return on our huge \$20 billion annual investment.

The York County Taxpayers Council has developed a set of **10 reform goals** designed to improve the quality of public education while reducing the cost statewide by **\$5 billion**, fully 25% of the current budget. These reforms remove politics from public education, encourage and reward parental involvement, and make provisions for economic disparity throughout the Commonwealth.

REFORM GOALS

1. Goal: Place public schools under the same set of regulations under which private schools operate. Provide for school choice (including cyber schools), with the budgeted year's direct instructional cost per student following the child.

Rationale: This will make our public school monopoly competitive, and lessen the need for vouchers and charter schools. It will release taxpayers from the cost-ineffective mandates in the School Code, such as tenure and the right to strike with pay. Public schools would have to maintain separation of church and state, but teach the enduring founding fathers' principles, moral values and virtue. Private schools would receive no direct state funding. To be licensed, they would have to admit any student who either has a voucher or cash.

2. Goal: Fund school districts using annual costs for each of three categories of student (normal, disadvantaged, and special-ed) and audited enrollment figures from the most recent school year.

Rationale: State funding should be based on a formula that provides an *adequate* education to students in each of the three categories typically in a school's student population. Funding should be sufficient to attract qualified teachers; optimize class sizes; respond to population changes; and reflect differences in the local cost of living and average earned income. Each year PDE would review the annual target costs per student for the three categories and adjust them (up or down) based on fluctuations in the cost of living. The rate of increase could not exceed the preceding year's annual increase in the average weekly wage. Most extracurricular activities, including interscholastic athletics, would be excluded from the funding formula.

3. Goal: Grant the right of referendum to district voters to approve **any** portion of the school district budget that exceeds the state subsidy.

Rationale: A properly constructed state subsidy should be sufficient to provide an adequate education to every K-12 student in the Commonwealth. YCTC believes that the general public should finance this core of public education. Therefore, if local districts attempt to spend more than the amount for adequate education, they should be required to make a compelling case to their taxpayers and seek any additional funding through voter-approved referenda.

4. Goal: Pay and retain teachers based on performance. For mainstream teachers, compensate according to the number of students who achieve proficiency under their instruction during the school year.

Rationale: Even education professionals admit that advanced degrees and longevity have little to do with teacher performance. It is time to pay good teachers more when they improve student achievement and increase their productivity (by teaching *more* students). Annual rankings would be used to identify the under-performers who need more training or elimination.

5. Goal: Protect teachers and school districts from frivolous suits by defining how a student loses his or her right to a free public education.

Rationale: Educators cannot be expected to meet the demands of a modern society if a handful of disruptive students dominate their time and attention. There must be objective means by which schools may terminate students, without fear of litigation, whose behavior negatively impacts the classroom.

6. Goal: Base the cost of new construction and renovations on state-approved standards. Eliminate the requirement for “prevailing wage” from all contracts and negotiations.

Rationale: An adequate public education does not depend on high-cost architecture elements such as Olympic swimming pools, fitness centers, covered parking, botanical gardens, or performing arts centers. Instead, the focus must be on classrooms designed for maximum efficiency and learning. Before any new construction takes place, a present value analysis should be conducted to demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of the decision to build. Renovations to existing buildings would be address modern building code requirements and historical preservation. All construction contracts would require approval by voters and would be exempt from “prevailing wage” labor costs.

7. Goal: Merge school districts and standardize the curriculum statewide.

Rationale: Pennsylvania currently has 501 independent school districts ranging in size from a thousand students to several hundred thousand. Whether we end up with one district per county or some other number, there is clearly no rationale for maintaining the status quo. Here in York County, there are 16 districts. Each has an administrative staff (superintendent, at least one assistant superintendent, a business manager, a technology coordinator and several staff assistants). Each district has a curriculum committee that constructs the course offerings and selects textbooks as if there is nothing in common with even the adjacent districts. Each has a food service staff, human resource coordinators, librarians, nurses, transportation managers, and maintenance departments. The list goes on and on. Administrative costs alone would decrease by 65% or more. Students who relocate *anywhere* in the state during the school year, as tens of thousands do, would benefit from the state’s common curriculum.

8. Goal: Enact HB 593 to improve parental involvement and responsibility.

Rationale: Unfortunately, there are a number of children at all grade levels who are either unwilling or unprepared for learning. Their disruptive behavior sometimes elevates to the point that are expelled and placed in alternative education until graduation or age 18. HB 593 requires the parents of expelled students to pick up the cost of alternative education or do community service in lieu of paying. Disruptive students are hurting the learning process.

9. Goal: Assure that school board composition reasonably reflects the make up of the district, that there are no conflicts of interest, and that directors are subject to term limits and a right of recall.

Rationale: In an average school district, 70% or more of the households have no children in district schools, yet this group has virtually no representation on the typical school board. One result is that both their concerns and life experiences are ignored. They are closed out of the process even though they pay the majority of the costs of education and hire most of the graduates who choose to stay near home when they graduate from school. Furthermore, while it may seem obvious, no school director should be related by blood or by marriage to a member of the district's faculty or staff. Finally, to maximize citizen participation, directors should be subject to term limits and a right of recall to permit voters to remove a director, before the expiration of his or her term, for failing to perform the duties of office.

10. Goal: Implement proven "best business practices" and cost management strategies.

Rationale: Many school districts struggle with the budgeting process and have little or no understanding of how to manage the business side of education. Industry has developed proven techniques for improving control over costs that should be implemented in the public school system as soon as possible. These include: (1) activity-based accounting to decompose aggregate sums into the elements that actually drive costs; (2) zero-based budgeting that starts from scratch every year instead of simply tacking on a percentage, such as the inflation rate, to last year's budget; (3) monthly reviews of actual vs. budgeted expenditures; and (4) a formal monthly review of a rolling 12-month cash flow analysis to provide visibility on the way cash enters and leaves the district. These common-sense business practices will enable the boards to better manage and justify hiring decisions, maintenance costs, class sizes, new construction, curriculum changes, and minimize the cash needed to be kept in the fund balance.