

# ***POLICY BRIEF***

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## **Governor Gets It Terribly Wrong on Education Spending**

Speaking to group of Pennsylvania teachers on June 22, Governor Rendell tried to make the case for asking the Legislature to approve an additional \$355 million in education spending in the 2010-2011 budget. In his remarks he said school district budget cuts are hurting schools across the state. To illustrate this claim he pointed to Penn Hills where 49 teachers have been furloughed. Too bad the Governor's aides had not read the news accounts regarding the furloughs.

Back in March when the original announcement of furloughs for the upcoming school year was made, Penn Hills indicated that 64 teachers would be affected. The reason? Not budget cuts. The school district has been losing enrollment since 2003 with losses of 100 to 200 students per year and in 2009-2010 the decline hit 400. With enrollment dropping by almost 10 percent in six years, the district had every justification for reducing staff.

Moreover, the actual furloughs, when they occurred, involved only 49 teachers, six of whom have already been recalled putting the current count at 43—about 10 percent of the 417 teachers currently on the payroll. Then too, the district is closing an elementary school and consolidating students into other schools. By 2012, six school buildings will be consolidated into three buildings. Simply put, barring a cessation in enrollment declines, there is every reason to believe that further cuts in future years cannot be ruled out.

Further, in all likelihood, after retirements and resignations are finalized this summer, some of the furloughed teachers will be recalled.

All in all, using the Penn Hills furlough announcement to depict the savagery of school budget cuts was inexcusably misleading. And the Governor knows well that teachers cannot be laid off simply for reasons of school district financial difficulties—only for enrollment decline or program cuts. He might also look at Pennsylvania's employment in local government education. Since 2007 jobs in the public schools have climbed by 11,000, moving higher each year right through the recession. So much for the scare talk about job losses in the public schools.

To the larger point of increasing school spending to protect teacher jobs and income, the Governor should for one moment ask where the money is coming from in light of the state's economic and budget environment. Perhaps he should consider the hard pressed taxpayers who will have to pick up the tab for such an increase. They are already facing local property tax hikes to keep teachers working and receiving their raises and generous benefits.

Consider that in the Pittsburgh region, the average hourly pay for elementary and middle school teachers as of March 2009 was \$37.92. That is higher than the hourly pay of registered nurses,

computer programmers, and much higher than accountants. Moreover, pay for those teachers had risen 9.2 percent from January 2007 to March 2009. And these numbers do not take into account the very generous health care and guaranteed retirement benefits that most private sector workers can only dream about.

Rather than continually trying to appease the powerful teacher lobby with ever more state funding, especially during trying financial times, the Governor should ask teachers to voluntarily take a pay freeze until the state's economy is in much better shape. At the very least ask teachers in the hardest hit areas of the state.

The Governor should listen to the advice he gave legislators when he admonished them to “man-up” and raise taxes. He should “man-up” and ask the very powerful teacher unions to do the right thing for the state and beleaguered taxpayers by making a modest concession of accepting a one or two year wage freeze while so many of their fellow Pennsylvanians are out of work or struggling to make ends meet.

Preventing the damage done to taxpayers and chances of a business recovery that will result from pushing state and local taxes higher is well worth spending some political capital. Not to mention being the right thing to do.

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