

# ***POLICY BRIEF***

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## **Another Example of Union Tone Deafness**

Teachers in the South Butler School District are on strike for the second time in the last twelve months. They can stay on the picket lines until early October under Act 88. They face no punishment, fines, or possible loss of union decertification as happens in other states when teachers strike.

Yet ten high school students staged a protest over their frustration with the negotiations and failed to report to class by 8 A.M. last Friday. They will face punishment. The district's assistant superintendent said "we can't have students leaving school on their own".

Can there be a clearer example of just how the power structure is tilted toward teachers' unions in Pennsylvania? Isn't it astounding that students in Pennsylvania can be compelled to attend class or face disciplinary action while teachers can blithely and with impunity refuse to show up for work? That tells us in a nutshell all one needs to know about the mindset of the political power structure in the Commonwealth.

We have demonstrated in two earlier reports that Pennsylvania is the perennial leader in the number of teachers' strikes, with none of the other twelve states that permit strikes coming close. Indeed, Pennsylvania has accounted for more than half of all U.S. teacher strikes since 2000.

South Butler is the second district so far this year to experience a teacher walkout (a strike in Easton ended September 9<sup>th</sup>) and there are sure to be more with over 85 school districts negotiating contracts according to the PA School Boards Association.

During a November 2008 public hearing regarding last year's walkout a South Butler resident told the school board "don't put our students and [taxpayers] through this only to fold at the end and give them what they are asking for". The strike ended due to the requirement of holding 180 school days prior to June 15. The dispute went to arbitration, but no contract settlement was reached.

A major problem is that the state is constantly giving in to what the teachers ask for—setting the tone for what happens at the local level. The Governor's proposed budget spending hike for education—while the state is in the throes of a serious recession and has falling revenue—and the looming pension time bomb that will require substantial tax

increases are two examples of the short shrift hard working taxpayers receive in the Commonwealth. That's why the school board—in its dual role as responsible for quality education and being a good steward of tax dollars while watching out for taxpayers' interests—has to hold firm in the face of demands for wage increases that could top out above 4 percent annually.

The newly announced (albeit tentative) budget agreement would boost education spending by \$300 million above last year's level at a time when other states have made spending and personnel reductions. Keep in mind that the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report for the state (ending June 30, 2008) shows that the function of "public education" grew by 28 percent from \$10.198 million to \$13.076 million from 2003 to 2008. By comparison total government expenditures grew at a rate of 23 percent across the same time period and the northeast urban Consumer Price Index increased 19 percent. Taxpayers are forced to fund additional increases in education spending, even though there is little evidence of a correlation between money and performance either on student achievement or teacher performance.

In addition, taxpayers across the state are going to have to face the prospect of millage rate hikes in the coming years thanks to promises made to teachers through the Public School Employees Retirement System (PSERS). On this item the Governor's office noted in a white paper that "under current law and using the system's annual earnings assumption (8.5%), the Commonwealth contribution will increase from \$340 million in FY2011-12 to \$728 million in FY2012-13 (114%). School districts' cost for retirement will spike at the same rate, with total contribution growing from \$261 million annually to \$662 million (153%)." It is hard to see how taxpayers in school districts anywhere, but especially in a district like South Butler where teachers are trying to extort above-market increases in wages and benefits, can absorb the costs of such a hike in addition to mounting teacher salary costs.

So there we have it: a state with no sanctions on strikes, looking to grow education spending again, and with a huge tab coming forward in the next few years for retirement costs. Can South Butler be the vanguard of a movement to stand against this avalanche of irresponsibility?

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