



## **When concern for schools trumps partisan politics**

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It was frigid last Friday morning, the kind of cold that can tax a car battery, sap the soul and provide a good excuse for skipping a legislative breakfast.

Stepping lively across North Lime Street and entering the meeting space in the basement at St. Andrew United Church of Christ, I expected to find a couple of dozen diehards.

Was I ever wrong.

Upwards of 200 people filled the space, and I was lucky to grab a lemon Danish and find a seat.

The turnout might not have been surprising if the topic had been death panels, illegal aliens or some other hot-button issue that yanks the chains of talk radio listeners.

But the subject was school finance reform. Two hundred people braved a bone-chilling sunrise because how we pay for public education matters to them. They hoped their numbers at the Good Schools Pennsylvania event would give the state lawmakers who attended something to think about.

### **Rhetoric checked**

I write often about school funding issues. I go to hearings. I interview experts. I tackle the subject over and over again out of a belief that education is what sustains civilization and keeps savagery at bay. I know a lot of people agree.

But 200 at dawn in the dead of winter? Crowding into a city church, where parking is at a premium?

For me, the interest was eye-opening. It made me think I need to do a better job keeping my pessimism in check.

But it wasn't just the turnout that raised my spirits. It also was the absence of partisan rancor.

Do Republicans and Democrats see eye to eye on anything these days? Is the greater good forever doomed because politicians fear they might offend the doctrinaire sensibilities of extremists who hold political parties hostage?

Maybe not. Friday's event made me think we shouldn't yet surrender to despair. Though it's politically divided, the state Legislature has found common ground on the critical question of whether a child should continue to receive an inferior education because his or her parents cannot afford to live in an affluent community.

It's an injustice that has been festering in urban and rural schools for years, and one that Pennsylvania in 2008 took a major stride toward correcting.

Change happened because enough Democrats and Republicans came together to enact a funding formula that says no student should be penalized for where he or she lives.

### **Reason for hope**

Where once wheeling and dealing influenced how much subsidy a school district received, now politics is out of the equation. An objective formula ties state money to need.

While it might not be perfectly designed and adequately funded, the formula nonetheless represents a sea change. It says schools with the poorest children and the weakest tax bases get the largest infusions of state aid.

On that point Friday, three Republican lawmakers and a Democratic one did not clash.

Rep. Bryan Cutler, a Republican, does want the formula tweaked to better ensure equity for rural schools, but he told me he's all for the change to a needs-based formula.

And Republican Sen. Lloyd Smucker congratulated Good Schools for persistence in spearheading the change.

"I don't see anybody looking to throw out the formula," he told me.

Partisan battles will likely be renewed this year over how much money schools get, but the idea that poor schools should get a fair share is surviving and becoming the norm.

It's evidence that bipartisanship isn't dead and doggedness can lead to progress.

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