Opinion

Do not abandon commitment to education

By JEFFREY G. VERMEULEN
Times Guest Columnist

I want to make sure Pennsylvania is able to produce the most highly skilled, best trained and appropriately educated work force. While I appreciate that the commonwealth is in tough economic times, we must look beyond the present and invest in the future of Pennsylvania's children by making basic education funding a top policy priority. And that means we must keep a promise made last year by the Pennsylvania General Assembly to meet state funding targets for school districts by 2013-2014.

This unparalleled goal, and the investment of $275 million in basic education, was a momentous first step to improve Pennsylvania's education funding system. It could not have been achieved without the broad bi-partisan support of the legislature.

Our policymakers came together to ensure Pennsylvania's children were provided with increased resources aimed at improving student achievement – the key to ensuring Pennsylvania's future economic success.

For example, 46,000 new students received tutoring or other remediation, nearly 2,000 more children are enrolled in pre- or full-day kindergarten programs, and 312,000 students are in new courses such as foreign language and advanced math and have the most up-to-date curriculum and hands-on learning tools for science.

When I look at this progress, I am thankful for this historic action but I also recognize our work is not over yet. If Pennsylvania abandons the goal of adequate and equitable school funding for all, we are failing to uphold the commitment we made to Pennsylvania's children.

Without increased state support for our schools, teachers and students, the academic progress we've made in recent years will be jeopardized. Class size will expand, at-risk children will have fewer opportunities to boost achievement levels, textbooks will not be replaced, science labs won't contain modern equipment and there will be fewer advanced class offerings.

Tough decisions will have to be made by school boards and superintendents as they seek to preserve valuable student achievement programs and recognize the financial capabilities of their local taxpayers.

The commonwealth needs to maintain its momentum on closing the funding adequacy gap for public education by making another solid investment in school districts in the 2009-10 budget and by continuing to use a school funding formula that takes into account student enrollment, district size, poverty and English proficiency.

Sure, times are tough. Spending is down. For the first time in years, Pennsylvania is experiencing a steady job loss. There is no doubt we are immersed in an economic crisis, the likes of which we have not seen in decades. But there is no greater investment during difficult economic times than in the preparation of the commonwealth's future work force.

By ensuring that our future work force is adequately prepared to meet the challenges of a 21st century economy, we can help stimulate the economic growth of Pennsylvania in the months and years to come.

Education is an investment that contributes to the direct economic success of individuals, benefits the economy, and attracts and supports business. In fact, investments in pre-K-12th-grade education are one the most effective tools a community can utilize in order to promote economic development.

Work-force development and constant training is a critical human capital process concerned with identifying future needs, developing a productive work force, examining the skills of employees at all levels, and determining both strengths and skill gaps.

Work-force development and training can prepare today's work force for tomorrow's challenges. Thus, to meet the economic challenges of the future, Pennsylvania's school districts must be provided with the resources they need today. Let's be sure that Pennsylvania is at the forefront of the movement to build the intellectual capacity of our young people to meet the challenges of the future.

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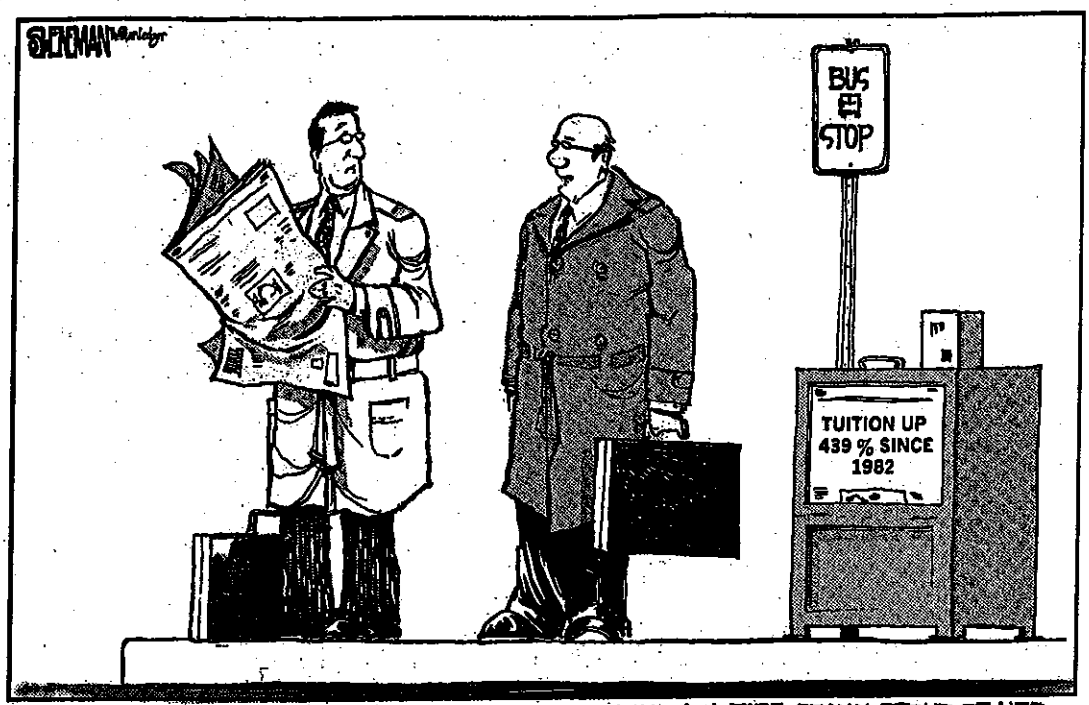
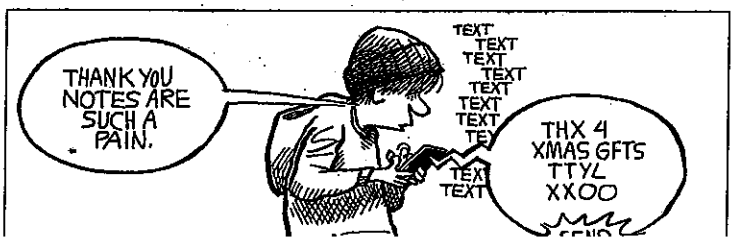


"MY DAUGHTER JUST GOT ACCEPTED INTO AN IVY LEAGUE SCHOOL. WE'RE REALLY PROUD OF HER. OH, THAT REMINDS ME... YOU KNOW ANYONE INTERESTED IN BUYING A KIDNEY?"



Animals are people, too

To the Times:

Thank you for printing the letter by Lee Hall concerning the inadvisable killing of deer proposed by Swarthmore College administrators. Lee's response to this poorly conceived proposal is so wonderfully articulated. She puts into words what there is much all of us can learn from such a generous and caring individual.

Members of other species deserve our respect, and as I have often heard Lee so eloquently put it, it is incumbent upon us to allow them "to live on their own terms," free of human control and interference.