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Teacher compensation is 'an essential economic investment'

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BY ROBERT B. "BRIT" SATCHWELL

Our schools have too many echoes from the industrial '50s and '60s, as does our state tax structure that funds them. "Educational reform" is currently a code phrase for cutting schools and teachers, but it means something else entirely to teachers. If the services I described in Sunday's essay - like more foreign language instruction, online connectivity, mentoring for at-risk students and more - are ones you'd like your child to have, this is your clarion call.

To build 21st century schools, we need a reliable 21st century tax structure, one that mirrors our evolving economy to promote economic growth. Our current tax structure is a '74 Cordoba that we keep tweaking to keep it on the road. A wealth of data from surrounding states with only moderately higher tax burdens than Michigan's (we rank 39th nationally in overall taxes) shows that moderate taxes, when targeted fairly and intelligently, create per capita wealth. Taxes, done right, enable growth. Growth, taxed wisely and moderately, supports education. Education, done right, creates wealth. Wealth, once created, generates taxes. I have details (sourced data) explaining this upward spiral available upon request to those who are tired of the old mantra that less is more.

I bet that if you asked any district's administrators and trustees to choose between controlling wages or benefit costs, 101 percent would choose benefits. I completely sympathize with them because health care costs are skyrocketing with no end in sight (unlike wages). The health care debate typically breaks into three camps:

- 1) Retain the current health system, tweak it as you go to mollify public discontent, and bear the economic and social burdens of unequal coverage - the inefficient downward spiral we're in now. Or ...
- 2) Develop a system that supports universal benefits in a manner that maximizes cost efficiencies. If we want to finance educational reforms or pay teachers fairly, we must reform the sucking wound called health care for the very same reason that General Motors must take \$2,000 of health care and retirement benefits (health care again) out of every car to be globally competitive. Ditto every business and public service in America. Health care stunts the national economy, stunts Michigan's budget, stunts education grants, stunts every child's classroom experience. Or ...
- 3) We can continue to cope with how to fund athletics, the performing arts, elective classes, planning time for teachers so that they can do more with less - while 21st century schools remain pie in the sky.

Teacher compensation, and more broadly, education, can be viewed as a pesky cost or as an essential economic investment. Market forces will win out either way - will we spend reluctantly or invest willingly? Let's wring out the huge inefficiencies inherent in our current tax and health care systems in order to build better schools that will revitalize the public's enthusiasm for public education.

Have you contacted your state representatives, Parent Teacher Student Organization, Black Parent Support Group, performing arts director, or athletic booster club lately? They need to hear from you, as does this year's wonderful teacher. Best wishes as we start our new school year together.

Rant over. Learning just begun.

About the writer: Robert B. "Brit" Satchwell, an Ann Arbor resident, is a math teacher at Forsythe Middle School. This is the second of a two-part essay. On Sunday, Satchwell discussed the challenges

underlying teacher compensation and evaluation, and its impact on educating our children. To contribute essays to Other Voices, contact Mary Morgan, opinion editor, at 734-994-6605 or mmorgan@annarbornews.com.

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