

The wizard of laws

by Paul E. Kostyu

COLUMBUS, OHIO - Maybe, what Ohio needs is David Copperfield, the master of illusion.

With a wave of a wand last week, House Speaker Jon Husted, R-Kettering, declared school funding fixed and constitutional.

The Ohio Supreme Court ruled four times that the funding method was unconstitutional, primarily because of the over-reliance on property taxes. Then the court washed its hands of the long-running case called DeRolph I, II, III and IV in 2003 and left it up to the Republican Legislature to figure out how to make funding constitutional.

Since 2003, billions of dollars have been poured into new and renovated school facilities. The state's per pupil allocation was increased. The Legislature as tried to reduce the disparity between rich and poor districts. Millions more tax dollars, too, were sent from public schools to charter schools, whose key friend in the Legislature is Husted.

Poof! Problem solved.

So what of the high percentage of school levies defeated by voters? Poof! What levies?

Over-reliance on local property taxes? Poof! A phantom revenue.

What of this from a Feb. 10 editorial in The Times Reporter, a Copley Ohio Newspaper: "Voters are sick and tired of new school tax issues, but that doesn't change the fact that most of our schools are in bad financial shape."

Poof! Schools aren't in bad financial shape. The naysayers, particularly those editorial writers, are just wrong.

No so fast there, Mr. Copperfield, umm ... Husted.

"The system is broken," said State Sen. Kirk Schuring, R-Canton. "We still have work to do."

Apparently, there are other Republicans who think so, too. Despite Husted's wizardry, Republican lawmakers, including Schuring, have been meeting with Strickland to craft a funding formula that works.

Schuring's plan would shift the burden of funding from property taxes to sales and income taxes, creating a steady and reliable source of money. Business and education officials would determine how the funds are distributed and how to analyze education outcomes. Strickland supports a solution that incorporates businesses.

According to Husted, there's always room to improve school funding, but there's no need for a solution if the problem is fixed. But Husted said a couple weeks ago Strickland should have a school-funding proposal in the budget he will submit on March 15. And Husted and Senate President Bill Harris, R-Ashland, designated House Bill 1 and Senate Bill 1 as legislative vehicles for changing the school funding formula. That seems to imply there's been no fix.

What's going on? It's called political gamesmanship. Husted and Harris are trying to back Strickland into a corner for promising to improve Ohio's education system. Meanwhile, the governor is trying to dance his way out of that corner.

Here's something else. Husted is in his last two years in the Ohio House and being touted for statewide office in 2010, perhaps in a run against Strickland, who will surely seek re-election.

Schuring said he hopes his proposal will bring Husted, Harris and Strickland "to some common ground." In other words, perhaps all three can save face.

Poof!

The wizard of laws by Paul E. Kostyu