

# OPINION

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**GUEST VIEW | MATTHEW STREIT, HERITAGE FOUNDATION**

## Time to update the U.S. tax code

Tax Day rolls around every April - yet the last major update to the U.S. tax system was in 1986, nearly 30 years ago. Think about how much has changed since then. In 1985, Microsoft Windows was released. Since then, Microsoft has released more than 20 updates to its operating system.

Updating the tax system is one of the perennial policy issues politicians enjoy talking about. And it could be a key policy debate this year and next.

But whether all the talk, hand-wringing and head-nodding will actually result in change is yet to be seen. Because while there's consensus in Washington that reform needs to happen, there's significant disagreement on how to do it.

A recent study on American attitudes and support for tax reform conducted by the American Perceptions Initiative, a project of The Heritage Foundation, found that only a slight majority of Americans support tax reform (52 percent), in part, due to limited familiarity with what "tax reform" actually means.

However, once respondents became more familiar with the current system and the possibility of alternate approaches, the level of support for tax reform among Americans jumped significantly to 71 percent. Only 5 percent believe the system is working just fine.

Americans are uncertain about what reform could mean, how it would impact them, and whether they trust Washington to tackle the problem.

A majority of Americans (75 percent) wants to "keep taxes as low as possible to stimulate investment and growth." And their desire to fix the current tax system is built on the concerns that it's "unfair, corrupt and too complex."

Everyone agrees the tax system should be fair. Americans currently feel "some people are getting away with not paying their fair share." Similarly, a majority agrees the current system encourages cronyism, gives government too much power to pick

winners and losers, and is too complex.

But it's not clear that they trust Washington to be able to fix it: Seventy-nine percent say Washington is incompetent and corrupt and cannot be trusted.

When asked what "fairness" means, 56 percent believe fairness means everyone pays an equal share or percentage.

Those that make more will ultimately pay more - 25 percent of a million-dollar salary is obviously more than 25 percent of a \$50K salary. Forty-four percent believe fairness means those with more should pay more (that is, a higher percentage).

With this as a backdrop, any attempt at tax reform should focus on the concerns of fairness, corruption and complexity. An updated tax system that would garner the most support would:

- Ensure the entire tax burden is transparent
- Close loopholes for corporations and individuals
- Eliminate special tax breaks for highly profitable businesses
- Institute changes that increase the amount of money individuals take home

While voters are not very familiar with alternative systems, there are clearly appealing aspects to them. In fact, after learning just a little bit about three alternatives - National Sales Tax, Business Transfer Tax, Flat Tax - only one in five (20 percent) would want to continue with our current federal income tax system. Eighty percent would prefer one of the other alternatives.

Americans are ready to support changes to the tax system. To build that support, the language of reform is important. Highlighting the top concerns and problems with the current system heightens the demand for change.

Politicians would be wise to put forward a plan to update the tax system that treats everyone fairly, is simple and straightforward, rewards hard work and savings, and eliminates special privileges.

—Matthew Streit is vice president of strategic communications at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.

**WEEKLY COLUMN | SEN. TOM O'MARA**

## Education debate at center of budget

This year's budget adoption cycle ran into some truly rough waters.

That's largely because Governor Cuomo attempted like never before to tie fiscal decisions to the approval of numerous, non-budget related and highly controversial policy issues: Ethics reform. Criminal justice reform. Increasing the minimum wage.

And, of course, dramatic education reform.

One news analysis said that "the governor peppered his budget proposal with policy plans, hoping to gain leverage against reluctant legislators." An attempt to gain leverage is one characterization of the governor's tactics. Others might call it strong arming. Ultimately it had the same consequence: it injected politically charged policy pressures into fiscal decisions that should be decided as devoid of these "take it or leave it" threats as possible.

In the end, the same news analysis I mentioned above concluded, "The budget talks also shed light on the changed atmosphere in Albany: Mr. Cuomo, while still popular with voters, saw his influence diminished since his first term, when he demonstrated a mastery of the machinery of state government and legislators tended to swallow their frustrations, rather than fight back."

Yes, we fought back against the governor, including against the Cuomo education reform plan though many teachers will vehemently disagree with that assessment.

So I'll stop here and make the most important point: the future of education is clearly at a crossroads in New York State. But the level of anger, frustration and even outrage that's currently driving these critically important decisions isn't working. It's not working for students and families, number one. And



SEN. TOM O'MARA

it's not positive, by any measure, for local school districts.

Largely it's been a fight between Governor Cuomo and the state's politically powerful teachers' unions. Unfortunately, the consequences have reached into far too many local school districts and homes.

We're faced with having to reasonably find the solutions that need to be agreed on. We need to preserve the high quality system of education for our young people that we all want - but that also achieves the improvements that every institution needs from time to time.

This shouldn't be decided by who yells the loudest, or who's the most stubborn, or who's the angriest.

This budget attempts to move everyone toward a more reasonable common ground. A strong-armed governor sure doesn't offer the best answer. But the politically charged, push and pull in every direction of the legislative process isn't the place to settle it either. The governor argued take it or leave it, my way or no way on education reform. Teachers' unions essentially argued the same - drop the Cuomo plan and don't include even a trace of education reform in this budget. Legitimate, reasonable concerns were raised on both sides. But the case each side was making to legislators ended up here: it's all or nothing.

It left the Legislature in the middle of the Cuomo versus teachers fight with the governor threatening no school aid increases without reform and the teachers' unions threatening that voting for any part of a budget including even a

single shard of reform - even if it would mean, at the same time, denying badly needed funding for high need, low wealth, often rural school districts - would be considered a wrong.

But government by ultimatum only produces gridlock - which never produces any kind of a worthwhile answer either.

It became the Legislature's task to somehow keep working through it.

In the end, the governor can go around claiming all the victories he wants to claim, but this budget does not enact the original Cuomo education reform plan. Far from it. The Senate early on rejected the broad scope of the Cuomo plan and his ridiculous over reliance on testing.

The new budget charges the state education commissioner and the state Board of Regents with ultimately determining changes - and not without undertaking a full public comment period that will allow every stakeholder (teachers, students, administrators, parents, grandparents, you name it) who wants to provide input to provide as much input as he or she desires.

In other words, it leaves remaining decisions on education reform where they can be most appropriately, effectively and fairly decided: in the hands of education-based

decision makers. They're being given another chance to try to get this right and to do it better this time, having now had the experience of the failed attempt at Common Core.

And it gives teachers, superintendents, parents - every stakeholder - the ongoing opportunity to have input, to ensure the fairness that needs to be ensured, to continue to make the case against the over reliance on testing that's now at the crux of this battle - and, most importantly, to offer better answers.

Importantly, the compromise reached in this budget produced a significant increase of \$1.4 billion in state support for public schools, a more than six percent increase that brings total state education aid to \$23.5 billion one of the largest, by far, of all state expenditures. It includes the accelerated elimination of \$603 million or 60% (even more in many districts) of the remaining Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) in the 201516 school year. It leaves us on the verge of eliminating the GEA once and for all next year.

—State Sen. Tom O'Mara represents New York's 53rd Senate District, which includes Steuben, Chemung, Schuyler and Yates counties, and a portion of Tompkins County.

## ANOTHER VIEW



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Why our daughter won't take state tests

The direction of NYS public education is being driven by political control and corporate greed instead of what is best for children. The FREEDOM for school administrators to lead, teachers to teach, and students to learn in a child-centered classroom has been STOLEN by bully bureaucrats in Albany and Washington D.C. who know little about education and believe a "one size fits all" approach will somehow "fix" public education.

In 2010, New York State officials, lured by MONEY from the Federal GOVERNMENT through the Race To The Top program, agreed to implement Common Core State Standards (CCSS) which were heavily financed by Bill Gates and developed by private interest groups with heavy influence from the corporate testing industry.

CCSS were hastily adopted with no transparency while "grave concerns" from childhood development specialists and educators were ignored. Contrary to the marketing rhetoric that continues to be sold to the American people, CCSS were NOT state led, NOT internationally benchmarked, NOT piloted or tested, and NOT evaluated for cost or efficacy

prior to implementation.

The Federal Government then spent hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars to develop National Standardized Tests based on the unproven Common Core Standards which quickly drove the development of unproven curriculum and teaching methods. Now, NYS Dept. of Ed. and our Governor intend to have students take these costly and developmentally inappropriate tests to evaluate the "performance" of school districts and determine whether teachers should keep their jobs.

The NYS Common Core Tests (Grades 3-8) to be administered in April 2015:

1. Compel teachers to narrow curriculum and spend a high percentage of the year prepping students to take tests on two subjects (Math and ELA) rather than teaching a well-rounded and balanced curriculum that inspires creativity and fosters the joy of learning for all students.
2. Requires many hours to take and have NO diagnostic value for teachers in supporting the academic achievement of students.
3. Are flawed, ambiguous, and intentionally designed to fail a high percentage of children by deliberately manipulating the "passing score" through arbitrary and subjective means.
4. Are being used to

collect a vast amount of data on children without parental knowledge or consent.

5. When refused, will not affect a student's classroom grade, placement, or services received. Parents refusing to allow children to take the NYS Standardized Tests will send a clear and powerful message to Albany (and Washington D.C.) that children are not guinea pigs, high-stakes testing based on unproven standards is harmful to public education, and implementing destructive academic reforms using bully tactics will NOT be tolerated!

We have the power to say NO to government overreach. Refuse NYS Assessments and become part of the critical movement to put the "public" back into public education. The time to act is now.

**Lynn and Steve Leonard**  
 Corning-Painted Post School District parents

### Congrats to Donna on 30 years in business

Congratulations Donna! It doesn't seem like you've owned and operated Donna's Restaurant for 30 years and as the article stated you were there as an employee for years before that.

Your hard work and perseverance made the restaurant what it is today. I'd see you walking down

the ally at 4:00 or 4:30 AM many mornings to open it up and do whatever it was you had to do to prepare for the day's business. I often marveled at the way you moved around the restaurant going from one table to the other, tending to the customers, going to the counter area to make sure the people sitting there didn't feel neglected. Watching you made me realize that there are no harder working people than wait staff and as owner you worked even harder than that.

Your place was the lunch stop for the City Hall employees who worked right next door to your restaurant. Art Webster and I stopped in every morning for coffee and conversation. It was a dark day tho when you raised the price of a cup of coffee to \$ 0.15.

When I was going about my duties and people would stop me and ask where a good place to eat was, if we were anywhere in the area of Cedar and Market Streets, it was Donna's that I steered them towards. On more than one occasion I had them look me up after they had eaten and thank me for recommending your place. I could send them to you with confidence because the food was great.

**Dick Faulisi**  
 Corning

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