

Voters Deserve Clear Facts about Attacks on Tenure Reform Before Vote on School Tax Hike

By Pat Hamill, Chairman, Colorado Concern

A sizeable income tax increase for public education in return for bold, lasting and effective reforms for our schools is what we have been told is the reason to support Amendment 66 on the November ballot. Yet voters need to know that those reforms could be wiped out after the election due to a teacher-union-backed lawsuit – thus pouring new dollars into the system with no reforms to fund.

Over the past several years, Colorado has moved to the head of the class in education reform. While many said, for example, that reforming teacher tenure by rewarding good teaching and addressing educators who aren't making the grade was impossible to achieve, Colorado did it. Senate Bill 191, enacted in 2010 with strong bipartisan support, ties teacher job security to their performance, mirroring the systems in place in most Colorado workplaces. The law has drawn praise from around the nation, and it's just now being implemented.

This common-sense law is a key component in the case for the Amendment 66 tax increase. In fact, as this tax measure was being crafted, a central selling point was that new dollars would be needed to fuel this and other structural reforms.

Fast forward to the tax increase now before voters. Amendment 66 advocates know that Colorado taxpayers have supported tax hikes when they are told what the new dollars will support, and this is particularly important for education funding. We believe that a persuasive case for new education investments rests on providing substantive and bold reforms that benefit children, teachers and our economy. We don't believe that Colorado taxpayers will vote "money for nothing" for schools.

Yet tenure reform is at risk because the teacher unions are threatening to sue to overturn SB 191 – and they received a deadline extension to allow the lawsuit to be filed after the November election. This sets up a scenario where voters could support taxing themselves to pay for education reforms that a lawsuit would wipe out after the new dollars start to flow. Voters need and deserve transparency.

Colorado Concern and a number of other business organizations wrote to the Colorado Education Association (CEA) asking for this basic transparency. While we urged the union to shelve legal action altogether, we also said that it is completely unacceptable to leave this matter unresolved and just pretend to voters that a legal dagger isn't being thrust at high-quality school reforms that most Coloradans support.

The fact is, the business community has been lukewarm at best to Amendment 66. While we are strong supporters of school reform, and many of us are persuaded that new dollars are warranted for public schools, we are troubled by the new and unfair tax system being used to fund the tax increase. Therefore, many of us decided just to remain neutral. But the looming lawsuit, the existential threat to SB 191 and the lack of transparency for Colorado voters is deeply troubling to our members, who are top business leaders from across the state.

If there is one area of universal agreement across the political spectrum, it's that our schools need fundamental improvement. Our good schools can be great, and our troubled schools need urgent care. Colorado has taken, and can continue to take, big steps toward creating a world-class education system that will be a magnet for great teachers, and a standard for learning. We hope the union will sideline the lawyers and help make a sincere and candid case to voters about what Amendment 66 can accomplish for Colorado students and the teachers who teach them.

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