

Designing schools should be local decision

By Jason Shelley

At a time when taxpayers are seeking less government, Indiana lawmakers are considering at least one proposal that could increase state government oversight and strip local communities of being able to determine the kind of school they need for their communities.

It's called the stock-school design plan, and it was inserted into House Bill 1001 by Rep. Dan Leonard, R-Huntington, who contends it will save taxpayers money. What this will do instead is create more government, require school districts from Evansville to Fort Wayne to use the same school design, and it likely will increase taxpayer spending in the form of increased building costs.

State lawmaker efforts to reduce property taxes should be applauded and encouraged. However, schools are an easy target for lawmakers who want to be perceived as doing something (anything) to reduce property taxes. What we don't need is additional state bureaucracy. School building projects should be a community issue. Communities should have control over the type of buildings they want to meet specific curriculum and community needs.

One-size does not fit all, for a variety of reasons. For example land conditions and climate in Brown County are much different than in Gary. It's short-sighted to believe that you can build the same school on completely different site conditions. But that's not the only reason this is a bad idea for Indiana:

- Most schools are designed to meet specific curriculum needs at an individual school. For example, some rural Indiana schools have large agricultural programs, while urban and suburban schools may not have an ag program at all. Some schools are designed for specific technology programs. Some schools are designed so they can be used for specific community programs. None of this is accounted for in a stock design.
- Design plans have a limited shelf life due to frequently changing code requirements, improved technology, products and materials. Stock plans would have to be revised constantly to account for these changes. This would add new costs to the state and thus the taxpayer.
- A stock design will not allow for a cutting-edge school. It will create a school based on minimum standards at a time when the state is working to improve the quality of education.
- While lawmakers say the plan will save money; it actually could increase costs to taxpayers. For example, the stock school plan amendment wants the state to design the canned schools. There will be different plans for different school enrollments. Architects will have to be hired by the state to design the stock plans. And, architects will then need to be hired by schools in order to revise the plans based on site conditions.

- In 2006, only eight new schools were built in the state. Yet, lawmakers want to establish a new bureaucracy to create stock designs when only a few districts are considering building.

There is no savings when using cookie-cutter design. Indiana has tried that. It didn't work. In 1951, lawmakers passed a similar stock-plan law. After 20 years, the state designs (paid for by property taxes) were never used, so lawmakers repealed the law. About two dozen states have tried the same thing; it's never shown success. There's a reason not a single state in the country has a cookie-cutter design law: It doesn't work.

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