

Winning Edge #47 – Fund Students, Not Systems

This is Trevor Bragdon with Commonwealth Partners' *The Winning Edge*: Tips to help conservatives persuade and win.



In the past several Winning Edge episodes, we've explored how to talk about the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) and the state budget using the "One Statistic, One Story, One Solution" framework.

So how do we apply that to education?

Pennsylvania's education system is in rough shape. Spending is up, but enrollment is down. The number of teachers is up, but test scores are down. There's plenty of [great research on the problems and the potential solutions](#). But when it's time to speak to voters, research isn't enough.

What makes a message strong?

Start by asking: What emotion are we trying to create?

Most voters already sense the education system isn't working. They might like their local school, especially if their kids went there, and they often admire teachers. But when they zoom out, they recognize the system as a whole is broken.

That's why messaging on education has to walk a careful line. You're speaking to people who have positive associations with individual schools or educators, and negative feelings about the system overall. When that's the case, how you frame the argument matters more than ever.

Which brings us to this message:

For the last 20 years, Pennsylvania has tried to fix education at the system level. We hired more teachers—but ended up with even more administrators.

We poured more money into schools—and now spend nearly \$22,000 per student—but reading and writing scores went down.

Pennsylvanians stepped up. We kept paying more—even as fewer kids showed up. Now, school districts are sitting on nearly \$7 billion in reserves, with no clear plan on how to use it—and no accountability for why they keep asking for more.

We've tried every system-wide fix: more funding, more staff, more programs. And yet ... everything is worse.

Meanwhile, where are families going? If they can, they choose charter schools, homeschooling, or private schools. These are growing because families are looking for what works.

When something isn't working, the answer isn't to do more of it. The answer is to change direction.

The problem isn't just bad results—it's a broken mindset. We've been trying to fix a system, when what we really need is to help a student.

It's time to stop funding failure.

It's time to fund students, not systems.

And if we truly believe that, the first step is simple: let the money follow the child.

Lifeline Scholarships do exactly that. They give families trapped in the lowest-performing schools the freedom to choose a better option—public, private, charter, or something else that works.

It's not about politics. It's about helping kids.

It's a simple shift: instead of sending money to a system that's failing, we send it to the student—so they don't have to wait for the system to change.

Because every child deserves the chance to learn in a school that fits them—not be stuck in a system that fails them.

What we are doing here is following the “**One Statistic, One Story, One Solution**” framework.

One Statistic

We focus on a single number: \$22,000 in funding per student.

It's round, easy to remember, and powerful—especially because voters will instinctively compare it to their own salary or the cost of sending their own kids to school.

We also include a supporting number: “nearly \$7 billion” in reserve funds. If you want to simplify further, you could just say “billions in reserves” to keep it clean.

One Story

While this message doesn't feature a personal anecdote, the overall structure tells the story of Pennsylvania's education system: We've tried more funding, more teachers, more programs. Yet, outcomes keep getting worse.

The story arc challenges voters to rethink their assumptions without making them feel foolish. It's a reframe: "You weren't wrong to want to fund schools—but now it's time to try something different."

One Solution

We point to Lifeline Scholarships as the solution, but the goal is bigger than one policy. What matters most is shifting how voters think about education funding altogether.

The one thing they should walk away remembering is: "Fund students, not systems."

The next time you're talking with voters about education, try using this message. Put it in your own words. You'll be surprised how quickly people nod along—because deep down, they already know the system isn't working.

They're just waiting for someone to say it clearly and show a better way forward.