

County Legislature wants to cap the gas tax.
 That puts them on the same side as state Conservatives who are calling on local governments to follow suit. State Conservative Party Leader Mike Long says that New York

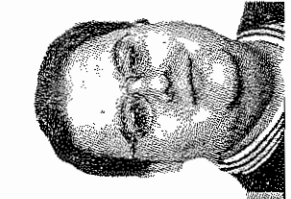
vices at our merchants." (This is the same Oneida County, by the way, that has the state's largest sales tax rate at 9.5 percent).
 Erie County Executive Joel Giambra has a different answer. As he told the Buffalo News, his county needs all the

problems?
 So the dilemma for Monroe County is obvious. Brooks and the county lawmakers must balance the desire to give taxpayers motorists a break at the pumps with the reality that they are already asking for more in overall sales taxes

COMMENTARY

Media boots conclusion of education study

If we in the media have any use at all, it is surely to filter good information from bad before we present it to the public. If we do that right, we're public servants. Failing that, we are little more than underpaid typists.



Benjamin Wachs
 MESSENGER POST
 COLUMNIST

Case in point: a new study called "New York State's Dual Crises: Low Graduation Rates and Rising School Taxes" has been getting unwarranted attention.

It's been covered in local radio and newspapers. The study, produced by the Public Policy and Education Fund Inc. and the Fiscal Policy Institute, claims (among other things) that low graduation rates in New York are caused by low school funding.
 It notes that school districts with graduation rates of over 90 percent spend an average of \$18,551 per pupil, while districts with less than 50 percent graduation rates spend an average of \$13,593.

To raise graduation rates, it concludes, raise school funding.
 I'm in favor of more money for schools; but I'm troubled that the media would launch a study like this — which is such an obvious piece of crap — into the public discussion.
 For all that we reporters are typing away at our little keyboards or speaking clearly into our microphones, we're not doing our jobs.

So let me explain what's wrong with the study, and then we'll talk about the media's complicity.

skewed — probably by the very rich districts downstate. Whatever the reason, these numbers aren't universally applicable: they have nothing to do with us.
 Graduation rates here are taken directly from the 2004-05 New York state report cards on each district, compiled by the state Education Department. Graduation refers to Regents diplomas or Regents-approved diplomas only. Data on per-pupil spending is taken from the Monroe County School Boards Association "Facts and Figures" book for the same year.

But what about the study's basic point — that more money spent equals higher graduation rates? That could still be true, right?
 Not even close.
 In Monroe County, the district that spent the most, per pupil in 2004-05 (Wheatland-Chili) had the second lowest graduation rate, while the district that spent the least, (Fairport) had the fourth highest — at 93 percent.

In fact, if you take the five districts with the highest cost per pupil and the five districts with the lowest graduation rate you'll find three districts — East Rochester, Rush-Henrietta and Wheatland-Chili — are on both lists.
 If you take the bottom five districts by cost per pupil and the top five districts for graduation rates, you'll find two districts — Fairport and Hilton — are on both lists.

The amount of money spent has virtually no bearing on graduation rate. That fact has been confirmed by numerous studies that came out of independent academic institutions rather than politically motivated think tanks.

This study should have been filtered out of the public discussion. Unfortunately, the media always seems to be the last to know — and have put the bad data into a very important debate on how we can save our failing schools.

Why? Why don't reporters catch this kind of thing more often?
 Because journalism school teaches reporters how to write headlines rather than read books. Because reporters who never studied economics report on economics; reporters with no government experience report on government; reporters who find statistical data boring report on public policy.

Most journalists are not subject matter experts, and it shows.
 There's a cynical assumption that journalists can be plugged into any subject and be competent.
 My plea to editors and publishers is to please remember that you can't expect someone who doesn't know anything to write about something, and my advice to the public is to expect better.

Contact Benjamin Wachs at bwachs@mpnews.com or at (585) 381-3300, ext. 459.

GOP proposes 'surrender,' not sound finance