In math and taxes: Stop messing with our future

The North Carolina General Assembly is a busy place these days, as legislators rush to pass laws, including the state budget, before the body adjourns in July. Two bills in particular have caught my eye, because both have the potential to harm the state economy in the future.

The first is the proposal to amend the state constitution to cap the income-tax rate at 5.3 percent. The constitution currently imposes a cap of 10 percent. If the bill passes, the amendment will go on the ballot in November.

The proposal would have no effect on taxes now. The state income-tax rate is already scheduled to drop to 5.499 percent next year. This is about the future.

One of the bill’s sponsors says it “lets the people have a say” on taxes, but that’s not quite right. The people already have a say, by voting for senators, representatives and the governor. What the proposal would do is handcuff “the people” of the future, because any future income-tax increase would require a constitutional amendment. The current leadership wants to lock in a low rate, which is the opposite of letting (future) people have a say.

A future GA would have to deal with a fiscal emergency with one arm tied behind its back. Fiscal responsibility means cutting spending or raising revenue (or both). This proposal would ban one of two valid solutions. Remember, small government and fiscal responsibility are distinct goals, and they are often in conflict. For example, insufficient funding of public schools makes government smaller, but it hardly seems responsible.

Moreover, the amendment is a kind of bait and switch. Sure, it’ll cap the income tax, but not other taxes. Since 2013, cuts in income taxes and the broadening of the sales-tax base have made North Carolina’s tax system much more regressive. Poor people pay a higher share of their income in taxes than before, and rich people pay a lower share. If anything, the cap would force future GAs to make the system even more regressive. Because poor and working-class people drive consumer spending, that wouldn’t be good for the economy.

Speaking of bad policy, the senate has passed a bill that would worsen high-school math education. Isn’t education one of those things we invest in to improve the future?

At issue is the controversial Common Core, in this case its math curriculum. CC is a frequent target of conservatives, and some parents find it hard to help with their kids’ homework. The Senate’s solution is to mandate high schools to teach two math tracks simultaneously: CC math and the traditional sequence of algebra and geometry. CC math is an integrated approach that blurs the distinctions among traditional math topics.

I love CC math, and I say that as someone who’s taught math and statistics at various levels. It’s based on the notion that understanding math is superior to rote learning of techniques. Common Core math doesn’t impose a particular way of solving problems. It builds the intuition that allows students to figure things out on their own terms.

Educational experts favor CC math, but parents find it alien. No surprise there! Parents learned under the old system, the one that left Americans ranking very low on international comparisons of math proficiency. We’re a nation of math dunces. And yet our senators think they know more than educators. Forcing two tracks on schools would be unnecessarily costly and some students would get an inferior math education.

So please, NGCA, leave the future alone!