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Early bills provide plenty to argue about

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

There's a bill pending that would just de-mandate physical education instruction in Illinois schools. The bill changes the word "shall" to "may" in every case, permitting schools to provide P.E. but not requiring them to. A committee hearing on that bill would feature some heated discussions, I'd predict.

Another bill would create a statewide voucher program. Not a pilot program. Not just for Chicago's at-risk kids. A program cranking out coupons parents could use to send their children to "any State-recognized, non-public school wishing to enroll eligible students." I believe that bill would start a fight. It has before.

Or how about this? We *triple the "education tax credit"* that currently permits about \$80 million per year to stay the pockets of mostly wealthy parents to subsidize the cost of sending their children to private schools, rather than letting the money reach the General Revenue Fund to support all kids' schooling.

Say your school district is bonded to near its statutory debt limit and then a natural disaster destroys the high school. How would you feel about a bill that says, "Tough luck, but a limit's a limit. No more asking the legislature to approve a bill to let you borrow beyond that limit. No matter what"?

All four of these policy proposals - [HB 440](#), [HB 443](#), [HB 444](#) and [HB 459](#) - are on the public agenda now, having been filed as pending legislation in the House. They were filed Friday, in fact, and all of them are sponsored by the same legislator - [Rep. Jeanne M. Ives](#) (R-Wheaton).

Rep. Ives is a West Point grad with experience as an Army platoon leader, so she's tougher than the photo I linked you to makes her appear. She represents affluent communities and makes no bones about the fact that she is "fighting for my constituents" as hard as she can. It shows in her bills and in her votes.

As a general thing, almost all state legislators do that. Those from districts populated mostly by urban and rural poor will sponsor and support bills that provide state help to the vulnerable. Rural-based legislators advocate for agriculture and for the rights of gun owners. Latino interests dominate some legislators' agendas.

Rep. Ives' bills are among just 13 measures that had been filed by Friday with the potential to amend the School Code or in other ways affect schools or professional educators or school children. Here's a [web page that I have put together](#) with links so you can learn the current status of each bill throughout the session.

We already reviewed the school-related parts of the Senate's effort to strike a "grand bargain" with Gov. Bruce Rauner and House Speaker Michael Madigan and somehow extricate the state from its black-hole of a fiscal crisis. School funding reform, we're all for that. Property tax freeze? Pension "reform"? Not so much.

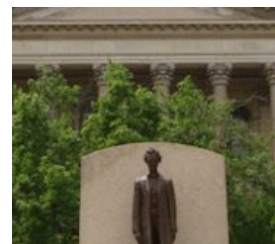
Those bills - [SB 1](#), [SB 11](#) and [SB 13](#) - are on the page. If you click a bill number, a new page will open in another window with an "inline frame" opening to the bill as it appears on the General Assembly's web site. You can read a bill's language, learn about its sponsor, track its progress. All information is always current.

I'll try to keep the bill list updated as the session moves along. Of the 10,000 or so bills to be filed in the new biennium, probably 300 or so will seek to amend the School Code. But many of them will be "shell bills," empty of content and waiting for amendments. I'll ignore shells until they are amended.

Although legislators are off this week, won't be back to the Capitol until next Tuesday, today and Friday are "perfunctory" session days in the House, as is Wednesday in the Senate; that means bills can be introduced even without legislators being present. Won't be long, the agenda will be cluttered with bills.

There's a half-dozen House bills we have not yet discussed. [HB 279](#) would allow legislators to give college scholarships to constituents. The so-called "General Assembly Scholarship" program was a drain on higher education. That is, no funds were appropriated specifically to cover the costs of these students.

The main problem, however, was corruption. Some legislators gave scholarships to the sons or daughters of key campaign contributors, for example, or to each other's relatives. Every year it became more and more apparent that the program was just too easily abused, to tempting to many legislators. So it was abolished.



[HB 331](#) would create a "calorie transparency program" that would, among other things, require schools to conspicuously display the nutritional values of all food items offered for sale to students. [HB 332](#) would allow universities and research organizations to view student records - under specific conditions.

[HB 353](#) would prohibit school boards (except in Chicago) from giving "post-retirement bonuses" to retired former employees. [HB 370](#) would require all schools, including charter schools, to post information on whom to contact and how to contact them in emergency child abuse-related situations.

Finally, [HB 425](#) would put the chief administrators and first assistant administrators of Intermediate Service Centers in Cook County into the salary structure established in the School Code for regional superintendents and their assistants.

The chamber schedules are keys to the tempo of a legislative session. Sessions always start slow. Both chambers will be in session January 24-26, with Rauner giving his "State of the State Address" at noon on the 25th ([monitor it here](#)). The [House](#) will convene on eight days in February, the [Senate](#) seven.

The big event in February will be on the 15th, Rauner's Budget Address ([monitor it here](#)). By then, it will be clearer than it is now if there will even be a budget. Both caucuses in the Senate are working hard to craft a bipartisan "grand bargain," but it's very iffy. If it happens, we should all stand and applaud.

Each chamber has scheduled a dozen session days in March. The 17th (St. Patrick's Day) is the Senate's deadline to move Senate bills out of committee. The House committee deadline for House bills is the 31st. Many bills will die on those days, and no one will cry at their funerals. Much clutter will have been cleared.

They'll work only the first and fourth weeks in April. The Easter break will last from April 8 to the 24th. The deadline for passing bills over to the "second chamber" will be April 28. May will be frantic and nearly non-stop, amending and moving bills and negotiating a budget, until adjournment May 31.

It occurs to me that you might want me to guess the likelihood of Rep. Ives' bills passing. I would be much surprised if any of the four bills described at the top of this commentary has much of a chance to pass. And it's not a partisan thing; school policy in Illinois doesn't often get decided along party lines.

Physical education has a very strong support constituency, and childhood obesity and similar conditions are of particular concern these days. Vouchers? Not statewide. Illinois is not a school "privatizing" state. Tuition tax credits? Only as some kind of trade-off in a package mainly of tax increases. Debt limit cases are considered individually, as they should be. I'm sure Rep. Ives will have a bill or two that pass this year, but not likely these four.

The plutocracy continues to grow. Illinois acquired a billionaire governor two years ago. He boasts of his persistence, but it looks a lot more like he's just inept. We soon will have a billionaire U.S. president. His potential for disaster will surely boost church attendance for at least the next four years.

Now it appears another billionaire will soon become the nation's top education official. Betsy DeVos married into the family that sits atop the giant pyramid scheme that's known as Amway. Her husband was a [political flop a decade ago](#), in spite of blowing \$35 million trying to buy the governorship of Michigan. But thanks to DeVos family generosity toward other candidates - [particularly Republicans in the U.S. Senate](#) - Betsy's likely to become Secretary of Education.

Yes, a cabinet position at the federal level can be had for only \$4 million bucks.

But, like Jeanne Ives' bills, the DeVos nomination will cause a few arguments. A Washington post reader likens her to a denizen of the "swamp" that President-elect Donald Trump has promised to "drain." AFT President Randi Weingarten says it would be nice if the voucher-charter champion DeVos [would support public schools](#). The Leadership Conference, a civil rights group, has [a long list of reasons](#) why Betsy is "the wrong choice" for a cabinet position.

The Senate hearing is today. There will be news conferences and eloquent assertions by a range of her opponents, but the cabinet position has been bought and paid for. Would Trump go back on his word?

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