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# Illinois School News Service

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## Rep. Mayfield getting serious about boosting kids' reading skills

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

Sometimes a legislator will just get tired of waiting for a goal that's been talked about as a priority for years but, somehow, never achieved. [Rep. Rita Mayfield](#) (D-Waukegan) must have reached that level of frustration with the failure of so many children to read "at grade level" by the time they finish third grade.

So last week she filed [HB 4424](#), a bill ordering that goal to be reached - or else.

It's a fairly simple bill, just four pages long. The [underlined language on Page 4](#) establishes a "reading initiative" that the Illinois State Board of Education would be required to undertake if the bill becomes law. The initiative would affect every elementary school and would focus on third-grade reading skills.

The goal would be to "ensure that all students, beginning with students entering kindergarten in the 2016-2017 school year, are reading at or above grade level by the time they complete 3rd grade." No student could be promoted to the 4th grade until he is "able to read at or above grade level."

**Rep. Mayfield's policy goal is not empty rhetoric.** Her bill has some teeth. If at the end of "a given school year" more than 10% of a school's third-graders are retained for having failed to read at the level required, "the the school district is subject to State intervention" as provided in language in the middle of Page 2.

Woah! State intervention? That's right. If so many of a school's third-graders get held back for poor reading skills, "then the State Board of Education may authorize the State Superintendent of Education to direct the reassignment of students or direct the reassignment or replacement of [relevant] school district personnel ...."

Rep. Mayfield is no stranger to public education. She's a former vice-president of the Waukegan Board of Education, a board member for the Waukegan Schools Foundation and a founding member of Citizens Organized for School Leadership Accountability (COSLA). "[R]eassignment or replacement"; that's some accountability!

What are the chances of this bill passing? In its current form, it may be a little too harsh to generate much traction. It may be a bill filed to draw attention to a significant problem. Legislators file such bills on occasion. But if it sprouts wings, some schools may have to recruit the whole village to help. [Here's a place to start.](#)

**The House and Senate are avoiding Springfield** this week, observing yesterday's Martin Luther King holiday and bracing themselves to next week's clash with Gov. Bruce Rauner. The governor will give his "State of the State" address to a joint session of the General Assembly at noon next Wednesday. ([Watch it live here.](#))

So that means no legislative action this week? No, not exactly. The House wasn't in session last week either, and yet Rep. Mayfield's bill to force reading improvement found its way to the public agenda. January 11 was a "perfunctory" day for the House; bills were read into the record with no legislators on hand.

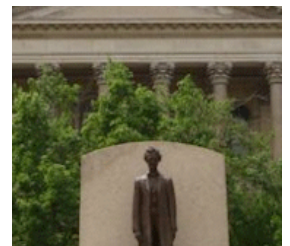
Wednesday and Friday of this week are also of the perfunctory variety. Bills will be filed but there will be no committee hearings at the Capitol or floor action by either chamber. (But at 10 a.m. Friday where will be a potentially important four-committee joint hearing in Chicago on "juvenile justice." It [may be webcast here.](#))

What other bills affecting public education were filed last week? There was not much. [Rep. Jerry Costello](#) (D-Belleville) filed [HB 4387](#), a proposal to give school districts more time to spend energy efficiency grant funds than has been allowed under current law; [HB 4432](#), filed by [Rep. Don Moffitt](#) (R-Galesburg) would permit a student to be absent from school "for the purpose of sounding 'Taps' at a military honors funeral ... for a deceased veteran."

**There was also a school funding bill filed** last week, but it seems unlikely to advance in the policy process. [HB 4439](#), filed by [Rep. Bill Mitchell](#) (R-Decatur) would require that the \$6,119-per student "Foundation Level of Support" from the state be nudged upward by 2% for 2016-2017 "and each school year thereafter."

Why is this bill unlikely? Because it's a joke. It would result, for example, in a Foundation Level of \$6,241.38 per student in the 2016-2017 school year. Sure, that's a more than a \$100-per kid increase. But it's a bit short of the \$8,899 Foundation Level [recommended for the current school year](#) - based simply on ECI inflation since the last adjustment - by the statutory Illinois Education Funding Advisory Board. Mitchell's caucus might like 2% but the majority party wouldn't lock that in.

The other reason why Mitchell's bill is DOA is that it repeals statutory language guaranteeing block grants for the Chicago Public Schools District. Chicago is the hometown of the majority Democratic party. Both House Speaker Michael Madigan



and Senate President John Cullerson hail from the Windy City. No way!

Another money bill, [HB 4451](#), sponsored by [Rep. Adam Brown](#) (R-Champaign), would alter the formula by which funding is calculated for the alternative schools programs administered by the CPS and by Regional Offices of Education. If the effect is to diminish the CPS share, as seems likely, the bill swims against the tide.

**Educator qualifications is the topic** of [HB 4360](#), filed last Wednesday by [Rep. Kelly Cassidy](#) (D-Chicago). The bill appears to prohibit the issuance of an educator license to anyone who has been convicted of a drug offense until seven years after the end of the sentence served for such a violation, rather than maintaining a permanent ban on issuing licenses to such individuals. The bill also seems to strengthen policy denying licenses to sex offenders.

Finally (for today), [HB 4362](#), filed by Rep. Michael Unes (R-Pekin), would require the State Board of Education to enter into contracts with two providers of a "college and career ready determination exam" and to let high school students choose which test they will take, with the State Board picking up the costs. If a student takes both tests, his parents would have to pay the costs for one of them. This bill is a GOP anti-PARCC statement; [HB 4380](#) has similar effects.

The General Assembly will have many more School Code-amending bills to consider this spring. The deadline for filing bills is still a month away, and many bills that were filed in 2015 remain viable as school policy proposals for the current year. (We'll look at some of those next time.) And, of course, there are the shell bills.

What's a shell bill? It is an empty bill - perhaps it changes a statutory word from "and" to "also" - that is filed in time to comply with the filing deadlines and serves as a placeholder for more substantive policy - which would be expressed as an amendment doing what and adopted when.

Yes, the legislative process occasionally has its surprises. The Constitution tries to slow things down a bit in the interest of transparency, but when all the caucuses agree on something - something big and ugly but necessary - on about the last day of a session, it can be a lightning quick blind-siding kind of a thing.

I'll try to point out the surprises as they come over the horizon.

**Rauner should leave the union-busting chore** to the U.S. Supreme Court. As you read here a month or so ago, the nation's highest court seems [set to overturn a four-decade precedent](#) requiring employees whose wages and benefits are bargained for by a union to which they do not belong to pay a "fair share" of the costs of bargaining. If that happens, it would, over time, pretty much spell the end of effective public employee unions.

To eliminate the fair share fees would incentivize employees to refuse to join the union that bargains for them. Eventually, the union's membership - its funding and its clout - would erode to the status of a "right-to-work" venue. The Economic Policy Institute calculates that would hike the ["pay penalty" for public employment](#).

It's long been recognized that public employees - teachers and other educators certainly - receive significantly less in wages and benefits than private sector employees with similar educational backgrounds, challenging professions and critical levels of personal responsibility. RTW would widen that gap by about a mile.

We're seeing the end of trend that reaches back as far as the Reagan Administration. (Remember how he broke the air traffic controllers' union?) As unions' influence eroded in the U.S. economy, middle-class wages - not just for union members but for non-members as well - [generally stagnated](#).

That, of course, is the crux of the "budget impasse" between Rauner and the Democratic-controlled House and Senate. Rauner wants legislation enacted to move Illinois toward RTW status, while Madigan and Cullerton want to prevent further erosion of the middle class - [which is no longer the U.S. majority](#).

Rauner's position will prevail eventually. Even if the Supreme Court accepts the fair share precedent set decades ago, Illinois will eventually go RTW. Money seeks power, which seeks money. We see plutocracy on the rise today, folks.

**Why do the candidates avoid science topics?** They dance around climate change generally, except for the candidates seeking the lowest common denominator vote. Evolution? Forget it. They debate foreign policy and economics, a little, but there's a coalition that wants presidential candidates to talk about science.

Here's the URL for the [sciencedebate.org coalition](#). It's largely an education-related organization, but there are some corporations, some associations - even some elected officials - nagging for some meaningful arguments about science. You [can be engaged in this topic](#) if you wish to sign a petition.

Speaking of candidates, [here's an interesting first-person account](#) of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's first involvement with politics back in 1960. The writer, Betsy Vandercook, attended a Park Ridge junior high school with Clinton (then Hillary Rodham) - who was at the time a Republican fanatic.

Vandercook recalls how Hillary actually called Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley to tell him how wrong it was for him to "steal the election" in 1960, causing John F. Kennedy to defeat her favored candidate - Richard Nixon. Another interesting angle: Betsy Vandercook supports Bernie Sanders for President in 2016.

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