



Jim Broadway

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## Illinois School News Service

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### Okay, now does everyone have the talking points?

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

Gov. Bruce Rauner [conducted a "media availability"](#) on Wednesday for no apparent reason other than, perhaps, to make sure everyone knows the "talking points," the preferred characterization of why there is no state budget, why the schools are in danger of not being able to open in the fall, why things are such a mess.

It's all House Speaker Michael Madigan's fault. Madigan saw that the rank-and-file legislative "working groups" were making great progress, had come "very close to an agreement," so he "put the thumb on the process," he "slow-walked, slow-rolled" the working groups to make sure they wouldn't get anywhere.

Why is Madigan doing all this? It is because *he does not want an agreement*, does not want a budget deal. Instead, he "and his super-majority are clearly working to create a crisis ... to force a bailout of the Chicago public schools and the city of Chicago, and to force a major tax hike after the general election in November."

Most egregiously, Madigan wants "a tax hike - without reforms," Rauner asserted, shaking his head. "The speaker's been pretty darn clear, he does not want reforms." By "reforms," Rauner has consistently meant his "[TurnAround Agenda](#)," a mix of pro-business policy initiatives and erosion of the bargaining rights of unions.

**Question: Why would Madigan suddenly change his character?** As Rauner regularly points out, Madigan has been the leader of the House Democrats' caucus for more than three decades. He has led his chamber during the administrations of six governors - two Democrats and, counting Rauner, four Republicans.

In all that time of Madigan's being "in control," there was never a failure of the legislature and the governors to enact a budget, not for any fiscal year in three decades, until 2015 - Rauner's first year in office. Madigan is the constant in this equation. The situation is unprecedented and Rauner's the only new factor.

There's also the issue of motivation. It is true that increased revenue - a "tax hike" - is required if the FY 2017 budget is to be both balanced and sane. But everyone agrees with that. All four caucus leaders and Rauner have said that consistently. So no "crisis" is needed - just an agreement on revenue and how to spend it.

It is Rauner's insistence on cutting the labor unions off at the knees before he will discuss a long-term budget strategy that keeps the crisis in place. Madigan believes that would further damage the "middle class" in Illinois, a segment of our society whose decline has - not coincidentally - [tracked that of the unions](#).

**Rauner certainly wants to sign** an FY 2017 education budget. The schools must open on time or he will be blamed. But his education budget proposals, based on the current, broken General State Aid formula, have wild effects - massive funding hikes to some very wealthy districts, deep cuts to others most in need.

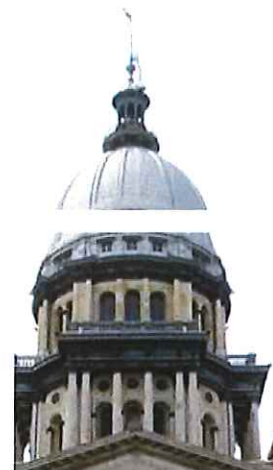
House and Senate GOP leaders have, at Rauner's request, offered up education budget proposals that would carry schools just into January of next year, without any changes in the GSA formula but just with a lame "hold-harmless" provision to prevent any "losers" - or at least to mollify them for a while.

Local school district leaders, who were also at the Capitol for an outdoor news conference Wednesday, didn't seem all that enthralled over the Rauner vision of education funding. Representing the "[Funding IL's Future](#)" coalition that wants a permanent solution to school funding, including an ["equitable" distribution system](#).

The coalition lined up district superintendents from all parts of the state, urban and rural, large districts and small ones, who spoke eloquently of the "crises" they have been experiencing every year, particularly with the inequitable shares of state support being "pro-rated" to the detriment of the poorest districts.

The coalition's representatives at the Capitol this week included:

- Tony Sanders, CEO, School District U-46, Elgin
- Dr. Carmen Ayala, Superintendent, Berwyn North School District 98
- Dr. Jennifer Garrison, Superintendent, Sandoval School District 501
- Marica Cullen, Superintendent, North Mac School District 34
- Mike Gauch, Superintendent, Harrisburg School District 3
- Dr. Gregg Fuerstenau, Superintendent, Taylorville School District 3
- Dr. David Lett, Superintendent, Pana School District 8
- Rich Well, Superintendent, Vandalia School District 203





- Fred Heid, Superintendent, Carpentersville School District 300
- Dr. Jennifer Gill, Superintendent, Springfield School District 186

There is strong legislative support for [SB 231](#), the coalition's favorite bill, which has passed the Senate. The bill would channel more than 90% of all state school funding through a revised GSA formula tilted more heavily in favor of the districts with the most low-income students and the least property tax resources.

That legislation, or anything even close to it, would require state school funding increases in the range of hundreds of millions of dollars, especially if the more affluent districts are to be "held harmless" from cuts they would otherwise have to absorb. Any "grand bargain" would include a tax hike for that and other reasons.

Which returns us to Rauner's strange characterization of Madigan. He would be the last member of the Democrats' caucus to "want to" enact a massive tax increase. He's been a party to so many half measures, band-aid approaches to budgetary needs, it's just difficult to count them. The 2011 temporary tax hike is just one example.

Madigan is a conservative. He shuns revolutionary change, massive adjustments in anything, especially in an election year. His mission is not to shape solid and permanent solutions to the fiscal problems of the school districts and the state. Madigan's mission is to win elections, to build his caucus.

Dumb talking points are not the solution. They are just more electioneering. To say Madigan wants a crisis to justify a massive post-election tax hike is exactly what I would say if I wanted a crisis that I could blame on someone else who would then enact the tax hike I also want but will prefer to blame others for enacting.

One of the things legislators genuinely care about, not just as a talking point but as a core mission, is the well-being of schoolchildren, the health and safety of the two million children enrolled in the public schools of Illinois. Many of the bills they file are about this. Many that pass do so with strong bipartisan support.

[HB 4365](#), for example, continues a process of recent sessions in which the safety of scholar-athletes, particularly in sports that involve blows to the head and possible concussions, has been a subject of ever-tightening regulation. The state has gone from no effective regulation at all to a status of strong protection for students.

In recent years, the policymakers have codified requirements that professionals trained to recognize the potential for an athlete to have sustained a concussion to take him or her out of a game or practice, and that a medical professional give consent before the student can return to play or practices.

This year's extension of concussion policy requires every school district to have a "certified athletic trainer" to submit a monthly report to the sports event-sanctioning organization (the Illinois High School Association) "on student-athletes ... who have sustained a concussion during school-sponsored activity."

That begins with the 2016-17 school year. By the 2017-18 school year, the IHSA will be required to compile a complete statewide report based on the school districts' monthly reports, for distribution to members of the General Assembly. The IHSA would be authorized to "take action against" a school that fails to report.

Was this a popular bill? It passed the House [105-0](#) and the Senate [52-0](#).

Similar unanimous votes were cast in both the House and Senate for [HB 4462](#), a complicated bill involving training that is required for public and private school personnel and for Illinois State Police staff to enable them to identify symptoms of allergic reactions and to administer epinephrine using an "auto-injector" device.

For schools, the bill was an update of previously enacted policy, modifying topics to be included in training, accounting for situations in which students are being transported by a company contracting for that service to the schools, revising some definitions and reporting requirements. House vote, [115-0](#); Senate, [55-0](#).

See, not everything is blocked by partisan gridlock.

[HB 6333](#), a related measure, got off to a somewhat rocky start in the House, but in the end it was roundly supported. The bill requires schools to maintain a written "asthma action plan" - and the State Board of Education will be required to draft a template of such a plan - for use in emergency asthma attacks.

In the early going, Republicans in the House challenged the bill's sponsor, [Rep. Robyn Gabel](#) (D-Evanston), as to the need for another "unfunded mandate" to be imposed on public schools. The floor debate became awkward for Gabel, who may be the legislature's most qualified member in the area of public health.

Seeing his colleagues' questions almost becoming attacks on Gabel, Rep. Robert Pritchard (R-Sycamore), the Republican caucus' leader on school policy, rose to support the bill and to commend Gabel for her work in this area. The sniping then stopped, but the bill's initial House vote was far from a consensus at [76-33](#).

That vote sent the bill over to the Senate, where an amendment was adopted to "allow," rather than "require," copies of the asthma action plan "to be distributed to appropriate school staff." The Senate then approved the bill [50-0](#), returning it to the House where it was warmly welcomed back with a [116-1 vote](#) on concurrence.

Another bill that survived a minor bump in the process was [SB 2137](#), sponsored by [Sen. Julie Morrison](#) (D-Deerfield), which began as a School Code revision requiring an IEP review within 15 days after a school receives notice that a service animal will be present at school functions for the benefit of a student with a disability.

Since the bill was designed to achieve conformity with federal law in this regard, an amendment was adopted requiring simply that "instruction on the federal Americans with Disabilities Act as it pertains to the school environment" be offered at teachers institutes "at least once every 2 years." The Senate was [50-0 for that](#).

**The bill sailed through a committee hearing in the House**, but when it reached a final action vote in that chamber it got pummeled by Rep. Jack Franks (D-Woodstock), who ranted without knowing what he was talking about (not uncommon for Franks) that the bill forced every teacher to comply with an "unfunded mandate."

Enough House members kept a grip on reality that [96 of them voted in favor](#) of the bill, but Franks' emotional tirade was probably what influenced 15 of his colleagues to follow him over the edge and oppose the bill.

Finally, there is [SB 2835](#), sponsored by [Sen. Andy Manar](#) (D-Bunker Hill), which adds to the law requiring drivers to stop for school buses that are "receiving or discharging pupils" by listing the kinds of locations where that can happen: "on a highway, roadway, private road, parking lot, school property," etc.

You wouldn't think such specificity would be needed but, as I tell my children, every fifth driver is in the bottom 20% in any driving-related category you can name. The Senate agreed [57-0](#) and the House followed with [110-0](#). (So Manar cares about issues other than school funding fairness; child safety is also on his mind.)

**Congratulations to [Logan Square Neighborhood Association](#) and [Southwestern Organizing Project](#) of Chicago and to the other 14 organizations who've joined as partners over the last ten years in the development, the growth and the success with your nationally recognized [Parent Mentor Program](#).**

What began as a program training parents in one school to engage with the education of the children and to provide needed support for the teachers has blossomed to include 70 schools and the involvement of 16 community organizations, boosting teachers' ability to achieve and parents' nurturing skills and confidence.

More than 600 parent mentors, school principals, supporting foundation representatives and state legislators are to gather today at Gage Park High School in Chicago to celebrate the graduation of new parent mentors from their training program, to "share stories of personal and school transformations," [their media advisory said](#).

The education and well-being of children can become the dominant priority of an entire "community" of citizens residing in the neighborhood of a school. And the school can become the focal point of civic engagement, of social activity, of growth in citizenship in many ways. This as a positive concept growing in acceptance.

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