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Despite stumble, grand bargain still possible

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

Theatrics aside, there's no reason to believe a "grand bargain" - revenue to keep the state afloat coupled with a business wish-list item or two - is beyond Illinois policymakers' grasp. All it takes is commitment by Gov. Bruce Rauner and the four legislative caucus leaders, a few shell bills and a day or two to pass them.

Of course, that "commitment" part seems hardest to bring about.

It was a dramatic event on Wednesday when [SB 11](#), the pension "reform bill of dubious constitutionality, went down in flames. No Republicans and only about half the Democrats [could find their green buttons](#) for the bill. And it was linked, in bill language, to all the other pieces of a grand bargain package.

But the caucus leaders alone have filed at least 1,000 shell bills. There's a "vehicle" out there for any policy purpose you can name. Hundreds of them could move from the Senate to the House - and pass hundreds more going the other way across the Capitol Rotunda. So, technically, the grand bargain could still happen.

And yet, that doesn't mean it will happen. Most likely, it won't. It also doesn't mean it *should* happen. Like most examples of "log-rolling" - which is constitutionally prohibited if done in a single bill - there are good ideas and horrible ideas in the 13-bill package the Senate assembled as a grand bargain.

Pretty much everyone agrees that [raising the floor of school funding](#) so the kids in economically depressed areas can still get a decent education, yeah, that's a good idea. Property tax policy in Illinois is another example of malpractice; a freeze is [just another half-measure](#). Scrapping it and starting over is a better idea.

Raising more revenue via the income tax and the sales tax is also a positive notion. The main reason Illinois is in such a fiscal black hole is that, for decades, it provided close to an average menu of state services, but lacked the guts to ask the citizens to cover current costs with current dollars. Monstrous debt is the result.

Bad ideas? "Saving" money for the state by forcing public employees into a choice that will reduce the benefits of their pensions in retirement, either way, is not only a bad idea - it is immoral and unconstitutional. [Quit messing with Tier I](#). Own up to your contractual obligations and just pay them.

Another proposal that emerges in economic hard times, like a flock of vultures circling a dying mustang, is gambling proliferation. Prof. John Kindt of the University of Illinois is one the nation's top experts on gambling and its economic effects. He was a committee hearing witness on [SB 7](#). [Here are his findings](#).

It's pretty obvious. When the entire state economy is considered (not just the part that involves dollars flowing into the state treasury), casino and video gambling are bone-headed state policies. Gambling is "about taking money out of the consumer economy and shipping it off to Las Vegas," [Klindt is quoted as saying](#).

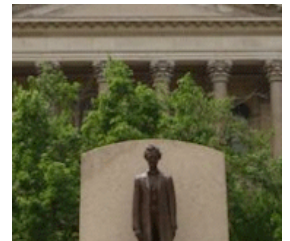
There's a personal dimension to casino and video gambling that affects every participant - but some more than others. Much research in the neurosciences has focused on gambling in the last decade or so, largely as an effort to understand the human propensity for risky behavior. The [analyses are usually rhetorically dense](#).

Roger Collier describes the effects [in laymen's terms](#) for an NIH article: "Though diverse in appearance, all slot machines, according to some mental health experts, have something in common: they are psychologically deceptive and make gambling addicts of people who aren't predisposed to addictions."

Bad economics. Creating and preying on addictions. Good policy?

Meanwhile, not-so-grand bargain bills continue to reach the public agenda. In fact, my account with the Legislative Information System (LIS) tells me that 254 bills that would in some ways amend the School Code have been filed. But when the unamended "shell bills" are removed from the list, the total is just 149.

I believe in a previous newsletter I estimated that not more than about one-third of that total would find their way to the desk of Gov. Rauner. [Here's a spreadsheet](#) at which you can click the bill numbers of the 149 bills to read their contents, or click their sponsors' names to learn about the sponsors.



It is important to know that today is the bill-introduction deadline in both chambers. More bills are to be filed today, but there won't be much growth in the numbers that would amend the School Code. In short order, therefore, in a week or so, we will have active School Code and related bills presented in a user-friendly form.

One bill I'd call your attention to now is [HB 2808](#), sponsored by [Rep. Will Davis](#) (D-East Hazel Crest) and, importantly, co-sponsored by [Rep. Bob Pritchard](#) (R-Sycamore). Davis chairs the House committee on PK-12 education appropriations and Pritchard is Republican spokesman for the committee. Powerful bipartisanship.

HB 2909, unlike the Senate's "grand bargain" vehicle, is fully in place. It describes in statutory language the "evidence-based" school funding model that is favored by the "[Funding Illinois' Future](#)" coalition. It was just filed on Thursday. I'll let Bob Dolgan of [Advance Illinois](#) describe it for you:

HB2808 makes school funding in Illinois more equitable and adequate and has the potential to end a decades-long problem. The bill aligns with equity principles in last week's [Illinois School Funding Reform Commission Report](#)—and the principles of Funding Illinois' Future—providing any new money to the neediest schools first and taking local contributions to school funding into account. We urge members of the House to co-sponsor the bill as a first step toward passing bipartisan, bicameral legislation this spring. Illinois must end the chronic underfunding of low-income schools and give all students the education they deserve in order to be ready for college and career.

Illinois needs a funding system that is equitable, adequate and fair. Illinois remains worst-in-the-nation in providing resources for low-income school districts. For every dollar Illinois spends on a non-low-income student, it spends 81 cents on a low-income student. Legislative action is needed now so that students in poverty access to resources so that districts may invest in reducing class sizes, providing updated textbooks and modern technology and offering advanced placement and other classes like art, foreign language and music that make up a well-rounded education. Funding Illinois' Future remains steadfast in its view that new funding legislation must do the following:

1. Recognize individual student need
2. Account for difference in local resources
3. Close funding gaps in five years and keep them closed
4. Provide a stable and sustainable solution

Funding Illinois' Future is a coalition of more than 200 school districts, school superintendents, community- and faith-based organizations working toward fixing Illinois' worst-in-the-nation school funding formula with the goal of giving every student in Illinois the education they deserve.

Thank you, Bob.

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