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Fwd: State Board back in 'rubber-stamp' mode?

1 message

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April Board Meeting

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From: **State School News Service** <j.m.broadway74@gmail.com>
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State Board back in 'rubber-stamp' mode?

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

The Illinois State Board of Education was established in the Illinois Constitution of 1970 to be an "independent" agency, a force for public education that would be insulated from political influences. That independence was never quite achieved, but ISBE's status as being "under the governor's thumb" is relatively recent.

Terms of office for State Board members used to be staggered. An incoming governor could fill vacancies as they occurred, but he would have to get reelected a time or two before he could appoint a majority the board's members. And once they were appointed, only a rash governor would attempt to disappoint one.

Gov. George Ryan convinced the legislature to change the law so a governor could appoint a majority of the State Board at the start of a term. But Ryan soon left the scene (of the crime) and it was Gov. Rod Blagojevich who flaunted his control of ISBE. But he eventually followed Ryan out the door, as you'll recall.

Gov. Pat Quinn may have hoped to control the agency but he was in too far over his head. Gov. Bruce Rauner, to his credit, appointed a strong chairman - former Sen. James Meeks - and an effective State Superintendent Tony Smith, and then the Rauner Administration seemed mainly to just stay out of their way.

But legislators seem to see that independence melting away. Gov. JB Pritzker made excellent appointments in naming Darren Reisberg to chair the State Board and getting highly respected Berwyn North SD 98 Supt. Carmen Ayala to replace Smith as State Superintendent. But the transition's been rough.

The Meeks board did its duty January 16 by adopting a state education budget proposal for FY 2020. But the old board's numbers [didn't align well](#) with the FY 2020 state budget Pritzker proposed to the General Assembly in February. So the new board (eight of nine members are new) adopted a budget of their own in March.

That proposal, adopted after the fact statutorily, is [strikingly similar, virtually identical to Pritzker's](#) budget. Only two lines - just additional items on the new board's wish list - make it different from a budget they could have drawn by just looking over the Pritzker's shoulder as he wrote his.

Members of the House [PK-12 education appropriation committee](#) were underwhelmed by the apparent plagiarism when they met with ISBE leadership this week. "You rubber-stamped the governor's budget," a committee member asserted. "It doesn't appear like a lot of thought went into that," [Rep. Katie Stuart](#) said.

In response, Reisberg seemed to deny the obvious. "We, at this point, don't feel like we rubber-stamped the budget," he said. "We feel like the budget that Gov. Pritzker put forth is very reasonable, given where we are as a state. And we felt like the budget that was put forth by the board that preceded us was not."

The State Board will meet again in two weeks, Reisberg said, and "we want to hear which of those lines you feel like were actually removed from that budget are of utmost importance to this general assembly and to this committee in particular." Members of the committee seemed less than pleased to point out some flaws.

The Meeks board voted just a tad more than level funding for the "District Intervention" line, funding for North Chicago and East St. Louis school districts that were taken over by the state. The Reisberg (Pritzker) board cut that line from this year's \$6,560,200 down to \$4,920,200 for FY 2020. The Meeks board had recommended about a \$12.6 million increase in Career and Technical Education funding; Reisberg (Pritzker) saw a \$5 million hike as reasonable.

"I know the governor has his budget, but as an agency you have a responsibility for the children of Illinois. So, you don't have to agree with him, but you do have to do what's best for the children. And I did not see that in your budget," Stuart lectured Reisberg. "Take back to the board that we want you more student-focused."

Members of the House and Senate stayed on task this week, churning legislation across the Capitol Rotunda to the "second chamber" with alacrity. The deadline for moving non-appropriation bills in that direction is Friday of next week. (Exceptions are possible, but they'll cost some political capital.)

Some bills that might seem a bit controversial are racking up large passing margins. [HB 2084](#), for example, which would establish a "Safe Schools and Healthy Learning Environments Grant Program," passed the House [107-2](#) on Thursday. The grants it might provide, of course, are "subject to appropriation."

[HB 2087](#), a bill to allow students to take part of their driver education program in a "distance learning" process (if their parents, the school administration - and the driver education teacher - approve) passed the House [113-0](#) Wednesday. (I'm missing something. Why would a driver ed teacher go along with that?)

[HB 2267](#), the bill calling for an elected Chicago Public Schools board passed the House [110-2](#) Thursday. It was a GOP idea back in the 1990s to hamstring Chicago's mayor, politically, by making him take the blame for CPS failures. Didn't work, of course, largely because of the effectiveness of the first CPS CEO Paul Vallas.

Most of the bills are totally non-controversial. [HB 2258](#) adds "speech" to a list of options, any one of which is required for a student to graduate from high school. Other options already include art, music, a foreign language or vocational ed. The bill passed the House [112-0](#) Wednesday and is now in the Senate.

[HB 2830](#), a bill prohibiting an employer from terminating an employee for taking time off work to attend a conference or "behavior meeting" at their child's school. The [105-5](#)

[vote](#) is remarkable. (The "no"-votes may tell you who, among House members, will take the business owner's side of any argument no matter what.)

But even a "mom and apple pie" bill could be divisive. [HB 2265](#), a bill simply requiring a semester of civics education at some point in grades 6 through 8, passed the House last week [73-31](#). Sure, it's a solid passing vote, but who are the 31 who don't want kids to learn how government works?

[HB 2209](#), requiring tax increment financing district (TIF) information - What districts? How much property tax money has been diverted to them? - to be printed on property tax bills, also passed the House easily this week. (Stretching the term "blighted" to beyond recognition has led to amazing TIF proliferation.)

The House has completed its three-day week (Whew!) so its members have gone home. The Senate was scheduled to be at the Capitol today, but they either got a great deal done in two days or were too envious of the House schedule; in any case, the chamber is silent. No floor debates to monitor today. Sorry.

But many bills were advanced this week, and many bills were trashed. The ISNS bill-tracking web page is pretty out of date now. I'll be traveling and unable to update it today, but it will be current again by Saturday night. Then next week, both legislative chambers have promised to work from Tuesday through Friday.

Can they call all the pending chamber-of-origin bills by Friday's deadline? Of course not. They don't even want to. It's so easy to tell a constituent, "We ran out of time and your bill just didn't get called." And isn't that better than having to say, "I could only get seven other votes for your bill, so it died on the House floor."

As you know, I'm influenced by science. My son James is a neuroscientist. For years, my writing has been informed by science that describes what makes people tick. I was shocked, for example, when I learned about some genetic traits that researchers have linked to behaviors of the most revoltingly violent kind.

As Dr. David Eagleman describes it in his brilliant book *Incognito*, those who carry those genes are "eight times more likely [than others in society] to commit aggravated assault, ten times more likely to commit murder, thirteen times more likely to commit armed robbery, and forty-four times more likely to commit sexual assault."

Then, after a bit of digression, he adds: "By the way, as regards that dangerous set of genes, you've probably heard of them. They are summarized as the Y chromosome. If you're a carrier, we call you a male." I strongly recommend David Eagleman's book - and I generally urge support for female political candidates.

These special ISNS features will be updated regularly: the [bill-tracking web page](#) showing the status of viable bills that could affect public education policy, and a page of links to all [ISNS newsletters so far delivered](#) in 2019. (The URL for these pages was changed April 1, so only ISNS readers can access them.)

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