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Dems' 'Life-Line' not helpful for GOP, Rauner

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

There was a lot of chatter from House Republicans on April 6 when [HB 109](#) - an appropriations bill that would send \$800 million to universities and human service providers through the June 30 end of the fiscal year - passed in the House. Why now?, GOP legislators taunted. The Senate was out until 4/25.

Besides, Gov. Bruce Rauner will never sign it. What's the point?

Pretty often, when an unpopular bill must be passed, it will be done in a matter of minutes. A shell bill on third in the second chamber will be amended and then get an immediate passing vote. Then the chamber of origin will hold a hearing (un huh) on the amendment, then vote to concur with it and, presto, it's done.

But on rarer occasions, it's helpful to slow things down, to give the media, the public and the constituencies affected by a complex bill a good long look at it before the second chamber has even been able to hold a hearing. HB 109 is such a bill. It's been called a "life-line" bill, but a citizen needs to study it to see why.

The bill needed time to make the rounds, to reach the folks whose communities need it - particularly the downstate university towns where the legislators are mostly Republicans - to be put on display as an emergency rescue effort. A House committee traveled [all the way to Carbondale](#) on Thursday for just that purpose.

Even though Thursday's [committee on human services](#) appropriations hearing was on the subject matter of Rauner's proposed FY 2018 budget, testimony from groups that provide human services were calculated to give graphic support to the pending "life-line" bill that will reach the Senate on Tuesday.

The witness slips you found at the above link are interesting. Proponents and opponents of the governor's proposal numbered nine each - but slips indicated "no position" [on that document](#). At this point in the budgeting process, folks are afraid to irritate either power center, the legislative or the executive.

[This morning's hearing in Chicago](#) on the subject matter of "community college affordability" is also sure to reinforce the benefits of post-secondary educational attainment, which HB 109 supports with significant funding. Also, [the PR fight](#) to end Illinois' two-year budget impasse continues.

Rauner, as usual, has been sticking to his new (and impossible) demand that a *permanent* property tax freeze must be enacted before he will consider a budget bill. By exposing the public to facts about the bill - the facts about the need and that funds are accumulating in accounts that can be used only in response to that need - may persuade him to relent, for political reasons if not for the health of Illinois' universities and of its most vulnerable citizens.

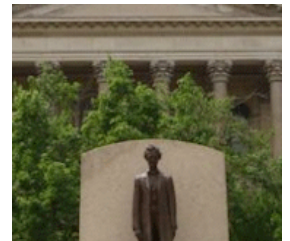
What does HB 109 seek to fund? The Monetary Award Program (MAP) grants that make the difference for so many low-income students to attend college or not, would receive \$287 million. Other Illinois Student Assistance Commission goals would also get some funding (such as Golden Apple Scholars, \$6.6 million).

The long-suffering institutions of higher education would get relief. Public health and safety programs, such as funding for homelessness prevention, for independent living centers, for prevention and intervention in cases of domestic violence, for the "Parents Too Soon" program and for services to senior citizens.

Generally, this measure would enable state agencies to do their jobs for sympathetic constituencies, for the poor, the old, the blind, for aspiring students of limited means, for victims of domestic violence and others. Rauner and his allies in the GOP caucuses can block this bill, but they do so at their political peril.

How will the bill fare in the Senate? Well, it was added to the Senate record on Thursday. The sponsor in that chamber is Senate President John Cullerton. It would appear likely to reach Rauner's desk soon. He can veto it, of course, and the GOP legislators can prevent an "override" of that action. But will they?

Both chambers should devote significant time to floor action next week. The deadline for a bill to be voted out of the chamber of origin is Friday for both House and Senate bills. (It's a good time for lobbying legislators. They'll come off the floor if you send in your card, but when in committees they're hard to reach.)



Speaking of committees, both chambers have scheduled some of them to meet next week. In the Senate, the appropriation committees meet at [9 a.m. Tuesday](#) (on FY 2018 budget proposals for universities) and [8:30 a.m. Wednesday](#) (Criminal Justice Information Authority, Prisoner Review Board, Juvenile Justice department).

The Senate's Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments convenes Tuesday to consider [SJCA 4](#), a resolution to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. That's right, the ERA returns. They were arguing about that issue when I arrived in Springfield in 1981. (Should have ratified it.)

Apparently the plan is for the ERA resolution to be passed in the subcommittee Tuesday, because it is also posted for a hearing by the [Executive Committee](#) on Wednesday, along with SJCA 1, a proposal to put a graduated income tax system plan on the ballot next November. (That is another excellent idea.)

Will the constitutional amendments advance? Since three-fifths majority votes are required, and since the Republican caucuses generally protect the interests of wealthy folks like Rauner, it is unlikely that the income tax measure will be successful. As to the ERA matter, it either fails here or fails in the federal court.

The House has a [slew of committee hearings](#) planned for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. A number of House bills got their committee deadlines extended a bit, but the large majority of the measures pending in House committees are House resolutions, which are simply policy expressions with no force of law.

The House committee on PK-12 education Curriculum & Policies will meet at 10 a.m. Wednesday to consider [HJR 38](#), a resolution urging schools and parents and others to become aware of the physical ill effects that children can suffer from if the backpacks they tote around are consistently too heavy.

The committee will also consider an amendment to [HB 2545](#), which would make it more likely that school personnel who "work with pupils" in third grade or older will be trained to recognize students exhibiting symptoms of mental health issues or potentially suicidal inclinations. The bill will pass as amended.

It appears that House members will be on the floor from noon until about 4 p.m. on Tuesday and from 11 a.m. until 3 p.m. on Wednesday. Most of the many committees and subcommittees that are scheduled will deal with just one or two issues, usually previously debated, so the hearings will tend to be quite brief.

Things took an unpleasant turn recently for Beverly Holden Johns, one of Illinois most prominent experts on special education policy - a presenter in demand for conferences nationally and internationally - when the "webinar" she was scheduled to present for the Illinois Principals Association next week was canceled.

Bev Johns has advocated for special education for 40 years, often as a witness testifying at legislative hearings and also communicating with professionals on her mailing lists (probably thousands), describing situations and encouraging people to take action, to engage with the policy process, on behalf of special education.

She had never been "fired" from a job before and she wanted to know the reason. She has ways of finding things out, and it appears her webinar was canceled because he opposes pending school funding "reform" bills ([SB 1](#) and [HB 2808](#)). Both bills would eliminate "direct and dedicated" funding for special education.

Things got complicated quickly. Johns received an email from the Illinois Association of Administrators of Special Education (IAASE), which she interpreted as a disparagement against her for her position on the school funding reform bills. She copied the email to her email list multitudes and refuted it.

This led to an amazing reaction by the IAASE. An Arlington Heights law firm sent Johns a "cease and desist" memo claiming that the IAASE's email was copyright protected and, "under federal law" Johns could be subjected to "statutory damages of up to \$150,000." Bev wrote to a bunch of folks about that as well.

Clearly, the issue is one of freedom of speech. The IPA objected to Johns' opposition to the evidence-based model of school funding reform and canceled her presentation, compensating her for her preparation time, I was told, but otherwise giving her just a lame "painful to part company" sort of response.

The IPA was no more responsive than that for ISNS as well.

For the IAASE to sic its lawyers on Johns, to threaten her with \$150,000 in damages for copying a document that was sent to her email inbox, that's just beyond the pale. It is unfortunate that, on the rare occasions when truly difference-making legislation is possible, some organizations let the pressure get to them.

Freedom of expression has been the cornerstone of civilization since the Enlightenment, when authorities stopped burning people at the stake for holding the "wrong" opinions. This situation came to my attention in part because of a contact from another educational leader who asked me:

"Can you imagine threatening Bev Johns for speaking out on behalf of services for special education students? What kind of student advocates are in charge of the Illinois Principals Association?" Answer: Folks who can't handle pressure.

Let me make a few things clear. First, I tend not to take sides in disagreements among my friends. I have for many years admired the role of school principals and respected their statewide organization. Same with IAASE. I am not taking sides in the disagreement over the school funding reform proposals, either.

I agree with Bev Johns that, despite some representations, the pending bills would eliminate the specific designation of a lot of state support for special education programs. But I'm not objecting to that. The designated funding may go away, but the federal mandate will not. Special education will continue to be provided.

The higher priority issue, in my view, is the gross and growing inequity in educational resources devoted to children from one district to another. If the evidence-based model is enacted - and then the policymakers actually provide the resources to fund it appropriately - I'll begin to accept the view that, yes, there are miracles.

Things will get very hectic at the Capitol starting next week. The possibility of success seems clouded over by a probability of a sickening failure, of another year of stop-gap budgets and half measures, another period of accumulation of debt that will ultimately be paid by your children and grandchildren.

Prospects for success improve, I think, when all leaders keep their cool.

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