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"The need for educational tests and policy measures to selectively identify, accommodate, and maximize the differentially specialized forms of individual intellectual potential becomes increasingly evident."

- Roger Sperry, Nobel Thesis 1981

(In other words: One size fits *one*.)

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Senate-passed property tax freeze bill sits in House committee

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

[Note: This is likely the last ISNS newsletter that you will receive in 2015. The governor and the legislative leaders seem to have given up on enacting a budget for the current fiscal year before it is at least half over. So now we'll discuss other topics of interest and then sign off until the first week of January.]

Of all the legislative initiatives still pending in the Illinois General Assembly, the bill that seems to attract the most interest among school district leaders would be [SB 318](#), a property tax freeze proposal that passed the Senate with votes to spare and now resides in the House Executive Committee.

The bill would cripple hundreds of school districts - and thousands of other units of government with property taxing authority, such as counties, cities, library districts, park districts - by freezing their tax levies for two years. Plus it would abolish the General State Aid formula in 2017, expecting to replace it with a new state school funding mechanism yet to be determined. [See how a [prominent public finance law firm alerted its clients](#) after the Senate passed SB 318.]

Can it become law? On the surface, it looks like a measure with muscle, an idea that could sprout wings. The Senate sponsor was Senate President John Cullerton. The House sponsor is Majority Leader [Rep. Barbara Flinn Currie](#), whose clout in the chamber is second only to that of Speaker Michael Madigan.

But this bill also has some drag on it. Republican legislators followed instructions from Gov. Bruce Rauner and voted "present" when it was called in the Senate. (That has the same effect of a "no" vote, but the GOP senators can deny to their taxpayer constituents that they ever voted "against" a property tax freeze.)

The governor's objection is based on his vision of how the costs of government must be reduced in Illinois. To reduce local governments' revenue without reducing their fiscal obligations would be a mistake, Rauner figures. He wants the legislature, in effect, to curtail collective bargaining by public employee unions.

That demand is at the crux of the so-called "budget impasse" in Illinois. The impasse is less about the budget than about Rauner's plans to prevent public employees from bargaining on wages, healthcare and pensions. Neither chamber will sacrifice public employees, so SB 318 seems likely to stay blocked.

Rauner has also focused on a couple of constitutional issues. He wants term limits, a truly anti-democracy idea which, constitutionally, only the legislature can initiate and, therefore, *will not happen*. Rauner also demands redistricting reform, which could happen whether Speaker Madigan likes it or not (not).

Check out the ["Independent Map Amendment"](#) campaign, which is gathering signatures on petitions that would require revisions to legislative district boundaries to be drawn by a non-partisan commission (rather partisan legislators). The campaign [has the funding and the leadership](#) to be successful.

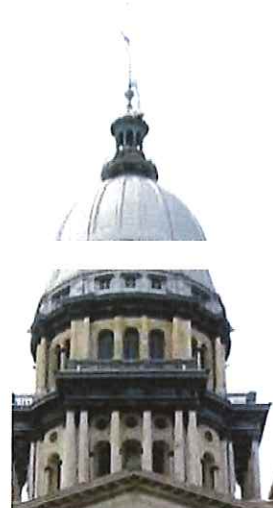
The [effects of this amendment would be profound](#) in 2022 and for decades to come. More than any other reform (much more than term limits), the Independent Map Amendment would cure much of what ails democracy in Illinois. And the citizens can put it on the ballot without the legislature's involvement.

Getting back to the property tax freeze bill, without passing what impact can it have? SB 318 sits there on the House calendar like a question: Might downstate school districts will *accept mere pain* (a shift of pension obligations from the state to them, perhaps) to *avert the threat of death* (property tax freeze).

Show 'em death, they'll accept pain. Speaker Madigan's mind works like that on occasion. Although the GOP caucuses have resisted the pension payment shift, the Democratic majorities would probably support sending it to Rauner's desk next spring if 2016 were not an election year.

What about a property tax freeze as part of a "grand bargain"?

Consider the following [from a report posted online](#): "For years [citizens] have wanted property tax relief along with more equal educational funding across the state's local school districts." Property taxes are "above the national average" and school funding inequities keep growing. Meanwhile, tax hike referenda are consistently "defeated due to voter discontent with high property taxes." Does any of this sound familiar?



The citizens referred to above do not reside in Illinois. The report is a retrospective on school funding reform in Michigan, a reform driven by high property taxes and unsustainable resource gaps from one school district to another, a reform that seemed even at the time (1993) to be *an act of desperation*.

The Michigan legislature simply repealed the property tax as a school funding mechanism. By the time the dollars in the pipeline would dry up, the policymakers would have to replace it. They would have no choice. They put themselves under extreme pressure - and wound up funding schools via a sales tax increase.

In SB 318, there's just a hint of what Michigan went through two decades ago. In addition to freezing property tax levies, the bill would create a bipartisan, bicameral legislative committee to craft a new school funding formula that provides an "adequate, equitable, transparent, and accountable distribution of funds...."

Yes, somewhat like the Michigan solution.

But this is Illinois. The sales tax rates are already high (albeit narrowly imposed, excluding most services taxed in other states) but the income tax is low. If Illinois were to address "adequacy and equity," it would have to rely heavily on the income tax (as [recommended by every blue-ribbon committee](#) since the 1980s).

A grand bargain? It's possible, but a long way off. Bottom line, SB 318 will not become law without companion legislation to replace the property tax dollars. The legislature will neither starve local governments nor nullify collective bargaining. If Rauner wants to be an achiever, he'll need to respect the legislative branch.

Speaking of the legislative branch, the House and the Senate won't return to the Capitol until January 13, according to the [schedule they've posted](#), still without a budget. They may still not have a budget for FY 2016 on February 17, when Rauner is scheduled to present his FY 2017 budget proposal to the General Assembly.

The pressure eased a bit last week when the final votes were cast on a bipartisan [bill to authorize distribution of funds](#) to counties and municipalities (so they can buy salt for winter highways, for example), to fund services for disabled people, to pay state lottery winners and other gambling-related costs.

You can now stop feeling sorry for payment-delayed Lottery winners.

So what about school funding for FY 2017? The Illinois State Board of Education will take up that topic in a meeting that is to begin at 9 a.m. Wednesday. The Board's budget hearings, such as they were, are over. They now know what folks in the field want. At the meeting, they'll look into the availability of funds.

[Here's the meeting packet](#). The meeting is planned as a three-site video conference. According to the agency, you'll be able to listen in via an audio link that you should find at the [ISBE web site home page](#).

Leading off the meeting will be the stars of the show, Commission on Government Forecasting and Accountability Executive Director Dan Long and COGFA's Revenue Manager Jim Muschinske, who will talk about state and national economic indicators and their likely implications for next year's revenue.

(There's about a 30-page PowerPoint on this in the meeting packet. Generally, recovery from the Great Recession has been slow and gradual nationally, and even slower and more gradual in Illinois, which means revenues will not magically rise to meet education advocates' desires for adequacy and equity.)

A remarkably detailed discussion of state General Revenue Fund support for education, down to the program level, is to be led by ISBE Chief Financial Officer Robert Wolfe (starting at Page 38 in the packet). The discussion is preliminary to the Board's adopting in January a recommendation for FY 2017 funding.

For example, will ISBE recommend full General State Aid funding of the Education Funding Advisory Board's latest "Foundation Level" of \$8,899-per student? It seems unlikely, since the current state support of \$6.94 billion would have had to rise to about \$9.5 billion to meet that EFAB goal this year.

Even at the lower Foundation Level of \$6119-per student for this fiscal year, appropriations were insufficient and distributions have been "pro-rated" at 92.1% "of the amount statutorily owed to districts," Wolfe's memo states.

The document discusses major programs funded through ISBE in a paragraph or so each. Interestingly, of the 104 individuals providing testimony (in person or by email) for the agency's budget hearings, 24 of them advocated for Agriculture Education's \$1.8 million. Another 22 just sought "adequacy and equity."

Early Childhood had 14 advocates; Regional Safe Schools had 10; Truants Alternative/Optional Education had 9 witnesses; Career and Technical Education had 7, as did community college funding. Most other programs were represented by just one witness. No problem. What is said is more vital than the number saying it.

Obituary for NCLB: The Republican-controlled Congress last week put the finishing touches on federal education policy to replace - to [bury with a glad good riddance](#) - the most prominent "domestic policy achievement" of the last Republican president, the [No Child Left Behind Act](#) of George W. Bush.

[ISNS declared the federal mandate a failure from the first, and felt relief when we learned that other observers - most of them with far stronger standing as judges of education policy - felt the same. Alfie Kohn, Susan Ohanian, Gerald Bracey and - eventually - Diane Ravich reinforced the notion of NCLB's fatal flaws.]

It was a [relatively quiet service](#) that was held for NCLB. The GOP tradition of favoring state policy over federal mandates prevailed, but the party's leaders in control of Congress couldn't very well bash their last president. The Democrats were complicit in the crime as well and, besides, they do not hold the microphone.

The new law, signed by President Obama, continues to require standardized testing of students, but it returns to the states the authority to set the standards and to judge whether the students have met them. State boundaries will again matter. The kids in Arkansas may again emerge as the nation's smartest.

Thanks for yet another QALY of 1. I learned just recently about the QALY, the "Quality-Adjusted Life Year," a measure by which countries with single-payer healthcare systems determine the cost-benefits of particular interventions. It's pure math. [Here's the source](#). You can judge your 2015 for yourself.

As you can see, a year in which you enjoyed perfect health, start to finish, is the best you can get. So if your status has been perfect, in the aggregate, your QALY was a 1. Now if you were in pain half the time, were depressed or had trouble with your daily activities or with walking, it might have been a 0.5 QALY.

Seriously, a zero seems extreme; a 0.0 QALY means you were dead. *But it can be even worse.* Some conditions are judged to be worse than death; you're in constant pain and bed-ridden with a hopeless prognosis. The QALY for a person in such circumstances can be a negative number. Death would be an improvement.

Well, as you will recall, my health status during 2015 was occasionally an adventure. I did 100 treadmill miles in July but, by the end of August, I was getting around in a wheelchair. The diagnosis was [Guillain-Barre Syndrome](#). But I was never in pain nor depressed, and infusion therapy led to an almost total recovery.

But with such a health challenge, how could my QALY for 2015 have been 1.0? Remember, the number is to be applied to a person's status - *in the aggregate* - for the year. The GBS brought my number down a notch, but my relationship with all my friends and ISNS subscribers, pushed it back up to a perfect 1.0.

For more than two decades, you have been a source of motivation, of reinforcement (or corrective adjustment) of my views, of my sense of professional satisfaction. Thank you so much, and best wishes for a wonderful holiday season and a happy and successful 2016. *I'll get back to you in early January.*

Oh, wait, one more thing. I'll soon reach out to non-subscribers, encouraging them to join you in support of ISNS so we can stay in business. For that brochure, I need some "blurbs." *If you can think of anything good to say about this service,* please use the [contact form on this web page](#) to say it. Thank you. - Jim

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