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Like a spelling bee - or not? Say it on HB 4292

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

You may like spelling bees, but dislike unfunded state mandates. You may not mind mandates, but just find spelling bees tedious. You may be from [Putnam County](#). In any case, you may have an opinion about [HB 4292](#), which *mandates* spelling bee access for all Illinois 7th-graders. Now you can more easily have your say.

Seriously (I think), HB 4292 is among the School Code-amending proposals posted to be heard Wednesday morning when the Elementary & Secondary Education: [School Curriculum & Policies Committee](#) (spelled out for the first, and last, time this year) convenes at 8:30. See the "Create Witness Slip" button on the linked page.

If you click on that button, the General Assembly's "[dashboard](#)" [page for that hearing](#) will come to your screen. Then at the right end of the row for HB 4292 you'll see a symbol that looks like a sheet of paper and a pencil ([click to say your opinion](#)) and one that looks like a magnifying glass ([click to see opinions of others](#)).

At this writing, there were no opinions registered against the spelling bee mandate, and one slip in favor of it was filed. I'm sure the newspapers will like the bill, which requires school districts to publish a notice of the date of their spelling bee competition "in a newspaper of general circulation."

Certainly the [folks at Scripps](#), cited in the bill as the official organizers of the spelling competitions, should favor the bill. The [English Spelling Society](#) should file a supporting witness slip. But the Statewide School Management Alliance is sure to oppose the bill. ([See their stern faces.](#)) They take a dim view of mandates.

Does filing a witness slip make a difference? There are other more influential factors. One is the professional credibility of the lobbyists who are "working" a bill. (That's largely why HB 4292 will probably falter.) Another is the ability of a bill's sponsor to line up votes for it. (Hmmm. This bill has strong sponsorship.)

Okay, clearly I don't have a clue about what's going to happen with this bill. The sponsor, [Rep. Emanuel Chris Welch](#), D-Westchester), is respected and effective. The Alliance exerts a powerful influence on School Code bills. But what the hay? The cursive-writing mandate slipped through last year, right.

To monitor the debate, click [Room D-1 at this link](#), 8:30 Wednesday. And file a slip. What could it hurt?

Of the seven bills posted for this hearing, Welch is the sponsor of four of them. [HB 4209](#) requires kindergarten to be full-day attendance programs by the 2019-20 school year. [HB 4291](#) makes successful completion of a one-semester course in computer science a requirement for a student to receive a high school diploma.

Welch's most challenging bill, perhaps, is [HB 4208](#), which creates a "Safe Schools and Healthy Learning Environments" program to be conducted in schools ranking highest in student suspensions and expulsions, or with "disproportionality" in students of color/white students being disciplined by such means.

The bill is aimed at closing the "school to prison pipeline" by offering an alternative to what the bill refers to as over-reliance on law enforcement in situations where student misbehavior does not truly constitute a threat to anyone's safety. The program it would create is funded, subject to appropriations.

Actually, your know, that spelling bee bill may be the easiest one for Welch to get passed.

Of the other three bills posted for Wednesday, we've already covered two of them. [HB 4193](#) deals with the timing requirements for special education due-process hearing reports. [HB 4205](#) requires "behavioral health support" to be made available to at-risk students and students with IEPs.

The last bill on the list, [HB 4308](#), seeks to give school districts information about the state's appropriations for public education, before school boards have to make decisions about staffing and then inform staff who are affected by such decisions. It requires that notices be mailed to teachers within 10 days of the state's enactment of a budget, but no later than June 30 in any year in which there is no budget enacted by June 15.

The bill's sponsor is [Rep. Steven Reick](#) (R-Woodstock), a lawyer with a masters degree in accountancy and taxation. He became a member of the General Assembly just last year.



The [House Revenue & Finance Committee](#) is also to convene at 8:30 a.m. Wednesday, in Room 118, with 14 bills posted. Most of the bills offer tax relief for various constituencies (old people like me, veterans, businesses in enterprise zones), or require such things as a taxing unit's pension contributions included on tax bills.

[HB 4227](#) and [HB 4276](#) define "qualified school" in pretty similar ways as the term relates to the "Invest in Kids Act," the tax credit generously afforded extremely wealthy taxpayers who donate to organizations that are able to give scholarships to children whose parents want them to attend such non-public schools.

The hearings Wednesday morning can't run too long. There will be some floor action in the House and Senate, and then about 11:30 the ceremonial actions will be taken leading to the entrance of Gov. Bruce Rauner who will at noon present his plan for a "balanced" (stop laughing) budget for FY 2019.

Is "slavery's hard history" difficult to teach? According to an article on the [National Public Radio web site](#), that would be the case. The article includes some poignant commentaries from teachers whose students find it difficult to relate, or even grow "defensive" when the subject of human bondage is described.

The NPR relied heavily on the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) and its "Teaching Tolerance" project. The Center has done some excellent research on the subject and concludes that the schools in America "are not adequately teaching the history of American slavery, educators are not sufficiently prepared to teach it, textbooks do not have enough material about it, and – as a result – students lack a basic knowledge of the important role it played in shaping the United States and the impact it continues to have on race relations in America."

There are many threads that can be followed through a country's history. You can go recounting war-to-war, as Americans seem mostly to do. You can look at the evolution of the culture, at the art and architecture and literature, or at its belief systems. In this country, I believe, the most important thread is that of race relations.

I strongly recommend a deep examination of the SPLC offerings on what the "hard history" is and how to approach it with students. There's a lot of hate that hangs near this subject. The SPLC probably gets more hate mail than any organization in the country. But everything gets studied. Take a look at the "[Hate Map](#)."

Now, I want to tell you a true story. In the 1990s, I was a part-time staffer for U.S. Sen. Paul Simon, whom I admired more than I can say. But he made a presentation once that I felt missed the mark, a presentation on racial history. It was a tribute to a number of black historical figures, among them Booker T. Washington.

I asked Paul why he had not included a commentary on Washington's famous "Atlanta Compromise" in his presentation. He said he had thought about it but decided there would be many in the audience who might not have known about that, who might admire Washington deeply and might respond negatively.

Now, there is much to be said of a positive nature about Washington. He was brilliant, energetic and sharply focused. He had the best of intentions for African Americans, for all citizens of the nation, really. He was an adroit manager of the moment, a man who saw the path to power and - on behalf of his mission - he followed it.

But there was something he did in September of 1895 that, in my opinion, set back for decades, perhaps even forever, any just resolution of "the race question" in this country. On the most conspicuous possible occasion, he told the white men of the nation that in "all things that are purely social we can be [as separate as the fingers](#), yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." The white community saw that as permission for segregation.

There is no doubt that, the very next year, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of "separate but equal," the voice of Booker T. Washington was ringing in their ears, the thunderous ovation BTW had received in Atlanta just reinforced in the minds of the justices that separating blacks from whites was the "right thing."

Washington surely would not have so appeased the white racists if he had known what the certain results of the court's 1896 ruling on [Plessy v. Ferguson](#) would be, the proliferation of "Jim Crow" laws, the separate but profoundly unequal schools, the disenfranchisement of blacks, the persecution, the lynchings.

The alternative to Washington's appeasement was the demand for complete justice, immediately, as voiced by the great [W.E.B. Du Bois](#), a prolific scholar and one of the founders of the Niagara Movement, predecessor to the NAACP. To Du Bois, Washington had just accepted the notion that black Americans were inferior.

Whereas Washington stressed the need for black Americans to learn to work with their hands and to wait to be accepted by whites, Du Bois wanted universities to be open to black Americans. He stressed the importance of preparing what he called "the talented tenth" for leadership positions in communities and academia.

It was not until 1954, in *Brown v. the Board of Education*, that the Supreme Court overturned the doctrine of Plessy in the schools, and not for a decade thereafter that redlining for segregation in housing was outlawed, along with discrimination on the job and at the ballot box. The decades since 1895 were too horrible to describe.

Did the "Atlanta Compromise" of BTW cause all of that suffering? There were many other factors, to be sure. The whites' ability to hate may have been underestimated. The animosities fanned to flame in the Civil War were slow to cool, haven't cooled even yet. But BTW gave a solid boost to the racism of the late 1800s.

Links to all newsletters posted last year can be found in the [web page at this link](#).

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