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Hearing slated on adequate funding requirement

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

Legislation linking tax credits for wealthy school privatizers supporting the "Invest in Kids Act" enacted last year to the adequacy of "Evidence-Based Funding" appropriations for public schools is scheduled to be heard by the Senate Education Committee when it convenes at 2:45 p.m. Tuesday in Capitol Room 212.

[SB 2236](#), sponsored by the committee chair, [Sen. Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant](#) (D-Plainfield), refers to a provision of the law passed last year that defines the "Minimum Funding Level" for public schools as an amount necessary to "keep pace with inflation and continue to advance equity through the Evidence-Based Funding formula."

What if the appropriations for public schools fall short of that minimum in a school year? Bertino-Tarrant's bill simply declares: "Notwithstanding any other provision of law, no credits may be awarded under this Act for any taxable year that begins in a State fiscal year for which the Minimum Funding Level is not met."

In other words, there'll be no tax credits to send children to private schools if the appropriation for public schools is insufficient to advance toward the state's statutory goal of making sure even the least affluent school district has the resources to give at least an "adequate" education for every child by 2027.

The "Invest in Kids Act" was injected into the school funding reform bill, [SB 1947](#), after Gov. Bruce Rauner amendatorily vetoed SB 1. As a concession to Republicans, up to \$75 million per state fiscal year in tax credits - briefly, a \$3-reduction in the income tax liability of a taxpayer for every \$4 donated to an organization that would give students "scholarships" to private schools. Total donations for which a taxpayer can receive a credit are limited to \$1 million per year.

A tax credit is money that is spent by the state but is kept "off the books" because it never arrives in the state treasury. It does not have to be appropriated like most other state expenditures. Tax credits essentially authorize individual taxpayers to make the decision about how a chunk of public funds will be spent.

There is no audit, no accountability, just a reduction in the tax liability for some wealthy person who wants to be known as a good friend of a private school, perhaps wants to [have a school named after him](#). Such tax credits appeal to Republicans. Senators of the GOP persuasion may not like Bertino-Tarrant's bill.

But of the [Senate Education Committee's 13 members](#), eight are Democrats and five are Republicans. I'd predict the bill will advance to the Senate floor. Committee members' contact information is at the above link. You can let them know if you like SB 2236. You may monitor the hearing [at this link](#) (click Room 212).

Finally, you can also file a "witness slip" on SB 2236 - or any bill posted for a hearing - by using the "dashboard" link on the General Assembly's home page. ([It's in red, low in the left column](#).) Having trouble? [Just click here](#). At that location you can create a witness slip - or even learn how other's have weighed in.

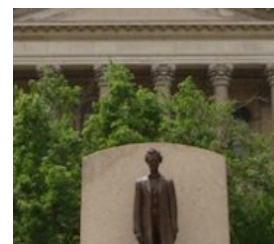
Among other bills posted in the committee, [SB 2260](#) enjoys bipartisan support from senators whose legislative districts apparently include school districts that were short-changed in a recent distribution of Personal Property Tax Replacement Fund dollars. The sponsor, [Sen. Jil Tracy](#) (R-Quincy) asks for \$4,353,136.

Districts eligible to receive a share of those dollars would be those for whom PPTRF receipts totalled at least 13% of their total revenue in FY 2016. Tracy's bill would add to this year's distribution an amount equal to 11% of the PPTRF dollars they got in FY 2016. If the \$4,353,136 falls short, it would be pro-rated.

Two House bills carried over from last year are also posted to be heard by the committee. One is [HB 1262](#) would require that school districts' requests for waivers of state law dealing with their budgets, tax rates and tax warrants be reviewed by the full House and Senate, not just be a panel of legislative leaders.

The other, [HB 3792](#), is currently a curriculum mandate. It would require that students, starting in grade 6, be "introduced to the importance of developing and applying a work ethic in a variety of contexts." [The bill's text](#) refers to concepts such as "importance of trustworthiness, integrity, initiative, and respecting authority; arriving on time and ready for work; and dressing appropriately for the nature and substance of the work."

Over the years, I've heard from school leaders who bemoan the fact that educators are expected - especially by the policymakers - not just to teach the children basic skills and impart knowledge to them, but also to solve every problem



they or their parents or their future employers may perceive in them.

The concepts listed in HB 3792 seem important, but are the expectations reasonable? And aren't these work ethic issues properly and best inculcated at home? Perhaps educators should focus these efforts only on kids from dysfunctional families. Just throwing out thoughts here. [Let me know what you think.](#)

Over in the House some important issues are pending as well. There's [SB 444](#), for example, the bill Rauner held for two months and then vetoed, casting the distribution of Evidence-Based Funding for schools into the darkness of doubt. Oh, the money will reach the schools, eventually, but why the constant fiascos?

As the bill's sponsor, Sen. Andy Manar (D-Bunker Hill), has pointed out, if Rauner had just signed the bill back in early November, the FY 2018 funding issues would have been addressed by now. As it is, without SB 444 or something like it, the school funding reform provisions of SB 1947 are a bit meaningless.

But SB 444 does not reside in the House. It's in the Senate, where it properly belongs, but to keep it from dying the House and the Senate will have to take identical actions. So the House committee on PK-12 appropriations is getting ahead of the game by having a "subject matter" [hearing on the bill at 3 p.m. Monday.](#)

What will happen? I don't know. Rauner wants to make 200 more private schools eligible for "Invest in Kids" tax credit scholarships. The General Assembly could let him have that by simple majority votes. Or they could override him with three-fifths majorities. Any other action, or inaction, kills the bill dead.

But there are many vehicle bills on the calendar. A second-chamber School Code bill could be amended into the original shape of SB 444 and sent to Rauner with great dispatch, in just an hour or two. House Speaker Michael Madigan has an attitude about amendatory vetoes. He thinks, correctly, they are not in the Constitution to let a governor write bills, but rather just to allow for efficient correction of unintended consequences or errors. We'll see.

The bill to grow the number of substitute teachers that I wrote about last week is also posted for a House hearing. The House [committee on PK-12 licensure](#) is scheduled to consider [HB 4160](#) at 10 a.m. Wednesday in Room 115 (audio only). The sponsor is [Rep. Lindsay Parkhurst](#) (R-Kankakee).

As you recall, the bill would allow a student in a qualified college teacher preparation program to get a substitute teaching license after completing 90 credit hours, rather than having to fully complete the program and graduate. Seems likely to reach the House floor. I don't find any witness slips opposing it.

Rauner is scheduled to present his annual "State of the State" speech to a joint session of the House and Senate at noon on Wednesday. He'll list his achievements as governor. That won't take long. Then he's expected to talk about issues he would like to see addressed this year. [Pension reform is expected](#) to be a priority.

But as I noted the the last issue, it's a hot topic because of pensions' cost to the state - not because it is low-hanging fruit. Fact is, Rauner and the legislators will need a tall ladder. [Andy Manar concurs with me](#) that changes in pensions will have to be "negotiated with the employees that are going to be affected."

The State of the State is a group performance. Rauner presents it and the the legislators, the leaders and some members from each of the four partisan caucuses, react to it. It can be more form than substance. The heavy-duty speechifying for Rauner will come on Valentine's Day when he proposes a budget for FY 2019.

Meanwhile, bills continue to flow onto the public agenda. Legislators in both chambers have until February 16 to introduce new legislation. They will eventually file thousands of new bills. Most of them, fortunately, will quickly expire. (Legislators file some bills in an election year just to be able to say they filed them.)

February will be a pretty active month here in Springfield. The bills will arrive and get assigned to committee and most of them will die of neglect. Rauner will sort of set the tone for the session with his budget proposal. I'm guessing the tone will be a little tense. But committees will meet and bills will move.

But then March will come in like a lamb. It is actually the month of the primary elections (March 20), and there's just so much political maneuvering to do it would be too much to expect the policymakers to be at the Capitol debating bills. It will be instructive for us all, however, this election event. *Lame ducks, you know.*

Years ago I learned a lot by reading University of Illinois professor [Murray Edelman](#), who called politics "the art of sharpening up the pointless - and blunting the too sharply pointed." We'll be seeing a lot of both of those practices in the coming weeks. I'll tell you when I see them, and I hope you'll do the same for me.

Links to all newsletters posted last year - and it was a very exciting year - can be found in the [web page at this link.](#)

The best way to contact me: Use the link below. As soon as you "submit" your message, it is sent to me by email. Your message may be complex and "attached" to a document, or it may be as simple as "call me." I am always connected to my email, and I promise to respond to you as soon as possible.

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