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Fwd: Focus turns to school district consolidation

1 message

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April Board Meeting

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Focus turns to school district consolidation

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

As has been observed in this space before, when policymakers decide they want to take an unpopular action because it is "the right thing to do," they don't want their own fingerprints on it. So they create a "someone else," a non-entity who cannot be retaliated against politically. "Not me," they say, "Someone else did it."

For example, school-consolidation fever is in the air at the Capitol this year. It's infected both parties, both chambers. But "forced consolidation" is a political third rail. What angers citizens (read "voters") more than for their school districts to be erased? Not much, really. Still, the temptation to make that happen is strong.

Why is that? For years, legislators - and even governors - have regularly pulled dollar figures out of the air. We could save millions if we just eliminate some of our 850-plus school districts. Gov. Pat Quinn thought having just 300 districts would save \$100 million per year in educational administrative costs, for example.

So Quinn set up a "Classrooms First Commission" with a goal of making "Illinois education more efficient" - and he put his Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon (it's a long story) in charge of it. But Sheila - like her father, the late U.S. Sen. Paul Simon - seemed to seek truth rather than political expediency, so [Quinn's social engineering project failed](#).

Merging hundreds of school districts into oblivion would have cost the state nearly \$4 billion, Quinn's commission reported, based on consolidation incentives and other costs incorporated in the School Code at the time. But the idea will not die. It's like a heartless vampire; there's no place to drive the stake.

Thus it is that the [ISNS bill-tracking web page](#) lists three "Big Ideas" bills all seeking a dramatic reduction in the number of school districts in Illinois. Two of them are already committee-approved, one in the House and the other in the Senate. The *most radical of them* - [HB 2755](#) - is posted for a House hearing Wednesday.

HB 2755 creates the "Illinois District Consolidation Commission ... for the purpose of recommending *what school districts in the State to consolidate, with a goal of reducing the total number of school districts in the State by at least 60%.*" Give 511 districts the kiss of death by November 4, 2019. [Emphasis mine.] Radical enough?

Is this a serious bill? It's posted for a hearing. No opposing witness slips have been filed ([unless you file one](#)). A House rule (Rule 21) has been suspended so legislators could meet as commission members even on legislative session days. The sponsor is a Republican. (For Democrats, he's their very own "someone else.")

"Show 'em death, and they'll accept pain." That's my description of a tactic I've seen House Speaker Michael Madigan use over the years. I think he's using it again. HB 2755 seeks to resolve an issue of massive complexity in just months. It is a guarantee of chaos. Is the sponsor, [Rep. Thomas Morrison](#), being set up?

By helping Morrison position his bill for committee action, House Majority Leader [Rep. Greg Harris](#) (author of the motion to suspend Rule 21) lends credibility for HB 2755 to play the role of "death." By comparison, a proposal to make only about 213 school districts disappear would seem reasonable albeit still painful.

What a coincidence! That's about the minimum number, 213, of school districts sought to be eliminated by either [HB 3053](#) or [SB 1838](#). Both bills have been approved - *unanimously* - by committees. Their sponsors are in the majority party caucus in the House and Senate. Both could easily pass by deadline.

These identical bills each would set up a 20-member "School District Efficiency Commission" (Doesn't that sound more positive?) to report by May 1, 2020. Even if a district is affected by a recommendation approved by at least 11 commission members, voters in that district would still be able to reject it in a referendum.

Will Illinois have a School District Efficiency Commission soon? I think it's likely. But as the bills are written now, it will take greater state incentive provisions - guaranteed ones, this time - for any policy to dramatically increase the frequency of district consolidations. Each merger question is unique. One size can't fit all.

Why does the issue continue to arise? Based on conversations with legislators over the years, I'd say there are two stark realities that drive it. One is the unit district concept - most policymakers seem to favor it strongly. The other is the large number of districts with just one building, just 200 or fewer students.

There also are comparisons with other states, such as Florida, whose educational systems are formed around countywide districts. With a half-million more students than Illinois, Florida has just 67 countywide school districts (plus seven special districts for research, development, deaf or blind students, e-learning).

Would Illinois' educational system look like it does now if it were designed from scratch? Of course not. During my early life (but not yours), the state had 13,000-plus districts. Recent consolidation has been slow but steady. As long as local referenda are part of it, the process will continue to be gradual - and properly so.

What other "Big Ideas" are posted for this week? A major deal, if it were serious, would be [HB 2597](#), House Minority Leader [Rep. Jim Durkin](#)'s proposal to *repeal the Property Tax Code*. But as an actual effort to change law, it's not serious.

Perhaps it is posted just to give Durkin an opportunity to express himself on the irrational provisions that run rampant through the the Property Tax Code. (If most voters knew of them, they would revolt.)

Another hot item in the [Big Ideas section](#) is [HB 2100](#), the bill to abolish the State Charter School Commission. This was one of the education policy positions favored by Gov. JB

Pritzker last year when he was a candidate. The bill was passed in committee a couple of weeks ago, but the sponsor, [Rep. Emanuel Chris Welch](#), said he would offer and amendment to address some technical flaws. An [amendment has been filed](#).

Some charter advocates at the hearing on HB 2100 tried to get Welch to say he was open to an "agreed amendment," one that might weaken the SCSC but not abolish it. Welch quickly denied making any promise of such an agreement. Indeed, the pending amendment simply seeks an abolish to the commission.

In addition, the section of the ISNS bill-tracking page devoted to [bills on charter schools](#) shows that several are posted for committee hearings this week. Some reflect the long-sought goal of repealing the SCSC's authority to overrule local school boards denials of a charters. Others would change charter governance.

The Senate Education Committee is scheduled to convene its last hearing for chamber-of-origin bills at 1 p.m. Tuesday with more than [two dozen bills posted](#). Most of them are likely to miss Friday's deadline for committee action. They will not die, technically, but they'll go into a coma greatly resembling death.

It's hard to say which bills will fail to emerge. Strong sponsorship is an indicator of likely success, but most of the bills in this committee have highly respected sponsors, members of both parties.

New curriculum and other mandates will have a hard time being heard, I think, and the two bills that would expand the age of compulsory school attendance (one at each end) would have significant cost implications and, therefore, are doubtful.

Non-controversial bills - ones that just tweak current policy and can clearly and briefly be described - will keep the pace of committee discussions moving along. Also, in such "last hearing" situations, committee members often agree to bills more on their respect for the sponsors than on their understanding of the impact.

The House committee on [PK-12 curriculum and policies](#) has about 60 measures posted; and more than 40 bills are posted for the PK-12 committee on [licensing, administration and charters](#). The House committee deadline is not until March 29, but the bills are stacking up and tick-tock, tick-tock.

Snippets:

A graduated income tax system such as Gov. JB Pritzker proposes in Illinois is, among other things, a primary governmental tool for preventing wealth from gravitating only to the wealthy. [In this brief video clip](#), Professor Joseph E. Stiglitz, 2001 Nobel Prize winner in Economics, explains why the American dream is being lost. Here's an excellent article from the [Kane County Chronicle](#) that explains why the Illinois League of Women Voters has supported a graduated income tax since 1977.

It wasn't just ISNS, but educators also suffered during the decade-long Great Recession and the budgetlessness of the Rauner Administration. In fact, as adjusted for inflation, [Illinois teachers lost 11.4%](#) of their purchasing power during that time, more than every other states except Oklahoma, Colorado and Mississippi.

State school funding got so low that statewide strikes occurred in the four states sandwiching Illinois - Oklahoma and Colorado just below, and Arizona and West Virginia just above - in the [graphic illustrating buying power lost](#) to inflation. [Information from the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#)]

The tax credits-for-private school scholarships program that was extorted into Illinois law by Gov. Bruce Rauner in 2017 could prevent as much as \$75 million dollars from reaching the state coffers. The program is designed to make wealthy taxpayers look good while all taxpayers pick up the tab for their "generosity."

Even though he is a multi-billionaire, Gov. JB Pritzker thinks such school privatization is a bad idea and wants the program repealed in Illinois. But the Trump Administration apparently thinks this is a good idea.

Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, one of the richest women in America, has traveled the country touting a [USDE plan for a \\$5 billion-limit](#), dollar-for-dollar tax credit scheme at the national level. The wealthy are a close-knit family in America.

It's no surprise that Illinois high school graduates increasingly have migrated to other states for their post-secondary education experiences in recent years. The [Illinois Board of Higher Education report](#) explains it all. Could have been worse, I think. My question: How did Alabama become a top ten destination?

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