



Jim Broadway

*Jim Broadway's*

## Illinois School News Service

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### Districts too reliant on school resource officers?

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

Events coincided last week - including the tragic school shooting in Florida - to invite a deeper inspection of legislation offering school districts with *high incidences of students being suspended or expelled* an alternative option to what many see as an "over-reliance" on law enforcement officers in schools.

The legislators and others who debated [HB 4208](#) in the House committee on PK-12 curriculum and policies Wednesday were unaware at the time of the incident in Florida in which a student *who had been suspended multiple times*, and then *ultimately expelled*, returned to the school and [killed 17 people](#).

The discussion of HB 4208 - and the events that were coincident with that discussion - are important for several reasons. One, they illustrate how laws are made and how, in some instances, how they are resisted. Two, they focus the question of what options are open, or should be open, to elected school board members.

Three, the discussion of HB 4208 related to a specific policy question that some researchers suggest can be crucial with regard to safety in America's schools. Finally, the discussion - and related observations made on Wednesday - reveals Illinois' new ["Evidence-Based" school funding](#) law to be *currently just an empty promise*.

**The basic facts about HB 4208 are clear.** The bill *could* create a program that eligible school districts *could* use to put more psychologists, social workers, counselors and other licensed professionals - and fewer police - in schools to alter students' behaviors that might otherwise lead to suspension or expulsion.

Why the "coulds" in that sentence? The bill is explicitly "subject to appropriations." If dollars are not budgeted for the "Safe Schools and Healthy Learning Environment Program" (and budgeting for it seems unlikely), it would never even exist. But even if it were funded, only certain districts would be eligible - just those with relatively high numbers of students being suspended or expelled - and even they *would not be required* to participate in it.

Note that current law already requires the districts most inclined to suspend or expell students, or those with the most racial "disproportionality" in the use of such exclusionary discipline, to plan how to reduce such numbers and to report to the Illinois State Board of Education as to what their plans involve.

HB 4208 is all so iffy, and yet the bill has drawn the attention of 320 (so far) [individuals who oppose it](#). Why would that be? Since it would be totally "voluntary," as Rep. Emanuel Chris Welch (D-Westchester), sponsor of the bill, says, the only reason to oppose it would be to *prevent any school board from having that option*.

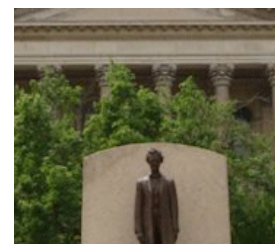
**The Statewide School Management Alliance** offered the only coherent reason for opposing to the bill. If funding for the program created by HB 4208 materializes, Alliance lobbyist Alison Maley told the committee, all districts should be able to seek it, not just those with certain disciplinary profiles.

But Maley also objected to the proposal as one which "incentivizes school districts to forego law enforcement" to access the grant money. Here is the language in the bill that underlies this objection:

*"Under this program, selected school districts must reallocate funding for school-based law enforcement personnel in some or all of their schools to other evidence-based and promising practices designed to promote school safety and healthy learning environments, including, but not limited to, restorative justice programs; increased use of school psychologists, social workers, and other mental and behavioral health specialists; drug and alcohol treatment services; wraparound services for youth; and training for school staff on conflict resolution techniques and other disciplinary alternatives. For purposes of this subsection (b), 'promising practices' means practices that present, based on preliminary information, potential for becoming evidence-based practices.*

*"To apply for a grant under the program, school districts shall submit applications that outline their plans for reallocating their funds, including the total amount of funds to be reallocated. Subject to the availability of funds, for grant recipients, the Safe Schools and Healthy Learning Environments Program shall match the amount that is reallocated from school-based law enforcement personnel to alternative methods of addressing student behavior on a dollar-for-dollar basis."*

While Maley is correct - the bill does incentivize districts to "forego law enforcement" in favor of the "promising practices" listed in the bill - no opponent explained why it would be wrong to allow locally elected school board members of eligible districts to make that decision to employ more social workers and fewer police.



**The other significant testimony in opposition** came from Curt Richardson, in-house attorney for McLean County Unit 5 (surely not an "eligible" district), who seemed to take offense at the legislation. "Many of the findings in this bill are false," he said, asserting that school resource officers (SROs) are what keep schools safe.

"Instead of a school-to-prison pipeline" Richardson said - referring to a concern that was raised in the "findings" section of HB 4208 - "our SROs' actions promote a school-to-college or career pipeline." SROs lead to fewer student arrests, he said, apparently unaware of research [evidence suggesting the contrary](#).

"To say that schools across this state have become overly reliant on law enforcement personnel to handle routine school disciplinary matters is insulting to many teachers and administrators who work extremely hard every day to teach children how to conduct themselves appropriately and as responsible young adults," he continued. "Where do these findings originate from? "

That is a key question. Actually, the findings originate in research. For example, Aaron Kupchik, a professor who directs graduate studies in Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of Delaware, referred to school resource officers in a 2016 article asking [if society doesn't expect "too much" from police officers?](#)

**But a more pointed question was asked** in an commentary by a trio of university-level education researchers, published coincidentally on the morning of last week's hearing (later updated to include references to the Florida school shootings). That question: Does having [police at school in fact make them less safe?](#)

The researchers question if practices of "target-hardening," the placement of metal detectors and surveillance cameras, the "run, hide, fight" training and, yes, police officers patrolling the halls, may not just make matters worse. They believe a better response might be what they call an "educational response":

"An educational response is important because the 'target hardening' approach might actually make things worse by changing students' experience of schools in ways that *suggest violence* rather than prevent it." [Emphasis by ISNS.] Maybe conspicuously guarding against violence [tells students schools are violent places](#).

"Our suggestion is simply that, instead of trying to find solutions to school shootings in the dubious arms of security technologies, or even solely through more promising public policy, society should ask deeper questions about the nature of education and schooling in American society."

**So did HB 4208 survive the committee hearing?** In fact it did, but in a [mostly partisan roll call](#). It will probably reach the governor's desk. An identical bill, [SB 453](#), passed the Senate last year but fell just short in the House on the last day of the veto session, when many members of the chamber had already departed.

Why is the opposition so strong now? I believe it is to protect the jobs of SROs from school boards that might like to try a different approach. The SROs are relatively new education system "constituents," but they do have an association now, with their [officers' photos posted](#) and their conferences scheduled. Established constituencies are usually protected, to an extent, from adverse policy. Few are ever just abolished.

What about the *EBF system being just an empty promise*? We'll comment on this more in the future, but you should know that chairman [Rep. Fred Crespo](#) (D-Streamwood) brought it to the committee's attention Wednesday that a \$350-per year school funding hike - the figure policymakers see as fixed - will fall far short.

The governor's school funding commission - and the State Board's FY 2019 budget proposal - said \$7 billion will be needed for every district to achieve adequacy. "We keep talking about \$350 million a year for ten years. That only gets us half-way there, folks," he said. (A member had suggested EBF dollars might pay for HB 4208.)

Finally, you should know that Senate Minority Leader [Sen. Bill Brady](#) (R-Bloomington) cited the "availability" of EBF money, the \$350 million, after Gov. Bruce [Rauner's lame budget speech](#). That money could help districts pay the pension cost-shift that Rauner proposes to send their way, Brady said.

You can count on references to the \$350 million to be made whenever the costs of any new proposal affecting schools are debated. Stay alert, folks, and keep your heads down.

**Sen. Daniel Biss has moved into a 'statistical tie'** with billionaire J.B. Pritzker for the gubernatorial nomination to be decided by Democrat voters in the primary election of March 20, according to a poll [reported in the Chicago Sun-Times](#). Pritzker's problem? Mostly, it is his phone chats with then-Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

It was bad enough when he was recorded by the FBI essentially asking Blago, to consider him for an appointment to a statewide office, should it come open. But it's more serious now that he's been overheard in leaked FBI tapes making some racially insensitive comments and "[rating](#)" [African American politicians](#).

What are Pritzker's political assets? He has unfathomably deep pockets, richer even than Rauner. He has been endorsed (foolishly) by the AFL-CIO and other labor groups. He also is obviously the choice of House Speaker Michael Madigan, who is also the chairman of the Democratic Party of Illinois. Is that enough?

**I think not. Sen. Daniel Biss is catching up** to Pritzker, is closer than the polls' margin of error. Chicago businessman Chris Kennedy (son of the martyred Robert F. Kennedy) is not far back. I can see a strong shift of African American support away from Pritzker and toward Kennedy (whom I endorsed long ago).

It may not be fair, but the Blago connection will doom J.B. Being sorry for remarks that seem so character-revealing is not enough. There was plenty of information about why Blagojevich should have been shunned. He should have done that, as should have Madigan, whose heavy hand ensured Blago a second term.

My recommendation is now this: Vote on March 20 for whichever Democrat alternative seems to have the best chance (based on latest polls) of beating Pritzker. (I think it will be Kennedy, but a [Biss victory would also be welcomed](#) as a breath of fresh political air in Illinois.) Whoever wins should beat Rauner in the fall.

**How current Illinois citizens will pay a huge debt** incurred, but not paid, *by their parents and grandparents*, will be the subject of a [House Personnel & Pensions Committee](#) hearing at 1 p.m. Tuesday in Room C-600 of the Michael A. Bilandic Building, 160 N. LaSalle Street, Chicago. (You may be able to [monitor it here](#).)

Yes, this hearing will be about the \$120 billion or so in "unfunded liability" that the five state-administered pension plans have accumulated in the decades when legislators and governors lacked the guts to tell the taxpayers what they owed to those systems. They spent money on politically more popular things instead.

The two potential methods of paying the debt that the committee will consider Tuesday are: (1) re-amortizing it for a longer paydown period (hopefully, this time, without a "ramp") and (2) "Pension Buyout Plans." The former, done right, would solve the problem. The latter could have beneficial effects, but just small ones.

Why should people who did nothing to incur the debt pay it off? Because there is no other choice. The policymaker culprits who let this happen are mostly gone, retired or dead, as are citizens who benefitted from the programs and services the policymakers bought with the money that should have gone to pensions.

Whoever pays this debt will be "innocent." Might as well spread the fiscal pain to as many as possible, to keep it from hurting anyone too much. Efforts to just ignore state's obligations to pension system members were unconstitutional, the Illinois Supreme Court has, properly, ruled. Grit your teeth and do what's right.

**The House will not be at the Capitol at all this week**, but the Senate is scheduled for session days Tuesday through Thursday. The Senate Education Committee is to convene Tuesday at 1 p.m. with six bills posted:

[SB 2468](#) requires that, if a special education child's IEP team decides the child does not require "assistive technology services or devices," it must inform the parents of that decision and explain the decision's basis.

[SB 2527](#) requires that, if a district establishes an "online learning program," the school board "may not limit (i) which students may participate in the program, (ii) the number of online courses a student may enroll in, or (iii) the number of credits a student may receive from online courses."

[SB 2542](#) changes the definition of a school psychologist to require that such a person "holds a valid Nationally Certified School Psychologist credential." A current provision that ISBE may require other credentials is removed.

[SB 2545](#) exempts from the provisions of the Open Meetings Act meetings of "joint committees" formed by school boards and teachers, or union representatives, for bargaining purposes.

[SB 2648](#) extends the deadline for the [Agriculture Education Shortage Task Force](#) to issue findings and recommendations to the governor and the General Assembly to January 1, 2021 (rather than next January 1).

[HB 1252](#), which passed the House in November, would require that grade school students must experience one semester of "civics education" in Grade 6, 7, or 8, and permits districts to use "private funding" to fund this mandate.

If you have an opinion on any of these bills and wish to file a "witness slip" to tell the committee what it is, you can file the slip electronically using a [form that you will find at this link](#).

**Links to all newsletters posted so far this year** are [at this web page link](#). Please remember that *current* archives are for our subscribers only; *do not share this link*. Also, all newsletters posted in 2017 can be found in the [web page at this link](#). You may share the 2017 archives web page link with anyone who wants to see it.

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