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Fwd: 'At-risk students,' should they be called that?

1 message

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Mon, Jan 28, 2019 at 7:49 AM

February Board Meeting

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From: **State School News Service** <j.m.broadway74@gmail.com>
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'At-risk students,' should they be called that?

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

[[Updated list of currently pending bills](#) of interest to education advocates.]

There are numerous references to "at-risk students" in the Illinois School Code. That phrase can be found in seven bills already been filed in the current legislative session. Most are not new in this respect; they just repeat words from current law. But one bill would give the phrase a whole new definition.

HB 190, sponsored by [Rep. La Shawn Ford](#) (D-Chicago), would codify eight characteristics or circumstances, any of which could cause a student to be classified as "at-risk." In the exact language of the bill, these factors are:

- (1) *He or she has failed 2 or more classes in the immediately preceding school semester.*
- (2) *He or she is experiencing a decline in his or her grade point average of more than 2 points on a 4.0 scale, or its equivalent on another scale, compared to the immediately preceding school semester.*
- (3) *He or she is a chronic truant, as defined under Section 26-2a of this Code.*
- (4) *He or she has been suspended more than 3 times from a school pursuant to Section 10-22.6 or 34-19 of this Code.*
- (5) *He or she is homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless.*
- (6) *He or she is under the legal custody of the Department of Children and Family Services.*

(7) *He or she is the subject of an investigation conducted by the Department of Children and Family Services.*

(8) *He or she displays recurring violent behaviors, including, but not limited to, fighting or threatening other students or school personnel.*

Ford's bill, then, would require every school board to "require its schools to connect at-risk students in need of academic support to either community-based or in-school academic support." Districts would also have to inform students' parents on the availability of such support; five types are listed in the [text of the bill](#).

Sure, HB 190 is a mandate. Ford has sponsored similar bills in the past, but they have stalled. It seems HB 190 reflects Ford's frustration with current policy, and it reflects his determination that specific actions need to be taken if vulnerable children who are the most difficult to educate are to succeed.

I'm interested in ISNS readers' reasons for considering HB 190 a good bill - or a not-so-good bill. (Remember, an opinion *must be backed up by a reason*.) I like Ford. He works hard and tries to make a positive difference. I truly do not have a fully formed opinion about his bill. ([You might give me one](#).)

But this is not why I'm raising the subject of at-risk students. The stimulus for that was a commentary published online by [The Conversation](#), a web site displaying the work of university faculty members from all parts of the country, the writings of academics who have expertise in a comprehensive range of disciplines.

The stimulating commentary, in this case, was written by [Ivory A. Toldson](#), Professor of Counseling Psychology at Howard University. It is entitled: [Why it's wrong to label students 'at-risk'](#)." Now, I've referred you to this site before, but it should not be assumed that I endorse everything published on it.

One of the factors that makes me look more closely at the logic of an article is a reference by the author to a book he or she has had published or is "forthcoming." That's the case here. It does not necessarily mean the logic is flimsy. Rather, it just hints at a motivation - other than my enlightenment - for writing the piece.

The title tells you Toldson is about to discourage the use of "at-risk" as a category of student. And it is deft of him to concede an opposing position in advance: "First, let's acknowledge that, paired with good data, 'at-risk' is practically useful and generally accepted in professional and academic settings. "

What he needs to do now is convince me that his preferred alternative - which is simply to refer to what we identify as an "at-risk student" by calling him or her a "student" - is better. He does avoid euphemisms and "labeling" a student in what he considers an uncaring or non-compassionate way.

But in my view he mainly avoids communicating with professionals in any meaningful way. When you're talking about children who are likely (based on experience and research) to struggle in the classroom more than most others as a consequence of specifically challenging circumstances, you eventually have to say so.

Tolson persuaded a commission to which he consulted to change the title of a report it was producing from "More Resources for At-Risk Students" to "More Resources to Ensure All Students are Successful." Was any meaning lost? Oh, yes. I think many of us would be totally misdirected by the revised title.

Now for the nuance. While I do not believe there is anything inherently demeaning about the use of "at-risk" as an adjective, my sense is that it is a term that might be

best for discussions among professionals. It is clear and already accepted, already defined. But kids need not be continually told they are "at-risk."

Getting back to Ford's bill to require connecting at-risk students to services that could help them, I believe a number of amendments are likely to be adopted if HB 190 is to progress through the process and be enacted. His definition seems inexact, and some of the bill's mandates may not be possible everywhere.

We won't peer so deeply into every bill that would amend the School Code. There's too many of them. The bill-filings now total more than 1,000, including the 114 that are [already on our list to track](#). The filing deadline is just a bit more than two weeks away. You should expect a total of maybe 6,000 bills to hit the agenda.

The House still has no committee appointments worth mentioning, [apparently](#). So there are no committee hearings scheduled. It is not a simple task to organize the House, but there are just 13 session days scheduled for March. Many bills are sure to die of neglect by March 29, the committee action deadline.

But the Senate [has lots of committees](#), and many of them - including the [Senate Education Committee](#) (11 Democrats, six Republicans; meeting in [Room 212 at 1 p.m. Tuesday](#)) - are scheduled to meet this week. They'll get organized and might even consider a bill or two. Yes, Senate Education has two bills posted.

Both bills are sponsored by the committee chair, [Sen. Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant](#) (D-Plainfield). [SB 28](#) deals with the complex concept of how a school "day" is counted for state reimbursement purposes. I expect this topic to be debated vigorously throughout the session. Tuesday's hearing will just be the start of a long argument.

Bertino-Tarrant's other bill, [SB 59](#), deals with high school-college "dual credit" courses. It is designed to prevent fees paid by students from exceeding "what the institution needs, per student, to administer a dual credit program," or from being used for purposes "other than administering the dual credit program."

You may be able to [monitor the committee hearing at this link](#).

Another segment of the seminar on government: We recently looked briefly at the web site of the Legislative Research Unit (go from the [legislature's home page](#) to [Legislative Support Services](#), to [COGFA](#), to the [LRU](#) site). On the left side of the LRU home page is a list of "major publications." Below that listing are some links to LRU publications and reports grouped by topic - including the topic of ["Education."](#) (Yeah, stuff's pretty old.)

I'd urge you to browse around a bit. There are many interesting links. The [annotated Constitution](#) pdf is excellent, answers a lot of questions. The [Tax Handbook](#) is excellently detailed. I'm looking at [Laws for Older Adults](#), also updated in 2018. Seriously, you can lose yourself for a day or more just on this page.

If you go back to that string of links at the start of the first paragraph and work backward, returning to the [COGFA](#) link gives you access to the [COGFA Analysis Unit](#). If you like reading about economic trends affecting the state budget, or about bond issues or about insurance or pensions - you'll just be in heaven here.

That's not all, of course. The legislative supports services page just has tons of stuff for you to learn. The professionals at the Capitol study them all the time. Well, there are a few sources of information that seem to go mostly unread. Example, the [Legislative Ethics Commission](#) page doesn't seem to get much traffic.

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