



Jim Broadway

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Rauner was right to predict his own unpopularity

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

As you will recall, when Gov. Bruce Rauner first took office in January of last year, he looked at the state's fiscal condition and - because of the cuts he would make to state services, no matter how needed they might be - said he would not expect to be winning any popularity contests in the months to come.

As wrong as he might have been on other predictions, he was right about that. His "disapproval" ratings began to rise after just the briefest "honeymoon" last year, and [continued to rise into 2016](#) even after surpassing the politically painful 50% milestone. Turns out people do expect the state to provide services.

The most recent poll suggests [the governor's ratings have hardened](#). About half the voters disapprove of his performance on the job. While most of the [Simon Institute's](#) survey respondents said no one in their family has been "hurt" by the state budget impasse, only 9% said the state is headed "in the right direction."

Election cycles are just two years long. Experienced governors (Big Jim Thompson, Jim Edgar) understood that when times are tough incumbents should front-load the pain. Do whatever cutting and taxing needs to be done in the first year, so the second year can look like a "recovery," something your party can be rewarded for.

But Rauner is not an experienced incumbent. He's making the second year of the current cycle look even worse than the first. Unless he changes course and addresses the spending-and-revenue imbalance and the services so many sympathy-evoking constituencies need, November's elections could be ugly for the GOP.

In fact, the ugliness process has already begun. A web site that appears to have been developed by a powerful union asserts that "Governor [Rauner's Illinois is dangerous](#)" Dangerous for whom? Elderly folks, for one; they lost funding for home health care. The site warns of dangers to children also, and to "working families."

The "dangerous cuts" site urges visitors to "sign up to stay informed" by receiving a newsletter about the policy process and how it can be changed, how policy can be made less dangerous. There are also links at the site that visitors can use to "contact your legislators" to support the most vulnerable constituencies.

So there is a policy-advocacy purpose at work in the "Rauner's Dangerous Illinois" web site. There is also a political purpose at work. As concern for children, the elderly and other vulnerable folks expands, so will the impression expand that Rauner doesn't care about much other than union-busting.

Rauner's response is to change the subject. That's not meant as a criticism. It's a tried-and-true tactic of the policy process and of politics. He is pushing hard for the enactment of his proposed public education budget - the chief feature of which is "full funding" of the \$6,119-student foundation level for FY 2017.

It would be the first time in seven years that funding through the General State Aid formula has not been pro-rated, which most severely handicaps the schools that rely most on the state for fiscal support. Every district would do better under the governor's plan than it would if funding were pro-rated at recent levels.

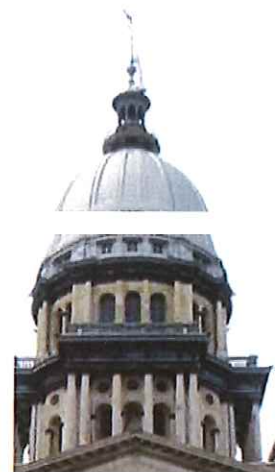
ISBE made comparisons [available for all school districts](#) to back up its claims. Rauner proposed to increase state support of the GSA formula by \$120 million to "fully fund" the foundation level. Of course, repeating the phrase "fully fund" as often as possible has a few misleading connotations.

For example, [my CPI calculator](#) says \$100 in 2009 money would be worth \$110.52 today. So, compared with 2009, even the boosted GSA that Rauner proposes would be, in effect, a 10.5% pro-ration from 2009 funding. Also, the implication that all schools would receive at least their current funding is far from true.

The comparison document provided by ISBE, for example, shows that Chicago Public Schools would receive under the Rauner proposal \$74 million less in FY 2017 than in this year. Dolton School District 149 (99% low-income students) would take a \$370,000 cut. East St. Louis District 189 (my *alma mater*) loses \$880,000. Granite City CUSD 9 (70% low-income) would take a \$600,600 cut next year under the governor's proposal.

The point is, the governor's plan can be made to sound a lot better than it is. And ISBE consciously makes it sound that way. That is their job. Similarly, the proposal embodied in [Sen. Andy Manar's yet to be adopted](#) amendment to [SB 231](#) is also a mere improvement in school funding equity - not an actual long-term fix.

Can Manar's 2016 version of school funding reform pass? It might make it out of the Senate, but passing the House in an



election year would be a challenge. What does House Speaker Michael Madigan think about school funding. He thinks, as he did in 1992, that the November voters should make it a constitutional mandate.

Now some cynical folks might believe Madigan (also Chairman of the Illinois Democratic Party) expects a constitutional question on school funding to draw more Democrats to the polls in November than would otherwise be the case. In that belief they surely would be correct. [HJRCA 57](#) is a pitifully twisted grasp.

[Read the text of Madigan's proposed](#) constitutional amendment. And remember, the last time it was asked, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that the word "financing" *does not mean providing money*; rather, it merely means deciding who will provide money. These words are just sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Teachers organization responds to Rauner plan: Illinois Federation of Teachers President Dan Montgomery expressed appreciation that "For the first time in several years, the General Assembly is having a meaningful conversation about school funding." But he said Rauner's proposal is just a distraction.

"Let's be clear," Montgomery said in a statement released by the IFT, "the Governor has not put forth a real education funding reform plan. He merely suggested putting slightly more money into the same broken formula without addressing the core need for fairness or adequacy. His proposal further demonstrates the flaws of the current system where students in dire need would face more cuts if nothing changes."

"We'd be foolish to think this is a silver bullet, especially coming from a Governor who is presiding over an epic collapse of social services and higher education because he refuses to ask the wealthy to pay their fair share. The same schools Rauner claims he wants to help are the center of the communities he is hurting."

"With limited resources, teachers and school staff are doing their best to educate students whose families are losing the support they need today and the college educations they want tomorrow."

Advocates to support Manar Bill in Senate Committee today: Representatives of some of the many organizations in the ["Funding IL's Future"](#) coalition announced plans Tuesday to testify before the Senate Education Committee today in favor of [Senate Amendment 1](#), a 490-page school funding reform document, to [SB 231](#).

"Advocates will urge Senate lawmakers to pass Senate Bill 231 – Better Funding for Better Schools – out of committee," the organizations said in a media advisory, "and will express their support for the bill to reform the state's inequitable and unfair public education funding system, which has shortchanged generations of children from cash-strapped districts in rural, urban, and suburban areas throughout Illinois."

Again, Illinois is one of the 49 states that have bicameral legislative branches. The Senate may take any action it wishes on SB 231, but nothing will come of it unless the House joins in the fun. The fact that Madigan has just filed a resolution calling for a constitutional amendment vote in November suggests that Madigan is not prepared to commit his caucus to a vote with uncertain political implications in an election year.

Still, the [Senate Executive Committee hearing](#) at 1:30 p.m. today is likely to be well worth monitoring (you may watch or [listen to Room 212 at this link](#)). The coalition represented has *"more than 230 members ... school superintendents, principals, faith leaders, parents, teachers, education reform groups, and others...."*

Carrying the torch for the organizations today are to be:

- Marin Gjaja, Senior Partner and Managing Director, The Boston Consulting Group
- Laraine Bryson, Tri-County Urban League, Peoria
- Caroline Crozier, Education Chair, LULAC of Illinois
- Josh Cauhorn, Associate, Burke, Warren, MacKay & Serritella
- [Ginger Ostro, Executive Director](#), Advance Illinois

More than 1,000 bills fell off the table when they could not reach the House or Senate floor before Friday's deadline for committee action. Most of them, 985 of them, were House bills, [as the legislative web site reports](#), and most of those were shell bills sponsored by Madigan and House Minority Leader Rep. Jim Durkin.

So these bills are all dead, right? We don't have to worry about them any more, right? No, not right. No bill is truly dead until the General Assembly in which it was filed expires. That won't happen until January of next year. The bills are just in a coma. It is unlikely that any will be reanimated, but it is not impossible.

But the bills are not needed. There are many shell bills - or even substantive bills - remaining to be amended in any way the caucus leaders desire and possibly passed before the May 31 end of the current legislative session. So there's no reason to suspect any of these bills will return like a vampire to stalk the Capitol.

Okay, don't be suspicious. But don't forget what the great Wilford Brimley said in *The Firm*: "I get paid to be suspicious when I've got nothing to be suspicious about."

A bill requiring all schools, public and private, to have an "asthma action plan," appeared to stagger a bit on Tuesday before being passed by a comfortable margin in the House. [HB 6333](#), sponsored by [Rep. Robyn Gabel](#) (D-Evanston) was debated at length before it was passed along to the Senate by a 76-33 vote.

Essentially, the bill just says school employees who "work with students" - teachers, counselors, administrators - should know what to do if a child has an asthma attack in school. The bill is a response to a growing number of students afflicted

with asthma, particularly low-income students in urban environments.

The State Board of Education is to produce a workable protocol for districts that do not develop their own for use in these situations. When heard in committee, [38 witnesses supported the bill](#) and only one, the Illinois Catholic Conference, was opposed. The committee vote was a unanimous, bipartisan 27-0.

But somehow, the bill became a partisan issue. In House floor debate one Republican after another rose to object to it, often on grounds that the state has no standing to tell private schools what to do - even though on matters of students' safety state policy comprehensively applies to public and private schools.

The GOP attacks ended after [Rep. Robert Pritchard](#) (R-Sycamore) - a GOP caucus leader on school policy and one who voted for the bill in committee - rose to ask some clarifying questions and make some positive remarks about the need for educators to be able to act quickly when a child has an asthma attack.

Although Pritchard and some other Republicans voted yes, [all no-votes were by GOP legislators](#).

Other school policy measures coming up for a vote Tuesday were not so controversial.

[HB 4367](#), sponsored by [Rep. Patricia Bellock](#) (R-Westmont), would require ISBE to reestablish the "reading instruction advisory group" that expired in December and that the group complete its work, including recommendations to the General Assembly, by the end of December this year. The bill passed 114-0.

[HB 4397](#), sponsored by [Rep. Jerry Costello II](#) (D-Red Bud), would extend the time period to allow school districts more time to expend the proceeds of "energy efficiency grants" awarded in 2014. The bill passed 113-0 and is now in the Senate under the sponsorship of [Sen. David Luechtefeld](#) (R-Okawville).

Your inputs - questions, comments, suggestions - are valued. For twenty years ISNS has been guided by wisdom "from the field." To contribute in this way, just [click this link to our contact form](#).