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Senate passes SB 231 - school funding reform

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

It lasted an hour-and-a-half, but it wasn't much of a debate. After SB 231 was amended and positioned for a final vote in the Senate, one Republican after another took the microphone and essentially accused the bill's sponsor of engineering not school funding reform but, rather, a "bail-out" of the Chicago Public Schools.

But in the end, [Sen. Andy Manar](#) (D-Bunker Hill) received the votes he needed to send the bill he's worked on tirelessly for more than two years over to the House for it to consider - or not - by the time the General Assembly adjourns at the end of the month. The vote was 31-21-3. The bill remains a long-shot, but it's not dead yet.

The thrust of the bill is to mitigate the resource disparities for the education of children depending on the zip codes of their parents' residence. It would achieve its goal primarily by sending about 90% of all state support for public schools through a new General State Aid formula radically tilted to benefit high-poverty schools.

In his budget address in February, Gov. Bruce Rauner declared he would not accept a new school funding policy that would "create losers," cause some districts to receive less state funding than they now receive. Manar said SB 231 is "my best attempt" to shape his bill so that no district would see an immediate cut in state support.

The bill includes a "hold-harmless" clause for that purpose. Even the wealthiest school districts would receive no less state support in FY 2017 than they are receiving this fiscal year. That, plus an "adequacy grant" to make every district able financially to educate children adequately, will cost about \$400 million, Manar estimated.

But the hold-harmless funding would "phase out" over four years.

Opposition to the bill was led by [Sen. Jason Barickman](#) (R-Bloomington), who served two years ago on a Senate advisory committee whose report (signed by Barickman) included recommendations very similar to the provisions of SB 231. Manar, who co-chaired that committee, reminded Barickman of that fact in debate.

Barickman seems to be seen by Senate Republicans as the most knowledgeable member of their caucus on school funding issues. He commended Manar for his hard work over the last two years, and stressed full agreement with the position that the present funding system is "broken." But he urged colleagues to vote "no" on SB 231.

He challenged Manar on the prospects of the House also passing the bill, and he expressed doubt as well that the extra \$400 million to fund the "hold-harmless" provision would be enacted, given the state's uncertain budgetary condition of late. But mostly, he objected to the bill's effects on Chicago Public Schools.

Block grants for the CPS that are already in the School Code were not removed in SB 231, and a provision was added by which the state would pick up a share of the cost of the CPS contribution to the pension system of which its educators are members - much as the state does for the other 860-plus school districts.

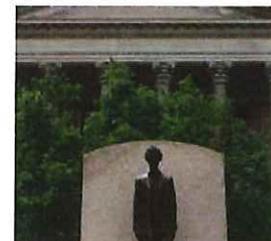
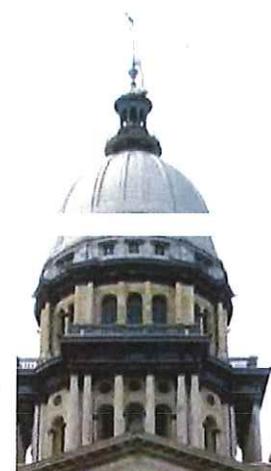
Manar called the pension contribution for CPS a matter of "parity" and defended the district's block grants on the basis of the number of students, the high percentage of students in poverty - and the fact that they were enacted by the state after significant study and debate among members of the General Assembly.

Ultimately, Manar described the effects of poverty in school districts such as East St. Louis - which has a property tax rate in excess of \$10 per \$100 EAV and still raises only about \$1,200-per student locally. High poverty rates require more funds, he said, and SB 231 "will attack poverty in the classroom."

[Sen. Matt Murphy](#) (R-Palatine) and [Sen. Dale Righter](#) (R-Mattoon) each mounted lengthy diatribes against SB 231, deploring its lack of provisions imposing "reform" on the Chicago Public School for what they considered incompetence and corruption, in spite of all that the state does for Chicago.

A member of the Republican caucus who had sincere compliments for Manar was Sen. David Luechtefeld (R-Okawville), who had co-chaired the Senate's Education Funding Advisory Committee with Manar two years ago. He congratulated the Democrat on his perseverance in bringing a difficult bill to the point of passage.

But Luechtefeld voted "present" when the roll was called. While the bill goes "in the right direction," there is insufficient assurance that the House would follow up and pass it and that the FY 2017 budget would include the \$400 million added education spending to cover the costs of the hold-harmless and adequacy grants, he said.



In the end, only one Republican voted in favor of HB 231. That was Sen. Sam McCann (R-Jacksonville), who has broken from his caucus on issues affecting his heavily labor-unionized constituency - and got challenged (unsuccessfully) by a Rauner-backed candidate in the March primary elections as a consequence.

McCann did not speak in debate on SB 231, but it seems likely that he feels less loyalty to the GOP caucus now that he has been punished for supporting the positions of voters who elected him to office rather than caving in to Rauner.

What will happen to the bill in the House? [Speaker Michael Madigan](#) (D-Chicago) will have more to say about that than anyone else. Madigan has seemed to want to bring more adequacy and equity to school funding in some other way. He wanted a constitutional mandate, but his [resolution on that failed](#).

There are reasons to believe Madigan may allow the bill to come to a vote. Certainly, there is much support for it in his Democratic caucus, and Madigan sat through a hearing last week of the House committee on PK-12 appropriations in which educators and advocates statewide advocated for SB 231.

But the goal that seems necessary is a veto-proof majority vote in both chambers, and the Senate roll call fell five votes short of the 36 that would take even though there are 39 Democratic senators. Madigan's House Democratic caucus has just 71 members, not a vote to spare if a veto needed to be overridden.

Also, this is an election year and, while the bill would be extremely popular in most of Chicago, Madigan might see it as politically risky in regions outside of Cook and the Collar Counties, regions where he hopes to elect Democrats, regions where voters might oppose helping Chicago even if the bill helped them too.

There will be more on SB 231.

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