



Jim Broadway

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## Illinois School News Service

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### ISBE (Rauner): Whack special education, call it a GSA hike

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

As a general thing, regarding run-of-the-mill matters, State Superintendent of Education Tony Smith and the appointed members of the Illinois State Board of Education take the initiative appropriately. They'll administer the agency as state and federal law requires, and they'll usually do a good job of it.

But on the big issues, when Smith's lips move you should hear the voice of Gov. Bruce Rauner. When the board acts on matters of great moment, you should be able to look up and see strings tied to sticks held by Rauner and dangling down to State Board members' hands as they each raise one to vote "aye."

How that can happen under an Illinois Constitution that created the ISBE as a constitutional agency, separate from and independent of the elected state officials (even the governor), is a story we'll save for a while. The focus for now is on the board's vote last week to gut special education - and then to brag about it.

Smith [tells us all about it in this week's missive](#) posted on the agency's web site home page. He called the FY 2017 ISBE budget proposal "groundbreaking," said his staff "worked to find creative ways within statutory constraints to prioritize dollars toward the most equitable distribution formula that exists in current law."

By "reallocating" the \$305.2 million in the current year's "Special Education - Funding for Children Requiring Special Education Services [budget] line" and sending the money through the "equalizing" General State Aid formula, ISBE can "fully fund" the Foundation Level, even bump it from \$6,119-per student to \$6,327.

**ISBE members also accepted Smith's proposal** to seek an additional \$262 million in "new" state funding, none of which would go to GSA. Most would go to "mandated categorical" programs (\$115.5 million) or early childhood (\$75 million). A totally new initiative called "Focus on the Community" would get \$15 million.

In describing the latter program, Smith demonstrated rhetorically by Rauner thinks he is far more "transformative" than former State Supt. Chris Koch, whom Rauner ordered fired shortly after he took office and stacked the board with a majority of members appointed by him. On "Focus," Smith had this to say:

"Our budget request includes a new Healthy Community Incentive Fund, which would support a competitive grant process to help coordinate, align, and leverage efforts to solve complex social problems within communities aimed toward serving the needs of the 'whole child.' The grant would enable school districts to take a lead role in cross-organization collaboration and become centers of collective impact and responsibility to the children of the community."

[I think I know what he meant by "cross-organization collaboration" to create "centers of collective impact" - and I even believe I agree with him. But as a communicator, I don't find that observation comforting.]

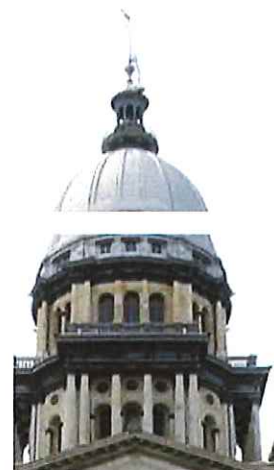
**Not everyone agrees that throwing special education under the bus** is such a good idea, even for an important priority like the General State Aid formula. "It stinks," Wheaton CUSD 200 Superintendent Jeffrey Schuler told the Chicago Tribune, which reported that his district would lose about \$843,000 in the fiscal sleight-of-hand.

"The state is in a budget crisis, I understand that," said [Beverly Holden Johns of Jacksonville](#), a longtime leader in special education policy and advocacy in Illinois. "But it is crazy to put that on the backs of children with disabilities," she told the Tribune. To ISNS, she observed: "You can't spend the same money twice."

"If you are reallocating over \$300 million to increase the Foundation Level in GSA, you cannot also spend that money on special education. If you spend the money on special education, you have not increased the Foundation level. This is the Illinois version of the great shell game where the pea represents funding for programs for students with disabilities," she said, noting as well there are federal policy reasons why the legislature should reject this scheme:

"The Federal special education law, IDEA, requires 'Maintenance of Effort' [spending the same amount or more on special education next year as was spent this year] for the state and for local school districts. While there are rare exceptions to MOE, this [pumping up the GSA formula] is not one of them."

**What's the likely outcome** of this proposal? The penalty for MOE shortcomings could be the loss of more hundreds of millions of federal dollars than the state could afford. Additionally, creating "winners and losers" on a large scale is not something legislators like to do. Besides, most of the largest "loser" school districts would be in the suburban counties around Chicago, home base to most legislators of Rauner's Republican Party.





Would children with disabilities really lose the services they need? In a strictly legal sense, they should not. But that is just because the law requires school districts to make those services available to the children no matter what. The State Board is the agency whose job it would be to monitor that and make sure the districts comply with the law. But as one observer told the Tribune, ISBE is not the robust agency it used to be. It would probably not monitor very closely.

Compliments for the State Board's proposal came from Sen. Andy Manar (D-Bunker Hill), whose efforts in the last couple of years have focused on boosting state funding through the GSA formula to mitigate the glaring disparities in educational resources-per student from district to district throughout the state. An analysis posted on the State Board's web site noted that, in 2014, the poorest school district had about \$6,000 for each student, the richest over \$30,000. ([See P. 7](#))

So what you can see is a clash of two powerful and politically potent policy goals, which cannot both be achieved with the amount of revenue the state will be able to allocate in FY 2017. (It seems strange to talk about FY 2017 when, except for the PK-12 education budget, there's no FY 2016 in place.) In such circumstances, the status quo usually remains the same. There's a "grand bargain" scenario that would support both goals, but [for now it is just a dream in Manar's head](#).

**Civics Lesson: The policy process hasn't always** been so controlled. Let me tell you about a friend of mine. Larry Stuffle was elected to the Illinois House in November of 1976. He was only 27 at the time. He won with only 24% of the vote. He was reelected in 1978, again with only about 24% of the vote. It gets stranger.

Republican Jim Edgar was also elected to the House - *from the very same district* - in both of those elections. He got only 29% of the 1976 vote and dropped to 24% in 1978. But neither Larry nor Edgar was the top vote-getter in the 53rd district. A Republican named Charles "Chuck" Campbell prevailed with about 30% both years.

That's right. [Two Republicans and a Democrat](#) were elected from the 53rd District in 1976 and 1978. There was another candidate, a Democrat - an incumbent State Representative - who finished fourth in 1976 with just under 17% of the vote. That ended Democrat Rep. Robert Craig's promising political career.

It was the "multi-member district" system, a great process. The state had 59 legislative districts; voters in each elected one senator and *three* state representatives. No matter how dominant a party was anywhere in the state, voters favoring the "minority" party always managed to have some representation in the House.

**Legislators never experienced partisan isolation.** There was always at least one House colleague of the opposite party who went to the same meetings, worked on the same constituency issues, appealed to the same voters. They might have been political foes, but they knew each other and cooperated often out of necessity.

So total gridlock was rare. Partisan caucus leaders held no iron-clad control. Rank-and-file legislators saw issues through the eyes of *their constituents* rather than through the political agenda of the Speaker of the House or the Minority Leader. Coalitions without party labels often formed to pursue goals of *regional* significance.

Sure, they often tangled as partisans; but they didn't demonize each other. Why don't we still have this system? Pat Quinn's demagoguery put the "Cut-Back Amendment" on the ballot in 1980. To voters still angry about a legislative pay hike in 1978, it all just sounded too good to pass up. Quinn. What a doofus.

**Larry served four terms** with rare effectiveness and congeniality. He was respected by colleagues on both sides of the aisle. In 1982, the first election under the current system, he won with 54% of the vote. But the GOP tilt in the Charleston area was too much; he narrowly lost in 1984 and again in 1986.

Larry became a lobbyist, representing mostly education clients, adult and continuing education professionals, high school districts. He guided the Illinois Alliance of Administrators of Special Education for a quarter of a century. When I lobbied in the 1990s, Larry went out of his way to be helpful. He had such a generous spirit.

Had? Yes. [I attended Larry's funeral service](#) Wednesday. Given everything that's likely to transpire now that Rauner's decided special education kids and their parents don't matter, the IAASE will miss Larry a good bit this year.

**Special note to all my new best friends** who have subscribed to the newsletter in the last couple of weeks. I'm focusing more on getting my accounts straight than I am on the revenue side right now. I'll get an invoice to your email inbox in a few days. I'm confident you'll like the terms.

Also, to those who did not receive the first newsletter or two because of flawed records at my end, I have restored the email addresses for everyone who has used the form at <http://illinoischoolnews.com/011116noticeform.htm> to let me know there was a problem. Again, I will get these records updated soon. Meanwhile, you will not miss any issues of ISNS during this exciting time in Springfield. Thank you - thank all of you - for supporting ISNS. - Jim Broadway

**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](#).