

Jim Broadway

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### Connections: Community problems show up in schools

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

My first journalism assignment was as the "education reporter" for the Edwardsville Intelligencer starting in 1970. I learned early on that educators would love it if their jobs were as simple as giving children knowledge and skills. Too often, they must also try to mitigate the effects of problems in the community.

For example, as the standardized testing movement was gaining momentum years ago, I asked a state superintendent if something like a prolonged strike at a community's major employer would affect students' test scores. Sure it would, he said. Kids pick up on family stress, and it hurts them academically.

Lead poisoning is again in the news. As in Detroit, disturbances in the [water system of Chicago](#) are feared likely to elevate levels of lead in the city's drinking water. [Litigation is already filed](#). But an Environmental Protection Agency official says lead pollution is a problem "everywhere, not just in Chicago. It's a national issue."

Indeed it is, as the residents of Galesburg in Knox County have discovered. A county Health Department administrator reports that 2% to 3% of [children under six have tested high](#) for lead - and some of it comes from their drinking water. There is a connection between this situation and the state budget crisis.

Knox County applied for - and received - two state grants to help pay for lead-abatement processes. But the county has received no funding on a \$6,000 grant since last July 1 - and nothing at all on a \$108,000 grant. Lead pollution is not a new problem in Knox County, but now it must be addressed without state help.

So what does all this have to do with the schools?

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention [puts it bluntly](#): "No safe blood lead level in children has been identified." A CDC-funded report by the National Center for Healthy Housing asserts "Lead exposure, even at low levels, has a significant [negative impact on health and educational](#) outcomes."

The costs are significant. The Center cites a study that "conservatively" estimated the cost of special education services for a lead-poisoned child at \$38,000 over three years. Another report cited claims a reduction in preschool children's lead levels would save society billions of dollars by lowering the "direct costs of crime."

**Schools are windows into their communities.** Almost anything that's going on "out there" will have an effect that shows up "in here," in the classroom. When things go noticeably wrong - test scores fall; schoolyard fights proliferate - it's more likely that the direct cause will be found out there, rather than in here.

But policymakers and well-intentioned folks who influence school policy often prefer to wear blinders, to just proceed as if nothing outside the schoolhouse matters. A state superintendent years ago used to say, "Poverty is no excuse," as if there were no effects that poverty outside the classroom can bring into the classroom.

A more thoughtful person, a leader of one of the many non-profits that care about quality education, once responded to my observation that changing the outside-of-school environment for children would have dramatically more impact than any changes we could make in teaching or testing in the classroom:

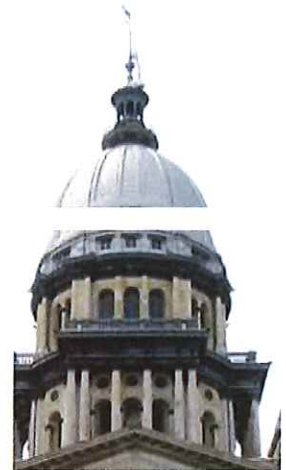
"Yes," she immediately conceded, "but there's nothing we can do about that."

But that is not true. There are two ways to go, two ways to make progress. One is to address the environment the kids grow up in. That would be expensive, of course, and might also involve violating some parents' rights. The other way is to make a school's resources track the environmental challenges of its students.

**Matching resources with students' challenges** is one of the effects Sen. Andy Manar (D-Bunker Hill) and supporters of his bill [SB 231](#) are trying to achieve. [Senate Amendment 1](#), the 490-page school funding reform document, was adopted by the Senate Executive Committee on Wednesday. It is now the bill.

Advancing SB 231 to third reading was not easy. Although [483 witness slips were filed in support](#) of the bill, another 46 were filed in opposition. The committee's 10 Democrats [voted to adopt the amendment](#); of the 7 Republicans, only Sen. Matt Murphy (R-Palatine) voted against it - the other 6 meekly voted "present."

As amended, among its many effects, SB 231 would dramatically tilt the General State Aid formula even more heavily than it has been to benefit school districts that have relatively small property tax bases and, especially, those that also have high





percentages of "low-income" students to educate. Manar - a true overachiever - was exuberant about the prospects for his bill on Thursday; he sent a link to the committee hearing. ([Testimony on SB 231 starts at the 8:30 mark.](#))

The bill has been shaped to ensure that no school district loses funding in FY 2017, relative to its FY 2016 distribution, but increases are immediate for districts in areas of relatively low affluence and those increases grow incrementally in coming years, during which funding to more affluent districts falls.

So where is it now? SB 231 is on third reading - passage stage - in the Senate at this writing. Technically, it could be in the House by the time you read this. All that would take is one floor vote. What the House would do with the bill is unknown. My guess is it would do nothing, but I could be wrong. But even if the House passed the bill and sent it to Gov. Bruce Rauner for his consideration, Rauner has already signaled an intention to veto it.

**Restorative justice is the true intent** of [HB 4630](#), which has a short title referring to it as dealing with "educator qualifications." It is one of several bills that are being considered this session to address certain onerous effects of a criminal code that has overly stigmatized thousands as "felons."

In this case the bill, sponsored by [Rep. Kelly Cassidy](#) (D-Chicago), would permit a person with a felony conviction for certain non-violent drug offenses to become qualified for an educator's license, rather than being barred from teaching for life as one of many irrationally harsh effects of President Nixon's "[war on drugs](#)."

The bill passed the House [64-47 this week](#) with an interesting roll call. Bills like this often turn partisan. Republicans vote "no" to avoid being "soft on crime." But this bill got 47 Democratic votes and 17 Republican votes. House Speaker Michael Madigan voted "no." Minority Leader Jim Durkin voted "yes." Very bipartisan.

The bill now goes to the Senate for its consideration. My sense of the Senate is that the bill will pass in that chamber. Will Rauner veto it or sign it? I believe this is a bill Rauner would sign.

**Will collegial bipartisanship be the rule** in the [Senate Executive Committee](#) next week? I don't think so. There are 29 constitutional amendment proposals posted for a hearing at 3:30 p.m. Tuesday. Most of those proposals will be dismissed without a word of regret. Most will be rejected by a [subcommittee that morning](#).

But [you might want to tune in](#) for the full committee's hearing in the afternoon. The time may be right for [SJRC 1](#), the graduated-income tax proposal of committee chairman [Sen. Don Harmon](#) (D-Oak Park). A similar proposal has been filed by Sen. Kwame Raoul (D-Chicago) in [SJRC 11](#).

Of the 49 states that have an income tax, 41 of them have multiple tax brackets. Income up to a low level is taxed at a low rate; higher tax rates apply to income at increasingly higher levels. Reasonable graduated income tax rates are the reason these 41 states are not in the fiscal black hole with Illinois.

In past years, the proposal has been partisan. Republicans have always opposed it. Rauner's position is irrelevant, since governors have no say about what goes on the November ballot. But the House has a say, and Speaker Michael Madigan tends not to take risks of any kind in an election year.

**Other constitutional amendment proposals** would: Abolish the office of State Comptroller ([SJRC 2](#)); impose term limits on various state officials ([SJRC 3](#), [SJRC 4](#), [SJRC 5](#), [SJRC 8](#), [SJRC 12](#), [SJRC 14](#), [SJRC 16](#), [SJRC 18](#), [SJRC 19](#), [SJRC 20](#), [SJRC 21](#) and [SJRC 23](#)); require 3/5-majority votes to pass bills during "lame duck" sessions ([SJRC 6](#)); abolish the office of Lt. Governor ([SJRC 7](#), [SJRC 27](#) and [SJRC 29](#));

Prohibit "lame duck" sessions except in certain emergencies ([SJRC 9](#)); make state mandates on local governments, including school districts, unenforceable unless the state pays the cost of implementation or the mandate is enacted by a 3/5th majority vote in the House and the Senate ([SJRC 13](#)); end legislative district gerrymandering ([SJRC 15](#), [SJRC 17](#)); enable citizens to "recall" elected state officials ([SJRC 22](#));

Ratify the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution ([SJRC 24](#)); prohibit using transportation funds for purposes other than roads, bridges and other structures or for public transportation facilities of any kind ([SJRC 25](#) and [SJRC 29](#)).

**Over in the House**, the PK-12 committee on Curriculum & Policy is scheduled to meet at 5 p.m. Monday to consider a resolution ([HR 1121](#)) that would declare Tuesday to be "Education and Sharing Day" in Illinois.

The House PK-12 committee on Appropriations will convene at 5 p.m. Monday to consider Speaker Madigan's lame proposal ([HJRC 57](#)) for a constitutional amendment on education funding. The same committee will convene at 3 p.m. Thursday to discuss the FY 2016 budget and a proposed budget for FY 2017.

Why is Madigan's proposed constitutional amendment lame? [If you read the text](#), you will see that it merely puts the burden of "financing" public education mostly on the state. As the Supreme Court ruled in the 1990s, the term "financing" does not mean paying the money; it just means deciding who will pay.

Therefore, Madigan's proposed education article is as [meaningless as the current one](#). But I'm guessing Madigan has calculated that, if it's on the ballot in November, it will draw voters who might otherwise stay home, voters who would be more likely to vote for Democrats than for Republicans. What do you think?

**The Illinois Network of Charter Schools** [rallied at the Capitol](#) last week. The organization has demonstrated some political clout, some effectiveness in the policy process. Only about 64,000 Illinois children attend charter schools. That's only about 3% of the total public school population, but [the INCS](#) can make the number seem large in the talking points it hands to

legislators and the presentations it makes under the Capitol Rotunda.

As you saw if you clicked the link, the group drew some pretty good coverage from Fox News. The Illinois charter movement has friends in both the House and the Senate, in both the Democratic caucuses and the Republican caucuses. [Sen. Patricia Van Pelt](#) (D-Chicago) expressed growing sentiments with:

"It's an insult to our human rights that we are to send our children to places where they just aren't learning. There is nothing wrong with our kids. Rather there's something wrong with a system that continues to send kids to the same school to get the same results over and over again."

There was a time when the Illinois Charter School Commission's ability to overrule an elected local school board's decision to reject an inferior charter application could have been curtailed. That time passed when Rauner was sworn into office. Future school policy may have to be shaped in recognition of this.

The ISNS Archives link is [at this URL](#). The secret password is: compromise. Please keep it a secret, just between us school policy insiders. The Archives page links you to every ISNS newsletter distributed this year and in 2015.

**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](#).