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Time to start weeding the garden

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

The legislative process is like horticulture. The bills are like seeds. In the spring, 177 gardeners (legislators) just throw seeds all over the place, maybe 5,000 of them, all different. Some will grow into something nourishing, like carrots or beets. Some will have a flowery aesthetic appeal. And some just will be weeds.

Actually, as a matter of math, most will be weeds. For every ten seeds sown, eight or nine will sprout into weeds. They must be pulled out or cut down. The master gardeners - House Speaker Michael Madigan and Senate President John Cullerton - swing the scythes first. They take out weeds by the thousands (plus the occasional flower) just by assigning them to a committee that will never give them water or sunlight; the weeds die of neglect, and are not mourned.

But the "substantive committees" in the House and the Senate have the delicate job of separating out the less obvious weeds from the food plants and the flowers. The committees pull the weeds out and leave them to die on the committee room floor. (Of course some weeds do escape their committees. But you knew that.)

Here's where you learn something. The [House committees](#) and the [Senate committees](#) have been formed and bills have been assigned to them. Click a committee's name to find out who its members are. Click "Scheduled" (if hyperlinked) to see what bills are "posted" for hearings. Click "Bills" to see what's been assigned.

Now the session deadlines come into play. The House committees have until March 31 to approve a House bill, and the Senate committees have only until March 17 to decide on pending Senate bills. Bills voted down, or just not receiving a vote in committee, go into a deep coma and almost certainly never wake up.

So timeliness is a factor and the action begins Wednesday afternoon, right after Gov. Bruce Rauner's "Budget Address," a constitutionally required performance which seems likely to resemble the governor's message from last year - short on the revenue by three or four billions, with a (false) claim that he can't do the cutting. (Some media expect Rauner to comment on the Senate's "grand bargain" proposals. My guess is he won't do that in any substantive way.)

The [Senate Education Committee](#) has eight bills to be considered when it convenes at 4 p.m. Wednesday in [Room 212](#), the most splendid of all committee rooms in the Capitol:

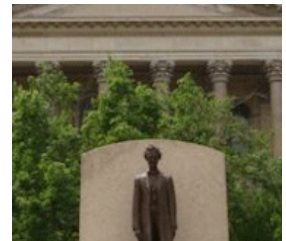
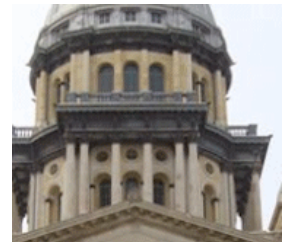
[SB 698](#) ([Sen. Jil Tracy](#), R-Quincy) continues Personnel Code exemptions codified for certain employees of the Illinois School for the Deaf and the Illinois School for the Visually Impaired. [SB 704](#) ([Sen. Kimberly Lightford](#), D-Westchester) seeks ultimately to reduce the number of arrests of students on school property.

Current law exempts students in the 11th and 12 grades from physical education classes for certain specified reasons. The exemptions would also apply to 9th and 10th grade students under [SB 756](#) ([Sen. Julie Morrison](#), D-Deerfield). Morrison also sponsors [SB 757](#), to require a student's state assessment score and a "college and career ready determination" to be entered on their transcripts unless the students' parents ask that they not be so entered; and [SB 764](#), requiring schools to post in English and Spanish information on contacting the DCFS child-abuse hotline.

[SB 791](#) (by [Sen. Martin Sandoval](#), D-Cicero) would amend the School Code and the Workforce Investment Board Act to allow a school board to permit students "substitute the entirety of grades 11 and 12 with vocational or technical education courses." [SB 863](#) ([Sen. Jennifer Bertino-Tarrant](#), D-Plainfield) would require, eventually, that three State Board of Education members *must be actual educators*. Hey! Looks like we have found us a flower!

The potential power impact of some bills is not always easily seen. Take [SB 865](#), for example, sponsored by school funding reform advocate [Sen. Andy Manar](#) (D-Bunker Hill). It's a very simple bill. It just requires that a school district report card to include the total and the per-pupil amounts the "State contributed to the Teachers' Retirement System of the State of Illinois in the prior fiscal year for the district's employees...."

What good will that do? Recall a few years ago when Madigan proposed to make each school district responsible for the "employers' share" of pension contributions, an amount that totals in the billions and is currently paid by the state. As the math genius Sen. Daniel Biss has often proven, this works powerfully to the advantage of school districts in affluent areas of the state, and largely to the detriment of districts in poorer precincts.



Manar's bill would create an annual statement of the actual cost, per pupil in the district, that the state is contributing to the TRS for the district's employees. The figures will vary wildly. The per-pupil contribution in the more affluent areas will far exceed the per-pupil contribution made for employees of less affluent districts. The argument will then be made, as it was when Madigan proposed it, that having the districts pick up the cost, rather than the state, would allow the state to put billions of dollars more into the General State Aid formula and other educational programs.

Obviously, if it passes, the bill would take a few years for its effects to have much clout. And it may not pass. Madigan may well now favor the proposal that's been tried a time or two, that of having the state pick up the employers' share of pension contributions for [members of the Chicago Teachers Union](#) pension system, which it does not currently do. That, of course, would lock in the pension payments' tendency to "undo" the "equalization" intent of the GSA.

House committees hearing PK-12 bills don't convene until Thursday. But the [House Personnel and Pensions Committee](#) convenes Wednesday, at 4 p.m. in Stratton Room D-1. (You may [monitor it at this link](#).) The pensions panel agenda is often scary, but pension policy is very tightly controlled by leadership.

By my count, there were 166 bills filed this year that would affect at least one - many affect all - of the five pension systems administered by the state. Of those - subtracting shell bills and bills obviously focused on the four systems that do not have educators as members - [we're still looking at 44 bills](#).

Some reflect tangentially related circumstances. [HB 3080](#), for example, increases the number of days to 130, and hours to 700, that a retired teacher can return to the classroom without impairing her retirement status. This obviously is needed because of teacher shortages resulting from years of erosion in teachers' status.

Some bills reflect unrelated circumstances. [HB 3061](#), for example, would add companies that participate in constructing a wall at the U.S. border with Mexico to the list of companies involved in "prohibited transactions" and, therefore, should not be invested in or in any other way benefit from Illinois pension system funds.

I've left [SB 11](#) on the list that I've linked you to above, even though it is as dead as it is unconstitutional. There may be other bombshells on the list. If you find one, please use the contact link below and tell me about it. (If the sponsor is a Republican, a pension bill usually has little chance of passing.)

Here's where you learn something. You can tell a lot about a bill by who its supporters are - and by who is against it. In the past, in order to know this you generally had to attend the committee hearing, listen closely and write very fast. Now, however, folks can file their "witness slip" electronically, and there is a way of finding out who is for or against any bill that is posted for a committee hearing. I've put [a pdf document on my web site explaining how](#) this is done.

There are two House committees meeting Thursday that deal with PK-12 education matters. Many of the bills look to be very controversial, very difference-making. I will try to preview them for you in a newsletter to be distributed Wednesday, overnight, to your email inboxes. But it may not happen, so cruise the [Dashboard](#).

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