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Illinois School News Service

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Fire chiefs oppose dyslexia screening bill

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

Current Illinois law permits school boards to use dollars remaining in their property tax-generated Fire Prevention and Safety Fund - after "the purposes for which the taxes have been levied are accomplished and paid in full" - to spend any dollars remaining in the fund for specific purposes, such as testing water for lead.

These are dollars, remember, remaining in a fund which has achieved the purposes for which the dollars were generated, which has completed "required" fire prevention, safety, energy conservation and school security tasks. Remember as well that the elected board has the discretion as to which authorized purposes to pursue.

Now [Rep. Keith Sommer](#) (R-Morton) proposes in [HB 507](#) to add testing students for dyslexia to the list of permissible goals a board might pursue in the expenditure of some of those unused dollars. Sommer wants local boards to have the ability to decide that all higher priority needs have been met - let's test for dyslexia.

But associations of fire department chiefs, and chiefs from communities around the state - [14 witness slips in opposition](#), totally - do not want the elected school boards to have that discretion. They opposed HB 507, which is posted to be heard by the PK-12 committee on "Licensing, Administration & Oversight" at 8:30 a.m. today.

Now, why would that group oppose Sommer's bill? No one else has filed an objection. (Actually, at this writing, no one else has filed a slip in support of the bill, either.) In such situations, it is usually a turf thing. Those fire chiefs believe those dollars belong to them. They won't admit that, but it's still true.

What might they say in testimony opposing the bill? Pay attention. There's a general lesson to be learned here. One argument might be that, without regard to the language of existing law, there is always something more that can be done for students' safety, that no peripheral priority should be allowed.

Another argument would make use of the worn-out (but still effective) trope of the slippery slope. If we let dyslexia have a claim to even a few of these dollars, what will be next? Wetlands preservation projects? Yes, it can get ridiculous. If you see this in time to [monitor the hearing](#), you may even hear dyslexia-denial.

Should the bill advance? I don't know. But I think the decision should be based on facts relating to other sources of funds for dyslexia-screening, on the prevalence of dyslexia and its effects of children in educational settings. Legislators should not just accede to a gang of turf-protecting interests.

The above commentary is more about the process than it is about a single bill. [There are about 15 items](#) on the agenda of that House committee this morning, and a similar number of bills posted to be heard by the House PK-12 committee on "[Curriculum & Policies](#)," which is scheduled to convene at 10 a.m.

I'm going to call your attention to a few high-impact bills but, for *reasons that will become clearer toward the end* of this commentary, I am not going to focus intently on any of them. Instead, I'm going to describe a process in which you can get an overview and choose from that which pending policy proposals to care about.

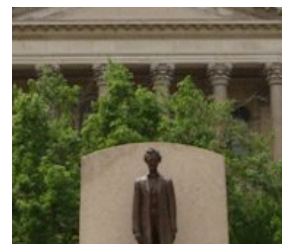
A key element of this exercise is the "[dashboard](#)" feature we reviewed last week.

To estimate a bill's chances of passage, the number and sources of witness slips for or against it are revealing. If there is zero interest expressed in a bill - no support or opposition evoked - that's a non-controversial bill. Unless committee debate raises questions the sponsor can't answer, the bill usually will pass.

You can open a browser window for both committees (giving you the ability to see what the bills do) and also dashboard windows for both committees (to see what emotions the bills have evoked), and then you can quickly focus on bills of interest to you with some efficiency and effectiveness.

I'm a little surprised that the voucher bill by [Rep. LaShawn Ford](#) (D-Chicago) - [HB 213](#) - has [only about 100 opponents](#) on file, and [HB 443](#), a similar bill by [Rep. Jeanne Ives](#) (R-Wheaton), has [even fewer objectors](#) than that. Ives' bill demanding physical education, [HB 440](#), has more than [900 opponents](#) who have filed slips.

It is interesting, I think, that [HB 266](#) by [Rep. Mary Flowers](#) (D-Chicago) - a bill requiring ISBE to set up a process by which parents can "opt-out" their children from state assessments - has evoked [not a single supporter or opponent](#). Does that



mean it's a non-controversial proposal that is likely to advance from the committee?

I don't think so. I think it remains a divisive issue. There have been ardent supporters of such legislation in the past. But it is likely to draw leadership opposition and, so, will probably stall in committee. Filing a slip against it would merely risk the wrath of Mary Flowers; veterans of the process know better than that.

The [powerful opposition](#) to [HB 663, Rep. Thomas Morrison](#)'s proposal to allow school districts to ignore some instructional mandates if the state has been late in distributing their funding, is pretty revealing of something (although I am not quite sure what it is). Enjoy this exercise. I'll be back as soon as possible.

Pro-ration as we have seen it is surely a thing of the past, based to Wednesday's [announcement](#) of a settlement between the Illinois State Board of Education and the Chicago Urban League, closing the books on a school-funding lawsuit filed by the League nearly nine years ago. We'll examine the implications further later.

The League made what I thought were cogent arguments questioning the constitutionality of Illinois' school funding scheme when they filed their suit in 2008. But they were ill-treated by the courts. The state was let off the hook entirely; only ISBE remained as a defendant. Eventually, the focus narrowed to just the pro-ration of General State Aid distributions during the bleak state fiscal years (but all recently have been bleak) FY 2013-FY2015.

ISBE Chairman Rev. James Meeks, who as a state senator devoted years of his life to the goal of fair school funding in this state and who surely had much to do with reaching the agreement ratified by the State Board, issued this statement:

"The case settled today addresses one of the many symptoms caused by the State's education funding system that is failing Illinois' students. ISBE deeply appreciates Governor Bruce Rauner and the General Assembly for their ongoing efforts to reform the core problem of Illinois' inadequate and inequitable education funding system.

"ISBE will continue to base all of its decisions on the best interests of individual school districts and their students to ensure that the whole child receives a high-quality education in a safe, secure, and supportive educational environment. ISBE remains hopeful that the General Assembly will enact funding reform during this legislative session to guarantee that no students ever have to settle for less than they deserve."

The Urban League justifiably saw the settlement as a [victory after a long struggle](#). The State Board agreed to settle, the organization asserted, "rather than face a court's ruling on Plaintiffs' pending motion for summary judgment [based on the argument that] the method the State Board has used in recent years to distribute limited state aid funds, known as 'proration', had a discriminatory impact on African-American and Latino students who attend majority-minority school districts in violation of the Illinois Civil Rights Act."

The League acknowledged that the settlement will not "result in the overhaul of the school funding system" when they originally filed their suit. But Chicago Urban League President and CEO Shari Runner's perspective is on point:

"After this lawsuit, lawmakers across the state have finally realized that the current funding system is broken; it is both inadequate and inequitable," she observed. "When the needs of students are not treated as priority, particularly those living in areas of high racially concentrated areas of poverty, the long-term consequences can be devastating." But the moral mandate to reform school funding in Illinois remains, the organization asserted.

"Our families and students deserve a school funding system that ensures funding is raised to a level that enables all students to meet rigorous academic standards and that distributes that funding equitably," Runner said. "This settlement helps, but until we achieve that goal, our work will continue."

This may be your last ISNS newsletter for a while. Actually, I had intended to write two, or even three, issues last week but instead I hung around the Memorial Medical Center ER a good bit, and I let technicians and doctors at the Springfield Clinic use their high-tech x-ray vision equipment to peer into my guts.

What they found was a dysfunctional gallbladder. This organ that we haven't really needed since the stone age now just exists, it seems, to cause trouble. Well, mine's coming out on Monday. Meanwhile, I have relied on a wonderful pill that keeps severe pain away but may cause my writing to be a tad creative.

I'm not in much pain at the moment, but I know I'll surely reach for the kind of relief that only Big Pharma can provide before the day is done. So my writing started to be inhibited early last week and my cognition switch will be in the "off" mode Monday. When will I write again? Tuesday, no way. Wednesday, maybe.

I'm sorry for the service lapse, but you may just have to expect that to happen occasionally when you subscribe to the news and views of a journalist who will be 74 in July. If I return to the classroom too soon, my scribbles could become quite dotty. (You know that I always rely on you to tell me when that happens.)

Should the U.S. have a Department of Education? New [Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos](#) says she can't think of a reason why it should. Rep. Thomas Massie (R-KY), who has [filed a bill to eliminate the USDE](#) at the end of 2018, said the agency has become "an unrecognizable federal beast." The bill will surely fail.

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