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Fwd: Does the GOP just want the rich to get richer?

1 message

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June Board Meeting

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From: **State School News Service** <j.m.broadway74@gmail.com>
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Does the GOP just want the rich to get richer?

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

It seems so strange. In our "representative" democracy, we're told, a legislator is elected to come to understand issues that are often complex and then, by commenting in public or voting on the record, to reflect his or her sense of positions their constituents would take - to "represent" their constituents.

[I will tell you that it used to work *almost* that way when I arrived in Springfield in 1981, but such representation has not been apparent for many years. But that's a whole 'nother story, an interesting story with quite understandable twists and turns, but it's a story that I'll have to save for your summer reading.]

What we see now, *on the issues that matter most*, is that legislators are elected, not to learn and represent the positions of their constituents, but rather to represent the positions of their political caucus (which pure political affiliation assigns them to) and then *convince their constituents to hold the same positions*.

Since voter sentiments matter so little, how are caucus positions determined? It is a dance of *differentiation*. The majority has the advantage. If, as in Illinois, the Democrats run the government, they set the agenda. The Republicans then accept the opposite. Their party persona becomes, *perforce*, the opponent of that agenda.

Political events going back decades [another long story] have given Democrats the identity of the keepers of the "safety net," the advocates of the "working men and women" and the party of "diversity." Remember, we're just talking about the *issues that matter most*. Positions on those issues set a party's persona.

Where does that leave Illinois Republicans in 2019? In a pretty tough spot. Democrat Gov. JB Pritzker was elected last year with many more votes than the Republican, the Conservative and the Libertarian candidates *combined*. The House and the Senate are under super-majority Democrat control. Democrats are in charge.

So the Republicans must take an opposing view on the issues that matter most. Those issues are defined by Democrats' proposals for how Illinois can emerge from its dismal fiscal state, from \$130 billion in unfunded pension liability, from a multi-billion-dollar annual structural deficit, from \$15 billion in unpaid bills.

The reality of the fiscal crisis is not in dispute. Individual legislators generally agree on how we got in this mess. In their hearts, surely most agree on the only reasonable remedy; much more revenue is required and graduated income tax rates would not only be a big part of the solution - but would also be the right thing.

The lucky Democrats can base their positions on reality, but Republicans are stuck with dissembling as their main tactic. Here's an example. [SJRC 1](#), a resolution to ask the voters in November of 2020 if they want state income taxes to be on graduated rates, or to keep the flat rate, was debated in committee this week.

Rep. Steven Reick (R-Woodstock), a sane and congenial voice on issues that don't matter very much, threw some smoke into the air. "Our job is to determine whether or not this is going to work before we put it on the ballot," he said, declaring his opposition until some "background considerations are answered."

Feigning ignorance is an old tactic. What "background considerations" are unclear? The resolution needs only to permit graduated tax rates, and that is its only effect. A bill is passing that would codify the rates if the amendment is ratified by the voters. (The richest 3% would pay more; us 97% would get a tiny tax cut.)

"There's really no rush to get this done," said Republican caucus leader Rep. Jim Durkin (R-Burr Ridge). Whenever year hear someone say, "this is not the right time," what they mean is that the right time will be "never."

But if the resolution and the bill setting the rate schedule are passed now, there will be time to communicate to the public, to deliver the facts so that those who vote can know exactly what the effects of ratification would be.

The Republican caucuses are unified, but with such an unenviable position.

Educators brought their stories to the Capitol on Wednesday, stories about the [3% cap on "pensionable" pay increases](#), about the impact of that cap on the dynamic of teachers' ability to invest in their own professional development, about its impact on teaching as a desirable profession for young people to enter.

From Geneva and Rock Island and Carbondale they came, teachers from Aurora and Troy, faculty members from Illinois State University. They brought with them [petitions](#), stacks of forms bearing the names of 55,000 educators and other citizens seeking to (Watch this!) "[save the teaching profession](#)."

As [my inaccurate article](#) last week *should have* said, the state's pay increase cap - beyond which the employers (school districts and universities, mainly) must pay for their impact on the educators' retirement systems - was sliced in half last year, from 6% to just 3%, surely worsening a severe teacher shortage crisis.

It was not the first cut. The cap used to be 20%. (I misreported that, too.) It was cut to 6% in 2005. Why was that? State policymakers, whose budget pays most of the "employers' share" of pension contributions for TRS and SURS members, objected to picking up the tab for decisions made at the local level.

It's easy to see that the timing was bad. How will empty classrooms be staffed this fall? How will bright young people be attracted into the arduous teacher preparation pipeline? A policy is either good or bad regardless of timing, but eroding the value of teachers' pensions would be a bad call at any time.

There are ways to shape policy for educators' pensions to discourage "gaming" by local policymakers while at the same time keeping generous and secure pension benefits as a rationale for the brightest - the *brightest* - high school graduates to choose to enter a teacher preparation program when they go to college.

Finding those ways should be the goal of state policymakers. Meanwhile, a bill to restore the 6% cap should be given a roll call vote in the House. [SB 1952](#) soared from the Senate 51-5 but in the House the 6% cap restoration provisions were taken out by [an amendment](#); it passed with *no effect on pension policy* Thursday afternoon.

Is it possible for the 6% cap to be restored before the legislative session is adjourned a week from today? Technically, it is. Any Pension Code bill (and there are many available) could be amended with that provision and pass quickly in one chamber - and the other could concur with that action within an hour or so.

But it won't happen. *It is not on the agenda this year.*

Long-term, what will help resolve the teacher shortage? A return of the general recognition in society that public school educators are grossly underpaid - compared to their non-educator peers and in view of their responsibilities and what they are held accountable for - is overdue. Worship of school "choice" needs to stop.

A teacher shortage in the 1960s was addressed, in part, by waiving university tuition and fees for students enrolling in teacher preparation programs. As I recall, salaries were secondary; teachers are motivated by the effect they can have on children. But a comfortable retirement plan *for them all* needs to be restored.

State policymakers and community leaders and, yes, even the voucher- and charter-advocates who have trash-talked the public schools for decades need to turn around, to apologize, to show respect. The PKD poll should never again find that a majority of parents *don't want their kids to become teachers*. ([See K7.](#))

[I've heard about interesting things going on at the local level to address the teacher shortage. We'll look at them shortly after the legislative session is adjourned next week. If you have information/ideas about teacher-shortage remedies, or anything else related to the crisis, [please let me know](#). Send attachments.

The House and Senate cranked out a lot of bills this week, with more to be debated today. I'll update the bill-tracking page by Saturday. It will be at the link below. Bills that do not pass by today's deadline will most likely be dead. A few will get the deadline extended, of course, and so will remain on the page.

These special ISNS features will be updated regularly: the [bill-tracking web page](#) showing the status of viable bills that could affect public education policy, and a page of links to all [ISNS newsletters so far delivered](#) in 2019. (The URL for these pages was changed for May 13, so only ISNS readers can access them.)

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