



Southwestern School District

Superintendent talks state school funding

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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BRIGHTON - August 1 is an essentially important day to many school districts across Illinois, which are waiting with bated breath to see the conclusion of Illinois Senate Bill 1 (SB1).

In a press release from the office of Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner, issued on July 19, 2017, Rauner called on lawmakers to send him SB1, which is an evidence-based school funding reform bill, which passed through both houses of the Illinois General Assembly. According to the release, if the bill is not sent to Rauner's desk soon, public schools throughout the state may not open in time for a new school year. Southwestern School District Superintendent Brad Skertich agreed with that sentiment, adding many schools in Greene, Macoupin and Jersey counties may not have enough in reserves to last 90 days without general state aid.

"There are 150 schools throughout Illinois with less than 90 days of cash on hand," Skertich said. "Some of those schools are in Greene, Macoupin and Jersey counties. Southwestern could operate until the end of February or early March, but that would mean exhausting every avenue we have, and we could never be able to restore those reserves."

That general state aid money required to keep some school districts' doors open this year would have to be delegated by the Illinois State Board of Education at least five days before it is distributed throughout the state, Skertich said. He said the status of SB1 should be decided by August 1 to ensure an evidence-based funding model could be enacted throughout the state.

If that model can be done through the passage of SB1, districts would start seeing general state aid coming between Aug. 10-15, which is the usual time such funds flow into Illinois schools.

In that release from Rauner's office, Illinois Democrats are accused of using a "procedural quirk" to prevent SB1 from advancing to his desk.

Once it reaches his desk, Rauner intends to issue an amendatory veto, which will result in higher state funding for almost every school district in Illinois, the release said. As it currently stands, the bill also includes what the governor describes as a "bailout" of Chicago's "broken teacher pension system." Rauner wants to amend SB1 to remove this from the bill and instead "provide adequate and equitable funding for students in Illinois no matter their zip code."

"Enough is enough," Rauner said in the release. "Children should come before everything else, and we have to make sure they get back to school on time. Legislators are holding our children hostage in a political game. This is shameful and unacceptable. Our kids deserve better. What are lawmakers waiting for? Send me SB1 so I can make the necessary changes to eliminate the Chicago Public Schools pension bailoit and we can get our kids back to school on time."

Skertich said politics such as these are what is ultimately preventing what he described as the first evidence-based school funding model to pass the Illinois General Assembly in six years. He said superintendents have been coping with funding dilemmas, including missed categorical payments for special education and transportation as well as proration of general state aid, which results in less money coming into the districts.

"This is the closest we have been for school funding reform in Illinois," he said. "To have it within arm's reach and have it all go down the drain would be devastating. It's due to the politics plaguing Illinois. It's Chicago versus the rest of Illinois or the rest of Illinois versus Chicago. We have kids who need money for education, and it doesn't matter their zip codes, they need an equal education. Politics between northern and southern Illinois should not affect kids, but it is."

According to Rauner, SB1 as it is currently written, does not ensure fair funding and outcomes for all Illinois children. Instead, he said it provides a bailout for the Chicago Public School system.

On a website hosted by Rauner, which reports to show how funding would differ between SB1 and his plan, the Southwestern School District would receive \$300,335.70 if SB1 passes, but would have as much as \$528,621.82 if Rauner were to amend it.

The Alton School District would receive \$970,208.63 from SB1, but as much as \$1,960,153.52 if Rauner amended it, according to the governor's own figures. The

Edwardsville School District would reportedly see an increase of \$132,445.94 from \$230,831.46, which would be guaranteed through SB1, to \$363,277.40 if Rauner were able to amend it.

A town hall meeting will be held at 6 p.m. on Thursday, July 27, 2017, at the gymnasium of Gillespie High School to discuss the current school funding crisis with special guest speakers Illinois Senator Andy Manar (D-Bunker Hill), Illinois Representative Christian Mitchell, and Illinois Comptroller Susana Mendoza.