



# Spotlight on Our Schools: Southwestern

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**BRIGHTON** - Many school districts in Illinois are concerned about Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner's decision to send Senate Bill 1 (SB1) through the Illinois General Assembly with an amendatory veto to remove what he describes as a "bailout" for the Chicago Public School system.

To see how this decision will affect schools in the Riverbend, EdGlen and northern Tri-County areas, Riverbender.com sent a questionnaire to each superintendent in the area. Answers to those questions will be published unedited as they are returned. The first of this series comes from Southwestern School District Superintendent Brad Skertich who has been extremely outspoken in regards to the need for evidence-based school funding in Illinois school districts.

*1 - Would you say your district has been placed in dire financial straits due to the current state funding model?*

After six years of proration and the loss of over 4.0 million dollars SW has made many changes to combat the fiscal crisis. To name a few, re-organized into attendance centers, elementary class sizes are larger, neglected curriculum updates, dependence on booster clubs and parent clubs for field trips, classroom supplies, extracurricular uniforms and supplies, struggled to meet student's social emotional needs, etc. While we are not in dire straits today, the fact that districts are calculating how long they can keep their doors open if state aid doesn't arrive is alarming and definitely a new low for Illinois. Districts have been operating in survival mode.

*2 - If the current state funding model met its categorical payments and did not have proration, would it be sufficient?*

No, the current state funding model doesn't distribute money based on student needs.

*3 - If this evidence-based school funding model is passed, what are the immediate benefits your district would see?*

Money would be distributed to districts adequately and equitably to meet student needs. The formula would also provide SW stability in future planning as the district would be aware of the state revenue it would receive annually. Currently we do not know what state revenue we will receive for the current school year and we are building a budget on assumptions rather than facts.

*What are some long-term potential benefits?*

See previous.

*4 - What is the largest expenditure in your district outside of payroll? How much is that impacted by pension debt?*

Our largest two expenses outside of payroll are transportation and operations /maintenance. Neither of these two funds are associated with TRS or pension debt.

*5 - If Rauner were to amend the bill to remove the "Chicago School Bailout," would it positively affect your district? Is that measure important to you?*

Rauner did complete an amendatory veto yesterday and in addition to his changes to the CPS Pension and CPS Block grant in SB 1, there were other significant changes to the bill that have not been completely digested. A few preliminary points to note are the Governor removed the district hold harmless provision in SB 1 and removed the state funding minimum. No hold harmless makes it challenging for districts to plan for the

future as revenue streams will not be consistent from the state from year to year. In addition, the removal of the minimum funding requirement by the state for public schools is alarming. Especially when you consider proration over the past six years. Why would educators, school boards and parents believe school will be properly funded using the past six years as an example.

The Governor's changes are not good for Southwestern students and as we sit right now, now state money will not flow to districts in August. This is unacceptable! Students will be impacted because of adult problems if something doesn't change.

*6 - How long could your district last without SBI passing?*

Without state funding arriving the district will be able to function as normal using reserves and local property taxes until late February/March. At that time, if this crisis continues into the spring, planning will begin to determine how the district will handle the remainder of the school year without state funding. Keep in mind, if SW has to exhaust all of its reserves, there is no recovery because it took decades to accumulate resources and the current crisis will wipe out all reserves.

*7 - How much in reserves does your district currently have? How long did it take to accumulate that?*

SW currently has over 5.1 million in operating fund reserves. It has taken the district decades to accumulate the funding it has on hand. Keep in mind, 5.1 million in reserves is a lot of money, but with costs averaging about 1.2 million a month, that amounts to roughly 150 days of cash on hand over 5 months.

*8 - How much is your district currently owed by the State of Illinois?*

The district is owed just under \$500,000 from the state for the 16-17 school year. The majority of the missing money is from Mandated Categorical Payments neglected by the state.

*10 - What measures has your district taken to alleviate the issues caused by current state funding in the last five years?*

Answered in question 1.

*11 - Have your communities and parents been supportive during this funding crisis?*

Southwestern students are fortunate to have a lot of support from parents and community members. Over the past six years our parent clubs, booster clubs and

community organizations have contribute hundreds of thousands of dollars to offset district expenses to ensure our students are impacted as little as possible by the school funding crisis in Illinois.

*12 - What do you think parents and the community need to know more about when making decisions based on public education?*

How is your district working to inform them? Southwestern has been sending emails to and using social media to communicate regularly with parents and the community.

*13 - What is the "best case scenario" for this outcome?*

Best case scenario our legislators work together and do what is right for the students in Illinois for the first time in nearly a decade and adopt of school funding formula (SB 1) that adequately and equitably distributes money to all school districts immediately and end the concern over school shutting their doors.

*14 - What is the "worst case scenario" for this outcome?*

Schools throughout the state begin to close their doors because state dollars aren't arriving and students are turned away.

Questions nine and 15 were not answered by Skertich.

*9 - What are the regional school district offices and the Illinois State Board of Education doing to assist your district (if anything)?*

*15 - How high is the possibility of your school district being forced to shut its doors due to this current Springfield squabble?*