

# State of Our Schools: Roxana, Edwardsville and Bethalto

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer  
August 9 2017 3:35 PM



**ALTON** - After Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner issued an amendatory veto to Senate Bill 1 (SB1), several school districts across the state became concerned about funding.

Funding has been a growing issue throughout the State of Illinois, especially in the area of education, over the last five years. When SB1 passed through both houses of the Illinois General Assembly, it was the first evidence-based school funding reform legislation to reach the governor's desk in six years. While Rauner himself admitted he agreed to 90 percent of the bill, he sent it back for an amendatory veto to remove a "bailout" for the Chicago Public School system and added a few other measures, which districts around the Riverbend admit would grant more funding, however, more money is not the issue, many say. To them, being paid on time is more important.

To see the state of local schools, Riverbender.com sent an identical 15-question survey to all districts in the coverage area, and have received three (from Southwestern, Calhoun and Granite City). Those were published without edits. Roxana, Bethalto and Edwardsville responded, but did not answer the survey directly.

Here are their responses:

## **ROXANA**

Roxana Superintendent Debra Kreutztrager said: *Although the state owes the Roxana School District \$559,334, the 2017-2018 school year is not in jeopardy. Because of the property tax base, is not heavily dependent on the state for financial resources. Reserves will offset any delays in payments from the state. Because of local resources, the evidence-based school funding model should not significantly impact the district.*

## **EDWARDSVILLE**

Edwardsville Superintendent Lynda Andre sent her superintendent's remarks from Aug. 2, 2017. In those remarks, Andre assured the district will be open through the 2017-18 school year, and will open on time in August.

"This is possible because District 7 is highly dependent on local property tax revenues to fund its operations and instructional programs," Andre said in the release. "While District 7 borrowed funds to finish the 2016-17 school year due to the failure of the State of Illinois to pay its financial obligations to public schools as promised, it will have sufficient funds to operate through March 2018 before borrowing again. However, if state aid funding is delayed, the district may have to borrow as early as February 2018."

When the Illinois General Assembly passed SB1 through both houses, it was revealed the Edwardsville School District may receive as much as \$228,000 annually in additional funding from the state.

As of June 30, 2017, however, the district was owed more than \$2.5 million by the state. Prior to that date, the district received approximately \$1.2 million from the state for payment on the second quarter of the 2016-17 year for special education and transportation categoricals. That payment was originally due in December 2016.

After the 2016-17 school year, the Edwardsville School District was operating on a deficit of more than \$6.7 million, according to its budget, however, after reviewing expenditures throughout the year, that negative balance in the education fund is approximately \$5.2 million.

"While this is a significant improvement over the original budget, the district still expended nearly \$2 million more than collected revenues after the transfer of almost \$627,000 in working cash tax receipts," Andre said in a release. "As with the past year, the district enters the 2017-18 school year with no cash reserves and is facing an approximate \$2.5 million budget deficit."

The impact of a \$0.55 tax increase for the education fund will not be realized until the beginning of the 2018-19 school year, Andre said.

## **BETHALTO**

The situation is much more dire at the Bethalto School District. In a release from Bethalto Superintendent Jill Griffin, she said the district will open its doors to students on Aug. 16, 2017, but added: "How long those doors remain open is up to the politicians."

"Today, Governor Rauner issued an amendatory veto on SB1," Griffin said in a release dated Aug. 1, 2017. "As a result of the amendatory veto, the state legislature must now either vote to override the veto or vote to accept the changes made to the bill by the governor through the amendatory veto process for the bill to become law, for the proposed funding formula to take effect and for schools to receive funding. If not acted upon swiftly, the Bethalto School District will not receive its general state aid payments, which are scheduled to start on Aug. 10, the date in which school districts have historically received their first payments for the new school year. The district is committed to keeping its doors open as long as possible, but will eventually be forced to close its doors without the regular and scheduled flow of general state aid payments."

At a July 27, 2017, meeting of the Bethalto Board of Education, it was revealed the state did not come through on its promise to fund the Bethalto School District adequately, and in fact failed to provide as much as \$950,000 in mandated categorical payments, which primarily go to bus transportation, special education and breakfast for low-income students.

As a result, the district ended the year with a negative balance of \$227,750 in the education fund and \$336,500 in the transportation fund. The district had to tap into its "minimal" reserves to pay the balance, which Griffin said "significantly impacts the district's vulnerable financial condition, a result of years of lost funding from the state, totaling millions of dollars."

If passed, SB1 would increase funding in the district by as much as \$700,000 a year. This is less than is currently owed from last year in mandated categorical payments alone by around \$250,000.

"In other words, this extra \$700,000, although extremely valuable, does not make the district whole from the loss of funding just last year alone," Griffin said in the release." After years and years of the proration of payments, a period of declining equalized assessed valuation, delayed categorical payments, the district has all but exhausted its reserves, as it has worked to maintain programs and personnel. So, continued brinksmanship in Springfield simply puts the district in further risk of having to close its doors, because it won't have the funds necessary to pay the bills."

In June 2017, the district received around \$393,000 in early local tax revenue, which it used to cover expenditures from the previous school year.

The district was "forced" last year to cut \$2.3 million from its operating expenditures to ensure a balanced budget. Griffin said this led to the losses of personnel, decreases in hours, losses of benefits and losses of programs and services.

"Although the district worked diligently to try to avoid making cuts that would have a significant impact on its students, inevitably cuts will," she said. "The district recognizes that it is responsible for its expenditures and is continuing to look at areas in which it can cut costs, trying to protect students through the process. However, if the governor and legislators in Springfield continue playing games, and general state aid fails to flow, the district will have no choice but to take drastic steps, steps that will have a negative impact on its students, including closing its doors."