

State School News Service

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New Jersey setting pension model?

By Jim Broadway, Publisher
State School News Service

While we're waiting for the General Assembly to get around to enacting an FY 2011 budget (the process will get rolling a day or two before the end of May), it's worth considering how pension system reform will shape up as an election-year achievement.

The [New Jersey proposal](#) might gain some traction as a plan for Illinois as well. Apparently the Garden State's new Gov. Chris Christie (beat John Corzine, a native of Taylorville) has found a formula for that elusive policymaking asset – bipartisanship.

The NJ pension system unfunded liabilities are only \$31 billion. Illinois' are more than double that. Both states have GRF budgets in the neighborhood of \$28 billion. Leaders in both states have warned that their pension crises could lead to bankruptcy.

The NJ plan involves higher employee payments for health insurance, capped sick days, vacation days and retirement benefits, and changes in calculating benefits, cutting out part-time workers and shifting to a defined contribution program. NJ teachers unions have not yet commented on the package.

Could Illinois do something similar? Before the end of 2010, it is likely to happen. The state Constitution protects benefits earned to date, but SSNS hears a phased-in two-tiered pension system is inevitable.

It will take a fight, but if there is to be an increase in revenue (tax hike) – which seems unavoidable given the budgetary chasm needing to be filled – pension “reform” will almost certainly be part of the deal.

Who will judge RTTT proposals?

Illinois is one of 40 states in competition for federal Race to the Top grants. The USDE has asked a score of application reviewers to judge each state using 19 complex criteria. Much subjectivity is expected. A question is: [Who are these reviewers?](#)

No one knows who they are. Well, that's not exactly true. USDE Secretary Arne Duncan probably knows, and surely some agency staff. But they have been picked, and trained at a super-secret site, according to a writer for the *National Review*.

So much for transparency, the NR writer complains.

Among the concerns is that big chunks of the RTTT \$4.35 billion will be handed out to special friends of Duncan and the Obama Administration, that states with the right connections will be favored whether their grant applications are top-notch or not. But is that a problem for Illinois to worry about, really?

FairTest.com: RTTT takes a ‘step backward’

Meanwhile, the [National Center for Fair and Open Testing](#) complains that the RTTT draft guidelines are a “step backward” in education reform. “FairTest” thinks test scores are overemphasized in the RTTT program while “out of school factors” affecting test scores and learning are given too little attention.

On another issue, Fairtest blasted National Merit Scholarship Corporation “bullies” for censoring the [cut scores it uses in each state](#). This achieves some “geographic” balance, but wealthy “white and Asian males” still get most of the awards.” [The [cut score for Illinois is 214](#), middle of the range. Students are most test-challenged in Wyoming, it appears.]

'Privilege of confidentiality' bill moved

Like counselor-client relationships in other settings, Rep. Sandra Pihos (R-Glen Ellyn) believes counselors and their student clients should have the "privilege of confidentiality" of their communication.

[HB 5126](#) would keep the information a student tells a school counselor out of the student's record and off limits even to the parents of the student, except in circumstances relating generally to the safety of the student or others, and to court orders. The bill was assigned Monday to the [House PK-12 education](#) committee. Other pending legislation addresses:

Immunity from liability: [HB 5138](#) would immunize a school employee from civil or criminal liability if the employee tells a parent or guardian that a student is in need of occupational therapy. Acts of "willful or wanton misconduct" would not be so shielded. (Yes, it does seem strange that this bill may be needed.)

Local School Councils: [SB 3063](#) would reduce the status of LSCs, the "local governing" bodies over all public schools in Chicago, to "advisory" and transfer their authority to the CPS Board. LSCs were set up in a "reform" of the mid-1990s to eliminate what was then considered an abused concentration of power in the hands of the CPS Board. Sen. James Meeks (D-Chicago) seems to think that was a mistake.

Special Ed assistants: [SB 3111](#) details requirements for training of special education teacher assistants, including legal requirements, knowledge of specific disabilities, curriculum needs, teaching strategies, data collection and team processes.

Inter-fund transfers: [SB 3117](#) extends the authority for school districts (not Chicago) to transfer dollars among their various funds to June 30, 2013. If not extended, such authority would expire in 2010. This is one of several bills filed on this subject.

Assistant principals: [SB 3014](#) authorizes districts to employ assistant school principals, describing their duties, their contracts, their job classification and their performance evaluation procedures.

Community schools federation picked

The [Federation for Community Schools](#) in Chicago has been selected to join Illinois' "Partnership Zone" and to help implement its promising community-involvement model of school improvement for the benefit of the state's under-performing schools.

[SSNS reported on the Partnership Zone concept in [a recent issue](#) announcing Illinois participation in an initiative of the USDE involving five other states and a non-profit group called Mass Insight.]

Although the Federation is based in Chicago, it has a growing [list of membership schools](#) in other parts of the state, such as Sycamore, Sullivan and cities in the metropolitan area surrounding Chicago.

The concept essentially converts schools from "silos of learning" into a hub of community activity where learning at all ages is emphasized, where schools are a venue for community engagement after hours and students' out-of-school deficits are addressed.

Parental involvement is emphasized.

Speaking of parents, [SJR 82](#) is posted in the Senate Human Services Committee today. It is a follow-up to [SJR 5](#), which passed last year and created a study committee on "parents' accountability" in regard to issues affecting children's social development.

The study committee was to report findings by the end of June; SJR 82 would move that deadline to December 31. A November date would be better.

The community schools concept and the question of parental accountability suggest something positive, in our view. They suggest recognition that schools are not the sole cause of the academic struggles of students in deficit-ridden environments. They seem to reflect awareness that education, as central as it is to the general health of a community, requires a community's full attention for it to stay healthy.

These developments, in contrast to test-and-punish "reform" models, seem to have potential benefits.

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