

State School News Service

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Fed dollars linked to tenure reform

By Jim Broadway, Publisher
State School News Service

U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin's proposal to avert the loss of up to 300,000 education jobs nationwide – about 17,000 in Illinois – seemed so promising when first proposed. But the cost, \$23 billion, has become an obstacle and the Iowan's bill has also come to be seen as another opportunity for "reformists."

Budget conscious federal legislators seem reluctant to add \$23 billion to the accumulated federal deficit of more than \$13 trillion in an election year. But that is an issue Congress usually overcomes.

Illinois' share would be more than \$950 million but, as State Superintendent Chris Koch observed in a chat with SSNS last week, "there'll be strings with it." What kind of strings? "They could say, 'Reform teacher tenure and you can have this,'" he said.

Indeed. While Washington-based education groups do support the "teachers' jobs" bill, a few see it as leverage for additional changes to state law. One relatively new organization that appears influential is the [Education Equality Project](#) (EEP). They want states to abandon seniority-based layoff policies.

That is, they want to bring an end to tenure.

"[Signatories to EEP principles](#)" include some of the most powerful voices concerned with school policy in the country. Chicago Mayor Richard Daley is on the list, as is state Sen. James Meeks, author of a voucher bill still pending in the Illinois House.

Eliminate tenure – that's a pretty significant string.

EEP demands put 'jobs bill' in doubt

Harkin sees the tenure reform demand as a poison pill. Politically, legally and logistically, the issue cannot be resolved by the start of the school year. "If Congress has to spend weeks debating tenure, there will be no jobs bill," he told *Education Week*.

EEP purports to see teacher quality as the key to closing the "achievement gap" between low-scoring poor minority race students and affluent white and Asian American students. However, its stance on tenure appears more aimed at union-busting.

A "quality-based layoff" system must have a basis on which quality can credibly be assessed, and experts on this issue seem to agree there is no such basis now. Data systems are not yet in place, among other realities, so layoffs based on "teacher quality" are years away. The timing is bad.

A [columnist for the Washington Post](#) puts the issue more plainly. The 300,000 teacher-layoff fear is just a sham, according to Charles Lane, but \$23 billion is also too small to "bankrupt the nation."

The money should be spent, Lane says, just to avoid "the social costs of squandering an opportunity to wring concessions and reforms from the special interest groups that dominate public education, to the detriment of parents and children everywhere."

With fiscal conservatives worrying about the cost of the teacher jobs bill, and "reformists" seeking to replace the seniority system in just a few weeks, the situation is serious. Harkin's proposal, at some level of funding, remains viable. It might even be enacted but it [faces an ugly struggle](#) in Washington.

EEP has advice on Race to the Top

The Education Equality Project, [formed only two years ago](#), now seems to think it has the answer for every conundrum of education policy.

Its advice to “Race to the Top” losers is to “race smarter,” to get better teachers and focus more on actions like “turnarounds” of failing schools. (Does that sound like Arne Duncan and Richard Daley?)

EEP questions some aspects of RTTT, particularly the fact that Illinois came in 5th in Round 1, even though it had only 31% support from unions. The program may need to be “overhauled,” EEP says.

How can Illinois ‘race smarter’? The EEP lays it out in a bit of scribbling entitled, “Illinois: Why It Lost and [What It Can Do to Win in Round 2](#).” The state did well, EEP notes, in lifting the limit on how many charter schools can be established.

EEP also praised Illinois for authorizing non-profit organizations to run teacher preparation programs, “rather than [to keep relying on] cumbersome, and often ineffective and irrelevant university based teacher preparation program requirements.” Ouch.

But the state lost points in the “Great Teachers and Leaders” category, especially for weakness in the “Teacher and Principal Evaluation” criterion. EEP observes that a “more robust” evaluation system has been enacted, but it won’t fully phase in until 2016. “This is one of several specific areas within this category that Illinois may want to revisit.”

While many doubt the promise of RTTT, Illinois is racing to the top with a vengeance. All signs point to a win in Round 2. A \$400 million grant will help, but it won’t stabilize districts’ budgets, Koch said.

Apparently only the Harkin bill can rescue FY 2011. The state budget is \$10 billion out of balance and Gov. Pat Quinn will have to slash away at school funding just to make it to January. ISBE has crafted some high potential programs, but they won’t help “if class sizes are raised to 38” students, Koch said.

Blagojevich trial evidence goes public

So, Gov. Rod Blagojevich is on the phone with his brother Robert, who tells him that a deal has been done, that a money source has come through and, “We got 60 in hand.” “That’s good,” Rod says.

“That guy,” Robert Blagojevich continues, “I’ll tell you what, I was very impressed. He’s got a very delightful wife. I had a chance to visit with her. She loves our hair by the way.”

“Yeah,” says the governor.

“Loves your hair and loves my hair and because it’s all real. (Laughs) I guess. It’s kinda interesting. Very well read lady. Anyway, yeah, ah, 60 and that’ll all go in the bank today.”

For those who miss The Sopranos, the Blagojevich tape [transcripts and audio files are now online](#), free, courtesy of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Who’s on Lon Monk’s fundraising list? Who is Tony Rezko considering for appointments to state boards and commissions? As exhibits are entered to the record of the trial of Rod Blagojevich, they are posted in pdf format – with audio files attached to the transcripts of wire tap recordings.

It may not be appropriate for tender young ears, so you may want to use your Internet filters to keep it away from the kids. The innocence of our teenagers must remain a top priority of course.

Meanwhile, I’m looking forward to hearing more about the “well read lady” whose apparently bald husband put “60” in Rob Blagojevich’s hand.

Update on SSNS future: We continue to receive kind encouragement and advice as to the future of SSNS. Thank you all. We will let the comments flow until the end of the day Friday, analyze the data over the weekend and report back to respondents early next week. If you have not yet joined the conversation, you [can do so by clicking here](#). Much obliged. - Jim