

# State School News Service

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## Setting the bar low for legislature

By Jim Broadway, Publisher  
State School News Service

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled long ago that a thing is not “obscene” if it has at least some “redeeming social value.” By that standard, University of Illinois-Springfield faculty member [Charlie Wheeler judges](#) the recent legislative session “not obscene.”

Sure, the General Assembly made a mess of its main responsibility – the FY 2011 budget – but if you look beyond that you see some accomplishments, some bipartisan cooperation on issues large and small.

Wheeler counts School Code changes to strengthen Illinois’ Race to the Top application as a major deal. Landline phone law changes will help the spread of broadband and wireless technology. Tax credits for job-creators, fine-tuning McCormick Place to keep it working as the biggest gear in the state’s economic engine, nursing home changes relating to mentally ill patients – Wheeler applauds all of this.

Of course he also likes the “reforms” enacted on public employee pension benefits, too, but that’s an issue beyond the scope of this examination.

His point was, despite the budget fiasco that gets all the attention, the 177 legislators responded fairly well on many non-budget issues. They passed a lot of complex legislation with less partisan rancor than you might expect in an election year.

In all, 542 bills survived the legislative process this year. Of those measures, 501 remain pending Gov. Pat Quinn’s sign-or-veto decision. He has 60 days to act on a bill, starting with the day he received it.

## Don’t like a bill? Write to Quinn about it

Now that the legislative branch has done its best – or worst, depending on your outlook – the place to have your say about any bill is in the executive branch. That is, you need to [contact Quinn](#).

A good many school-related issues are on his desk:

[HB 43](#), the “stop and yield” at school crossings bill we featured in yesterday’s School Policy Update, is pending. (Come to think of it, that is an exception to Charlie’s point about bipartisan legislating.)

[HB 4672](#), as amended, adds school social workers who work with grades 7-to-12 students to the list of school employees who must be trained to identify and intervene when they see “warning signs” that a student is exhibiting suicidal behavior. That bill was approved unanimously in both chambers.

[HB 4674](#) would ease the transition of students from military families who so often enroll in a district at odd times during the school year. It deals with such issues as grade and course assignments, credit for prior studies, extra-curricular eligibility, transcripts, health records and a host of other issues.

This bill resolves issues brought to legislators last year by Department of Defense officials who urged Illinois to join a national “compact” that could then just impose its rulings on member states. HB 4674 addresses the issues of concern without giving up state sovereignty on school enrollment matters.

[HB 4755](#) is aimed at capturing federal grants for the education of homeless children. ISBE would create a program, subject to appropriation, and retain up to 5% of the funds to cover administrative costs.

## ‘Sunshine Commission’ bill still unsigned

[HB 4836](#), a bill that seems sure to play a critical role if the legislature ever gets around to addressing the state’s structural deficit, was sent to Quinn May 26. He has until July 25 to sign it. That would set off a fiscal review of every executive branch program.

The reviewing authority – a commission appointed by the legislative leaders – would have six months to recommend program cuts, mergers and other ways to cut costs. Its recommendations likely would be used to help gain public acceptance of a tax hike.

If that is the plan, Quinn should sign the bill before the end of the first week in July, to ensure a report will be delivered in time for early January action. A later signing would be just another Quinn goof-up.

**Early Childhood:** [HB 4879](#), prohibiting ISBE from deducting early childhood pupils from calculations of transportation reimbursement to school districts, was sent to the governor on June 2.

ISBE said the bill would cost the state \$5 million, but that is expected to be offset by saving districts the costs of transporting early childhood program kids in separate buses, keeping money in the classroom.

Meanwhile [HB 5322](#), sent to Quinn May 28, erases the June 30 sunset of the state’s responsibility to be the “primary” provider of early childhood program funding through appropriations to ISBE.

[HB 5481](#) would allow ISBE to fund gifted education programs, subject to appropriations, conducted by local school districts. Grants documentation would include comprehensive plans, proof that program elements are “currently” in place, and proof that the program providers are competent.

[HB 5633](#) amends school construction grant law to account for changes in grant priority status after a district consolidation or formation of a cooperative high school. Quinn received the bill June 3.

[We will continue reviewing pending School Code bills in an SSNS issue to be distributed Thursday.]

## ISAC recognizes students’ lobbying

As bleak as FY 2011 looks for the Monetary Award Program (MAP), the Student Assistance Commission last week [recognized](#) that this year’s funding would also have been a pure disaster if not for the efforts of college students across Illinois.

MAP benefits are focused on students who meet all college admission requirements but lack the money to attend. Last year, you recall, legislators slashed funding for MAP in the spring session, only to return in the fall and hastily bolster it by \$205 million.

That was a result of a grassroots lobbying action by students – including many who would not receive a benefit – joining college faculty and staff in seeking a supplemental appropriation. As a result, funding for an additional 141,500 students was provided.

This year’s MAP funding is also uncertain. Quinn will decide – the legislators abdicated the duty – but the state’s fiscal status is an historic mess. ISAC already has rejected over 40,000 eligible students seeking assistance since April 19. Because applications are up by 22%, up to 200,000 denials are expected.

## Deficit pushes sad stories to surface

While there is no question MAP funded students face a tough FY 2011, others who rely on the state will suffer also. Providers of services such as “Meals on Wheels” for senior citizens have already closed their doors because the state can’t pay them.

A particularly regrettable account surfaced Monday in the Chicago Tribune which reported that a Quincy center for profoundly [mentally and emotionally ill](#) children has had to curtail its services to them.

The state owes Chaddock residential center more than \$370,000 and hasn’t made a payment since last September. Parents of seven Chicago children were informed that they have 30 days to pick up their children from the Quincy facility.

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