

State School News Service

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Education programs dismembered

By Jim Broadway, Publisher
State School News Service

Years of pandering, of state leaders assuring citizens they can have services commonly expected of state government without having to pay for them, finally are exposed as a lie in ways that reach deeply into the classroom as burdens for children to carry.

As Gov. Rod Blagojevich crafted a record he hoped would carry him to the White House – and his ally Senate President Emil Jones padded his pension and the salaries of his state-employed relatives – that lie became a staple of politics in Illinois.

Democrats gripped by group-think nodded in unison about how, even with a difficult revenue structure, they had passed budgets to be proud of. They knew the day of reckoning would come but hoped at each step down the path to oblivion – not this year.

This year their hopes were in vain. This is the year that schoolchildren will pay, as will senior citizens, veterans, the unemployed, the poor, the homeless and the physically and mentally ill. This year, in the depths of recession, the state is powerless to help.

Ironically, this year the legislators are hoping the citizens learn the truth, that services are not free and only tax increases can revive what is now lost. In effect, they hope the voters will understand that they have been lied to for years, but that somehow they will not hold the liars accountable.

Incumbents are difficult to defeat in this state. Any voters hoping to unseat the liars will be frustrated in November – and taxes will be raised in January.

CCS adopted and, oh yes, programs cut

So smoothly State Superintendent Christopher Koch [informed school leaders](#) that the Illinois State Board of Education last week adopted national “common core standards” and, almost as an afterthought, the SBE also “took action on the FY 2011 budget.”

[The standards](#), of course, are designed so that every student in every state will be expected to learn the same information and acquire the same skills and to be measured in those respects in the same ways.

This will not, Koch assured SSNS, lead to a national curriculum down the road. But that is a topic for the future. Today’s subject is [school funding in FY 2011](#).

The good news is that the General State Aid funding is held at FY 2010 levels, \$4.6 billion, enough for the Foundation Level to remain at \$6,119 per student.

The bad news is that is an artificial number, subject to erosion. Pro-rating will occur if Quinn signs a bill costing \$22 million that is [currently on his desk](#). But that is nothing compared to the pro-rating that will likely occur if the state loses the enhanced match of federal Medicaid dollars (see article below).

There is also the governor’s “reserve” authority to consider. Agencies are to be told to “reserve” (not spend) up to one-third of the amount the state still owes them in FY 2010 funding. Currently, education is owed \$1.4 billion; Koch says that may rise to \$1.8 billion. That would shelve \$600 million at ISBE.

The SBE also approved level funding for mandated categorical programs, except for an \$84 million cut in Regular Transportation which is not part of IDEA, not subject to federal rules about state support.

Funding is iffy, zeroing out is a certainty

Like GSA and mandated categorical programs, any line surviving in the ISBE spending plan is subject to reduction. The SBE preserved early childhood with a cut of “only” 10%, for example. Bilingual education got off with just a 7% reduction from FY 2010.

When the fiscal screw tightens, as it probably will, both allocations will be threatened. The same could happen to Truants Alternative/Optional Education (40% cut) and Regional Safe Schools (60% cut).

But advocates of specific ISBE budget lines may feel it is better to have an uncertain appropriation than none at all. There is no recovery from zero unless a supplemental appropriation is passed next spring.

Zeroed out lines include: Advance Placement, After School Matters, Agriculture Education, Arts/Foreign Language, Reading Improvement Block Grant, Grow Your Own Teachers, National Board Certification of teachers, Teach for America, ADA Block Grant, the School Breakfast Incentive program.

Each of these programs has a history, a strong story and an affected constituency. As the effects of their demise are reported by the media in the fall, they’ll become part of the teach-the-citizens-program on what happens when you get only what you pay for.

How likely is a supplemental appropriation? Well, it depends largely on how the elections go. If anti-tax candidates go viral and are victorious, the future of education and human services in Illinois will suffer. The state might as well join the confederacy.

But measures to protect incumbents are most likely to succeed. There will be no massive turnover in the General Assembly. Emboldened by reelection and in dread of the effects of further delay, legislators will probably pass a tax increase early next year.

They will do it to revive the most popular programs that now appear to be zeroed out, as reflected by citizens – not professional advocates – who express alarm at the direction “cheap” government leads to. If citizens remain apathetic, decline will continue.

Pain of latest hit will reach classrooms

In the coming weeks, as Gov. Pat Quinn struggles to fill a \$787 million hole in his Medicaid budget (dug by U.S. Senate Republicans in search of “[Obama’s Waterloo](#)”), education programs will feel more pain.

It had seemed so certain that Congress will extend its “enhanced match” of state Medicaid funds that 29 states (including Illinois) actually budgeted for it. Who would slash health services to the poor?

As we learned last week, all Republicans in the U.S. Senate – plus one Democrat – are willing to do just that. The [bill in question got 57 votes](#), but it takes 60 to make a majority in that 100-member body.

Quinn now holds extraordinary authority to cut and paste together something that looks like a spending plan for FY 2011. When he has to adjust for nearly \$800 million – Medicaid dollars in the budget but not forthcoming – all major state program areas are sure to suffer losses. ISBE lines remain in peril.

Even before this hit, General State Aid pro-rating was anticipated. Deep cuts now may be in store for mandated categorical programs. ISBE budget lines cut by 10% may fall by another 10% or more; a line cut by 40% may be zeroed out entirely.

What about the Harkin Bill, the \$23 billion proposal to prevent the loss of 300,000 education jobs? That measure, if passed, would send Illinois \$978 million or so, enough to undo the damage the ISBE had to inflict last week and rescue many proven programs.

When it surfaced early this year, leaders of both parties embraced Harkin. But Republicans leaders have since seen a defeat for Obama and the higher resulting jobless rates as an election issue too good to give up – regardless of its effects on citizens.

So the GOP is happy to be “the party of ‘no’” at the federal and state levels. Will voters fall for the GOP spin that the “Democrats in charge” alone failed to deliver? GOP strategists believe they will.

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