

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin

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## SPRINGFIELD DISPATCH

### Building off local relationships

Lifetime of connections forged by Welch, a Proviso Township native, paid off in race for a House seat

BY MARC KARLINSKY  
Special to the Law Bulletin

Rep. E. Christopher Welch has deep roots in Proviso Township, the part of the western suburbs he's always called home.

He grew up there, was high school class president there and, later, was president of the board of the Proviso Township High Schools District 209.

Now, he represents the area in the Illinois House — a seat he won last year over three primary opponents in part, he said, due to his close connection to the community.

"One of the things that people underestimate about me is the depth of my relationships," Welch, a Democrat, said. "I've been involved in Proviso my entire life. My family's been around Proviso my entire life. And so there's numerous relationships that have been developed over 42 years."

In an interview with the Daily Law Bulletin, Welch — a partner at Sanchez, Daniels & Hoffman LLP — elaborated on life in the western suburbs, his legal career and a few topics in Springfield in the current session.

**Law Bulletin:** Describe your path to practicing law. What did you do previously and what led you to pursue a law degree?

**Welch:** I always wanted to be a lawyer. I was one of those kids who grew up watching the "Perry Mason"- and "L.A. Law"-type shows on TV, and just always was fascinated by it. I grew up as a kid who loved to just run his mouth, and in high school I was an active member of the speech team. When I went on to college, I majored in speech. So those were the things that helped me hone my communications ability and my desire to want to be a lawyer even more.

I wanted to go to law school part

time and be able to pay for it, to kind of minimize my debt and that's how I ended up working at WGN right after college (as a weekend assignment editor), but I continued studying to be a lawyer that entire time. And as soon as I finished law school, I went on to do what I love doing — and that's practicing law.

**Law Bulletin:** What areas of law do you practice in?

**Welch:** I am predominantly in school and municipal law. I represent school districts and municipalities when they're sued for wrongful termination-type cases — Section 1983. We spend a great deal of our time in federal court.

**Law Bulletin:** What led you to run for the Illinois House?

**Welch:** It's a position I ran for in 2006, against then-incumbent Representative (Karen) Yarbrough. At the time, I was really running and pushing education as a primary issue. As you know, I spent 12 years on a school board, so I'm very passionate about education issues. And she kicked my butt. (Laughs.)

But my passion for education didn't go away, and we were all surprised that she decided to run for Cook County recorder of deeds and step down as state rep in 2012. When I heard that, I immediately said, 'Boy, that's something I'd like to do again' — and running in an open race, it would have to be different. And certainly, that turned out to be the case.

**Law Bulletin:** Suburban school districts seem to be front-and-center in the state's pension debate. As a school board member and as a legislator, where do you stand on how to fix the state's pensions?

**Welch:** The pension discussion is definitely now front-and-center. I'm sure you've followed the governor's budget address and saw that the pension obligation is consuming the state's budget — this year it's mak-



E. Christopher Welch

Illinois House, 7th District

- **Career:** Weekend assignment editor, WGN-TV, 1991-1997; associate, Sanchez, Daniels & Hoffman LLP, 1997-2003; associate, James J. Roche & Associates, 2003-2007; partner, Sanchez, Daniels & Hoffman, 2007-present; Illinois House, 7th District, January 2013-present
- **Age:** 42
- **Law school:** The John Marshall Law School, 1997
- **Interests:** Reading, watching the Chicago Cubs and playing with his son

ing up about 19, 20 percent of the overall budget, and two years from now, if we don't address this issue, the pension line item will be larger than the entire line item for education K-through-12 in the state's budget — so something has to happen.

That being the case ... we have to put something forward that's going to be constitutional. We have done some things, or heard a number of proposals and seen a number of bills filed, but we have to do something that's going to be constitutional. If it's not, all we're going to do is have people run to court right after a bill is passed, a stay is going to be issued and the obligation's going to continue to grow — as opposed to passing something that's constitutional that could go into effect right away.

**Law Bulletin:** Are there any special initiatives you've proposed or bills you've submitted so far?

**Welch:** I'm really excited about a piece of legislation I filed, House Bill 2405. It is a bill that calls for all-day kindergarten. I really believe if we're going to address the issues that our state faces, it really starts with education. And it starts with early education.

I've spent 12 years on the school board where I've had many kids coming into high school reading at a third-, fourth-, fifth-grade level, and that's a sad state of what's happening in the early formative years. And so I'm working along with the Illinois Federation of Teachers and we're really pushing to focus on all-day kindergarten for the state of Illinois.

**Law Bulletin:** Would the state pay for that program or would it just provide guidance to districts?

**Welch:** I'm certainly looking for a way it would be a state-funded program. Right now I'm still having some discussions with folks on how to fund it. That's not a part of the current bill that's on file. Once I come to some resolution to the funding issue I'll be filing an amendment to it, but it's certainly to make this a successful program.

There's 89 school districts in the state that do not offer full-day kindergarten and that would be a funding issue for them. So for the state to mandate that, we need to mandate that with some type of funding that comes along with it.

**Law Bulletin:** You're on the House Judiciary Committee, which has spent nearly two months discussing gun legislation. What are your thoughts on those hearings?

**Welch:** I think the gun discussion has been a very robust discussion. We've had numerous Judiciary meetings; we've had meetings here in Springfield, meetings in Chicago. We've taken testimony from advocates for gun control; we've taken testimony from the NRA. We've heard from a whole host of people including a number of people (Thursday) on the mental health aspects that are necessary to be considered.

And I think that what we've heard so far has been a very good discussion. We know that concealed carry has to be the law of Illinois sometime before June 8 or 9, and I just want to make sure that in my role, we do so in a reasonable and fair and constitutional manner that also still maintains public safety.

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