

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 161, No. 138

A revolutionary proposal for financing education in Illinois

Everybody talks about it, but nobody does anything about it. It seems that everybody in Illinois complains about the system of financing public elementary and secondary education in Illinois.

The system relies too much on the real property tax, the critics say.

It allows property tax-rich districts to spend more than property tax-poor districts; the state should pay a greater share of what the districts can spend (but without telling the districts how to spend the state's funds, of course); or we should simply omit the local property tax and support education through a state income tax of at least 10 percent.

In short, it's unfair!

The debate goes on and on. Study commissions meet and advance proposals that are "fairer" — and are dead in the water.

I suggest the debate never ends because the school districts — and the students, their parents and the taxpayers — all want somebody else to pay for education.

Moreover, they want total control over how the funds raised elsewhere are spent, and they want to spend as much as they desire.

School districts and teachers scream that the state should fulfill its obligation to bear the primary responsibility for funding schools under Article X, Section 1, of the Illinois Constitution (but let us decide how much money we want to spend).

It won't happen.

I propose that we totally abandon the system of a "foundation" and state grants varying by the property tax base in each school district.

Then let's allow school districts to impose a school income tax if they wish and support the schools through a local income tax and lo-

cal property tax, combined as the school board sees fit.

I propose guaranteeing a decent level of state funding, while leaving much local control intact.

Here's what I propose, modestly called The Lousin Grand Plan:

First, ignore the "property tax base" and "property tax effort" in each school district.

Today, a school district that has less property tax value per student effectively gets more money from the state. Some areas of Illinois actually reject shopping centers, factories and other entities that would pay higher property taxes apparently to show they need more state aid.

Worse, some areas, notably Chicago, use tax increment financing districts liberally and thus show a lower property tax base per pupil. To eliminate this game-playing we'll have to abandon altogether that component of education financing formulas.

Second, dispense state aid on a "per pupil" basis.

This follows naturally from the first part of my proposal. (Of course, there could be adjustments for high-risk children, such as those from poor families or special

needs children.)

I propose that we totally abandon the system of a "foundation" and state grants varying by the property tax base in each school district.

Third, the state should provide 51 percent of the amount estimated to educate each pupil for a "core education."

Article X, Section 1, of the Illinois Constitution contains the hortatory statement that the state bears the primary responsibility for funding public education.

I have heard teachers and administrators say that means at least 51 percent of whatever the



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schools think they should have.

I disagree, partly because I remember the floor debate in 1970. I think it means the core education, not the "wouldn't it be nice" wish list.

For Spanish language classes that would mean classroom expenses, such as teacher salaries and instructional materials.

It would not include a field trip to Mexico during spring break.

For physical education that would mean the cost of gym classes and probably the school athletic teams.

It would not include the diving well one high school installed. (If one high school gets a diving well in its swimming pool at state expense, we can be certain that every other high school in Illinois would demand one, too.)

For music, that would mean the cost of music classes, bands, choruses and orchestras.

It would not include the cost of sending the band on tour abroad. (These are real examples.)

If the General Assembly determines that the cost of core education is \$8,000 per pupil, then the state would provide \$4,001 per

pupil. The school district and individual schools would have to bear any additional costs.

Fourth, statutorily authorize any school board to impose a local income tax, piggybacked on the state income tax, to supplement or even displace the real property tax levy.

The lion's share of state school aid comes from the state income tax, doesn't it? And local school aid comes from the local tax levy on real property, doesn't it?

Why not a local income tax?

Fifth, let each school board decide how to raise local funds from property taxes or the local income tax.

Let's allow the school boards — all of which except the Chicago Public Schools Board are elected by the voters — decide whether those who have high-value property or those who have high incomes should pay more toward financing public education.

The board could decide whether to retain 100 percent local property tax financing, adopt 100 percent local income tax financing or establish a mixture.

Funds raised locally are spent locally. I trust local voters to watch their boards.

According to the 2013-2014 figures I have seen, if the state had contributed just over \$4,000 to each of the 2,100,403 public school children enrolled that year, it would have necessitated a slight increase in state aid.

Under my proposal, the remaining funds would have come from the locally imposed income tax, the locally imposed real property tax and such private fundraising sources as the schools can find, such as bazaars, tag days for the football team, alumni associations and charitable foundations established to support that school.

Many schools already use these sources to supplement public funds.

Let's stop tinkering with a flawed system. Let's think boldly.

P.S. I am a graduate of the Chicago Public Schools, K-12.