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ISBE Seeks To Waive State Assessments, Address Drop In Public School Enrollment During Pandemic

By: Derek Cantù



For the second year in a row, the Illinois State Board of Education is seeking a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education for standardized tests normally given during schools' spring semester.

Earlier this month, State Superintendent Carmen Ayala sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Education asking for the waiver on assessments, noting that more than a million Illinois students are still receiving their education completely through remote learning.

"We believe that bringing students back in-person only to immediately begin state assessments will have a very harmful effect on their social-emotional wellbeing, mental health, and more importantly their re-connection with the school community," Ayala told the Board of Education during its monthly meeting Thursday.

If the feds agree, tests like the SAT and certain graduation requirements — like high school civics — would be waived for the Class of 2021.

More than 600 district superintendents across the state also signed onto the waiver application.

Tony Sanders, the superintendent of U-46 school district in Elgin, told the board that a disproportionate number of his district's students of color are attending classes fully online. He said that the population of students would be negatively affected by required testing.

"That's 13,700 students predominantly of color who we would have to try to figure out a way to get them into a building to be tested, and take away 6 to 7 days of in-person instruction in order for that to happen," Sanders said.

Falling enrollment

The pandemic has also accelerated decreasing enrollment in Illinois public schools.

Before the pandemic hit, ISBE had projected public school enrollment would decrease by 1.1% for the 2020-2021 school year — a rate consistent with drops in the previous five school years.

But as of October, that enrollment drop was closer to 1.9% — approximately 36,000 students.

ISBE Finance Officer Robert Wolfe explained a school's enrollment level impacts the amount of funding they receive from the so-called evidence-based school funding model state lawmakers passed in 2017.

"If there is a tier distribution in [fiscal year 2022], there will be an impact in these calculations potentially in [fiscal years 2023 and 2024]," Wolfe said. "Because we will utilize the greater of the current school year average student enrollment or that three-year average."

Under the new school funding law passed in 2017, Illinois is supposed to increase funding to districts by \$350 million annually for ten years to help schools hit specialized financial adequacy targets. Those targets are calculated based on local property tax support and the academic needs of the district.

Lawmakers initially advocated the new funding formula would allow schools to reach 90% of their respective adequacy targets by 2027. But Gov. JB Pritzker this week proposed withholding the \$350 million increase in funding for the second year in a row, claiming federal sources will fill in the gaps for local school districts so they won't have to cut their budgets.

Senate Majority Leader Kim Lightford (D-Maywood), a prominent member of the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus, this week said she was concerned about Pritzker's school funding plan disproportionately affecting lower-income districts.

"We must consider more thoroughly the consequences of pushing off yet again making investments in education," Lightford said. "The longer we wait, the more students in lower-resource schools suffer."

If a school district's enrollment decreases, its adequacy targets decrease along with it. However, decreased enrollment numbers will not impact a school's minimum base funding for the coming school year.

Wolfe said if the state wants to make changes to enrollment calculations in the school funding formula — such as instituting a multi-year hold harmless provision to prevent funding loss from a temporary enrollment drop — that will require legislative action.