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---Courier News--- 2/16/18

School leaders see damage in picking up pension costs

Officials say shift in plan would undo funding revamp

BY SARAH ZIMMERMAN

SPRINGFIELD — Public school administrators who just last summer were ecstatic over a promise of equitable state financing in a revamped education funding formula were disheartened Thursday by Gov. Bruce Rauner's proposal to unload more costs onto local districts, which they said could lead to higher property taxes.

The Republican governor proposed a \$696 million savings to the state's bank account by shifting the employer portion of teachers' pension contributions to local districts over four years. The state currently pays about 9 percent of the cost.

Schools argue that picking up the tab would have devastating effects and exacerbate inequity, which last year's funding change aimed to end. Educators said it would undo many of the effects of that evidence-based funding model, which gives needier districts extra money for educational services.

“The governor just poured water on our campfire,” said Tony Sanders, CEO of **Elgin School District U-46**. He said that if his district — the state's largest outside Chicago — doesn't raise property taxes, it would have to cut programs just to “make ends meet.”

The plan is part of a \$1.3 billion spending cut Rauner suggested, supplemented by \$470 million in savings from dictating state health insurance terms, instead of allowing employee unions to negotiate them. Neither plan has much support in a Democrat-controlled General Assembly.

Rauner's justification for the shift is that if pension costs were paid by local governments, they'd have incentive to reduce the burden. But Ben Schwarm, executive director of the Illinois Association of School Boards, said pensions are set by the Legislature, not school districts.

Illinois schools are primarily funded through local property taxes. Historically, school districts in areas with higher property wealth receive more money in taxes than districts in impoverished communities. That setup has led to the largest school funding gap in the nation.

The funding law prioritizes state money to needier districts. Rauner, who initially vetoed the measure, now touts it as a crowning achievement.

“For a man who seized upon school funding reform as his greatest accomplishment as governor, he certainly does not seem inclined to make sure the new formula is given a chance to work,” said Democratic Sen. Andy Manar of Bunker Hill, who sponsored the funding overhaul.

Chicago Public Schools CEO Janice Jackson had a unique reason to resist the plan. Until this year, Chicago schools paid the employer portion of teacher pensions but in the funding remake, the state took on the city's share.

“Our state made historic progress just six months ago, and we cannot go backwards,” Jackson said in a statement. “The families, educators and courageous lawmakers who fought so hard to achieve fair funding will not allow their hard-earned progress to be reversed.”

Rauner promised to follow up with legislation giving schools “the tools they need to more than offset the costs.” In the past, he has proposed restrictions on collective bargaining by local government employees, which Democrats don't support.

Sanders said his plans to use additional money from the funding revamp for new technology and educational programs would likely stay on the drawing board if Rauner has his way.

“We finally got to a place to provide the resources our children need,” he said. “And the budget address just pulled it all away.”

---Courier News--- 2/16/18

U46 CEO welcomes changes to PARCC

Sanders wants to get test results more quickly

BY RAFAEL GUERRERO



School District U46 CEO Tony Sanders said he welcomes any changes the state would make to the PARCC tests taken by elementary and middle school students. (Brian O'Mahoney/Courier-News)

The state's decision to revamp or overhaul standardized tests for elementary and middle school students has the support of **School District U46** CEO Tony Sanders if it means test results will get to school districts more quickly.

Sanders said the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers exams, known as PARCC, would be taken by students in the spring, and the results would not be available until the start of the following school year. At least the ISAT exams, which PARCC replaced, would provide preliminary data to school districts at a faster pace, he said.

“By the time you see the results of your students, you no longer have those students,” Sanders said.

The Illinois State Board of Education announced last week that the PARCC exams may get a revamp or overhaul, possibly as soon as next year. The exams have been given to students in third through eighth grades in the spring since 2015.

The assessments, aligned with the Common Core state standards adopted by dozens of states, have come with controversy since first implemented. PARCC testing requires large

amounts of time to administer and are even more complicated if there are an insufficient number of computers or devices available for students to use.

Parents have often complained about the exams, prompting some to opt their children out of the tests.

School district administrators have been critical of the time it takes to get scores from the state, especially if the delay makes the data irrelevant.

A letter State Superintendent of Education Tony Smith sent to district superintendents last week outlined what the agency wants out of a new or changed standardized exam.

The objectives include expediting the time it takes for results to get back to schools, expanding the number of languages the assessments can be taken in and transitioning into a “computer-adaptive” format in which a student’s questions will change depending on their performance on previous questions.

Jackie Matthews, spokeswoman for the Illinois State Board of Education, said some of the changes would be seen as early as next school year, pending the board’s request for proposals and the bidding process.

U46 schools would welcome additional language options, Sanders said, noting the district’s large population of English language-learning students. He also believed a computer-adaptive format would benefit U46’s younger students, who already take Measure of Academic Progress, or MAP, tests that are similar in format.

“The feel would be more like what we take three times a year in elementary school,” Sanders said. “It could give students to feel a little more comfortable taking (state assessments).”

In St. Charles, School District 303 educators are focused on preparing for this spring’s PARCC exams, which will not be affected by any of the proposed changes, district spokeswoman Carol Smith said.

That said, educators and district officials see the state superintendent’s letter and his suggestions as “positive changes,” Smith said.

“We have the ability to adjust to any of the changes if they decide to change it in the future,” she said.

Smith said the district would welcome a quicker test-taking process. “The sooner we get the data, the better able we are to see where are our students are in terms of their achievement and growth,” she said.

Last fall, a little more than 28 percent of U46 students in third through eighth grades met or exceeded standards on the PARCC exams taken in the spring, according to state data; the district’s average was below the state’s average of 34 percent. At Algonquin-based District 300, its average proficiency rate was on par with the state average, at 34 percent. St. Charles students were well above the state average, with about 51 percent meeting or exceeding proficiency, according to state data.

---Associated Press--- 2/16/18

Illinois schools say pension shift would be financial burden

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. -- Illinois school administrators say they cannot afford to pay teachers' pension costs as part of Gov. Bruce Rauner's plan to balance the state budget.

The Republican governor said Wednesday he wants to save \$700 million a year by shifting the employer portion of teacher pensions from the state to schools.

Tony Sanders is the CEO of **Elgin U-46**, the state's largest district outside Chicago. He says his district would have to raise property taxes or cut programs.

Other critics derided the idea. They point out Rauner has railed against high property taxes for years and now would force one on local schools.

Rauner says local officials should pay the costs so there's incentive to keep them low. He says he will work on legislation to help schools cut other expenses.