

State School News Service

347 S. Durkin Drive, Springfield, IL 62704
Contact: Business Manager Sarah Payne
Phone: 217.697.8243 Fax: 877.529-0183
URL: www.stateschoolnews.com



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Consolidation bill amended, passed

By Jim Broadway, Publisher
State School News Service

Rep. Linda Chapa LaVia's bill to set up a commission on school consolidations was approved by a House committee unanimously this morning, but only after being amended to include representatives of public educator groups on the commission and protracting the period of the "study" of the subject.

Chapa LaVia, who chairs the House committee on PK-12 education, assured committee members that [HB 1216](#) will not result in a set of recommendations that would automatically "become law" if accepted by the General Assembly.

That issue remains a bit ambiguous, even after the bill was amended today. Rep. Jerry Mitchell (R-Rock Falls) urged her to engage in a colloquy on the floor of the House when the bill is called on third reading, to clarify such legislative intent in the record.

From an 18-member commission appointed by the legislative leaders and the governor, without any specific qualifications, the bill not requires members to be appointed from public education interests.

Both state teachers unions would be represented, as would the associations of school administrators, school boards, principals, school business officers, large unit districts, special educators. The Chicago Public Schools would be represented, and leaders of the legislature and ISBE would appoint members.

The State Board would support the commission administratively and the members would serve without compensation until January of 2013.

Process taken off the fast track

Instead of having to report its recommendations in just 60 days after the bill is signed into law, HB 1216 now has the commission voting on its report "on or before July 1, 2012." The legislature would have 14 days from the next time it convenes to accept or reject on the commission's report.

Unless a special legislative session were convened in the summer of 2012, that means the legislature could not take action before the fall veto session, in November or December of 2012.

Chapa Lavia said she expects the commission to hold a long series of public hearings throughout the state as a key part of its study. The goals remain the same – saving money, improving student learning, lowering property taxes, assessing the savings that the commission's advice would bring and giving "input to school districts on reorganization."

Again, she assured the committee that the report of the commission would not be a bill that legislators would have to vote up or down. The only reason the bill calls for a vote "to accept" the report is because "this is not a task force, it's a commission," she said.

Any bill based on the recommendations will have to be drafted, filed, heard in committee and moved through the normal legislative process, she said.

The bill has similarities with [SB 1324](#), which is in the Senate Executive Committee at this time. Today's action suggests the Chapa LaVia bill is the vehicle most likely to emerge from Gov. Pat Quinn's call for school consolidation, and that the governor now understands his goal will not be reached without the input and acceptance of affected interests.

Miss 9 days and you're a chronic truant?

The committee this morning also gave a unanimous approval vote to [HB 3179](#), which cuts in half – from 18 days to 9 days – the number of times a student would have to be out of school to be considered a “chronic truant” and invite intervention.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. John Cavaletto (R-Salem) said the initiative arose out of meetings in his area of educators, juvenile justice officials and judges. It came “mostly from the judges,” he clarified.

The idea is to reduce the time after it is clear that an attendance problem exists so “we can get to the children earlier.” It would “encourage aggressive intervention,” he said, noting that chronic truancy is often a result of “parent neglect.”

Rep. Fred Crespo (D-Streamwood) suggested the bill could be burdensome to truant officers. “It's going to create more work,” Cavaletto said, “but if it saves more children I think it's worth it.”

The committee did not approve every bill today.

[HB 3487](#), which would allow school districts to stop complying with “instructional mandates” the state does not fully fund, died on an 11-10-1 vote, with 13 votes needed for a bill to reach the House floor.

The bill was sponsored by freshman [Rep. Thomas Morrison](#) (R-Palatine), a small business owner who taught fifth grade for six years in a private school in Arlington Heights. His bill would require that, if a student “requests information” on a mandate that has been discontinued, the school must provide it.

Committee members advised Morrison that his bill was too broadly written, that many mandates “are there for good reason” and that he should amend HB 3487 to exempt more mandates than just those he singled out, such as health and special ed.

Morrison was unresponsive to the advice, however, and rather than take the bill “out of the record” he allowed a negative roll call to proceed. It does not appear that his bill will get another hearing.

Senate committee approves vouchers

With all four Republicans voting in favor and the six Democrats evenly split, Sen. Matt Murphy's bill to create a potentially 30,000-student “pilot” voucher program in Chicago was approved by the Senate Education Committee 7-3 Tuesday night.

[SB 1932](#) now heads to the floor for consideration by the full Senate, perhaps next week but not likely before the session days of March 29-April 1.

The bill is virtually identical to the voucher bill that committee chairman Sen. James Meeks (D-Chicago) sponsored last year and came within a vote or two in the House of seeing enacted into law.

It would provide vouchers worth about \$3,600 per child to “eligible” parents – those whose children are enrolled in the lowest-performing schools (the bottom 10%) or the most severely over-crowded schools in Chicago. The number was not reported Tuesday, but last year's estimate was 30,000.

The money would come from the Chicago district's share of Foundation Level and Poverty funding. If the program were in effect this year, according to ISBE lobbyist Nicole Wills, the total would be about \$3,600 per student. At the potential maximum, that would consume about \$108 million per year.

The funds would be subtracted from dollars that the state would otherwise distribute to the CPS.

Education organizations opposed the bill strongly, arguing against diversion of public funds to private schools and citing studies showing vouchers are an ineffective tool for improving student learning.

The CPS did not weigh in, however. Meeks told the committee that he asked CPS CEO Ron Huberman why not, Huberman said, “We don't have a plan” for the lowest-performing schools in Chicago.

The bill has a chance. Last year's similar bill passed the Senate and nearly passed the house. In both chambers, Republicans provided the most support.

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