

Senate to discuss education reform

BY JENNIFER WIG
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SPRINGFIELD —The governor wants reforms; the Senate wants more information.

Responding to the governor's call for reforms in education, the Senate will conduct a committee of the whole on March 3 to hear testimony and discuss the possible creation of a new Department of Education.

Senate President Emil Jones, D-Chicago, said a meeting of the whole is needed to discuss Gov. Rod Blagojevich's plan to strip authority from the Illinois State Board of Education and create a new Department of Education.

"The magnitude of the issue for the state of Illinois and the tremendous interest by the Senate membership merit that a Committee of the Whole should be convened," Jones said in a release.

Witnesses include representatives of the governor's office, the ISBE, Superintendent of Schools Robert Schiller and Michael Bakalis, chairman of the governor's new Education Accountability Taskforce.

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SEN. DAVE LUECHTEFELD

Sen. Dave Luechtefeld, R-Okawville, said Senate members want to know what actions the governor will take aside from making himself head of a new Department of Education.

"We need to know what ideas the governor has," said Luechtefeld, a former teacher. "He talks about making it better and new organization, but we don't know what those are. We'd just like to see what some of his ideas are that would make this new group better before we sign onto it. Will we come to any conclusions? Probably not."

During his State of the State address, Blagojevich lambasted the ISBE for wasting money and cluttering the education process with

administrative rules. The Illinois Senate Republican caucus recently banded behind a "Gubernatorial Educational Mandates Relief Act of 2004" to clean up the thousands of mandates. The legislation, Senate Bill 2868, does not identify specific mandates to revise, leaving the duty to the governor.

The proposal would allow change in the current State Board of Education in case Blagojevich's plan does not receive General Assembly approval, Luechtefeld said.

"School's still out as to whether we're going to get rid of the state board or not. If not, let's make it better," he said.

The House held a similar meeting last year to discuss Blagojevich's education reforms.

Jerry Stermer, president of Voices for Illinois Children, said he will ask to testify at a committee to bring up the governor's education plan.

"We're concerned that there's simply not enough in the new proposal to accomplish the goals that members of the General Assembly and the governor have articulated for this year and that now may be the time to put the question on the table: Shouldn't we simply restructure school financing in Illinois? Shouldn't we recognize the over reliance on the property tax in Illinois?" Stermer said.

Blagojevich has proposed \$400 million go toward K-12 education, but he has not dedicated the money to specific areas, instead saying he wants input from the General Assembly.

Stermer said he is also concerned that no mention of a promised \$30 million expansion for early childhood block grants, means it will not receive any money.

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