

State may fingerprint teachers

Legislator calls for in-depth teacher background checks

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SPRINGFIELD — Making a good first impression could soon take on a new meaning for Illinois teachers. One state lawmaker wants teachers to submit to fingerprinting, an employment screening precaution taken in all but three states, including Illinois.

State Rep. Careen Gordon, D-Coal City, is proposing that Illinois add FBI criminal background checks for teachers. State background checks scan Illinois records using an applicant's name. Federal background checks require a fingerprint and determine whether applicants have been convicted of crimes anywhere in the country.

"If someone commits a crime in another state, we wouldn't necessarily know about it (now)," Gordon said. "It's another way to make sure that our children are kept safe."

State Rep. Careen Gordon, D-Coal City
Gordon said she does not want school districts to pay the extra costs. The former prosecutor also said the additional effort required by law enforcement agencies conducting the checks for schools would be minimal.

"As a prosecutor, we were able to run background checks immediately," she said. "This is something that can be run by law enforcement at the same time."

Illinois is one of three states that does not require fingerprint checks when teachers are hired, although some require it only for teachers moving from out of state. Several Chicago area schools have recently added the measure to the hiring process. The response largely stems from an incident last summer when an Elgin principal was found to have been convicted of felony financial fraud in Wisconsin.

Master Sgt. Rick Hector, spokesperson for the Illinois State Police, could not say whether this measure would create a lot of extra work

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for the agency and could not estimate the cost of the program.

According to the Illinois State Police Web site, the fee to process a non-fingerprint criminal background check is \$12. The cost for a state fingerprint check is \$14, but that does not include federal records. Current law dictates that school districts or regional superintendents pay for state background checks, but the costs can be reimbursed by the State Board of Education.

Representatives from the Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Federation of Teachers and the Illinois Education Association all say they have yet to take an official stance on the issue and will further examine the legislation, House Bill 3997, before making any solid decisions.

Peter Leonis, director of governmental affairs for the ISBE, said the bill appears to be a positive step. He said the board has reservations about the possible cost and paperwork delays the new requirement might cause, but was reluctant to make an official statement.

"Generally we're pretty supportive of what Rep. Gordon is doing here," Leonis said.

Charlie McBarron, director of communications for the IEA, said they are also in the process of reviewing the bill.

"We've got some unresolved issues and some questions, but on its face it appears to be a bill that we can support," McBarron said. "We can support it because the intention of the sponsor is to increase safety in schools and that seems to be a fair way of attempting to ensure that the people who come into contact with our kids are high-quality people."