



Pressure: Will the push for an income tax increase work?

By Joseph Ryan | Daily Herald Staff

Published: 3/20/2010 12:00 AM

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Gov. Pat Quinn isn't greeted with cheers at the state Capitol when he argues for raising the income tax. Jubilant chants for hiking taxes don't spontaneously start along parade routes as he campaigns across the state.

But it was a very different scene for Quinn at the Illinois Education Association's banquet Friday, where he was greeted with howls, whistles and waving banners backing his tax hike push.

"Together we will make it happen," a beaming Quinn declared to the 1,500 or so teacher union members in Rosemont.

In order to turn his plan into reality, Quinn must now move that enthusiasm from teachers - those being slapped with pink slips because of \$1.3 billion in state education cuts under his budget - to parents and the lawmakers represented by them in the General Assembly.

"It is obviously critical," Quinn said after his debate with Republican state Sen. Bill Brady before the IEA. "It is not only teachers, but parents and the students."

With both Democratic leaders in Springfield holding out little hope for passage of the 1 percentage point income tax increase Quinn wants, the challenge is undoubtedly immense.

If he was expecting a groundswell of reaction to his education cuts, he certainly got it.

Almost immediately, large districts relying heavily on state money announced draconian layoffs, filling auditoriums with angry parents and frightened teachers.

In particular, Elgin's U-46 laid off more than 1,000 this week, teachers making up nearly 80 percent of those cuts. And many suburban districts that don't rely nearly so much on state money are laying off teachers and cutting programs. For example, Arlington Heights Elementary District 25 is looking at cutting at least 13 teaching positions and 40 support staff.

Cuts will only continue and few schools will be left unscathed. A state education board survey earlier this year found districts were predicting 12,400 layoffs even before the 17 percent cut in state funding was announced. Teachers would have made up half of those cuts. The voluntary survey was completed by 75 percent of the state's districts.

The state cuts were crafted to spread the pain, with a 14 percent reduction in general state aid that supports poorer schools and a 27 percent drop in grants to some of the state's richest districts. Even private schools will face cuts in special grants.

Supporters of a tax increase have been undoubtedly banking on fallout sending teachers and parents banging on the doors of local lawmakers to demand a solution.

"I would think cutting education ... is a way to put greater pressure on people for a tax increase," says Charles Wheeler, a former veteran statehouse reporter and current University of Illinois at Springfield program director. "And the way these cuts are designed, whether intentionally or (not), puts added pressure on suburban legislators."

Yet, so far lawmakers who should be feeling the pressure say they have not changed their minds. Quinn has been calling GOP lawmakers into his office over the last week to make his case since fellow Democrats won't move on a tax hike without bipartisan support.

One of the Republicans commonly considered a potential supporter says she hasn't been swayed. "As far as I'm concerned, there is no way in Sam Hill I can vote for an income tax increase," says state Rep. Suzie Bassi, a Palatine Republican who lost her primary on Feb. 2 and therefore won't face the wrath of voters in November.

Bassi and other Republicans want lower state and teacher pension benefits and Medicaid cuts to fill in some of the state's \$13 billion shortfall before contemplating Quinn's proposal.

Bassi says she has had very few, if any, phone calls from teachers or parents about school cuts in her Northwest suburban district. Same goes for Sen. Pam Althoff, a McHenry Republican whose district includes a sliver of U-46.

Still, if the calls do start coming, Althoff says she can convince them she is right. "Most of those people are extraordinarily supportive of what we are saying," she said.

Meanwhile, state Sen. John Millner, a Carol Stream Republican, has been inundated with pleas for help. His district covers a larger portion of U-46. "I'm as frustrated as they are," he said. "This pressure is just going to continue to increase."

But if the phone calls don't push lawmakers to support a tax hike, Quinn may find the pressure swinging back on himself. One of the biggest questions is whether Quinn will actually make the cuts he threatens if a tax hike fails.

"I'm not going to have a situation happen in Illinois where our education system is slashed because individuals in the legislature don't want to stand up and do the proper thing," Quinn said Friday.

Asked if that meant he would back off the cuts if a tax hike fails, Quinn said, "No. There is a fork in the road."