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Quinn pushes school mergers

Governor calls for 600 fewer districts statewide

By KERRY LESTER

More than two-thirds of Illinois' school districts should be eliminated by merging them into other districts in a quest to save the cost of paying their superintendents, Gov. Pat Quinn said Wednesday.

Quinn, in his budget address, called for cutting the state's 868 school districts by 600, saying having fewer, larger districts would save taxpayers \$100 million in salaries that would then go back into the classrooms.

Quinn also proposed cutting \$95 million from what the state pays to bus students who live too far to walk to school.

Quinn's office plans to introduce legislation to reapportion school districts similar to the way legislative districts are redrawn due to population changes, with the aim of merging many over the next two years.

Representatives of some suburban school districts said Wednesday's announcement was the first they'd heard of the plan, which is backed by the Illinois State Board of Education.

Palatine Elementary District 15 board member Jim Ekeberg said he had no doubt consolidation would save money, but it could cause other complications.

"What it can do is remove local control," said Ekeberg, stressing he was not speaking on behalf of the board. "It sounds great on paper, but does he really have a plan?"

Others weren't as sure Quinn would see all the savings he's after.

"When you have a district this size, you still need people to manage it," said Terri McHugh, spokeswoman for Schaumburg Township Elementary District 54. She said she's unaware of any consolidation talks in the district, which formed in 1952 when four districts merged and now has 14,000 students and 2,000 employees.

In 2009, Community High School District 94 in West Chicago, along with its three elementary school feeder districts, commissioned a study that showed the individual districts performed better financially and academically than they would if merged.

Yet, University of Illinois Springfield Professor William H. Phillips, a leading authority on school consolidation who performed the study, said at the time it was the first of 38 studies he's done on consolidation that showed such results.

State budget Director David Vaught emphasized that the legislation would still allow for local control.

"It would not have a requirement that districts have to be exactly equal," he said.

The governor's office said Quinn Chief of Staff Jack Lavin studied efforts in Maine and Florida, both of which have significantly reduced the number of school districts in recent years.

The state board of education believes merging school districts would save money and improve administrative leadership, curriculum alignment and course offerings, spokeswoman Mary Fergus said.

However, Fergus noted, consolidation "is not a quick process."

Illinois' number of public school districts, 868, is the second highest in the country. Of those districts, 200 are made up of a single school, state officials said.

According to state board records, about 140 school districts have consolidated in the past 28 years.

Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno, a Lemont Republican, advocated for pursuing consolidation efforts "aggressively" and said "those are the fundamental changes the state is going to have to go through in order to get stabilized long term."

Quinn also proposed cutting by \$95 million the amount the state pays to bus students to school and eliminating \$14 million in state support to regional offices of education, which conduct training and other services.

Lavin said local taxpayers could shoulder the burden instead.

"If the locals elect them, they can pay for them," Lavin said.

Overall, state support for elementary and secondary education would climb 3.2 percent to \$7.2 billion, still 1 percent lower than in the 2009-2010 school year. Higher education would see just a slight increase in money, 1.2 percent to \$2.15 billion.

Efforts to force consolidation of school districts and trim regional offices of education have been blocked in the past. Lawmakers, in a sweeping 1985 education reform package, required consolidation with the goal of no fewer than 1,500 students in any district with kindergarten through 12th grade. It became an issue in the campaign for governor and the legislature repealed it months later. In 2003, then-Gov. Rod Blagojevich, in his first budget address, proposed eliminating regional offices of education, a plan that never bore fruit.

Y State Government Writer Mike Riopell, staff writer Jake Griffin and Daily Herald news services contributed to this report.

Bold: Quinn also wants to cut \$95 million from busing budget

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