School funding agreement brings equity – at a high price

After defying Governor Rauner to pass a bipartisan budget in July, lawmakers convened a special session in August to finish their work and pass a new evidence-based funding formula for school funding.

FROM SB1 TO SB1947
To that end, both chambers passed Senate Bill 1 in early August. IFT strongly supported SB1, which would have benefited every district in the state and ensured that all students – regardless of zip code – received equitable funding and a high-quality education.

Rauner vetoed and rewrote significant portions of SB1, falsely claiming it was a “Chicago bailout” and pitting districts statewide against one another. The Senate overrode his veto, but soon after, House and Senate leaders met with the governor to work on a compromise.

Late last month, they announced it in the form of Senate Bill 1947.

Passing the agreement was no easy task. It was initially rejected in the House, only to be approved on a second attempt after a vote to override the governor’s veto of SB1 failed. The Senate concurred and passed SB1947 the following day. The governor signed the bill into law on August 31.

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You may have noticed lately that the IFT and our local unions have doubled our efforts to energize members and build our power. If you’ve wondered why, the answers are Bruce Rauner and Mark Janus.

You already know Governor Rauner. As he promised, for the last two years, Rauner has tried to push through a radical political agenda at the expense of working families. Fortunately, voters like you have been speaking up, and legislators from both sides of the aisle have been listening and pushing back.

Rauner is up for reelection in 2018 and defeating him is the IFT’s top political priority.

However, you may not be familiar with Mark Janus. Mr. Janus is an Illinois state employee and the lead plaintiff in Janus v. AFSCME, a lawsuit funded by wealthy anti-union forces attempting to destroy our members’ ability to fight for themselves and the communities we serve.

Much like the Friedrichs case in 2015, Janus seeks to overturn decades of precedent and make it illegal for unions to collect agency or “fair share” fees from non-members. These fees ensure that our members’ ability to fight for them and our local unions have doubled our efforts to energize members and build our power.

To help protect our members from harm in the likely event that anti-union activists prevail in Janus, the IFT is instituting a new union card. This card will provide stronger legal protection than our current card. If you haven’t already been asked to sign a new card, you will be soon. Please be sure to sign it and encourage your colleagues to do so.

"Recording" every member is a big job. But it’s just one of the many ways that these attacks on our unions are providing an incredible opportunity to grow stronger and more powerful through one-on-one conversations with our colleagues.

There’s no better example of that than a collaboration the IFT recently embarked on called the Peoria People’s Project. Working with IFT staff and partners in SEIU and Grassroots Collaborative, the Peoria Federation of Teachers (Local 780) and Peoria Federation of Support Staff (Local 6099) trained member volunteers to talk to their union brothers and sisters in the community as part of this incredible effort. (Learn more on page 6 of this issue of Union Link.)

Local 780 President Jeff Adkins-Datro said the project has energized his members and given him confidence to face the challenges ahead.

“It’s been so exciting to have the People’s Project going on in Peoria. Our union office, which is normally dormant during the summer, buzzed with all kinds of activity this year…. It makes me no longer afraid of the fair share deal, but gives me (and can give all of our locals) a plan and pathway to thrive right through,” he said.

“Thrive right through it.” As your president, I look forward to working together to do exactly that in the months ahead. Together we will bring our union’s vision to reality — “members fighting powerfully for a strong union and the future we all deserve.”

In solidarity,

Daniel J. Montgomery
President

THE GOOD NEWS

The evidence-based model of school funding, strongly supported by the IFT and originally contained in SB 1, remains largely intact in this measure. The model looks at many critical regional factors before establishing how much money each school district needs to educate their students well. Then it determines each district’s ability to provide those funds. The difference between the two is the amount the state must provide to close the funding gap. This equitable distribution of resources is what our union and other education advocates have long fought for.

THE BAD NEWS

Despite its desirable components, some harmful changes in the agreement forced the IFT to oppose it.

The most objectionable aspect of the bill is a voucher-style program which allows businesses and wealthy individuals to claim a tax credit for donations to private school scholarship funds. The program will cost $75 million per year over the next five years and rob public schools of students and resources.

In his statement after the legislation passed, IFT President Dan Montgomery said:

“Tonight, state legislators moved Illinois closer to doing what we have needed to do for years — to ensure our poor students and communities fairly. Unfortunately, it came at a very disappointing cost. Governor Rauner capitalized on the crisis he created when he vetoed the original bill and used it as leverage for private school tax credits that benefit the wealthy while working families continue to struggle.”

The bill also includes “mandate relief,” which permits schools to hire outside parties to provide driver education services — without seeking a waiver from the Illinois State Board of Educa-
tion (ISBE). (A public hearing and school board approval are required.) And SB 1947 reduces the current physical education requirement, allowing districts to offer PE just three days per week instead of five. Some students may opt out of PE entirely if they participate in interscholastic or extracurricular sports.

Several organizations joined with the IFT to oppose the legislation, including the Illinois Education Association (IEA), School Management Alliance, League of Women Voters, and the American Civil Liberties Union.

In lieu of SB 1947, the IFT strongly urged lawmakers to override the governor’s veto of SB 1, or to pass a compromise bill that did not contain tax credits and mandate relief.

IN THE END

This agreement comes at a high price. But for the first time since 1997, Illinois will begin to move away from its archaic, inequitable school funding system and towards one that ensures every district in the state will receive appropriate support.

“[I] believe we’re now on a better path toward equity and adequacy, and we must move forward in our classrooms and communities,” concluded Montgomery. “But it’s clearer than ever that this governor does not prioritize public schools, and we must fight for one who does in 2018.”

More Information

To stay up-to-date on legislative action, visit ift-ilt.org/Legislation/under-the-dome.

You may designate your redirection to one of the following Executive Board-approved alternative, non-political expenditures:

Carl J. Megel Special Education Scholarship
Two $1,000 IFT-sponsored scholarships awarded annually to a special education student.

IFT Robert G. Porter Scholarship
The union offers two $10,000 scholarships annually to a special education student. It is intended to help pay for the first time since 1997, Illinois will begin to move away from its archaic, inequitable school funding system and towards one that ensures every district in the state will receive appropriate support.

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IFT members have a lot at stake in the 2018 election. It is vital that we support candidates who will stand up for workers’ rights, protect employee pensions, and invest in public education and services. As you’ve likely seen, many individuals have already announced their candidacy for governor and are in full campaign mode—well in advance of the December candidate filing deadline.

The IFT takes its responsibility to advocate for you very seriously, particularly when it comes to deciding whether to endorse individuals for public office. That’s why our union has worked diligently over the years to develop and fine-tune a statewide Political Action Committee (PAC) process that gives every member a voice in these important decisions.

For the March 20, 2018 primary election, that democratic process will soon be underway. In January, regional PAC committee meetings will be held to determine each candidate’s position on key issues. The regional PACs will use voting records, position papers, questionnaires, and other information to determine if a candidate should be recommended for IFT endorsement in the primary. Meeting notices are sent to each IFT local in the region, and members are encouraged to attend, ask questions, and make their voices heard.

After regional endorsement recommendations are made, the statewide PAC committee will finalize a list of endorsements to be considered by the IFT’s elected Executive Board.

Watch ift-aft.org for the complete list of board-approved endorsements prior to the start of early voting on February 8.

Get Ready to VOTE!
It’s not too early to be sure your vote counts in the primary election on March 20, 2018.

Note: Early voting begins February 8, 2018.

Be sure you’re registered to vote, especially if you’ve moved or changed your name recently. Check your registration status at https://ova.elections.il.gov/RegistrationLookUp.aspx.

If you need to register, there are two easy options:

ONLINE: Register or update your name or address at https://ova.elections.il.gov/.

IN PERSON: Visit your local election authority or driver’s license facility. (ID will be required.)

As part of the fiscal year 2018 budget, a new tier of pension benefits (Tier III) has been enacted into law for the Teachers’ Retirement System (TRS), State Universities Retirement System (SURS), and members of the State Employees’ Retirement System (SERS) not covered by Social Security.

It is important to note that Tier 1 members and retirees of these systems are NOT IMPACTED by the new law.

If approved by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and upon implementation, each newly-hired employee and current Tier II employee (generally, those hired after January 1, 2011) will be required to make a voluntary, irrevocable election to participate in either Tier II or Tier III.

Tier III is a hybrid plan that contains two elements:

$ A defined benefit plan, similar to what is offered to current Tier II members; and
$ A defined contribution plan, similar to a 401(k).

Because the new law must first be approved by the IRS, there is currently no timeline for implementation.

The General Assembly creates a new tier of pension benefits.

Say “Thank You” on PSRP Day – November 15

Every day in schools and colleges across Illinois, para-professionals and school-related personnel (PSRPs) make a difference for our communities. But too often, we forget to simply say, “Thanks.”

The third Wednesday of each November is PSRP Day in Illinois, an annual day to show appreciation to the more than 100,000 dedicated PSRPs who provide essential services in classrooms, school offices, cafeterias, school buses, and more. Their work is invaluable to ensuring that our institutions run smoothly and efficiently. They keep students safe in healthy, productive learning environments.

In the IFT, PSRPs play a critical role in keeping our union strong. So, whether you work with PSRPs or are a parent, on Wednesday, November 15, please express your gratitude to a PSRP in your life. It will be deeply appreciated.
Peoria locals put union’s vision into action

Governor Rauner’s persistent attacks on our communities and the likelihood of an unfavorable decision in the Janus v. AFSCME case in the U.S. Supreme Court have spurred the IFT to develop a new vision and powerful plan of action to ensure that our union thrives in the days ahead.

Towards that end, the Peoria Federation of Teachers (Local 780), the Peoria Federation of Support Staff (Local 6099), and their partners in SEIU Healthcare and Grassroots Collaborative worked together this summer with the IFT to develop and conduct the Peoria People’s Project (PPP).

“People’s Project organizers discussed ways to get members to recommit to their unions and make connections with their community. They decided to conduct a five-week program that included training dozens of IFT members and other volunteer “interns” on how to have effective conversations with fellow members about what issues mattered most to them and how the union could help. Learning to listen was key to preparing the volunteers.

After being trained in best practices, the interns put the People’s Project goals into action. Volunteers went door-to-door in their neighborhoods to canvass other members and assess their commitment to building a powerful union. They asked members to sign a new union card, participate in committees, attend city council meetings, make calls to support the fight for school funding, and more.

“The door-to-door aspect of the Project is what moves people,” said Mary Fran Wessler, president of Local 6099. “Having a face and a name, and a smile at your door makes a huge difference and can sway people,” she added.

Some volunteers were initially apprehensive about knocking on doors and having conversations with their colleagues, some of whom had differing views on unions and politics. There was also anxiety about asking other members to make calls to the governor about school funding or raising the minimum wage.

But once they hit the streets, interns said they found the experience enlightening and empowering. Local 780 member Linda Wilson was among the interns who used her training to create positive, effective interactions.

“I had a two-hour meeting with a veteran teacher who couldn’t stop talking about workplace issues that were important to him,” Wilson said. “He really appreciated that someone from the union had come to his home. He even called our approach ‘out-of-the-box.’

“It was a great feeling to make that one-on-one connection with a fellow member,” she added. “Just as importantly, I was able to encourage him to make calls to advocate for some important issues, and he even plans to participate in a union committee. What a positive result for such a simple effort! All I did was ask – and listen,” she added.

By the end of the summer, PPP efforts had resulted in an amazing nearly 1,700 door-knocks, more than 300 personal conversations, and hundreds of new union cards signed. The collaborative effort also laid a strong foundation to create a community “labor table” that will bring unions and Peoria together to fight for issues that will benefit everyone.

“The Peoria People’s Project is the living embodiment of our union’s vision — Members fighting powerfully for a strong union and the future we all deserve,” said IFT President Dan Montgomery. “It represents both what we have to be as a union and how we will win the fights ahead, local by local, community by community.”

The project’s work is far from over. Additional meetings are scheduled, and the strong union-community relationships they are building will have a positive impact on upcoming contract campaigns.

Most importantly, the project has shown that by reaching out to members individually, every local union can effectively engage members, increase the understanding of their shared concerns and challenges, and build union strength.

“Just as important, we are finding that someone from the union had a smile at your door makes a huge difference,” she added. “Having a face and a name, and being approach ‘out-of-the-box.’

“It was a great feeling to make that one-on-one connection with a fellow member,” she added. “Just as importantly, I was able to encourage him to make calls to advocate for some important issues, and he even plans to participate in a union committee. What a positive result for such a simple effort! All I did was ask – and listen,” she added.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

PSRP/PUBLIC EMPLOYEE CONFERENCE
October 20-21, 2017
Springfield, IL

UNION LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE
FALL SESSION
November 4-5, 2017
Westmont, IL

ILLINOIS PSRP DAY
November 15, 2017

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