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Downstate schools get funding shaft

By Jim Nowlan

As a result of 2012 Illinois state budget cuts, many downstate school districts lost \$400-500 and more per pupil this year while wealthy suburban districts came off almost scot-free. It is almost a crime.

In his recent budget address, Gov. Pat Quinn proposed further cuts for schools this coming year. And the Illinois State Board of Education is again recommending that poorer districts receive the biggest cuts. It doesn't have to be. It is wrong.

Illinois needs to revamp its incomprehensible, jury-rigged school funding "system."

Only half a dozen people in Illinois really understand the complex Illinois formula for state aid to public schools, and the six aren't allowed to fly on the same plane, or so the saying goes.

The General State Aid (GSA) formula was created in the 1920s during the administration of Governor Len Small of Kankakee. The worthy objective was to provide financial help for property poor school districts that couldn't generate anywhere near the money from the local property tax that the wealthy districts generated.

The GSA formula operates as follows: A foundation level of dollars per pupil is established. Each school district should, from all sources in total, have at least this minimum foundation level of dollars per pupil.

If the foundation level is, say, \$6,000 per pupil and a district can only raise \$3,000 from a base local tax rate, then the state will provide \$3,000 per pupil to bring the district to \$6,000. It is more complicated than that, but that is the idea and substance of general state aid.

Many suburban, often wealthy districts generate much more than \$6,000 from local taxes, and thus receive only a token amount of general state aid. The wealthy districts do, however, receive state funding for special education and transportation and other so-called categorical programs, generally on the same per pupil basis as other school districts.

This past year, Illinois allocated \$6.8 billion from all state sources to local schools or, on average, about \$3,391 for each of our 2 million public school students. But few receive the average.

For example, in 2010-11 Kankakee School District 111 received \$4,875 per pupil in general state aid while New Trier High on Chicago's suburban North Shore received only \$218 per pupil in general state aid (New Trier received an additional \$518 per pupil from categorical grants).

Even with all the state aid it received, Kankakee expended only about \$11,663 per pupil while property-wealthy New Trier spent \$20,807 per pupil, largely from property taxes.

This past year, the state reduced general state aid by \$519 million, or 11 percent of the preceding year's total, about \$259 per pupil statewide.

How did the state make its reductions? You might think it would do so on an amount per pupil statewide, so that every school district felt the same pain.

But no, the state decided to reduce each district's general state aid from the preceding year by the same 11 percent. (Actually, year-to-year changes in enrollment and local property valuations also affect GSA, so the figures cited below are approximate.)

So, New Trier High saw its general state aid of \$218 per pupil go down 11 percent, or a total of about \$24 per pupil. At the same time, Kankakee saw its funding for the current year go down by a whopping \$536 per pupil!

I looked at some fairly representative school districts in the state, and here is what I found to be approximately the case:

School district	2010-2011 # students	2012 GSA reductions	reductions per student	2010-11 spending per student
New Trier High	4,237	\$ 101,000	\$ 24	\$20,807
Hinsdale High	4,532	\$ 124,000	\$ 28	\$16,865
Kankakee 111	5,345	\$2,866,000	\$536	\$11,663
Rock Island 41	6,463	\$2,112,000	\$326	\$ 9,996
Streator High	889	\$ 407,000	\$458	\$11,952
Stark County	821	\$ 246,000	\$299	\$ 9,302
Eastland 309	679	\$ 40,000	\$ 59	\$12,767
West Carroll 314	1,220	\$ 492,000	\$403	\$11,243
Chadwick-Milledge	526	\$ 163,000	\$310	\$ 9,141

I think it would have been much fairer to reduce the allocation for each student in the state by the same \$259 or so per student. A strong case could also be made for reducing high-spending districts by more per pupil than that in low-wealth districts, the reverse of what we have.

There is talk among educators of having a “funding summit” this summer. It is about time.

Unfortunately, big change, such as reducing the disparities in per student expenditures between rich and poor districts, rarely happens in Illinois. The larger public interest, in this case of students, is too often subordinated to that of parochial regional interests.

There has to be a better way, and one fairer to downstate Illinois.