

Rauner and education in New Year

By Jim Nowlan

Gov.-elect Bruce Rauner has pledged to roll back income tax increases and boost funding for education. I have suggested in this space that to do both this coming year would take greater prestidigitation than the great Harry Houdini displayed when thrown into a freezing river in a strait jacket and chains (Houdini survived, by the way).

So, what should the incoming governor do for education? If anyone asks my opinion (no one has), here are some thoughts.

Most schools hold school longer each year than we do, and for 6½-7 hours each day rather than our six. I found an old United Nations survey of school going. Of the 50 nations that responded, 42 went for more than 180 days (we are at about 175-180) and 20 held school for between 210-239 days per year.

And the several nations with which I am familiar hold school year round, with several short two-week breaks during the year and briefer summer vacations.

I hear local teachers lament the loss of learning that occurs during our three-month summer breaks.

In 2002, the Rock Island-Milan school district went to a modified year-round calendar. According to school district spokeswoman Holly Sparkman, surveys show that most teachers, students and parents are happy with the calendar, and “It has developed a more positive attitude toward school.”

A study by Elisabeth Palmer and Amy Bemis of achievement in 75 year round schools found no significant effect on achievement in 42 schools yet significant positive effects in this regard were found in 27 schools. They concluded thus that “students attending year-round schools are likely to perform as well if not better than their peers in traditional nine-month programs.”

We can't do much about a longer year and school day without more money; even the year-round school is problematic without more dollars, as many downstate districts lack air-conditioning.

Yet over time we have to do something. I recall a conversation over coffee with a number of faculty several years ago at the University of Illinois. A distinguished professor of electrical engineering asked his engineering colleagues: “Aren't your international students better than the American students?” They nodded, ruefully. That hurt.

The next great wars, heaven forbid, will likely be fought with digital technology more than with men (and women) at arms. We need to be on a “war footing” now with education to stop our slide into mediocrity.

In addition to a longer school year and day and year round education over time, there is another action we can, also probably over several years.

It is close to criminal that Illinois spends \$7,000-\$8,000 per year on students in some districts and \$20,000-\$25,000 on those in other districts. In Iowa, I am told the spread from the lowest spending to highest spending districts is only 3 percent.

Bruce Rauner cannot address these issues immediately.

I suggest he do the following:

Keep the taxes where they are in the first year. Pay off the billions we owe vendors and maybe, if anything is left, increase education funding a bit, encouraging year-round education.

From year two to year four, the final year of his term, slowly ratchet back the income tax increases. To do that he will have to broaden the bases of the income and sales taxes, as he will have to keep revenues at about present levels if he is to increase funding for education.

At the same time, the school year could be extended a few days each year.

Bruce Rauner will need all of the moves of a Harry Houdini to escape from the dire situation he finds himself in.