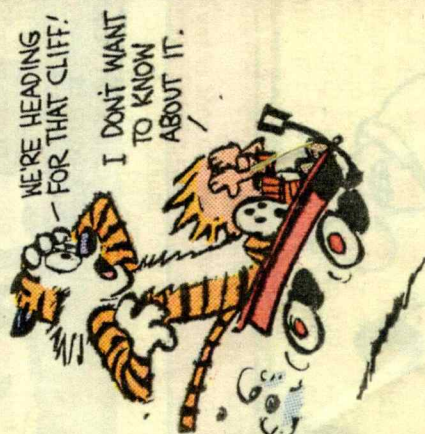
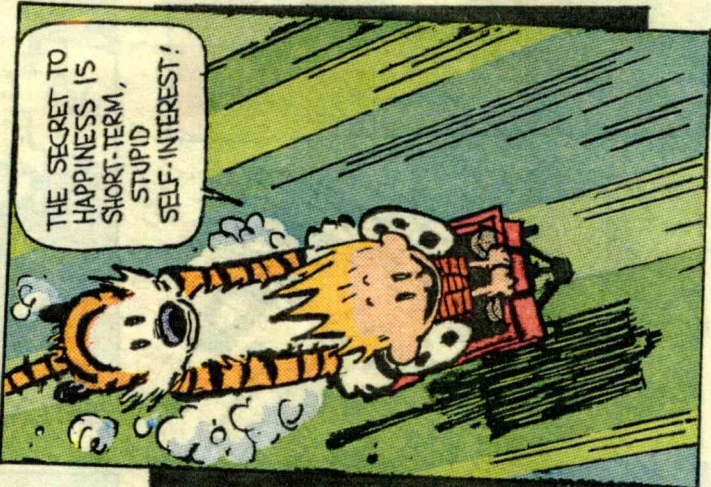
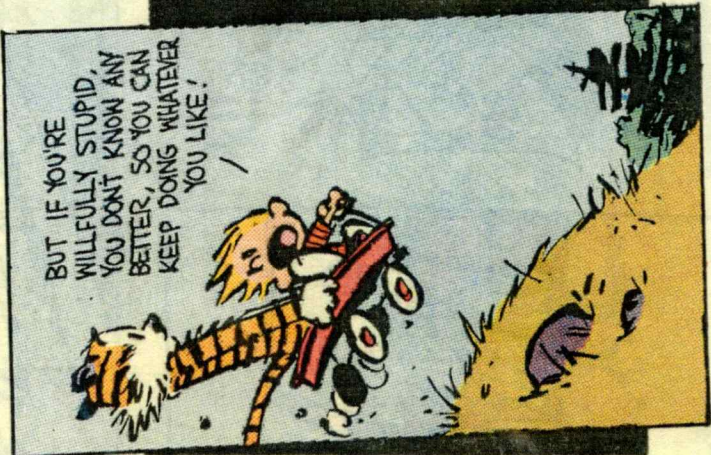


calvin and Hobbes



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League panel may study school funding

By DAVE MOORE
H&R Staff Writer

Saying the Decatur School District is in a fiscal crisis, the League of Women Voters of Decatur moved Wednesday to form a citizens committee to help solve the district's problems.

One solution is the first property tax rate increase for the education fund since 1956, league leaders said. Increasing the education fund tax rate beyond the current \$1.84 per \$100 assessed valuation would require a referendum.

"Do we put a referendum before the public? I don't know," league president Kathleen Owen told 37 interested citizens Wednesday. She said a committee comprised of community leaders should study funding and other issues facing the district and make

recommendations.

Wednesday's meeting at First Lutheran Church was aimed at attracting people to join the committee, which may meet for the first time in June.

Those at Wednesday's meeting included Decatur City Council member Shirley Moore, Partners In Education board and former school board member Jane Hawkins, and David Livingston, state president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

While the league didn't outright propose a tax hike, it issued a fact sheet that said Decatur ranks fourth to last compared to 40 large districts in the state in its education fund tax rate.

Also, the league said, the district's expenditure per pupil has decreased from \$2,416 per student in 1982 to \$2,207 when calculated in 1982 dollars.

The league's position is the district should consider a referendum if it doesn't have enough money to maintain or improve education.

Some persons at the meeting cautioned the league about approaching voters with a tax increase in today's economic climate.

"Seventy-two percent of my tax bill goes to the district," said Bill Oakes, director of marketing at St. Mary's Hospital. "A lot of people see things that way. We should know the obstacles before going in."

The idea of a citizens committee appealed to Betty Watkins, who teaches a gifted program in Decatur schools.

"I think it's important for the people to come to the school board (for a referendum) instead of the school board coming to the people," Watkins said.

We should know the

Oakes had wrong when he made statement.

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Finding funds for city schools

No one's waiting for state

By **RON INGRAM**
H&R Staff Writer

An annual waiting game is under way to see how the state legislature will help or hurt the Decatur School District's fiscal 1993 budget.

But district administrators, school board members and citizen groups are not idle. They are planning for the possibility the legislature will take little or no action to benefit schools in the face of mounting state debt and the November general election.

Already the board has trimmed \$2.5 million from the educational program for 1992-93 to help cope with a \$2 million loss in state aid this year caused by Gov. Jim Edgar's efforts to balance the state's budget.



Hendren
Be flexible

A network of community groups, led by the Decatur League of Women Voters, is organizing with an eye toward pushing a referendum to increase the education fund tax rate.

And the school board's Parent Advisory Council is suggesting steps the district might take to enhance its financial position, keying off a Financial Advisory Committee report presented to the board in August.

The PAC cautioned the board to go slow on possible consolidation with any of the smaller school districts in Macon County. Such a move could net the districts more than \$12 million in state incentive payments over three years.

Noting that consolidation "would meet with a great deal of negative feeling in the smaller communities," the PAC said before such a move is tried the district must make "a concerted attempt to establish a basic level of support."

To support the financial advisory panel's recommendation to seek more federal grants to promote magnet and choice schools, the PAC suggested hiring a grants coordinator and paying him based on grant dollars brought into the district annually.

"Why pay someone when Don Wachter (associate superintendent) and I are already doing that job," said James Hendren, school district director of business affairs. "Last year our federal special grants totaled \$600,000. Over the prior 10 years, our grants totaled more than \$500,000."

PAC members urged the board to continue employing custodians and school nurses rather than contracting for those services. They said replacing custodians "will have a negative impact on the daily lives of our students."

Hendren said if the legislature doesn't act to change the school aid formula this year and provide more money to downstate schools, Decatur will have to be flexible in responding to that situation.

"But things may change radically in Springfield," Hendren said. "There are many bills in the hopper. One is proposing to change the tax structure."

The legislative task force studying school finance is recommending equalizing the taxing power and tax rates between dual and unit school districts, Hendren said.

That plan would increase the real estate tax rate for unit districts' education funds to \$2.47 per \$100 of assessed valuation over five years. The current maximum education fund tax rate without a referendum is \$1.84 per \$100 of assessed valuation, which is Decatur's rate.

Overall, the task force's recommendations would increase unit districts' tax rates to a maximum of \$3.70 per \$100 of assessed valuation versus the current maximum of \$2.68.

"If we got that kind of an increase, we wouldn't need a tax referendum," Hendren said.

Panel talks focus on school tax rate

■ Ad hoc committee also takes a look at new 'education strategies.'

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

Some said it was time to "hold the taxpayers' feet to the fire" and raise more money for schools.

Others said the focus should be more on encouraging school board members and administrators to try new things.

Despite these differences, the concerned citizens who gathered at First Lutheran Church Wednesday morning have this in common: They're committed to finding out what local schools need and delivering it — and they've formed a grass-roots, ad hoc committee to do it.

About 17 concerned citizens gathered for the committee's first meeting. The independent committee was organized by the League of Women Voters of Decatur during a community meeting two weeks ago.

The effort comes on the heels of devastating state aid cuts that forced the Decatur Board of Education to trim \$2.5 million from its educational programs. Several committee members said now is the time for voters to approve the first education fund property tax increase since 1956.

They noted that Decatur has among the lowest school property tax rates in the state. Among 40 large unit districts, Decatur ranks 39th.

And Decatur's taxpayers contribute a smaller portion of their overall property tax bill to schools than surrounding smaller communities, according to a committee fact sheet. In Mount Zion, about 49 percent of the total tax

rate is for schools. In Decatur, the figure is 39 percent — lower than in Argenta, Warrensburg, Forsyth and Maroa.

"Our school board is in a survival mentality, and I think money has done it," said the Rev. James Lillie of Decatur. "I want to go after the money. That's what's needed. I want to hold our taxpayers' feet to the fire and say, 'That's not adequate.'"

Bill Oakes, also of Decatur, emphasized the need for "alternative education management strategies" over the need for more funding. "I'm very, very disappointed in the school board for the lack of education strategies that have been proposed," Oakes said.



Lillie
'Survival' mode

Since the end of discussions about "choice" schools last year, "it's been business as usual," Oakes said. "We haven't heard a single, solitary word about alternative education management strategies since then."

The committee, whose members come from various backgrounds, will meet again at the church on July 9. At that public meeting, committee members will discuss the school district's finances and community demographics.

"We have to become more informed as a group before we start going out, reaching out more," said Cindy Reynolds, chairperson of another group, the League of Women Voters of Decatur School Study and Action Committee.

New school chief says 'something is going rig

By REID MAGNEY
H&R Staff Writer

New Superintendent Donald Wachter says the future of the Decatur School District lies in its recent past.

"The system is here," Wachter said Wednesday, following his elevation from associate superintendent by the school board Tuesday night.

Wachter said he plans to "toot the district's horn" after several years of leaving the limelight to Walt Warfield. "Something here is going right."

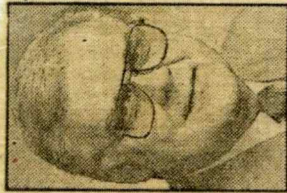
That's because the district already has programs in place aimed at reducing its dropout rate and dealing with other important issues, Wachter said.

"We're concentrating on the elementary and

middle school levels," Wachter said, "After that, it's too late."

One area in which Wachter said he will press the board soon is for greater involvement by parents.

Wachter wants to give parents more say in what happens to a child in danger of flunking. Options include taking the child to special evening or Saturday tutoring sessions.



Wachter

A school referendum is "not one of my priorities," he said.

NVR - 7/16/92

ht' in Decatur

"I don't know whether the board will buy that," Wachter said.

Money is another big issue facing the district, but don't expect to hear Wachter beat the drum for a referendum to raise school taxes.

Instead, Wachter said he will await the outcome of a League of Women Voters study on school finances. After that, "it's up to the board to decide whether to have a referendum," he said.

SCHOOL GOALS

8/9/92

K+R



Wachter

The cuts start with his old job.

New leader plans new initiatives

■ More magnet schools, technical education typify Wachter's vision.

By **RON INGRAM**
H&R Staff Writer

Anyone hungry for change in the Decatur schools might not have long to wait.

One of Don Wachter's first moves as superintendent of schools was to recommend the elimination of his old job.

"I recommended to the board keeping my old job as associate superintendent vacant," Wachter said shortly after a meeting to map out goals with the Decatur Board of Education.

Wachter also hopes to increase the level and range of Decatur's technical education, to add magnet elementary schools and to increase the level of academic achievement.

In a recent interview in his new office, Wachter shared some of the performance goals agreed to by him and the board. Although that process is not finished, the goals roughed out so far could have far-reaching effects on district education.

High on the list is greater involvement from members of the community.

The more people are involved in the public schools, the more ownership they will feel in what happens there, Wachter said. To apply that philosophy, he plans to enlist help from administrators, teachers, parents and students.

Technical education is also high

SCHOOLS

Continued on A5

SCHOOLS: 'Tech-prep' proposed

Continued from A1
on the list.

"I've proposed bringing Jim Oettel (director of vocational education) back to the Keil Building as director of technical education," Wachter said. "There is a national concept called tech-prep which makes sense for Decatur. We're a manufacturing community. I proposed giving Jim two years to build a tech-prep program in Decatur."

The tech-prep concept would give students college credits for technical courses taken while in high school.

"We've told our students that you must graduate from high school. But that's not enough. Some of them need to have an advanced degree," Wachter said.

"If we get them interested in the tech-prep program, some of them will begin thinking about what is beyond high school instead of about dropping out," he said. "If we've given them some advance college credit, it's less likely they'll drop out."

Wachter said he has discussed a joint program with Richland Community College President Charles Novak. Such a program is already in place on a limited basis at the Decatur Area Vocational Center, where Oettel now works.

"There is already a transitional agreement among Richland, the Heartland Region Education for Employment and the area vocational center which grants kids between three and 12 hours of credit in programs at Richland," Wachter said.

The board is interested in keeping a breadth of program, not just athletics and music but clubs as well. But it is interested in keeping the stress on academics."

— Donald Wachter, Decatur school superintendent

School board members also want to add magnet schools among the central city elementary schools: Durfee, Washington, Coppenbarger, Harris and Garfield, Wachter said.

The district's two present magnet programs are at Johns Hill and French, both central city schools.

Introducing tech-prep programs at the high schools could make them magnet schools of a sort as well, Wachter said. One or more of the three high schools could have tech-prep, and students from anywhere in the district could elect to attend that program, he said.

"We have some space at each of the central city elementaries because of white flight — people moving to the suburbs or sending their children to baby sitters in more outlying schools," Wachter said. "We'll be trying to attract people back with varied programs. We've been very successful doing that at Johns Hill and French."

What new magnet programs might include still must be worked out, he said.

Wachter said board members

Another goal the board is considering would tie encompass extracurricular and co-curricular activities to academic achievement, Wachter said.

"The more kids are involved in school, the more likely they will stay in school," he said. "Last year, about 40 percent of our secondary students were involved in athletics. School pride correlates with academic achievement."

"The board is interested in keeping a breadth of program, not just athletics and music but clubs as well. But it is interested in keeping the stress on academics."

The board probably won't finalize Wachter's performance goals until later this month, when district administrators meet to brainstorm a number of educational issues.

But in the meantime, Wachter said, he is preparing to meet the challenges outlined so far.

The board of education recently gave Wachter a two-year contract effective Aug. 1. His annual salary is \$87,000 and includes 21 vacation days.

8/22/92

CENTRAL ILLIN

Board scrubs plan

■ Parents protest move to bring workers to schools four hours later.

By **RON INGRAM**
H&R Staff Writer

and **GEORGE ALTHOFF**
Herald & Review Editor

Parental concern is causing the Decatur Board of Education to rethink a plan to shift the starting time of elementary custodians by four hours.

"Board members have expressed that they want some adjustment in the plan," Superintendent Don Wachter said Friday.

The board held a special meeting to discuss personnel matters in closed session Thursday night. Before the closed meeting,

parents and custodians voiced their objections to a plan that would have moved the starting time for the elementary custodians to 10:30 a.m. from 6:30 a.m.

Wachter said he will meet Monday with James P. Hendren, school district director of business affairs, and Robert McDowell, assistant director of buildings and grounds, to thrash out a new plan.

"It will have to be a compromise," Wachter said. "You can't cut 25 percent of your custodial budget and expect operations to remain the same. We can come closer to meeting parents' concerns about someone being there when their children arrive for school."

Facing rising operating costs and cuts in state aid, Decatur trimmed \$500,000 from its 1992-93 custodial budget, axing the equiv-

for custodians

alent of 23.5 full-time positions from its 100-member custodial staff. Fourteen full-time and a number of part-time custodians lost their jobs.

Arguing Thursday for an earlier starting time, Gary Witts, president of the custodians' union local, said security at the schools would be a major concern.

Broken glass often is scattered on playgrounds, said Witts, president of Local 344 of the Service Employees International Union. A loaded .38-caliber revolver was recently found near one school and needles and other drug paraphernalia also have been discovered on school grounds, he said.

The safety of teachers and secretaries also would be a concern with a later starting time, Witts said. Custodians now check for security problems before opening the schools in the morning, he said.

If custodians began their duties later in the day, Witts said the security chores would be left to other personnel.

Hendren said Friday that principals likely would be responsible for opening the schools.

Linda Loman, a Garfield School parent, echoed Witts' comments. She said custodians help provide security at schools because they "police the area."

Kent Fuiten, head custodian at Garfield, said many normal morning duties now performed by custodians would be left undone or would have to be performed by other employees if the shift is made in starting times.

Those duties include snow removal, mopping doorways and halls on rainy days and cleaning up after before-school breakfasts, said Fuiten, business agent for Local 344.

Teachers spend their own money in classroom

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

Five hundred dollars. Six hundred dollars. Maybe more.

That's how much Marilyn Delbridge figures she spends each year on her sixth-grade class at Enterprise Grade School.

She's not alone.

A teacher's bank account has become an accepted source of funding for America's public classrooms.

A recent survey of 22,000 teachers nationwide showed 96 percent spend their own money on classroom supplies. In Illinois, all elementary teachers surveyed said they spent their own money.

They buy apples, stickers, books, puzzles, counting games — items that teachers say are essential to keep children interested.

"If you want to have your room a learning environment, you will have to spend money out of your pocket, definitely," said Robert Winters, a Dennis Grade School kindergarten teacher who says he spends \$300 to \$400 annually to keep his classroom up-to-date and interesting for kids.

Decatur School District officials are aware of the private spending.

"I don't think there's a teacher alive that hasn't done that," said James Hendren, business affairs director. "It's a very generous gesture on their part."

But it's unnecessary, he said.

Based on a formula, each school receives money each year for classroom supplies, he said. At elementary schools, it comes to \$44.85 per student. In middle school, it is \$57.03. In high school, it's \$64.26.

"It's based on a reasonable amount that we feel is adequate," Hendren said.

Even so, teachers feel a pinch.

"The only way we are going to get these things," said E. Ann Chambliss, Enterprise Grade School kindergarten teacher and president of the Decatur Education Association, "is to buy them ourselves."

Amendment could cost schools funds

By **RON INGRAM**
H&R Staff Writer

9/23/92

Decatur public schools could lose state money if a state constitutional amendment mandating school financing is adopted by voters Nov. 3.

Members of Decatur's independent Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee discussed that possibility Wednesday morning during their monthly meeting.

While the recently formed group has taken no formal stand in favor of a referendum to increase Decatur's education fund tax rate, finding ways to increase the school district's financial stability tops its agenda.

State money currently provides about 55 percent of the support for Decatur's educational program with about 38 percent coming from local funds. The rest is federal or private grant money.

The proposed state constitutional amendment states "the state has the preponderant financial responsibility for financing public education."

Decatur is among the large school districts in the state supporting the proposed constitutional amendment.

If the proposal is adopted and the Illinois State Board of Education determines that "preponderant" means 51 percent, then funding to local districts, like Decatur, which are getting a higher percentage could suffer.

The percentage of local vs. state funding is reversed for Decatur when compared to most other school districts, said Rev. Jim Lillie, pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church.

The state on average pays about 33 percent of the cost of public education with local taxpayers picking up 57 percent.

Except for 4 cents per \$100 of equalized assessed valuation added by the state legislature, Decatur has not had an education fund tax increase since 1956.

"I'd like to see us go after more funding locally," Lillie said. "The state has proven it is unreliable."

When committee members questioned why the school board does not push for a referendum if it perceives a financial need, former board member Jane Hawkins had an answer. She said the board does not want to give the perception that it is forcing something down voters' throats, but instead wants a grass-roots movement to come forward that it can then support.

Decatur, Illinois

Wednesday, September 30, 1992

Herald & Review

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Board must lead on taxes

A GRASS-roots effort demanding higher taxes for schools seems a pretty remote possibility.

Former Decatur School Board member Jane Hawkins believes the board is waiting to get behind this kind of group. Otherwise, it fears it will give people an impression it is trying to force something down their throats.

This is what Hawkins told the Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee when members asked why there has been almost no talk about a tax referendum, even though there is a perception Decatur schools need more money.

Another reason is also plausible.

It may be that not all seven members believe additional tax monies are needed.

At some point, we suppose, members of the board will enlighten us about their feelings on school finance. They are going to have to provide the leadership if a referendum is to be successful.

Ad hoc committees of citizens will be useful. Volunteers will be needed to distribute information and drum up interest. But the school board and school administration will be the ones who will have to gain the trust of the public.

Other matters will have to be cleared away. In November people will vote on an amendment to the Illinois Constitution that tells the state it must pay the preponderant share of the cost of schools. Backers say this will require the state to pay at least half the cost. Currently, state support is down to about one-third. A decade ago it was nearly 48 percent. Backers believe judges will interpret preponderant to mean 50.1 percent or more. Opponents insist approval will result in almost confiscatory increases in income and other forms of taxes.

Decatur's district is, like others, backing the amendment, though it could conceivably cost the district money. Decatur currently gets about 55 percent of its money from the state. So Decatur could lose if judges interpret preponderant to mean no more than 51 percent.

For the moment a suit that asks equal funding for all districts is dormant, but may be revived once we know the outcome of the referendum.

There are times when it is useful to wait on the sidelines, seeing what is going to happen. But sometime soon the board is going to have to start telling the public that you get what you pay for. Grass-roots demands for higher taxes? Not likely in this climate.

Magazine slams

■ District rates barely ahead of East St. Louis in preparing students for jobs.

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

A recent study suggests that students who graduate from Decatur's public schools are not ready for some entry-level jobs.

But local officials criticized the study, saying it's biased toward wealthy communities.

Expansion Management magazine ranked 500 school districts in its October/September issue — and Decatur was in the bottom third.

The national magazine, which targets corporate executives who are looking for communities in which to base operations, gave each district a score between 50 and 150, with 100 meaning that graduates should be prepared for entry level positions in indus-

trial and technical fields. Decatur scored 83.

"It's an indicator of what employers might expect of the quality of local school districts," said Eric Patterson, research director for the project.

In comparison, Champaign scored 122, Springfield scored 111.8, Peoria scored 106.5, and East St. Louis scored 82.

The score was based on eight guidelines: The four-year graduation rate, the percentages of area residents who are high school graduates and who are college graduates, the amount of money spent per pupil for instruction only, the average classroom teacher base salary, the ratios of students to teachers and students to counselors, and average scores on SAT and ACT aptitude tests.

Decatur suffered because of an unusually high ratio of students per teacher, an unusually low four-year graduation rate, and an unusually low amount of money spent per pupil for instruction, Patterson said.

Decatur schools

The amount Decatur spends per pupil for instruction, \$1,552, or \$1,650 when adjusted for cost of living, is "only better than 6 percent of U.S. districts," Patterson said. Its four-year graduation rate — 67 percent — is better than 13 percent of the nation's districts. Its ratio of students per teacher — 22.7 to 1 — is better than 7 percent of the districts.

Richard Lutovsky, president of the Metro Decatur Chamber of Commerce, said he doesn't believe the study will convince firms against expanding into Decatur.

"I don't see an individual rating by one magazine in one category as being detrimental to our ability to attract and retain jobs," Lutovsky said. "The fact that you spend more per pupil doesn't necessarily translate into a better product."

Steve Hengst, Decatur director of schools for curriculum, said that many of the things the magazine saw as negative have been viewed positively in other studies.

"We are frugal and still have good test

scores," Hengst said. He said there's no guarantee that students will be more educated "simply by spending more money on students and having a smaller class size."

Hengst said that ACT and SAT scores indicate Decatur graduates are ready for college, and he believes they're ready for entry-level jobs, too.

"We'd like to have more money," Hengst said, "and we think we could do a better job with more money."

Nancy Nachman-Hunt, managing editor of Expansion Magazine, said the bias toward wealthy communities did not make the scores less meaningful.

"Unfortunately, money is an indicator. I don't think you can get around that," Nachman-Hunt said.

Decatur's score indicates students are less likely to be prepared for employment, she said, "but we would never, ever, ever suggest that a company interested in Decatur use only our index to make a decision."

N&R 10/12/92

11/3/92

School districts need financial aid

While I do not agree with the Expansion magazine's judging criteria in a recent article in the Herald & Review entitled "Magazine Slams Decatur Schools," we should pay heed that there may be some things that need fixing in our community that require our attention.

The magazine study said that Decatur scored low in three areas — high ratio of students per teacher, unusually low four-year graduation rate, and an unusually low amount of money spent per pupil for instruction.

Changing these will cost money. While money alone cannot guarantee good schooling, there is some point at which the lack of money and constant belt-tightening can put quality education in jeopardy.

While the Decatur School District has many positive programs, a dedicated staff, and ACT scores that are above the national and state averages (last year's School Report Cards showed that Decatur's college-bound students averaged higher than those students in Champaign, Bloomington, Peoria and Springfield), there are also problems. A few of the major ones are: Classes are too large. Programs which have proven successful have had to be cut and others may be cut in the near future. The purchase of new updated math books and materials has had to be postponed. Too many of our students are not graduating. There is little money for expansion, innovative programs and programs for gifted students.

Decatur does have an unusually low educational tax rate of \$1.84 per \$100 of assessed valuation — a tax rate which has not been raised since 1956. No, this is not a printing error. The tax rate has not been raised for 36 years. Yes, money was raised for construction during that time, but there has been no increase in the educational tax rate that buys instructional materials and pays teachers and staff. Only 15 percent of unit districts in Illinois have this low or lower education fund tax rate.

The Decatur School District has survived because of more than average help from the state and from the federal government. This help is a boon to districts with low assessed valuation, but it is not enough and it is often unreliable at times like this when the state is broke.

I believe that the citizens of Decatur care about education. This is a concern not just of parents with school age children, but of the entire community. If we are concerned with the work force, we care. If we want a safe and pleasant place to live, we care. If we are concerned with the future of our town and our country, we care.

Schools need all the financial help the State of Illinois can give them, but they also need local communities to support and pay for what we value.

Agnita Wright Dupree
Decatur

10/9/92 - HGR

READERS' RESPONSE

YES

Voting 'yes' will let our elected officials know where our priorities are. For the last 15 years, state funding for education has dropped from 48 percent to 33 percent. These figures define our elected officials' priorities. We must spend money for our top priorities. We must invest in the future.

Cindy Reynolds
Decatur

■ ■ ■

The state must correct the totally unacceptable disparity that exists among rich and poor communities in Illinois.

Agnita Dupree
Decatur

■ ■ ■

The schools need more money to help the children become good citizens.

Lorraine Peterson
Decatur

■ ■ ■

Property tax relief.

H. Wilson
Mount Zion

■ ■ ■

Tax relief.

Sue Keller
Decatur

■ ■ ■

Once we get past the rhetoric on both sides, this issue is quite simple. Do we, as citizens of this state, believe that all children within its borders are entitled

Should the state
of Illinois be required
by constitutional
amendment to pay half
the cost of elementary
and secondary
education?

■ Yes ... 9 □ No 3

to the optimum education possible? If we do, then education must become the top priority of the state government. This improved status should be translated into a financial commitment to all districts throughout the state.

E. Ann Chambliss
President,

Decatur Education Association

■ ■ ■

So that all children have the same opportunity to become educated and productive adults.

Marian Woyna
Decatur

■ ■ ■

The legislature must be given the message that the citizens demand a much higher budget priority for education.

Barbara Ohlsen
Decatur

■ ■ ■

For years politicians have been promising that education is their first priority. It's a promise they haven't kept. Illinois ranks 47th out of 50 states in spending. Since 1976, the percentage of state support has continued to decrease, resulting in a greater reliance on property tax to fund schools.

Terri Melrose
Decatur

■ ■ ■

NO

In my opinion the Article X Education, which is sometimes called the Berman Amendment will become a taxpayer's nightmare. It is expected to cost \$2.9 billion and will be a forever tax with no end. This proposal opens the door for the state to create a new state property tax on top of our local property tax which may also be increased.

Madonna Schwarm
Loogootee

■ ■ ■

I believe education is a community responsibility, not state or national.

Catherine Sloat
Blue Mound

■ ■ ■

Because too many independent, religious schools would expect their share. It is hard enough to keep the public schools funded.

A. Artis
Decatur

Decatur, Illinois
Sunday, October 11, 1992

Herald & Review

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Vote no on school proposal

THAT BACKERS of Illinois schools are pinning their hopes for more money on a proposed constitutional amendment shows the desperation many feel about the future of education.

At the Nov. 3 election, voters will be given a constitutional amendment that asks whether the state has a "preponderant financial responsibility" not merely a "primary responsibility" for financing public education. Backers say the word preponderant means the state will pay more than half the cost. Illinois now pays about a third, the rest coming from local and federal sources.

This is really a misbegotten proposal put together during a session of the General Assembly in which legislators once again ducked responsibility for schools and virtually all other matters of interest to the public. Legislators and the governor have ample authority now to spend whatever they want on schools.

Indeed, the best argument for passage is that legislators might get the wrong message if voters say no. They might figure the public doesn't give a hoot about schools. We shall have to disabuse them of that notion if it should fail, as it should.

It is simply wrong to entomb such proposals in a Constitution. A Constitution should provide us a set of general principles, not specific proposals that are better addressed in statutes. Framers of the 1970 Constitution were wrong to include the clause on primary responsibility.

What next? A proposal that at least 3 percent of conservation money be spent on catfish. Or that 25 percent of the budget be spent to control air pollution.

These are matters that are best settled by elected officials. Remember, the governor and legislators can be removed from office if they go against the wishes of people. Changing constitutions is much more difficult — and should be.

Whatever the fate of the amendment, more money will be needed in future years for elementary and secondary education. Federal sources are drying up. Property tax referendums are chancy these days. Opponents say income taxes may have to be raised as much as \$2 billion.

Our support for adequate funding for education remains firm. A constitutional amendment is the wrong way to accomplish this goal.

10/22/92 NVR

Group sees need for school tax hike

■ Grass-roots committee plans to push call for referendum.

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

A grass-roots effort to hoist Decatur's public schools from their deep financial quagmire gained momentum Thursday.

Members of the independent Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee reached a consensus: They plan to develop a strategy for convincing the public that it's time for a school property tax increase.

"There is a burning desire by this group to do that," said Bill Oakes, director of marketing and community relations at St. Mary's

Hospital and committee chairman.

Members agreed they would like the Decatur Board of Education to support the effort.

"There's a lot of frustration and uncertainty at the grass-roots level," Oakes said. "People want leadership from the school board. They want a plan, whatever the plan is."

Decatur's public schools are suffering under \$2.5 million cuts in educational programs. Voters have not approved an education fund property tax increase since 1956. The school board has not strongly supported a referendum.

The committee also is interested in encouraging new approaches that could save money, such as more help from parents.

The group has no definite timetable or

amount in mind for a tax increase.

Members agreed not to wait for the Nov. 3 election outcome on the proposed education funding amendment. If passed, supporters believe the amendment could eventually bring more state money to Decatur.

"How long do you wait? A year? Two years? Three years?" said Cindy Reynolds, the school district's computer coordinator.

Oakes said Superintendent Don Wachter has tentatively agreed to join the next committee meeting at 7 a.m. Nov. 12 at First Lutheran Church. The group intends to ask Wachter for a list of programs that schools could offer with more money. They also hope to ask him for a sense of where the school board stands.

Schools rank low

Decatur Public Schools can not afford another state tax cut if it is to prosper. Currently, class sizes are too large, teachers lack the proper teaching materials, and students are not being offered quality programs similar to schools in Bloomington, Champaign, and the Chicago suburbs. Students and staff alike are losing their motivation. Teachers can not possibly perform well under the current classroom conditions, and therefore students fall through the cracks.

Even worse, recently Decatur scored only one point higher than East St. Louis in *Expansion Management* magazine for preparing its students for the work force. In other words, Decatur students are not ready for entry-level jobs.

The district scored within the bottom third of 500 school districts, and it ranked an eighty-three on a scale of fifty to 150. The district administration criticized the report due to the fact that they believe it catered to wealthy districts.

This is the Decatur Public Schools' problem. They criticize such educational studies and fail to act and improve the educational quality of the district. The school district should be searching for new ways to improve the current situation, and in the end, provide schools that will prepare its students to compete in the international arena.

Furthermore, if the problems this district faces are to be solved, Decatur must change its focus from balancing the budget to providing quality schools. Balancing the budget is important, but it should not take precedence over creating a sound education for Decatur's students.

Most importantly, Decatur schools as a whole must work together and strive for excellence. As a district, we must realize that scoring average or just above the national norm is not commendable. Rather, Decatur schools should only celebrate when reaching the top tenth percentile. We need to stop rewarding ourselves for winning last place!

Finally, Decatur schools are an omen for attracting quality jobs and businesses. Businesses want to locate where there are good schools, and unfortunately our schools do not excel. If Decatur is going to prosper as a community, the Decatur schools must seriously change its image.

In all, Decatur simply needs to raise taxes. Decatur ranks considerably low compared to other districts of its size in tax dollar amount. We rely too much on state aid and not enough on ourselves. It is time to invest money and effort in our schools, and it is time to create the exemplary school district for others to follow. Currently, other school districts pity us. Is that what we want, or do we want a change for the better?

School money ills discussed

10/28/92

Board member hints at possible tax increase, cites grass-roots effort

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

One member of the Decatur Board of Education hinted Tuesday night that it might be time to turn to property taxpayers for more school funds.

The hint comes as a grass-roots citizens committee steps up plans to convince the public such a tax increase is necessary. On Thursday, the chairman of that group implored the school board for leadership in their effort.

On Tuesday, Norma Walton urged fellow board members to meet and discuss "when we might increase the funds available for our district."

She said she saw three possibilities for increased funding. One of those possibilities, she said, is that "these local people who have been writing to us," urging support for a property tax increase referendum, "they might come through."

The other possible sources, Walton said, are that the economy might improve and that voters might pass a state constitutional amendment on Tuesday intended to boost state education funding.

The independent Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee has been discussing the Decatur School District's devastating financial condition for months. Group members recently reached a consensus that they will develop a strategy for convincing the public it's time for a school property tax increase.

Despite calls for school board leadership, board members have declined to push for a referendum that would let voters decide on such a tax increase. They are waiting for grass-roots support first.

The board agreed to hold a study session at 5:30 p.m. Nov. 10 to discuss what priorities it would envision if more funding was available.

The district recently made \$2.5 million in educational program cuts. Voters have not approved an education fund property tax increase since 1956.

It was unclear whether board members would support such a ballot referendum soon.

"The board cannot push that," Walton said after the meeting. "We're getting to the point where we have to let people know what we'll do with the money."

■ Minority report

There are 12 black men among Decatur's 826 full-time public school teachers, but an official says that's not good enough.

Story/A3

State cuts have schools studying funding options

11/10/92
H&R

Board to discuss tonight if it will opt for 'conservative' or 'liberal' budget

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

It boils down to this: Either increase property taxes for education, or watch Decatur children suffer under a school system brutalized by spending cuts.

That was the main difference between two financial options the school district's superintendent presented to the Decatur League of Women Voters Monday night.



Dansby

'People who say you do not throw money at this problem aren't throwing their brains at it, either.'

The "conservative option," as Don Wachter called it, would call for increased spending on instructional material and salaries. This would be balanced by cutting more educational programs and possibly using working cash funds or money not spent in the

budget.

The "liberal option" was different in two important ways:

■ First, along with the other spending increases, it would call for more than \$2 million worth of educational programs to be restored, because the cuts are

"harming instruction."

■ Second, instead of trying to balance the increases by cutting more programs, funds would be sought by placing a property tax increase referendum on the ballot in April or November 1993 — or perhaps in both months.

When asked which option the school board seemed to be favoring, Wachter called the question "unfair" and said he would prefer not to answer until he has discussed it with the board. The school board will discuss financial options in a special meeting at 5:30 p.m. today at the Keil Administration Building.

Eunice Dansby, the only school board member at Monday's meeting, offered her support for a referendum to increase property taxes for education.

"I would support even having a bake sale," Dansby said, when asked if she would support a referendum.

"People who say you do not throw money at this problem aren't throwing their brains at it, either," Dansby said. "It's the only way of taking care of the problem."

State aid cuts forced the school board to trim \$2.5 million from educational programs for this school year.

Among 40 large unit districts, Decatur has the 39th lowest school property tax rate. There has been no education fund property tax increase since 1956.

Decatur, Illinois,
Friday, November 20, 1992

CENTRAL

Plan links schools,

■ Strategy aimed at boosting chances for a 1993 tax increase.

By **RON INGRAM**
H&R Staff Writer

Decatur School District strategic planning aimed at an education fund referendum in 1993 will be tied to updating the Decatur Advantage.

Schools Superintendent Don Wachter on Thursday told the independent Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee that "the Decatur Advantage is not far from rejuvenating itself. It would behoove us to be part of it."

The Advantage is a communitywide strategic plan that incorporates goals for economic opportunity; improvement of quality of life, which includes social

services, education, housing and recreation; human relations; community image; and vision, which continually reassesses changing community needs.

Wachter said the current funding for the Advantage program expires at the end of 1993 and evaluation of the overall plan will have to take place by June so solicitation for new funding can begin.

"We hope to piggyback on the Decatur Advantage and come up with a vision of education for the future," Wachter said. "We're working with the chamber of commerce on that."

The Decatur Board of Education last week decided to embark on formulating an overall education plan for the school district before going to voters for a property tax increase to support the educational program.

Board members discussed hiring a professional fa-

ILLINOIS

★ **A3**

Decatur Advantage

cilitator to help in the planning process. But Wachter told the committee Thursday that facilitators are costly, with one recently used by a group of regional superintendents charging \$1,000 a day.

Following Thursday's committee meeting, Wachter said he will recommend to the school board that it put some money into the Decatur Advantage's strategic planning process to help move it along.

Time is of the essence, committee members pointed out Thursday, if the school board hopes to get its plan completed, sell it to the public and then ask for public support for more real estate property tax dollars to make the plan a reality.

Board member Norma Walton, who attended Thursday's meeting with Wachter, said the board does not see how it could be ready for a referendum at the April municipal and township elections and

likely will try to put a proposition on the November school board election ballot.

Ad hoc committee members support a referendum and indicated Thursday they will immediately begin formulating a plan to help get the tax proposal passed.

Committee members agreed they will meet Dec. 17 to discuss ways they can support the school district and promote the need for a referendum.

The school board has not yet indicated it will seek to place a referendum on the ballot next year. But board members appear to be leaning in that direction.

The school district could raise about \$1 million in new money for each 25 cents per \$100 of assessed valuation that was added to the education fund tax rate. Voters last increased the education fund tax rate in 1956.

Decatur, Illinois,
Wednesday, December 9, 1992

CENTRAL

Decatur school

■ Property owners will likely have to pay higher real estate taxes.

By **RON INGRAM**
H&R Staff Writer

Decatur School District property owners likely will pay higher real estate taxes next year thanks to a 6 percent increase in the tax levy adopted Tuesday by the board of education.

But the amount tax bills will increase depends on how much the school district's 1992 assessed valuation increases over the 1991 valuation, said James Hendren,

school district director of business affairs.

Assessment figures will not be known until April or May, he said.

Projections call for the district's assessed valuation to increase about \$22 million, Hendren said. That would mean about a 5 percent increase in 1992 real estate taxes paid next year, he said.

The 1992 tax levy is \$15,295,384 compared with \$14,231,458 for 1991.

One reason tax bills likely will increase is the school district is taking advantage of a higher ceiling allowed by state law on the operations, maintenance and building fund tax rate.

That rate was 46.5 cents per \$100

ILLINOIS

* A3

Is tax levy increases

of assessed valuation last year but was increased to 50 cents for 1992 by the Decatur board Tuesday.

On a house valued at \$100,000 and assessed at \$33,333, the extra 3.5 cents would mean a tax increase of about \$11.66 a year.

The school board helped reduce damage to taxpayers' wallets Tuesday when it abated \$200,000 in 1992 taxes in the bond and interest fund. It is this abatement which is keeping the total levy increase at 6 percent instead of the 7.4 percent it otherwise would increase.

The bond and interest fund levy would have increased 21 percent without the abatement, which was made possible by using accumulated interest in the fund to reduce

the levy. As it was, the bond and interest fund levy increased to \$1,016,067 from \$996,999 in 1991, about a 2 percent increase.

Hendren said the school board historically asks for more money in the tax levy than it anticipates receiving in order to take advantage of any unexpected increase in total assessed valuation.

In other matters Tuesday, the school board reviewed a proposed change in its policy on vacation days for administrators. The change would limit to a maximum of 20 the number of vacation days an administrator could carry over from year to year.

Thus if an administrator qualified for the maximum of 20 days

vacation in 1992 but did not take it, he could carry it into 1993 but would have to use it that year or lose it, said Superintendent Don Wachter.

Some administrators have accumulated 50, 60 or even 100 days of vacation time, Wachter said. The new policy would be phased in over three years so administrators would have opportunities to use the accumulated time without damaging the school district by their absence, he said.

However, if they did not use the time by June 30, 1996, they would lose it, Wachter said.

The board will vote on the vacation policy proposal early next year.

Decatur, Illinois,
Friday, December 18, 1992

CENTRAL ILLINOIS

A3

School panel sets tax hike strategy

■ Ad hoc committee plans post-holiday push for November election.

By JEFFREY BILLS
H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR — Backers of a property tax increase to raise school funds in Decatur are bracing themselves for a big push after the holidays.

With an eye on the November ballot, the grassroots Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee on Thursday discussed how they wanted to organize, who they might include and whether they want to make a formal

statement to the Decatur Board of Education.

The group, organized in late May by the League of Women Voters of Decatur during a community meeting, has already decided it's time to convince the public that a tax increase is needed.

Decatur's public school system is suffering under millions of dollars in education program cuts forced by the threadbare state economy. Voters have not approved an education fund property tax increase here since 1956, and the Decatur School District's tax rate is among the lowest in the state for large districts.

The school board has suggested that members of the community might be

invited to help discuss solutions. Jane Hawkins, a former school board member who now serves on the ad hoc committee, said the board needs "to begin relying on those committees that are there," such as the grassroots group.

Ad hoc committee members agreed that they want to issue a formal statement to the school board, possibly in connection with Partners In Education. Partners, a group that helps businesses get involved in education, may join forces with the ad hoc committee in an effort to push for a tax increase referendum.

Any statement made to the board is likely to be encouraging.

"If the board is busy ducking punches, it

will have no energy to be creative," said the Rev. James Lillie, a committee member. "It should be a very positive statement."

The board "needs to know that the support is out there" for a tax increase, said Eve Shade, the school district's volunteer coordinator and an ad hoc committee member.

The committee talked about organizing into subcommittees that would be responsible for such tasks as research, publicity, strategy, voter registration, issues and endorsements.

The group hopes to make some final organizational decisions during its next meeting, Jan. 19.

Group says higher taxes key to better education

By **TED KLEINE**
H&R Staff Writer

1/20/93

DECATUR — A local school advocacy group plans to ask the Decatur Board of Education to put a tax increase referendum on the November ballot.

The private Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee approved a draft of its request Tuesday and will present it during the school board's Jan. 26 meeting. It didn't propose a specific tax increase amount.

"It's a statement that asks the board to take some active leadership as quickly as possible to address two major concerns," said committee Chairman Bill Oakes.



Oakes

Says school board must act quickly

The first concern, Oakes said, is that the school district's funding is inadequate. The second concern, he said, is that "There are people in the community who want excellence in the schools, and the board should seek them out."

The school board is working on a strategic plan and has not yet seriously discussed a tax referendum, said board President Jeanelle Norman.

"When you do have a referendum, people need to know what it is you're going to spend it on," Norman said.

The committee will ask for a referendum even though a new school financing proposal may force the district to raise taxes. The proposal, written by the Illinois Task Force on School Finance, is before the state legislature. It would increase state funding to needy school districts but require them to collect more taxes to get the increase.

If the proposal passes in its current form, the Decatur School District would have to raise taxes to qualify for full state aid. The district now has an operating tax rate of \$3.03 per \$100 assessed valuation. The state proposal asks for at least \$3.33 per \$100.

"There has to be some kind of minimum effort from the school district," said Kim Knauer of the State Board of Education.

Decatur taxes less than most districts in Illinois. In 1991, its tax rate was 371st out of 422 districts.

The cost of an "adequate" education, according to the task force proposal, is \$3,898 per regular elementary school pupil. Decatur brings in \$2,671 per pupil.

Parents group cries out for action

School board requests
ideas from Wachter

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR — A group of citizens concerned about bleak school finances begged the Decatur Board of Education for leadership and action Tuesday night.

The board responded by asking Superintendent Don Wachter to present some ideas for the next regular board meeting Feb. 9.

"When you want to go someplace, you have to set some goals," said Norma Walton, board vice president. "We have to define our goals."

The grass-roots Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee made several suggestions in its formal statement, which Bill Oakes, the group's chairman, read to the board. Here

are some of the suggestions, in part:

- "The community needs your leadership. The board has an opportunity to make a strong, clear statement on the issue of local funding for the schools by doing whatever is necessary to place a school tax referendum on the November ballot."
 - "The community wants your advocacy. We believe it is time to get Decatur excited about excellence in education."
 - "The creation of a new vision for District 61 will be most meaningful if the task is approached aggressively and concluded within 120 days." A new strategic plan should be "openly developed."
 - "Finally, we implore the Board of Education to commit itself to action now, tonight."
- "We see no good reason to delay any further," Oakes said. "The issues and the needs are well-known."

Despite the plea, the board took no formal action. Board member Eunice Dansby said no major decision should be made because of an "unwritten policy" that the board does not make important decisions when not all board members are present. Board President Jeanelle Norman was absent.

But the board did request that Wachter present comments during the next meeting.

"We've laid another job on you," Walton told Wachter.

"That's what I'm here for," Wachter re-



Oakes

Ad hoc
committee
chairman urges
tax referendum

sponded.

Wachter recommended that the district participate in a communitywide strategic planning project — a rejuvenation of Decatur Advantage that is to begin soon.

Wachter recommended that the district then base its strategic plan on the ways in which education fits into the larger communitywide plan.

The district's planning could begin this spring, Wachter said. The district might then be able to propose a November school tax increase referendum sometime in late August, he said.

After the meeting, Oakes said he was optimistic about the board's response to the ad hoc group's suggestions.

"They took what we said to heart," Oakes said. "The board really went on record by saying this is an important subject. I'm willing to grant that the board took its first step tonight."

Cuts force students to chip in

Decatur's \$2.5 million loss means increased workload, lost programs

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

SCHOOL MONEY PROBLEMS



MAY I HELP YOU? Franklin School student Ellen Jacobs, 11, works for an hour each day answering the school's phones. Photo by Darrell Goemaat

DECATUR — On a typical day, 11-year-old Ellen Jacobs misses an hour of class time to answer her school's office telephone.

Mary Gendry, the principal at Franklin School, has little choice. She can't just let the phone go unanswered.

Devastating budget cuts forced the elementary school to sacrifice a part-time secretary. So now children miss class to help out in the office.

"Usually they bring me

We need to think about the students and how we're short-changing them.'

— E. Ann Chambliss
DEA president

my work so I can do it between phone calls," said Ellen, 11. "Mrs. Gendry has me say, 'Hello, my name is Ellen Jacobs. I'm a sixth-grade student helper. May I help you?'"

It's just one example of what happens to an impoverished school district when it's forced to cut deeper and deeper. In Decatur, the trickle-down effect of fiscal bloodletting has left nobody unstained.

"You can go up and down the ladder," said Jim Hendren, the district's director of business affairs and one of its top administrators. "Part-time secretaries were released. Computer aides and custodians were reduced. Maintenance was reduced. Central staff was reduced.

"I'm now director of safety. We had a full-time person doing that. So I'm in charge of tornado drills — and I'm the chief financial officer."

This is the storm that administrators and school board members forecast in March, when the threadbare state economy forced the board to slash \$2.5 million in education programs. The cuts took effect this school year.

The real-life impact is every bit as dismal as everyone expected.

"We all knew it was going to be painful," Hendren said.

CUTS

Continued on A4

District assesses impact

The Decatur School District is trying to determine just how much damage has been done to school children because of \$2.5 million in program cuts this year.

Story/A4

Funding outlook dismal

As enrollment stabilizes in Decatur, the city's education fund is plummeting into debt. And the district's chief financial officer says that more funds must be found for schools to maintain existing programs.

Story/A4

SCHOOL MONEY PROBLEMS

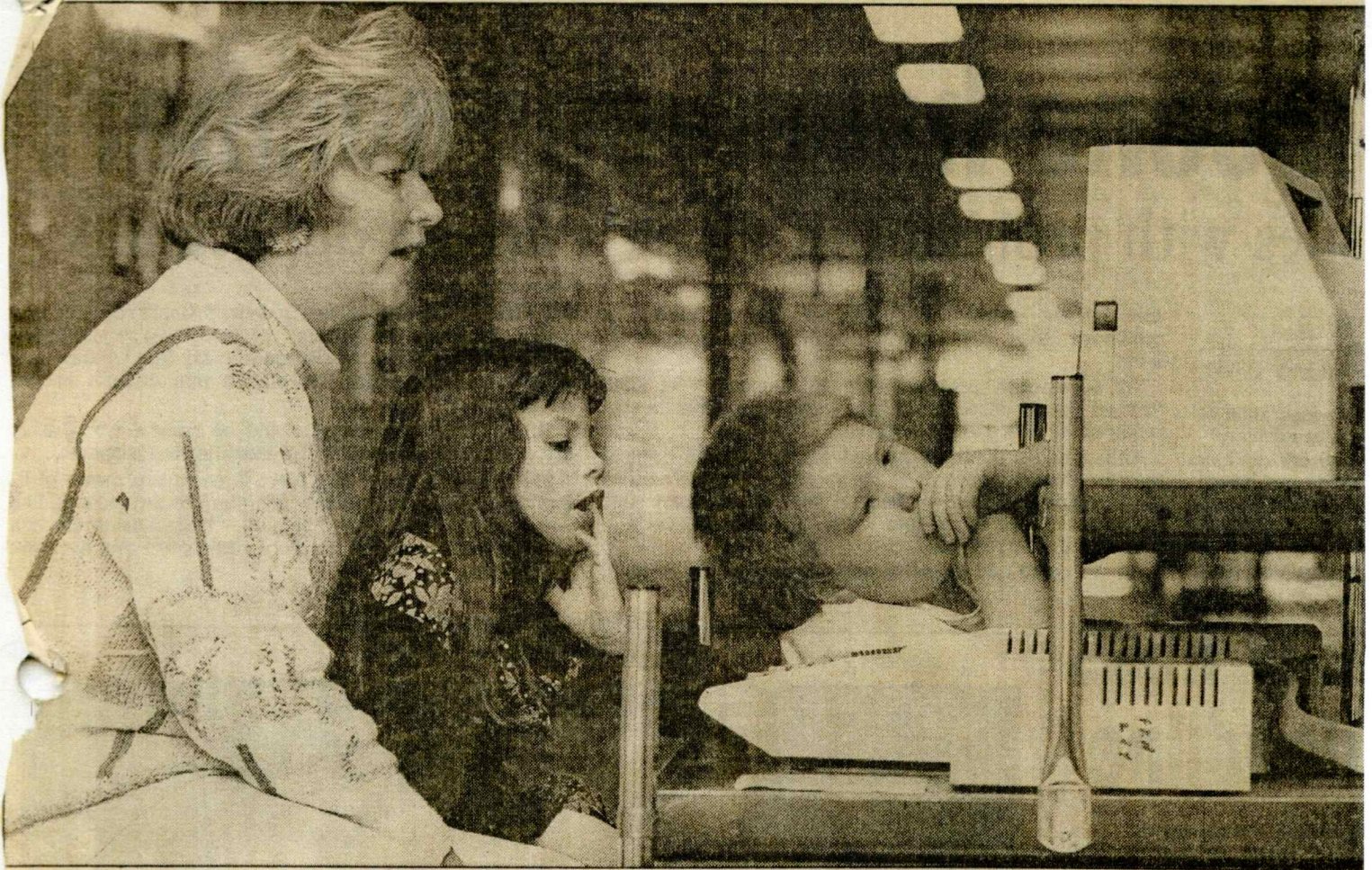


Photo by Darrell Goer

Parent volunteer Debbie Fields works with her daughter Danelle, and Aaron Wright, both 6 and first-grade students at Franklin School.

CUTS: Teachers feeling time crunch

Continued from A1

"Anytime you institute something like that, there's going to be morale problems."

"Everybody is feeling the time crunch," said E. Ann Chambliss, president of the Decatur Education Association and a kindergarten teacher at Enterprise School. "More is being demanded of teachers, and there's less time to do it. We need to think about the students and how we're short-

changing them."

Even Ellen Jacobs has noticed. "We don't have a computer teacher any more," the student said. "I miss the computer time."

The computer specialist has been replaced by parents who volunteer to work with students.

"When you see all the things cut out for the children, that's what's really sad," said Debbie Fields, a mother who volunteers about 20 hours per week at Franklin.

"Whenever I spend a day here, I do a little bit of everything."

Gendry and other principals have done their best to cope.

"There's a difference in morale," Gendry said. "People feel that they're being asked to do more in less time."

As for students answering the school phone, Gendry said, "It's just something that we need."

Gendry said she makes sure students are able to complete their

work. For example, Ellen is a straight-A pupil who excels in reading, Gendry said, so it's no problem for her to miss that class.

And Ellen said her friends and parents "think it's neat" that she helps out in the office.

Gendry is grateful for the help from pupils and parents.

"I can't imagine how we would get by without help from the parents," Gendry said. "I know this wouldn't be as good a school

Some programs may need to be restored

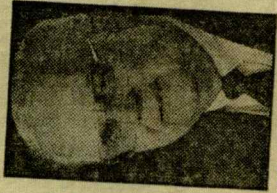
Teachers assessing damages as guidelines for corrections.

DECATUR — Everybody agrees: Decatur children are suffering because of \$2.5 million in education programs slashed this year.

The district is now trying to determine just how much they're suffering — and what programs must be restored.

Superintendent Don Wachter has directed his staff to assess the damage and hopes to have recommendations for the school board in March.

"If there are some things that are hurting kids, we do have a working cash fund to borrow from," Wachter said. "If some of the cuts are actually hurting the learning opportunities for kids, we need to take a look at what we're going to put back."



Wachter

Seeks facts

aides. In addition, the board cut this down to three full-time from a fund primarily for more computer technology.

"I've got a lot of principals and librarians that are doing troubleshooting now on the

It is too early to tell which programs might be restored, Wachter said. But school personnel throughout the district say computer instruction is near the top of their priorities.

The board gutted the district's elementary computer offerings. Each of the district's 19 elementary schools once provided a half-time computer aide. To save \$70,000, the board cut this

computers," said Cindy Reynolds, the district's computer coordinator. "There's a lot of things that aren't getting done."

"Some of the teachers say they are cutting back on writing activities in the computer lab. It's frustrating when you know something should be done, and you don't have the time to get it done."

Other educators lamented the loss of kindergarten music specialists, reading improvement specialists and early evening custodian help, they said, limits after-school opportunities.

Wachter said he asked his staff to document the areas most hurt.

"I want evidence that substantiates that learning has been hurt somewhere along the way," Wachter said. "I've directed them to come back with hard information, not just their opinion."

—JEFFREY BILS

Debt mounts as enrollment stabilizes Outlook for next school year dismal without more funds

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR — Somewhere, somehow, Decatur's public schools must find more money.

So says Jim Hendren, the school district's chief financial officer.

"We're going to sustain the existing programming for the 1993-94 school year," Hendren said. "After that, we're done. We're either going to have to borrow money or generate money."

Although the state has steadily cut back on millions of dollars intended for the Decatur School District, the impact was deflected by a decade of declining enrollment and school closings. With enrollment stabilizing, however, Decatur's education fund is now plummeting into debt.

Despite the need to raise money, the school board has been reluctant to ask property owners for more school taxes.

Decatur's education fund tax rate of \$1.84 per \$100 of assessed valuation ranks last among large Illinois school districts.

In 1991-92, in comparison, the rate was \$2.18 in Peoria, \$2.60 in Springfield, \$2.65 in Champaign and \$3.12 in Bloomington.

A 25-cent increase in Decatur's rate would net about \$1 million more for the district each year. If voters approved such an increase in November, the district could see the benefits in the 1994-95 school year.

For the owner of a \$45,000 house assessed for tax purposes at \$15,000, a 25-cent increase would cost \$37.50 more each year — or about \$3 a month.

Such an increase would bring Decatur's rate to \$2.09 — still well below the rate for most large districts in the state.

A local group of citizens called the Ad Hoc School Concerns Com-

mittee has committed itself to pursuing such an increase.

The group is concerned by the numbers: Last year, the district's education fund had expenses of \$44.6 million but only \$40.8 in revenue — nearly a \$4 million deficit.

The budget for this year's education fund is \$43.4 million, but the district expects only \$42.8 million in revenue for that fund, Hendren said. This is a \$389,000 deficit. In 1991, the district had a \$2.5 million deficit in local education cuts.

Also, some cuts must be restored next year.

For example, the district saved \$300,000 by delaying the purchase of new textbooks. The district must buy the textbooks next year, Hendren said.

Where will the money come from? In a worst-case scenario, the district would simply have to use money from its working cash fund — essentially borrowing from itself.

Various state measures could also have an impact, but none of them is certain.

"It's like trying to tack Jell-O to a wall, trying to figure out what they're going to do in Springfield," Hendren said.

Despite the district's need, officials openly wonder if voters would approve even a modest property tax increase. The last time Decatur voters approved such an increase for education was in 1956.

Decatur, Illinois,
Monday, February 8, 1993

CITY DESK



• MANUGIAN •

The high cost of crime

When he says more money should be spent on the root causes of crime, instead of imprisonment, Macon County Sheriff Lee Holsapple knows what he's talking about.

Unfortunately, most taxpayers never will.

Holsapple is skeptical of a recent flurry of anti-gang legislation that would lengthen sentences for gang crimes, criminalize gang activities not already on the books and try minors as adults for gang-related crimes. Holsapple realizes the legislation will also pump even more criminals into prisons and jails already unable to keep up with the current flow.

No one understands this better than Holsapple. If jails are society's garbage can, Holsapple is the man who has to sit on the lid.

What the sheriff forgets, however, is how reluctant most taxpayers are to recognize the need to spend more money — even if it saves them money in the long run.

WE AMERICANS just don't like to pay taxes. From corporate chairmen to retirees, from laborers to former presidents, we do anything and everything we can to avoid paying taxes.

The last thing we want to do is increase them. Provide more remedial instruction for failing students? Hire more teachers because today's classrooms are filled with dysfunctional kids from disintegrated families?

Why face our problems when we can just scowl and complain that today's teachers just don't crank out students like they used to.

Decatur officials, long badgered to hire more cops, have taken exactly the right approach with the public. They know we don't want to pay for preventive programs, no matter how much sense they make, and they don't waste time trying to sell them.

Instead, they've offered us an itemized list of police services. It comes in three easy to understand packages.

For a negligible increase in the sales tax, we can have the kind of community policing programs that will make our neighborhoods safer. For a little larger tax, they can make our neighborhoods more secure. And for a little more than that, they can have the kind of preventive policing that might actually discourage criminals from planning crimes in the first place.

NO ONE'S asking us to pay higher taxes. They're simply telling us what improved services will cost. It's up to us to put our money where our mouths are.

And that's just why Decatur won't have any better police force tomorrow than it has today.

It's why funding for the school district is a laughable fraction of what is spent in comparable communities, and it's why so many streets and sidewalks in this city are reminiscent of third-world countries.

It's also why the legislature's new anti-gang bills make sense. If we're not willing to take steps to redirect our young from joining gangs, we're going to have to pay the cost of locking them up so at least they can't hurt us.

And that means buying a lot more garbage cans.

Rick Manugian is city editor of the Herald & Review.

Outcry for vision spurs special meeting

DECATUR — In response to a public outcry for a vision and a strategic plan, the Decatur Board of Education will conduct a special meeting on Feb. 23.

During the meeting, the man who is guiding the entire community of Decatur in its quest for a new strategic plan will make a presentation.

Jeff Cordes, senior partner of the IBM Customer Business Development consulting firm, will tell the board how he would organize a strategic plan for the school district.

Superintendent Don Wachter said that Cordes has been hired to spearhead a new strategic plan for the entire community. That plan is intended to supersede the Decatur Advantage strategic plan.

The special meeting and Cordes' involvement were two of the four recommendations that Wachter made Tuesday night. The other two recommendations:

- The board should begin a strategic plan for the district after the community strategic plan is far enough along for the board to know the education issues that have arisen. This should be by the end of April or the first week in May, Wachter said.

- The board should immediately develop the process by which the strategic plan will be made, so that the board is ready to go in early May.

Wachter said that the fee Cordes would charge is subject to negotiation, but did not have a range.

— JEFFREY BILS

2/19/93
Herald & Review 2/19/93

Consultant makes pitch to board

DECATUR — Jeffrey Cordes wants to help ensure that the Decatur School District is like a cold frog, not a boiled, dead frog.

"Does anyone know what we have in common with frogs?" Cordes, a strategic planning consultant, asked the Decatur Board of Education during a special meeting Tuesday night that was devoted to the quest for vision.

"We don't recognize change in our surroundings," answered board member Robert Gruenewald.

"Bob has seen this before," Cordes joked as he passed around a fluffy, stuffed frog and spelled out how his firm, IBM Customer Business Development Consulting, would help the Decatur School District recognize change in its surroundings — and respond to it.

That change, Cordes said, is the increasingly global marketplace.

"We're going to be concerned about what's going on in Los Angeles," he said. "We're going to be concerned about what's going on in Oklahoma. We're going to be concerned about what's going on in Frankfurt, Germany."

He compared unsuccessful organizations with a frog placed in a pot of water that is gradually heated to a boil. The frog will not notice the gradual change and will die.

The board probably will decide next month whether to spend the \$25,000 it would take to hire Cordes' team of consultants.

Tuesday's discussion came on the heels of a public plea that the school board develop a vision for education. Last month, an independent, grass-roots group of concerned citizens of various backgrounds, the Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee, issued a public statement begging the board for leadership and vision.

Superintendent Don Wachter recommended that the board listen to Cordes' presentation. Cordes said he already has been hired by Decatur Advantage II to develop a communitywide strategic plan.

Cordes said he has been active in Decatur since June or July, and that his main contact has been John D. "Jack" Strong, president of the Federal Kemper Insurance Co. But he declined to say how much that group was paying his firm, because he said the group has not yet gone public and didn't plan to until April.

He said that three to 10 consultants would work with the school district to help it fit in with the communitywide plan. Work would begin in May and end in August.

The process includes a two-day meeting with 100 to 150 members of the community representing all walks of life, Cordes said.

— JEFFREY BILS

Herald & Review 2/19/93

Decatur school cuts look permanent

■ But factors in new projections could brighten the financial picture.

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR — One year after Decatur school leaders proposed slashing \$2.5 million in education programs, many of the cuts are looking more and more permanent.

When children returned to Decatur's public schools this fall, they discovered that dozens of opportunities, ranging from swimming to computer instruction, had been trimmed or eliminated. When the new school year starts this August, they probably won't notice much improvement.

That's the best guess of the school district's top administrators, who have spent hours drawing conservative conclusions from estimates and predictions of such unpredictable things as the state legislature.

Superintendent Don Wachter

unveiled these predictions Tuesday in the district's new three-year financial projection.

"We're going from being in the red to at least being in the yellow this year," said Wachter, referring to the bright yellow cover on the financial projection booklet. Last year's cover was red.

The new financial projection is sunnier than the last one. A few months ago, he said, it looked like the district would be \$600,000 in debt at the end of next school year. The new financial projection puts the district just more than \$1 million in the black by that time.

Even so, the district is projected to overspend by \$854,000 next school year and eat into its surplus or carryover. If nothing changes, the district would be more than \$3 million in debt at the end of the 1995-96 school year.

But Gov. Jim Edgar's recent pledge to increase education funding has brightened the local picture — to the tune of nearly \$1.6 million, Wachter said. The district could also receive more money be-

■ Drug policy

Board adjusts earlier stand on expulsion.

■ □ ■

■ Board bus stop

A new company is hired to carry the kids.

Stories/A3

cause of an increase in the number of poor children in the district, he said.

Under the projection, next year the district would restore money to buy new instructional materials. This was delayed this year to save about \$300,000. The district would also restore \$250,000 for the modernization of equipment, which includes buying computers.

Wachter cautioned that the projection might not be completely accurate. He said that the staff tried to be conservative. The district might be able to restore other educational programs, he said.

3/10/93

3/21/93

Ad hoc group takes lead on schools

Private citizens rallying community

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR — While the Decatur Board of Education searches for a vision, a grass-roots group of private citizens is pushing to rally community support for education.

The group, called the Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee, met again Thursday to discuss how to reach out to dozens of service organizations — and what to tell them.

And while the school board has suspended discussion of a possible increase in school property taxes until at least August, when it expects to have developed a vision, the ad hoc group is gearing up for a possible campaign to garner support for a tax-increase referendum on the November ballot.

The group — which has been the school board's cheerleader and friendly critic — hopes to be at the board's disposal if board members decide to support a push for a property tax increase.

District administrators figure they'll be unable next year to restore most of the \$2.5 million in education program cuts implemented this school year. Voters have not approved an education fund property tax increase since 1956, although Decatur's education fund tax rate is among the lowest in the state.

"I don't think we have the power or the constituency to push a tax referendum right now," said Bill Oakes, the group's chairman. "The ball is in the school board's court."



Oakes
Says the ball is in the school board's court on pushing for a property tax increase.

The board is considering whether to hire IBM Customer Business Development Consulting to provide vision and a strategic plan. The Decatur Advantage Inc., another private group, already has hired that firm to design a communitywide strategic plan.

The school board has said it hopes to have a strategic plan and vision by August and decide then whether to pursue a tax increase.

The delay hasn't stopped the School Concerns committee from planning and trying to determine the needs of Decatur's educational system.

"I've had people tell me, the board's not doing it, so who's going to do this?" Oakes said.

"I've had people ask me, under normal circumstances, wouldn't the board be conducting this discussion?"

Jane Hawkins, a former school board member who is active in the School Concerns group, said the board sometimes appears as if it does not discuss topics because board members want to avoid dissension, and instead tries to create an image of unity.

Members of the ad hoc group did not want to criticize the board.

"We're not going to fight them," said the Rev. James R. Lillie of Holy Cross Lutheran Church. "We want to unify the whole community. Sometimes the best leadership is in the back end, pushing."

The group's next meeting will be at 7 a.m. April 15 at First Lutheran Church in Decatur.

School group begs for voice in choice

■ Committee
wants role
in selecting
superintendent.

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR — They meet casually every month. They sip coffee and talk about Decatur's children.

They stand for openness. They stand for unity involvement. They're virtually begging the Decatur school board to give them a voice — even in efforts that the public traditionally has been shut out of, like selecting a new superintendent.

In an age when "empowerment" is fast becoming a catch-phrase among corporate and government leaders, the grass-roots Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee is emerging as the focal point for private citizens who want more say in Decatur's public schools.

The group is picking up steam. Fifteen people from all walks of life attended its latest meeting Thursday morning.

"We're certainly in a position to plow right ahead," said Bill Oakes, director of marketing

SCHOOL

Continued on A4

SCHOOL: Group widening its scope

Continued from A1

and community relations at St. Mary's Hospital and the ad hoc group's chairman.

Among the highlights from that meeting:

■ The group is gearing up for a big push this summer to promote a local property-tax increase for education. The school board has suspended until August its discussion of a possible referendum to increase that tax.

■ The group is actively seeking minority involvement. Members of the group plan to meet with representatives from the Decatur branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the local African-American Roundtable.

■ The group is forming a speakers bureau. The speakers would speak at meetings of local organizations, touting Decatur's public schools and discussing local education needs. These presentations are to begin in June.

■ The group will make a formal statement to the school board concerning programs that members feel should be restored in Decatur's public schools. The school board cut \$2.5 million in programs starting this school year.

The dismal financial condition of the Decatur School District originally rallied the ad hoc group together. Members were joined by a common frustration: Voters have not approved an education-fund property-tax increase since 1956, even though Decatur's education-fund tax rate is among the lowest in the state.

But the group's scope is growing.

Group members agreed Thursday that the school board should involve the public much more in its search for a new superintendent.

The last search, less than a year ago, was kept highly confidential. Some business and community leaders were allowed to interview finalists, but they were sworn to secrecy.

Eventually, the school board hired Don Wachter, who was associate superintendent at the time. Wachter announced Tuesday that he is retiring.

Several members of the ad hoc group said Wachter's decision rankled them because his tenure was so short.

Jeanelle Norman, school board president, said later Thursday that the board would have to decide as a whole whether to open the superintendent search process to the public.

On another front Thursday, the ad hoc group agreed that it wants to be intimately involved with the school district's effort to develop a strategic plan. The school board hired a consultant Tuesday to coordinate the planning process.

The group has cultivated a role as the school board's cheerleader and friendly critic.

"We obviously don't want to be combative. We want to be in a co-operative mode," said Cindy Reynolds, the school district's computer coordinator and a member of the group. "But how long do we keep silent?"

The ad hoc group meets next at 7 a.m. May 6 at First Lutheran Church.

Decatur, Illinois,
Sunday, April 18, 1993

Herald & Review

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Open up school selection

AGAIN, AN appeal is in order to the Decatur School Board to allow the public to participate in the search for a new school superintendent. Board members argue that privacy is necessary because some otherwise qualified candidates may be reluctant to apply if they know their names will be revealed.

Why that is the case isn't all that clear. After all, people in all lines of work change jobs — even careers — frequently. But even if that is the case, the benefits of public participation outweigh the possibility of losing potential applicants.

Not everyone is excluded. In past searches, the board has had finalists meet with carefully selected people, meaning that some voters are invited to the party and others are left with their noses pressed to the window.

One group has already put in a pitch for inclusion — the Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee.

Should that group be included? Sure, and it shouldn't have to ask. Neither should others interested in the quality of education in Decatur public schools. Should students be included? Why not?

Superintendent Don Wachter's decision to take early retirement caught some by surprise. But there was no reason to believe Wachter, at age 58, would remain superintendent for more than a few years. His successor could influence Decatur schools into the next century.

How should the board proceed?

■ Seeking the advice of individuals and groups about a new superintendent is a good start. Holding a meeting in which everyone is invited is one way of getting the process started.

■ Names of candidates should routinely be released to the public, including the news media.

■ People should be allowed to question candidates when they come to Decatur.

■ Inevitably, the School Board must make the final decision — a decision that must balance the interests of all. But it will be better able to do this if it hears from as many voices as possible.

This process will:

1. Give the new superintendent a foundation of support in the community.
2. Provide a footing to develop broader support that will be necessary if the district decides to ask voters for a tax increase.

Richland Community College followed a similar procedure that led to the selection of Charles Novak as president.

5/7/93

Openness sought in search for school chief

■ Ad hoc committee
will ask officials to
keep process public.

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR — A grass-
roots committee is calling
for the Decatur Board of
Education to conduct its
search for a new
superintendent of schools
publicly.

In a meeting Thursday,
the Ad Hoc School Concerns
Committee arrived at a
consensus: The search for
Decatur's top education
administrator is no time for
secrecy.

"I question the need for
secrecy at any point," said
William Scott, a teacher at
Eisenhower High School, as
others in attendance nodded
their agreement. "What I'm
looking at is a completely
democratic and open
process."

**question
the need
for secrecy
at any
point.'**

— William
Scott,
Eisenhower
teacher

The
Decatur
Board of
Education
is
searching
for
someone to
succeed
Superinte
ndent Don
Wachter,
who is
retiring.

During
the last
superintendent search a year
ago, the board kept the
names of finalists
confidential. The board
refused to discuss the
backgrounds or strengths of
candidates and released no
names until Wachter was
chosen.

Such secrecy is not
maintained in other districts,
Scott said.

Fifteen people — including
pastors, business people,
educators and volunteers —
attended the ad hoc group's
meeting.

The independent group is
growing. Members of
Decatur's African American
Community Roundtable,
including its chairman, the
Rev. Lloyd Jackson, joined
the group Thursday.

Members of Decatur's
NAACP branch also intend
to join, said Bill Oakes, the
ad hoc committee's
chairman.

Some committee
members, including
Jackson, said they felt the
initial superintendent
applications could be kept
secret. But once the board
has narrowed the list to
finalists, the names should
be made public, committee
members agreed.

The committee plans to
make a formal statement
about the selection process
during the next regular
school board meeting.

The group also will urge
the board to restore several
education programs that
were trimmed this year,
including computer aides at
the elementary level, a
revised reading
improvement program at the
elementary level, and the
advisee-adviser program at
the middle school level.

5/12/92

Ad hoc group wants names of finalists

Board members don't
respond to request

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR — A grass-roots committee on Tuesday asked the Decatur school board to reveal the names of finalists in its superintendent search.

"There should be input from the community — and, we believe, open input," said Pete Method, who addressed the board on behalf of the Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee. "There should be wide

availability of relevant information."

Budget

Board members got a glimpse of the proposed education-fund budget for next year.

Story/A3

ago, the board kept the finalists' names secret.

If the board accepts the ad hoc group's proposal, it would be a big change in the Decatur superintendent search process. During the last superintendent search a year

Even after the two finalists publicly acknowledged that they were in the running, the board refused to discuss their qualifications openly or verify who they were.

This year, the search process began anew when Don Wachter announced his retirement. A screening committee is expected to give the school board a list of six finalists in early June.

"The Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee believes that the process of selecting this person is of great direct concern to the entire community," Method told the board in a written statement.

No school board member responded to the committee's proposal during the meeting. Board President Jeanelle Norman said after the meeting that if the board discusses the proposal, it will do so in open session. The board's next regular meeting is May 25.

The ad hoc group proposed that a committee made up of "board members and representatives openly chosen by interested community groups" evaluate the six finalists. Under the proposal, this committee also would interview the finalists and conduct in-depth interviews with those who make the cut.

Method said a "significant portion of the population" favors a public search for the school district's chief executive. Such a search would help build quick public support for the new superintendent and ensure that the new superintendent meets the community's needs, he said.

TO REACH US: Delivery...

Panel seeks school board cooperation

■ Group wants names of superintendent finalists made public.

By JEFFREY BILS
H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR — Will the Decatur Board of Education publicize the names of finalists in its search for a new superintendent?

It was nine days since the Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee posed that question, and still there had been no answer.

"We haven't had much reaction or response from the board," said Bill Oakes, chairman of the grassroots group.

During the board's last regular meeting on May 11, the ad hoc group formally requested that the public be privy to the process of selecting a new top executive for Decatur's public schools.

Board Vice President Norma Walton said in a phone interview after the committee meeting that the question hasn't been discussed yet by the board.

The group also formally requested that the board restore certain education programs to the budget, including a reading-improvement program. The board has been mute on that point, as well, Oakes said.

Walton said later that discussion about restoring some programs is a possibility for future meetings now that the board is looking at the school district budget.

The dozen or so people who attended the ad hoc group's meeting Thursday night agreed that they would like to receive some feedback. For the time being, they decided to wait before pressing for answers on their budget questions. But when it comes to the superintendent search, the group decided it wants answers as soon as possible.

Oakes said he would contact board President Jeanelle Norman to find out how the board would respond to the request for openness.

Norman was unavailable for comment Thursday evening.

The board is in the process of searching for a superintendent to succeed Don Wachter, who is retiring. The board hopes to have a list with six finalists in early June and conduct interviews shortly afterward.

The board's next regular meeting May 25 is its last regular meeting before the final selection process begins.

"We still have no idea what the board's process will be," Oakes said.

The group also decided to discuss how to raise public interest in the November school board election. Several board seats will be up for election. The ad hoc group will discuss this during its next meeting at 7 a.m. June 17 at First Lutheran Church.

Decatur, Illinois,
Sunday, June 6, 1993

Herald & Review

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Schools must face change

Rarely does a school district have the opportunity to change course as dramatically as does the Decatur School District.

Change is occurring on three fronts, and it could dramatically affect the district's nearly 13,000 students, their parents and the Decatur business community:

- For the second consecutive year, the district is hiring a new superintendent.

- Four school board positions are up for election in November, and at least two incumbents have said they will not seek re-election.

- A consulting firm has been hired to help administrators and the school board set a vision for the district.

Today through Wednesday, the Herald & Review will provide, editorially, some insight into each of these areas.

This newspaper, in some circles, is viewed as an adversary of the Decatur School Board and the Decatur School District.

The first perception is frequently correct. A good newspaper must serve as a check and balance on government. That includes school boards.

The second perception is wrong. This newspaper supports a strong school system. It recognizes that what is good for the school district, in the long run, will be good for the economic vitality of the city.

The two roles are not mutually exclusive. Any governmental body that spends tax dollars must be scrutinized. Often, a newspaper is the only organization that has the resources to serve as a check and balance on the government.



First of four parts

In the past year, the Herald & Review has been at loggerheads with the Decatur School Board on several fronts:

- The need to conduct more openly the search for a new superintendent when Walt Warfield resigned last year.

This newspaper campaigned vigorously for the release of the names of finalists for Warfield's position and for public involvement in the process.

The school board did involve selected members of the community in the hiring, but the process, for all intents and purposes, was closed. Also, the board refused to make public the names of the finalists, putting the finalists' perceived need for confidentiality above that of the taxpayers' right to know.

- Decatur school officials, with the apparent blessing of the school board, have repeatedly withheld from the public information regarding the presence of weapons in schools. The board also has refused to release specific information about disciplinary action taken against students caught with weapons or, until recently, to even explain its policy on weapons.

In the judgment of the Herald & Review, this practice is short-sighted, inexcusable and intolerable. Taxpayers should not be stonewalled by the school district.

- School district officials have taken a nonchalant attitude toward the Illinois Open Meetings Act. A series of events over several months prompted the Herald & Review to ask Macon County State's Attorney Larry Fichter to assist in seeking the school board's compliance with the law.

Initially, Fichter declined to take action against the board. But after yet another apparent violation in October, Fichter sought and gained an injunction against the board. The board is seeking to have it overturned.

These points of contention between the school district and the Herald & Review are not restated in an attempt to exacerbate the relationship between the two parties. Rather, they are meant as an ethical disclosure, of sorts.

It is important that you, the reader, know of these differences as you read this series of editorials about the school district.

The Herald & Review believes strongly in the positions it has taken, but there is no ax to grind. The education of so precious a commodity as our children is much too important to be held hostage to a hidden agenda.

MONDAY: Seeking a superintendent.

Herald & Review

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New chief must bring changes

For the second consecutive year, the Decatur School Board is searching for a superintendent to lead the district.

A year ago, the school board's search was narrowed to a choice between an insider and an outsider.

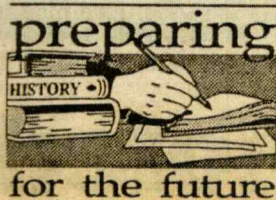
The board opted for the former, selecting longtime district employee Don Wachter, associate superintendent, to replace Walt Warfield.

Wachter, 57 at the time, was expected to serve a few years and then retire. But 10 months into the job, he announced his retirement effective June 30. Wachter's tenure, unfortunately, was short and uneventful.

For the sake of stability, the board should hire someone who is willing to make a commitment of at least three years to the district. What's needed is a superintendent with a no-holds-barred approach to education and a healthy respect of the need for proactive change.

The new superintendent must possess a multitude of talents, including:

■ **VISION.** Having a defined and clear vision is critical to the success of any organization. The school district for too long has operated without vision, a realization that prompted the board last year to hire a consulting company to help mold the district's vision.



Second of four parts

That work is proceeding, and the new superintendent should be deeply involved.

■ **INNOVATIVE IDEAS.** Nationally, education is undergoing massive upheaval. Decatur must be on the leading edge of that change, utilizing not only the resources of the district, but those of the private sector and higher educational institutions such as Richland Community College and Millikin University.

The new superintendent must act as a change agent for the district. Worthwhile innovations now in place should be continued, but much more change is necessary. The district must come to grips with an unacceptably high dropout rate of more than 40 percent among black males; student discipline problems and the increasing presence of weapons in the schools, and the influence of gangs and drugs. Those are problems that detract from the primary mission of the district — educating our children.

■ **PUBLIC RELATIONS EXPERTISE.** The new superintendent must encourage public involvement in the district, for that is one of the linchpins of success. He or she must accentuate the positive, but also be candid in assessing the weaknesses of the district.

The new superintendent also may have to take the lead on seeking an increase in Decatur's education fund tax rate, which since 1956 has remained at \$1.84 per \$100 of assessed property value. A tax increase, if it is needed, can only be sold to the public through open, honest communication.

Last year's search for a superintendent was, for the most part, conducted behind closed doors. A hand-picked group of district residents was involved in the interviewing process, but that was the extent of public involvement. Names of the finalists were not released.

But those were last year's mistakes. The school board now has the opportunity to improve on the process and solicit community involvement.

At tonight's meeting, the board continues the process of culling the candidate field, which has been narrowed to four. The finalists should be introduced to the public. A committee of teachers, students, parents and business owners should be formed to interview the finalists. Perhaps the finalists could share their views on cable television.

The greater the public involvement, the greater the likelihood of community buy-in once the board hires a superintendent.

Decatur's next superintendent must be someone who can lead the district into the 21st century. Letting that person interact with the public prior to being hired would be a positive step.

TUESDAY: The changing school board.

Herald & Review

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Voters face challenge, opportunity

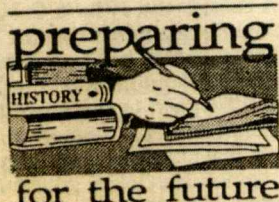
The makeup of the Decatur Board of Education could change dramatically when voters go to the polls in November.

Four spots on the seven-person board will be up for election. Two incumbents — Norma Walton and Eunice Dansby — have said they will not seek re-election for personal reasons. The other two incumbents — President Jeanelle Norman and Robert Gruenewald — are undecided about whether to run for another four-year term. A fifth board member, Sheryl Wood, will be moving to Philadelphia and probably will resign.

The pending vacancies pose a challenge to residents of the district: Who will step to the plate to serve on the board?

An infusion of new people and new ideas is desperately needed. The current board's norm is to think, talk and act in lockstep, often approving policy without so much as the appearance of discussion.

Case in point: A review of the board's minutes of meetings from Oct. 1, 1991, to Sept. 30, 1992, shows that the board voted unanimously 201 out of 210 times. That does not include perfunctory motions to go into closed session, reconvene into open session or adjourn.



Third of a four-part series

Along with a new superintendent and a clear-cut vision for the future, the new board will be expected to chart a course to take the Decatur School District into the next century.

It won't be easy. Serving on the school board can be time-consuming, challenging and frustrating.

But a strong, qualified board is needed if the school district is to grow and meet the challenges of the future.

Board members must possess many talents, among them:

■ **KNOWLEDGE OF BUDGETS.** Decatur, like most school districts, is operating under severe financial constraints. Board members must have a good working knowledge of the district's budget and be able to challenge administrators on financial matters.

True, board members must work in partnership with the administration. But the board should not merely rubber stamp whatever administrators want.

■ **ABILITY TO LISTEN TO THE PUBLIC.** Issues that come before the board should be debated in open session, whenever possible. An important part of that debate should include the public — teachers, students, parents.

Too often the current board has seemed to listen with deaf ears to constituents.

Case in point: A grass-roots group, the Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee, has for several weeks asked the board to involve the public in its search for a new superintendent and to release names of finalists for the position.

The school board has listened but made no effort to open the search process, and has not stated whether it will release names of the finalists.

The push for openness by a group of concerned citizens took an absurd twist at the school board's meeting of May 27. Board member Dansby stated that the number of applicants for the superintendent's position had been reduced by one-half. Qualified candidates had been scared off by the ad hoc committee's request that the names of finalists be made public, Dansby said.

On what did she base that statement? Someone at a gas station had told her, she said. Dansby would not identify the person. Absurd, indeed.

And even if Dansby's statement were true, good riddance to those potential candidates. The district needs a superintendent who is eager to function in the public eye, not one who fears publicity.

■ **ABILITY TO SEEK CONSENSUS.** The board must be able to weigh the views of the public and the advice of the administration in making decisions.

Compromise is inherent in this process. But at times, voices of dissent must be raised, a trait that seems to be in short supply on the current board.

If there is any hope for a wider variety of voices and leadership on the board, it lies in November's election. The time is ripe for new leaders to step forward.

WEDNESDAY: Developing a vision.

Herald & Review

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The following are opinions reached by consensus of the Herald & Review Editorial Board. All other articles on this page are the opinions solely of the authors. We encourage readers to offer opinions on information provided by the Herald & Review.

Vision must embody the district

As unsure as the needs of public schools may be in the next century, one thing is certain:

The Decatur School District needs a clear-cut vision of what it wants to be and where it wants to go.

Does District 61 want to be an average school system or a top-notch one?

Most people would choose the latter. But achieving that goal will take the efforts of a wide variety of people and organizations, not just the administration, school board and teachers of the district. It is a community challenge.

The school board's push to draft a vision for the district is a step in the right direction.



preparing
for the future

Last of a 4-part series

A consultant, IBM Customer Business Development, has been hired to assist the district in formulating that vision. The process is expected to be completed Nov. 1.

The vision process comes at a critical time for the school district. A new superintendent should be hired by July 1. Two to five new board members will join the seven-member school board following the November election.

That turnover makes it extremely important to have the vision process be broad-based, tapping into the many segments of the community that have a stake in the educational system. Those groups include:

■ **TEACHERS AND OTHER STAFF.** Face it. Teachers are the key to the implementation of new programs. Whether or not the Decatur Education Association buys into the vision that will guide the district into the next century is critical to the success of that vision. The district has many excellent teachers and staff members. Those employees would bring a unique perspective on education that must be included in the process.

■ **PARTNERS IN EDUCATION.** Partners in Education, a non-profit group funded by Decatur businesses, has been an important contributor to the success of the district. Members of the group understand the needs of the business community because they are part of it. As employers, they recognize the shortcomings of the educational system. The participation of Partners in Education in the vision process would be invaluable.

■ **AD HOC SCHOOL CONCERNS COMMITTEE.** This coalition of district residents has been active for several months. The group supports openness in the hiring of a new superintendent and an increase in the district's education fund levy, which has not changed since 1956.

■ **HIGHER EDUCATION.** Millikin University and Richland Community College are tremendous community assets. Administrators from those schools have shown a willingness to get involved in Decatur's public educational system.

Tapping into the resources available through Millikin and Richland could greatly enhance the school district's programs and curriculum.

■ **VOLUNTEERS AND PARENTS.** Hundreds of people volunteer their time throughout the district. Parents are the primary constituency of the school board and deserve to be included in this process.

■ **STUDENTS.** Children are on the receiving end of the educational system. Not including them in the vision process would be inexcusable.

The school board should encourage participation by these groups and any others that wish to be part of the vision process.

To meet the needs of the future, contributions will be required from all corners. Freezing some people out of the process will only deprive the district of their potential — and probably vital — contributions.

How important is any of this? All that's hanging on it is the future of Decatur's public schools.

4/18/93

Committee's 'lesson' may aid school funding

School information campaign aims to tell community of financial need

By **RON INGRAM**
H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR — Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee members will stump Decatur with the message that Decatur public schools need financial help.

Committee members agreed Thursday to refine a nine-page fact sheet prepared by one of its subcommittees as the basis for presentations to service clubs, parent-teacher associations and other groups.

"The core issue is the community is not spending as much as it should on education," said Bill Oakes, ad hoc committee chairman. "We'll be asking, 'Is that good enough for you? Is it good enough for you or your neighbor's children?'"

While not specifically promoting an education fund referendum, which the committee is already on record as supporting, the group hopes to enlighten the public on the schools' financial struggles. Presentations will begin in August.

"I was struck the other day in a conversation with a fairly knowledgeable individual who said, 'But I thought the schools were getting the lottery money,'" Oakes said. "There is still a lot of ignorance in the community."

The lottery money going to education only supplants other funds which were taken away from the

state's contribution to public schools, and does not increase that contribution, the subcommittee's financial status report noted.

Much of the report's information came from Superintendent Donald Wachter and Director of Business Affairs James Hendren and from surveys by the Illinois Large Unit District Association, of which Decatur is a member, said William Gerstner.

Gerstner, a retired Illinois Power Co. senior vice president, chaired the subcommittee that put together the report. Gerstner will highlight the subcommittee's report for the school board at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Keil Administration Building.

Among the highlights:

- Decatur last passed an education fund property tax referendum in 1956, when the rate was set at \$1.80 per \$100 of assessed valuation. The rate was increased by state legislation to \$1.84 in 1986.

- Among the 41 members of the Large Unit District Association, Decatur, Quincy, Marion and Cahokia have the lowest education fund tax rates, all at \$1.84 per \$100 of valuation.

- Compared with other large Central Illinois districts, Decatur spends the least per pupil annually at \$4,056. Other district totals are Urbana, \$5,365; Bloomington, \$5,288; Springfield, \$4,966; Danville, \$4,566; Champaign, \$4,485; and Normal, \$4,156.



Oakes

Ad Hoc School Concerns Committee member says 'the community is not spending as much as it should on education.'

- In 1982 dollars, Decatur is spending about the same year after year to educate its students. In 1982 the per pupil figure was \$2,416 while the 1993 figure, in dollars adjusted for inflation, was \$2,421. In the intervening years the figure dipped as low as \$2,195 in 1991.

- Since 1981, Decatur's dependence on state funds has increased from 49.45 percent to 62 percent currently. That leaves the school district open to the whims of the state legislature such as in 1991 when it cut \$2 million from Decatur's state aid, money that will never be recovered.

- The percentage of local property taxes going to Decatur schools has decreased since 1977 when the school's tax bill made up 51 percent of the annual tax bill. Today the school's share is 40 percent.

Why schools go begging in Illinois

Despite its wealth, state provides less education funding than many others

School funding has long been a divisive issue in Illinois politics, where regional divisions, antagonisms and jealousies often block concerted efforts to fund all public schools adequately and fairly. This year's Illinois gubernatorial race between Democrat Dawn Clark Netsch and incumbent Republican Jim Edgar is no different.

While elected officials have fought over the issue, Illinois' financial support for its elementary and high schools has slipped. In an investigation of school funding across the nation, Tribune reporter Patrick T. Reardon found that Illinois' per-pupil funding has fallen below the national average for more than a decade.

Although the state ranks 9th in per capita income among the 50 states, it ranks behind 42 other states in the share of this income devoted to schools.

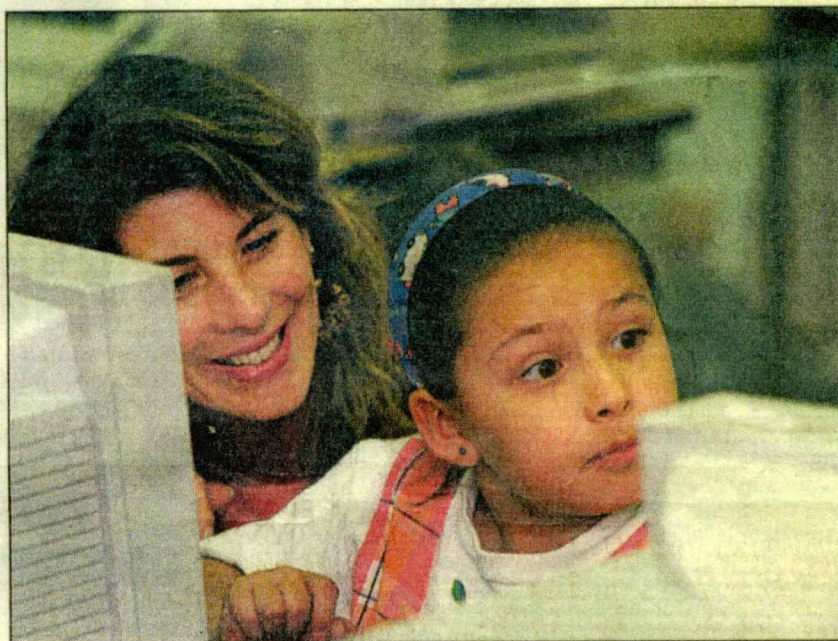
Reardon's investigation of the school funding process in Illinois gives a new insight into this seemingly intractable problem.

See Page 12.

As one of the richest states, Illinois has the financial ability to spend much more on its elementary and high schools. In 1993, 42 other states devoted a larger share of personal income to education than Illinois did. Rank ▶ 1st

School revenues

1993 revenues per \$1,000 of personal income:



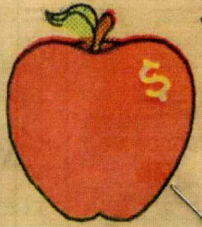
Tribune photo by Michael Budrys

In wealthy Rondout District 72 in Lake Forest, 2nd grader Janet Valdez, in word-processing class with teacher Sheila Byrnes, is getting a lavish education. But most districts are barely getting by.

How Illinois stacks up

Selected states for the 1993-94 school year and their rankings among all 50 states.

SELECTED STATE	PER CAPITA INCOME		SCHOOL REVENUES PER PUPIL		SCHOOL REVENUES PER \$1,000 PERSONAL INCOME	
		RANK		RANK		RANK
New Jersey	\$26,732	2	\$9,893	1	\$54.74	13
• Illinois	\$22,534	9	\$5,841	22	\$42.06	43
Pennsylvania	\$21,241	16	\$8,494	4	\$58.12	8
Minnesota	\$21,017	18	\$6,151	16	\$53.00	16
Wisconsin	\$19,822	22	\$6,798	9	\$57.67	9
Wyoming	\$19,724	24	\$6,036	17	\$66.26	2
Indiana	\$19,161	30	\$6,238	15	\$55.28	12
Maine	\$18,775	32	\$5,968	19	\$54.63	14
Mississippi	\$14,708	50	\$3,745	50	\$49.03	28
U.S. average	\$20,781		\$5,938		\$48.49	



VIEWPOINT

Schools
need money
NOW
AIO

VIEWPOINT

12/4/90

Pass the bucks

Decatur schools need an infusion of cash

By CINDY REYNOLDS

As a parent and an educator, I applaud your recent editorials which urged our legislators to do something to end the inequality in education spending and prodded us to examine what we want from our schools.

In addition to money coming from the state, I think we as a community need to look at how much we value education and ask ourselves if our community is funding education at an adequate level. The last rate increase for Decatur Public Schools was in the 1950's — that was more than 30 years ago! Times have changed. Our student population is different and has more demanding needs.

Decatur is blessed with an extremely dedicated staff of administrators, teachers and support personnel. We have many positive things happening in our schools, but we cannot ignore our problems.

Our administrators and board are being forced into making too many decisions based on money ^{rather} other than what we would like to provide for students.

- Do we want to continue to have large classes (over 50 percent of our elementary classes have 26 to 34 students)?
- Do we want to continue to have 10-to-20 percent "split"

classes (two grades in one room) as a way of conserving space and staff?

- Do we want to see our test scores decline?

■ Do we want to have schools where scheduling music, physical education and the many other beneficial programs is very difficult because there is not adequate space in many of our buildings?

- Do we want to continue to have our children knocking on doors to raise money for our schools' needs?

■ Do we want to provide our students with access to the technology that is available but is not within our budgets of obtain? We have the vision of how to use technology to help our students, but we need \$60,000 per school to provide the equipment.

If our district spent the state average per student, we would have approximately \$11,000,000 more money in our budget. We cannot solve all of our problems with more money, but many of the problems that face our schools take money to solve.

When we played Monopoly as children one of the things we learned was that you rarely won unless you took a risk and made an investment in the future.

Our students and our community are our future. We need to make an investment now. We need to let our schools know that we care and are willing to financially support our schools.

Editor's Note: Cindy Reynolds is a computer specialist for the Decatur School District.

Decatur schools' frugality noted

By KRISTI RUGGLES

H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR — Expansion Management magazine may not give high grades to the quality of education at Decatur's schools, but it respects the district's ability to stretch a buck.

In a recently published report used to help businesses expand or relocate in new areas, the trade magazine ranked Decatur schools 21st among 25 Illinois school districts through a formula called the "Education Quotient."

Researchers base the magazine's annual assessments on high school graduation rates, money spent per pupil and teacher-to-student ratios.

But, in a separate article in its September/October issue, Expansion Management applauded Decatur for capitalizing on its limited funds.

In a "Bang for the Buck" com-

parison, Decatur is listed sixth nationally for offering a quality education for little money.

"The EQ, for all its mathematical cleverness, has one weakness," the article says. "It does not reward a school district that does more with less."

"It tends to obscure that thin line between those schools which did great because they spent a lot of money or had a highly educated populace already, and those schools that had neither but still produced great results."

Decatur, in the eyes of the magazine, was one such district.

"In summary," the story stated, "this list honors school districts where parents and educators, no matter what their own educational background, have produced a superb environment for achievement, with proven results, and have done it on a sensible budget."

School tax referendum proposed

■ Board member says more money needed to improve education system in Decatur.

By KRISTI ROGGLIES
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DECATUR — In the wake of two mediocre assessments of Decatur public schools this month, school board member Bill Oakes on Tuesday called for a tax referendum and an education foundation to help fund district programs.

Sagging test scores and a grim report from the North Central Association Com-

mission sparked Oakes' comments.

The Illinois Goals Assessment scores, which will be inserted in the Herald & Review this weekend as part of the district's state report card, show Decatur schools' scores are below the state average on most tests. The IGAP tests assess students statewide in math, science, social science, writing and reading.

Of the city's 19 grade schools, five did not exceed state averages: Brush College, Coppenbarger, Garfield, Harris and Washington. Enterprise School fared the best among grade schools, beating the state average on every test.

Brush College had the highest numbers in the most undesirable columns: 83 percent of its third-graders scored below the state writing goal; 52 percent of the sixth-graders achieved below the state reading goal.

Tests were administered to third-, sixth-, eighth- and 10th graders in some subjects, while seventh-, ninth- and 11th-graders were tested in other areas. In all, the grade schools took eight tests.

Mound and Thomas Jefferson middle schools fell below state averages in every area; Johns Hill seventh- and eighth-graders usually beat the average.

In the North Central report, Oakes said schools are described as weak in safety,

technology, modern teaching techniques, science labs, counseling personnel and office computerization.

Oakes calls the reports a "picture of a deteriorating school district which cannot reach average anymore and is failing a significant portion of its student body."

He proposed that the board ask administrators to plan for a referendum to increase taxes and form a committee to develop an education foundation.

"As a community we have turned away from the responsibility to adequately fund local education," he said.

The property tax rate in Decatur has remained the same since 1956.

Accenting the positive at Enterprise

For educators, making learning fun more than a cliché, it's a philosophy

By JEFFREY BILLS
Herald Staff Writer

A lot of carrot. A little stick. It works just fine in Mary Hipsher's classroom.

The carrot: A bingo game in which students must answer questions about ancient Rome to win.

The stick: Maybe a look, a verbal warning if a student is making too much noise. That seems to be all it takes. The children are well behaved, and when class is over, they form an orderly line at the door.

"They will do anything to play bingo," said Hipsher, a sixth-grade teacher at Enterprise school.

The timeworn cliché — "make learning fun" — is a fact of life at Enterprise. And it seems to work.

Enterprise School, on Decatur's far southwest side, serves a diverse student population from modest and affluent areas. More than 85 percent of the students travel by bus to a district encompassing roughly everything south of Decatur Street and west of U.S. 51.

Fifteen surrounding acres of playground give the school a country feel.

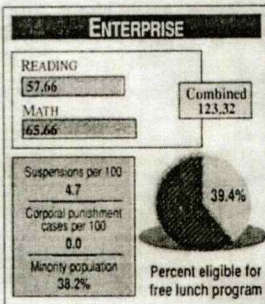
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The school offers a variety of positive reinforcements, including awards and certificates. The discipline system includes a film festival on the first Tuesday of each month — for children who have had no detentions.

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CARROT AND STICK: The Enterprise staff prefers positive reinforcement to corporal punishment and suspensions to shape student behavior.

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To avoid suspension, students must attend a "care team" meeting if they accumulate four detentions. The care team includes a counselor or teacher, one of the child's parents. The goal is to impress upon the child that there are a lot of people who care.

"They've been very successful in reducing the number of suspensions," Moma said.

Moma knows his school's methods might not work in other schools. Why do they work here?

"It's students," he said. "It's a staff of good teachers. It's motivation at home. Most of them want to come to school. Most of them have fun while they're learning."



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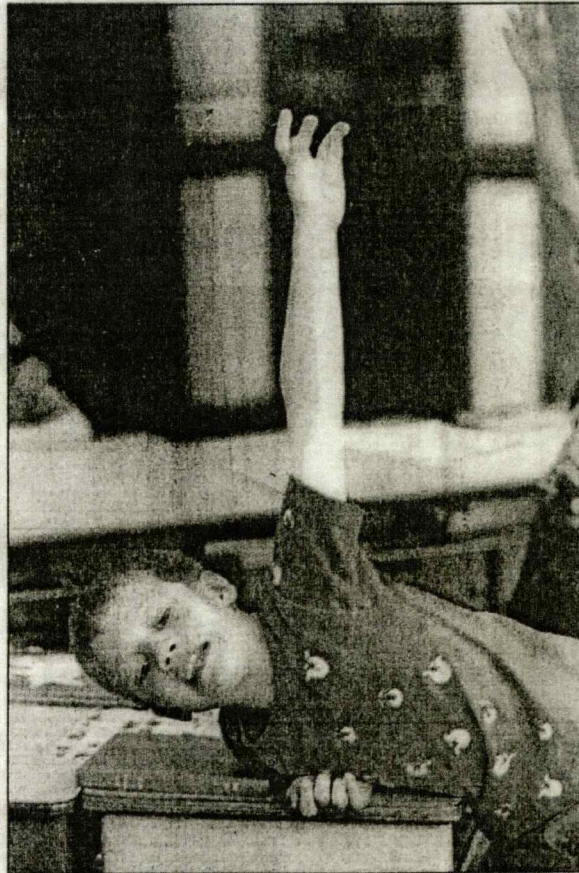


Photo by Darrell Goemaat

EAGER TO RESPOND: Seven-year-old Jacob Ahola, a first-grader in Ellen Berger's class at Garfield School, eagerly waits to be called on to answer a question during a "Show and Tell" session recently. Educators at Garfield respond to the challenges of teaching in the inner city by filling any role needed — from part-time parent to stern disciplinarian.

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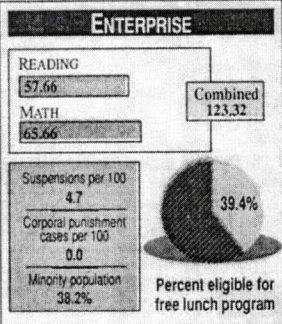
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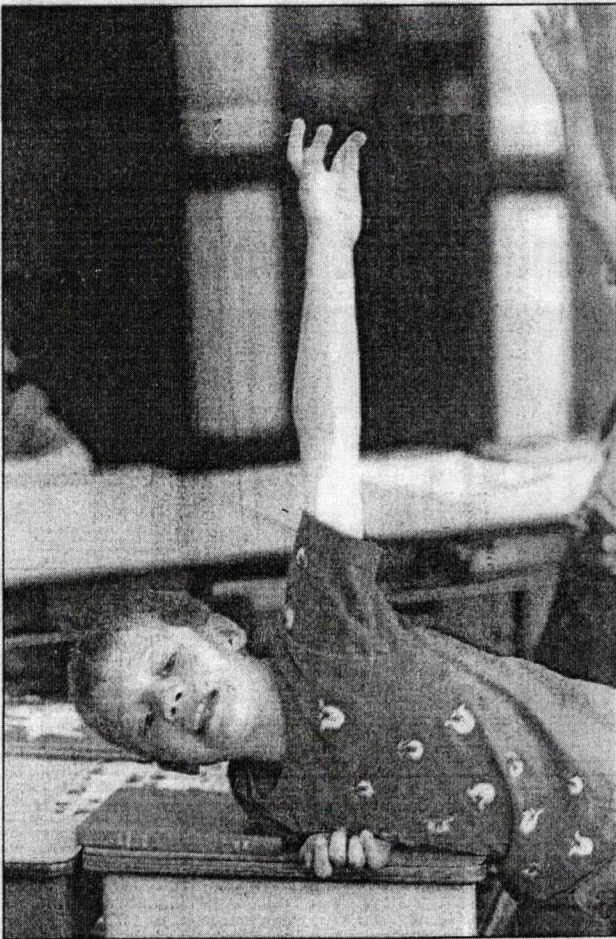


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A14 SPECIAL REPORT Decatur, Illinois · Tuesday, May 18, 1993

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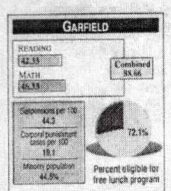
BEYOND THE SCORES

Decatur Elementary Schools

"If every school could have that parent-school connection, that would solve our school problems."

John Hill Principal

Good intentions only go so far in the inner city



Frank Lee cradled the young boy in his arms and gently stroked the child's head. "He's OK," the Garfield School principal said, as the boy quivered like a leaf and gasped sleepily about. Moments earlier the boy had sat silently on the floor of the principal's office, staring down. Before that he had been disrupting a class.

"He is fully intent on me," Lee said.

"I take more than great intentions to make this inner-city school work. It takes guts. It takes stomach. It takes leadership. The education must not be an accident."

Lee said Garfield "the best school in Decatur," despite—in comparison to other Decatur schools—the lower test scores and higher discipline rates.

"The scores are as high as they are because of what the teachers put into it," Lee said. "There are more single-parent families in this school area than there are traditional families. The students come to school without any high self-esteem, without any social skills, without any desire for learning or education, because their parents have no regard for education."

"I don't want to come to school. That's wrong with 'em," that's the kind of attitude you find with a larger number of parents. We have educational apathy."

Breaking the boy's head one more time, Lee sighed and said, "Sometimes I wonder why they had them. To a casual observer, this could be any school. The building is neat and quiet. Classrooms do not exhibit the kind of wild behavior cycles might expect. People appear to study hard. Some children are grouped in ways that they can work together."

One classroom contains highly creative children. Each child, if isolated in a "mini-classroom," is a trouble-maker, Lee said. But together, in a more structured classroom structure that could make some principals raise their eyebrows, Lee said.

Lee's approach to discipline suits his school.

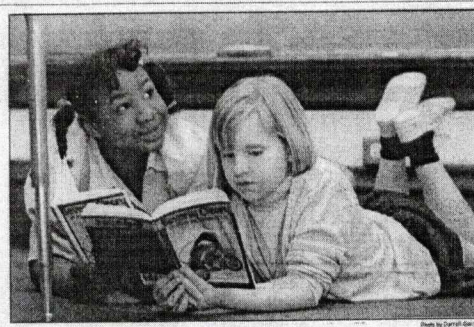
"We utilize all forms of discipline," he said. "Corporal punishment is extreme, but we have parents who come in here and say, 'Would you give him a swat?' If corporal punishment is necessary, it's a form that is agreed upon by the parents and the school. We use it."

Lee defends Garfield School passionately.

"Just because a person is poor does not mean that a person is not intelligent," he said.

"The fact is, a lot of kids make it, and they make it in spite of meanness."

Creative impulses, parents are busy shaping miles of smiles



In one classroom, children were sitting at a table, reading books and papers. In another, they were standing on tables, holding objects up to the ceiling.

"This is another 3-4 grade classroom," Dean Henderson said, peering into yet another room where children were up and about, talking, walking.

"I'm not sure what's going on."

The halls of John Hill Magnet School were alive with the sound of classroom activity.

Henderson, the principal, doesn't mind. She knows her building is different from other schools.

"This building is a model. It's probably unique," Henderson said. "But these things aren't things we're necessarily concerned about."

What is the concern about?

It's the walking down the halls with books on their heads.

It sounds nice, but does it work?

"That's a work," Henderson said. "Obviously it does. The test scores show it."

John Hill Magnet School, which is the creative offspring of the people who attend here, the teachers are made Henderson, Henderson explained, and the afternoon tend to be more interactive.

But don't be fooled by the creativity. It is not true that kids are hanging from the rafters," Henderson said.

The K-8 school tries more

innovative strategies than many schools. There are many mixed-grade classrooms and foreign language instruction.

"There are teachers who teach here who would probably not be able to teach in a more traditional building," Henderson said. "What I see here is that people's personal lives do dictate much more."

Henderson said teachers use lots of group work and have the children make decisions.

"At other schools, teachers might determine the curriculum," Henderson said. At John Hill, teachers are more likely to be used only if they happen to be useful.

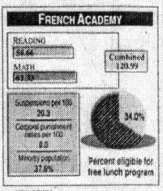
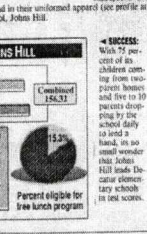
When it comes to discipline,

Henderson said she doesn't believe in corporal punishment and instead seeks positive solutions.

"We have high behavioral expectations," Henderson said. "It's much more problem-solving oriented. Our suspension rates are extremely low."

What works here might not work in other buildings, Henderson said. The school is open to any eligible child in the district, with students selected by lottery. But parents are virtually required to make a commitment. And that might be the biggest difference.

"Seventy-five percent of our kids live in transient homes," Henderson said. Five to 10 percent drop for the school daily.



A STRUCTURE: Masters teach French Academy, a magnet school in the inner city where more than a third of the students are eligible for free lunch program.

School wins respect through daily discipline

It's 9:10 a.m. at Mary W. French Academy. Time for the morning assembly.

Students file in and line up in the gymnasium. Everyone is dressed formally with navy blazers or skirts and light blue ties. They recite the Pledge of Allegiance. They recite the French Academy Creed.

"I can be a successful student only when I demonstrate my willingness to follow school rules, be polite and courteous, follow all school directions. The responsibility is mine," the children proclaim. "I do not have the right to keep any other student from learning. I keep my hands and feet off other students, and to be a good citizen."

"I prepare them for the day," said Charles Harris, the principal. "It settles their minds. It gets them ready for school."

The assembly and the theme song aren't the only things that set French Academy apart from other elementary schools in the Decatur school district.

When a visitor enters a classroom here, students stop what they're doing and greet the visitor in unison. A pupil who is called upon must stand before speaking. Masters are a big part of the lessons learned here.

As one of Decatur's two magnet schools, French Academy is open to any eligible child in the school district. Students are selected by lottery.

Our school is pretty much a cross-section of the district," Harris said. "We're not an elitist school by any means."

Parents send their children here because they want them in a disciplined environment. We really communicate a lot with parents. It's not a problem. I contact parents quickly.

Discipline is uniform and strict throughout the school. Each week, every pupil receives a behavior report, which a parent must sign and return to school with the child on each Monday.

Corporal punishment "is not used," Harris said.

We do use suspensions," Harris said. "The philosophy of our school is that no student has a right to keep other students from learning."

Parents make French Academy effective, Harris said.

"They've chosen to send their child here," Harris said. "They pay to send their child here. If respect is expected, that's our biggest asset."

ADAMS Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%	COPPERHAGEN Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%	FRANKLIN Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%	OLIVE GROVE Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%	SOUTH SHORES Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%
BAUM Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%	DEWIS Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%	HARRIS Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%	PARSONS Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%	STEVENSON Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%
BRUSH COLLEGE Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%	DUNFEE Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%	MURPHY Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%	SOUTHWEST Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%	WASHINGTON Reading: 40.33 Math: 35.33 Combined: 37.83 Students per 100: 442 Central population: 181 Minority population: 44.9%

SOURCE: Decatur School District. READING AND MATH: Test scores are average per 100 students and central population scores per 100 students for the 1992-1993 school year. MINORITY: Percentage of minority students (all non-white students) are 44.9%.

Stories by Jeffrey Bils, H&R Staff Writer

Graphics and page design by J. Damon Cain, H&R Graphics Editor



Squeezed for money, Taft School in Lockport has to use its library as a classroom and a cafeteria.

heterogeneous state in the union. It is a melange of Northern sensibilities and Southern grittiness, Eastern gloss and Western rawness. Its diverse economy encompasses farming, mining, manufacturing and financial services. And it contains some of the wealthiest places in the U.S.—and some of the poorest.

African-Americans, Hispanics and Asians make up a significant percentage of Illinois residents, but these groups are heavily concentrated in the state's cities, only modestly represented in its suburbs, and virtually non-existent on the rural plains.

Two centuries of Illinois history haven't dulled the edges of these diverse elements. Indeed, the constant friction has tended to sharpen antagonisms.

This is evident in the single most important political reality in Illinois: its regional divisions.

Illinois is divided into three parts. Isolated in the far northeastern corner of the state is Chicago. Ringing Chicago are its suburbs. The rest of the state—containing more than 90 percent of its land but only about a third of its people—is called Downstate.

For more than a century, Chicago dominated Illinois. But since 1950, it has been a shrinking giant



funding



Tribune photo by John Smierciak

The reason? Legislators from wealthy areas won't vote for the state aid program unless their schools benefit.

Like politicians anywhere, they want to keep their jobs. And this desire has been intensified in recent years as more and more have taken to fashioning themselves as full-time legislators with no other occupation.

And, to keep their voters happy, they've found it essential to fight for their region rather than for the state as a whole.

The result: gridlock in the Illinois General Assembly.

Master politicians such as House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago) have to use all their cleverness to keep their disparate party caucuses together. They have little time, energy or interest left over for setting an agenda of goals to reach.

In fact, anytime the leaders have to take a stand on an issue—any issue—they run the risk of fracturing their fragile coalitions. It's safer for them to keep quiet.

Twenty-five years ago, Gov. Richard Ogilvie, a Republican, didn't keep quiet.

With Illinois running perilously close to bankruptcy, he proposed and pushed through the state's first income tax.

ble system of school finance. This inadequacy and inequity lessen the educational opportunities available to our children and diminish Illinois' ability to meet the economic challenges of the future."

Inadequacy and inequity—these two words tell the story of education today in Illinois, and also why it's so difficult to change it.

Most Illinois schoolchildren—four of every five—are in school districts that don't have enough money to provide an adequate education. And there's a huge disparity between what districts do spend. Some spend nearly five times more than others.

There's not enough money for the vast majority of children, and what money there is isn't distributed fairly. So why doesn't the state legislature radically reform school funding in Illinois?

Because the region of the state with the most political clout today—the suburbs—is also the region where funding for schools isn't just adequate, it's lavish.

Most school districts in Chicago's suburbs are spending well above national and state per-pupil averages, and it's evident in their high quality teachers, elaborate science labs, state-of-the-art computers, swimming pools, gymnasiums, sports programs—and test scores.

James G. Ward, a former labor organizer who is now an education professor at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign tells of the time he commuted back and forth from Urbana to do some consulting work for a district in north suburban Glencoe.

"I'd drive back home down I-57 and get ticked off that my kids didn't have half of what those kids in Glencoe had," Ward recalls. "Downstate, they know the suburbs have more, but they don't know how much more."

With a relatively low level of funding from the state, school district budgets in Illinois are made or broken by how much money can be raised locally through the property tax.

A key factor in the property tax is the value of real estate. And, in the suburbs, the land is very valuable—from the new residential developments to the shopping centers, office buildings and industrial parks. As a result, most suburban school districts have more than enough money.

That's not the case elsewhere in Illinois. Downstate, property values are depressed. In Chicago, there was a sharp rise in real estate values at the end of the 1980s, but city residents generally have

THE TALE OF SCHOOL FUNDING IN ILLINOIS

BELOW AVERAGE REVENUES PER PUPIL

Since 1982, Illinois schools have had less money for their students than the national average. Preliminary figures for 1993 show Illinois schools with \$5,841 in revenues per pupil, compared to the U.S. average of \$5,938.

POORER STATES SPEND MORE ON EDUCATION

Last year, Illinois ranked 9th among the states in per capita income, but only 22nd in total school funding. Schools were better funded in states with much lower per capita incomes, including Wisconsin (22nd in income), Wyoming (24th), Indiana (30th), Minnesota (18th) and Maine (32nd).

SCHOOL REVENUES AMONG LOWEST OF TOP STATES

Illinois is running behind many of its economic competitors in education funding. Among the 20 richest states in the nation, Illinois ranked 15th in total school revenues in 1993. That same year, Illinois was 6th among the 9 largest urbanized states.

PER-PUPIL FUNDING BELOW MINIMUM

In a report issued in late 1992, a blue ribbon legislative task force, working with the State Board of Education,

the state budget, it also provided an unprecedented boost for elementary and high schools. For much of the next decade, state funding for education in Illinois nearly equaled the national average, and total funding was significantly above average.

But Ogilvie paid the price. Three years after enacting the income tax, he was narrowly defeated by Democrat Dan Walker.

Illinois politicians have never forgotten that lesson. Ever since, they've been leery of tinkering with the income tax or taxes of any sort.

That's part of the reason why Illinois' flawed tax system remains unchanged.

Historically, the sales tax in the U.S. has been imposed on goods, such as refrigerators and pencils. But, over the past decades, Americans have been spending less of their money on goods, and more on services.

To adjust to this shift, many states have expanded their sales taxes to cover a wide array of services. Illinois, however, hasn't followed suit.

New York taxes 74 services; Iowa, 95; New Jersey, 45; New Mexico and Hawaii, 155 each. By contrast, Illinois imposes its sales tax on just 16 services, and it misses out on a major new source of revenue.

In addition, Illinois doesn't get as much punch from its income tax as it might.

The 1970 Illinois Constitution permits only an income tax that imposes the same flat rate on every taxpayer. By comparison, 34 other states have a graduated income tax, that is, a system in which wealthier people are taxed at higher rates than poorer ones.

States with graduated income taxes were in the best position to tap into the income gains over the last decade and a half. Although most Americans lost ground to inflation during that period, the wealthiest 20 percent were the one group that recorded strong increases. And they were the ones with the highest rates.

Meanwhile, flat-rate states, such as Illinois, were losing ground to inflation because the incomes of most of their people were falling.

In late 1992, after two years of study, a legislative task force on school funding published a report in which the group asserted:

The schools and schoolchildren in Illinois have long been burdened by an inadequate and inequitable

level of income than suburbanites and are less able to handle the heavy cost of school funding.

The problem with any effort to increase state funding for education in Illinois is that it would require an increase in the income tax.

In terms of money raised, that increase, even without a graduated set of rates, would fall heaviest on the suburbs. But the improved funding would go to schools in the rest of the state.

From the suburban point of view, there's little reason to change.

The move to improve school funding in Illinois also stumbles over the anti-Chicago bias throughout the state. In part, that antipathy is due to a misconception that the city takes an undue share of state revenues.

In part, the antipathy that the rest of the state feels toward Chicago is due to a misconception that the city takes an undue share of state revenues.

However, a University of Illinois study, published in 1989, reported that, "considering the severity of their problems, Chicago and other hard-pressed areas [of Illinois] are receiving relatively less state funds from a number of program areas, while the prosperous areas are receiving relatively more."

The anti-Chicago feeling is also due, in part, to racial antagonisms, although rarely are these expressed publicly.

One veteran legislator says the racial subtext is even stronger now that whites are a minority in the city than it was 20 years ago when he entered the legislature.

Yet, for all its prejudices and all its divisions and all its reasons for not making a move, the political power structure in Illinois can act when it's backed into a corner.

In 1988, the Chicago White Sox baseball team had all but loaded its bats and warmup jackets onto a plane for a move to St. Petersburg, Fla., when then-Gov. Jim Thompson and the legislative leadership rounded up enough votes to force through last-minute funding for a new \$150 million Comiskey Park.

The same thing happened when Congress expanded the eligibility requirements for Medicaid. With more people able to take advantage of the program, the cost of the program in Illinois shot up sharply. It's now the largest piece of the annual state budget, a distinction once held by state aid to schools.

Legislators say they have no choice but to fund Medicaid at the required levels.

Education, on the other hand, is under no such mandate.

calculated the per pupil funding level necessary to ensure an adequate education for each school child in the state: \$3,898. The report found that 1,561,938 children — or more than 79 percent — were in school districts spending below that minimum.

LOPSIDED SPLIT OF SCHOOL REVENUES

Across the U.S., the average school district receives about 46 percent of its money from the state and 47 percent locally. In Illinois, however, the average district got only 33 percent of its funds from the state in 1993 and 59 percent locally, mainly from the real estate tax.

HEAVY RELIANCE ON LOCAL FUNDING CREATES DISPARITIES

A heavy reliance on local money means that districts in affluent areas have a much easier time bank-rolling education than districts in middle-class or poor regions. The result is huge spending disparities. In the 1992-93 school year, one Illinois district spent \$11,437 per pupil, while another had only \$2,394 per student.

MEDICAID FUNDING TOPS EDUCATION

Funding for elementary and high schools has fallen to second behind Medicaid spending as part of the Illinois state budget. In the present fiscal year, Medicaid is expected to cost \$5.7 billion, or 17.6 percent of the budget. Schools, on the other hand, will receive \$4.8 billion, or 14.7 percent.

sapped by the loss of many of its people and much of its economic clout to the suburbs.

Those suburbs, once dismissed by Mayor Richard J. Daley as "country towns," are now the dominant political force in the state.

Meanwhile, Downstate, which ruled Illinois in its early years, has been buffeted by the loss of manufacturing jobs in its cities and deepening poverty in its rural areas. Although the weakest of the three regions, it remains a significant factor in the state mix.

The divisions, however, are only part of the story. As important in explaining the nature of Illinois and its political culture is the philosophy of government of the people who pioneered and controlled the state in its formative years.

There were four major groups that, together, set the tone for all that has come after.

One group—prosperous Yankee farmers from New England—settled in the northwest sections of Illinois and brought with them a view of government as a means of achieving good. Their traditions were steeped in grass-roots democracy, and they expected to use government to improve the quality of life for everyone.

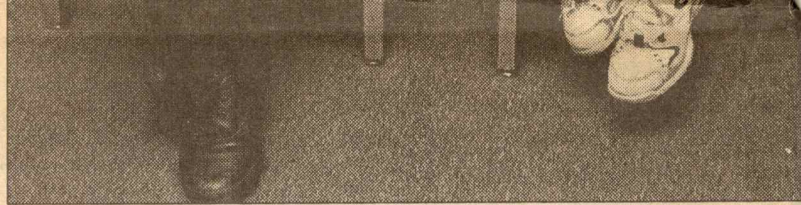
Their efforts were frustrated and ultimately overwhelmed by the other three groups: poor farmers from Appalachia; European immigrants; and business entrepreneurs.

The Appalachian farmers, clustered at the southern end of the state, were the only significant political force in Illinois when it achieved statehood in 1818. They came out of a political background in which the workings of government were in the hands of an elite. The average Joe had no say in what went on—and didn't expect any.

Much different from the Appalachians in language and culture were the Irish, Germans and other immigrant groups who began settling in Chicago after the Civil War and transformed it into one of the major cities of the world.

Yet, they all shared a search for a better life and a sense of government as something outside of their control. This attitude was especially pronounced among Catholic immigrants whose clergy-dominated religion dictated beliefs and brooked no contradiction.

This left a political vacuum into which stepped the entrepreneurs



Tribune photo by John Smierciak

Taft School teacher Jeanette DaRosa has to double as a nurse, holding an ice pack to a child's injured head.

who had come to Illinois and particularly Chicago seeking their main chance.

These businessmen saw government as a marketplace where goods, services and favors were bartered. Politics, in their view, was a business. What they wanted from government was to be left alone to pursue their dreams of profit.

To achieve this, they put politics into the hands of professionals, the political parties. The understanding was that they'd leave politics to the politicians, if the politicians left business to the businessmen.

If the cost was, as historian Daniel Elazar put it, "a tax of petty corruption," well, it was better than an aggressive set of crusaders trying to tell business how to run itself.

The Yankees fought this government-as-marketplace attitude with several waves of reform during the 19th Century. But, despite some victories, the efforts always came to nothing in the end.

As a result, the Yankees and others with an interest in good government—often the most educated and potentially influential segments of the state's population—began opting out of the political process. Burned by their failures at reform, they developed a cynicism about Illinois government and its venality that has been rooted deep in the state's political culture ever since.

The combination of Illinois' deeply divided nature and its government-as-marketplace philosophy has created a political culture akin to a raucous bar fight in an old-time Western.

Each region of the state, interest group, racial and ethnic group and economic class takes part in a no-holds-barred struggle, seeking advantage.

In most other states, politics is less complex and less fractious. In Wisconsin, for example, many residents share a common Scandinavian background, and most

share a belief in government as a means of improving life.

In Illinois, government is the way to get your fair share—but only if you fight for it.

Laws in Illinois tend to be broadly written and filled with exceptions. That's because they're the result of compromises and because no one trusts anyone else.

Because of the suspicion at the state level, there's a great emphasis in Illinois on local control. In the 1940s, for example, Illinois had 12,000 school districts. Today, the number is down to a little over 900, but that's still many more than most states have.

Also, unlike most other states, Illinois has three different types of school districts: elementary, high school and unit, which includes both levels of education.

It's a confusing and unnecessarily complex system, but it's what happens when everything is the result of barter.

The three different school aid formulas in Illinois are another example of the unnecessary—and, arguably, wrong-headed—complexity that results from the state's marketplace political culture.

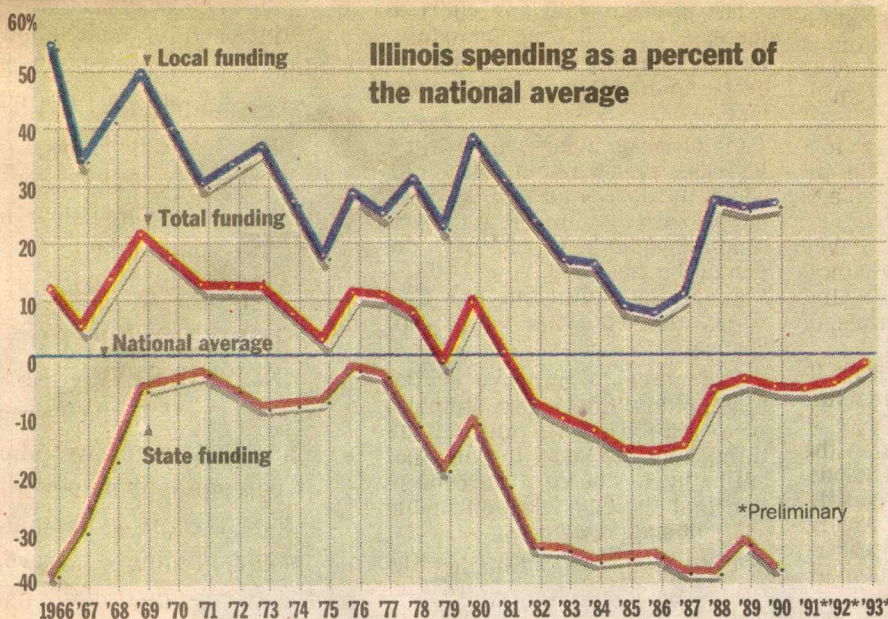
The main school aid formula is designed to give state money to school districts that aren't able to raise enough themselves to provide an adequate education for their children and to those that have large numbers of children from poor families, needing extra help.

Various factors, such as local property values, are fed into the formula to determine how much money each district will receive. But, under this formula, some districts in Illinois, mostly in the Chicago suburbs, wouldn't receive anything since they're so wealthy and have so few poor children.

So the state offers those districts two other formulas, one of which is a simple flat grant of about \$200 per student. Thus, districts that don't need state aid are given it anyway, and there's less money for the areas that really require the money.

average

was more than 16 percent below the average.



1966	11.7%	-37.7%	53.7%
1967	5.0%	-30.0%	33.7%
1968	-	-	-
1969	21.3%	-5.4%	48.8%
1970	-	-	-
1971	12.2%	-3.0%	29.5%
1972	-	-	-
1973	12.0%	-8.5%	36.2%
1974	-	-	-
1975	2.7%	-7.7%	17.0%
1976	11.0%	-1.9%	28.2%
1977	10.4%	-3.2%	24.5%
1978	7.5%	-11.5%	30.6%
1979	-1.1%	-19.7%	22.1%
1980	9.6%	-11.1%	37.7%
1981	-	-	-
1982	-8.2%	-33.1%	23.3%
1983	-10.9%	-33.4%	16.5%
1984	-13.1%	-35.4%	15.7%
1985	-16.4%	-34.8%	8.4%
1986	-16.8%	-34.4%	7.2%
1987	-15.8%	-37.4%	10.5%
1988	-6.0%	-37.5%	26.8%
1989	-4.2%	-32.1%	25.4%
1990	-5.7%	-36.7%	26.2%
1991*	-5.9%	NA	NA
1992*	-4.9%	NA	NA
1993*	-1.6%	NA	NA

Losing ground to competing states

- When stacked up against its main economic competitors, Illinois is among the also-rans in total funding for schools. Among the nine largest industrialized states, Illinois ranks 6th. Among the 20 richest states, Illinois ranks 15th.

Top urbanized states

1993 ranking,
revenues per enrolled pupil

Ranking

1. New Jersey	\$9,893
2. New York	\$8,529
3. Pennsylvania	\$8,494
4. Michigan	\$6,854
5. Ohio	\$5,845

Richest states

1993 ranking,
revenues per enrolled pupil

Ranking

1. New Jersey	\$9,893
2. Connecticut	\$8,506
3. New York	\$8,529
4. Pennsylvania	\$8,494
5. Alaska	\$8,434
6. Massachusetts	\$6,897
7. Michigan	\$6,854
8. Maryland	\$6,515
9. Delaware	\$6,508
10. Rhode Island	\$6,442

Revenues per enrolled pupil: 9 large urbanized states

80 percent or more metro, over 7 million population; 1993 dollars

STATE	1971	RANK	1980	RANK	1990	RANK	1993	RANK
U.S.	\$3,871		\$4,532		\$5,960		\$5,938	
California	\$4,053	6	\$4,806	6	\$5,627	7	\$5,309	9
Florida	\$3,426	8	\$4,383	7	\$6,167	5	\$5,757	7
Illinois	\$4,344	4	\$4,965	4	\$5,618	8	\$5,841	6
Michigan	\$3,871	7	\$4,936	5	\$6,302	4	\$6,854	4
New Jersey	\$4,697	3	\$5,805	2	\$9,676	1	\$9,893	1
New York	\$5,796	1	\$6,212	1	\$9,066	2	\$8,529	2
Ohio	\$5,259	2	\$3,902	9	\$5,676	6	\$5,845	5
Pennsylvania	\$4,209	5	\$5,093	3	\$7,313	3	\$8,494	3
Texas	\$2,907	9	\$4,044	8	\$5,021	9	\$5,506	8

Revenues per enrolled pupil: 20 richest states

Adjusted for inflation; 1993 dollars

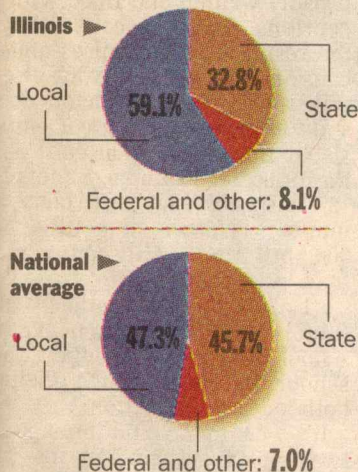
U.S.	\$3,871		\$4,532		\$5,960		\$5,938	
Alaska	\$5,383	2	\$9,348	1	\$9,878	1	\$8,434	5
California	\$4,053	13	\$4,806	13	\$5,627	17	\$5,309	18
Colorado	\$3,750	15	\$5,273	8	\$5,557	19	\$5,091	20
Connecticut	\$4,337	9	\$4,378	16	\$8,669	4	\$8,560	2
Delaware	\$4,497	6	\$5,495	4	\$6,241	11	\$6,508	9
Florida	\$3,426	18	\$4,383	15	\$6,167	13	\$5,757	16
Hawaii	\$4,494	7	\$4,329	17	\$6,059	15	\$6,390	12
Illinois	\$4,344	8	\$4,965	11	\$5,618	18	\$5,841	15
Maryland	\$4,504	4	\$5,174	9	\$7,041	6	\$6,515	8
Massachusetts	\$4,501	5	\$5,282	7	\$6,972	8	\$6,897	6
Michigan	\$3,871	14	\$4,936	12	\$6,302	9	\$6,854	7
Minnesota	\$4,284	11	\$5,413	5	\$6,272	10	\$6,151	13
Nevada	\$3,704	16	\$3,521	20	\$5,522	20	\$5,177	19
New Hampshire	\$3,337	20	\$3,921	19	\$6,230	12	\$6,395	11
New Jersey	\$4,697	3	\$5,805	3	\$9,676	2	\$9,893	1
New York	\$5,796	1	\$6,212	2	\$9,066	3	\$8,529	3
Pennsylvania	\$4,209	12	\$5,093	10	\$7,313	5	\$8,494	4
Rhode Island	\$4,319	10	\$4,722	14	\$7,028	7	\$6,442	10
Virginia	\$3,345	19	\$3,988	18	\$6,028	16	\$5,436	17
Washington	\$3,665	17	\$5,312	6	\$6,166	14	\$6,020	14

Skewed revenues

- The major cause of the inequities in school funding in Illinois is the state's heavy reliance on local funding, mainly through the property tax. Nearly twice as much money is raised locally for schools as is supplied by the state. Nationally, about an equal amount is provided from both sources.

1993 revenues

Percent of total school revenues by source



Source of revenues

In percent of total

SCHOOL YEAR	ILLINOIS		NATIONAL AVERAGE	
	STATE	LOCAL	STATE	LOCAL
1963	23.0%	73.0%	39.3%	55.9%
1964	—	—	—	—
1965	23.9%	70.3%	39.1%	52.5%
1966	22.2%	71.8%	39.9%	52.1%
1967	25.7%	66.8%	38.5%	52.3%
1968	—	—	—	—
1969	31.1%	63.9%	39.9%	52.1%
1970	—	—	—	—
1971	33.1%	61.0%	38.3%	52.8%
1972	—	—	—	—
1973	33.8%	61.0%	41.4%	50.1%
1974	—	—	—	—
1975	39.3%	53.8%	43.9%	47.4%
1976	38.3%	55.1%	43.4%	47.8%
1977	37.7%	53.7%	43.0%	47.6%
1978	37.6%	54.0%	45.7%	44.5%
1979	38.1%	53.6%	46.8%	43.4%
1980	38.5%	54.4%	47.4%	43.3%
1981	—	—	—	—
1982	35.2%	59.9%	48.3%	44.6%
1983	35.8%	59.4%	47.8%	45.4%
1984	36.4%	59.2%	48.9%	44.4%
1985	38.5%	56.9%	49.4%	43.9%
1986	39.1%	56.5%	49.7%	43.9%
1987	36.8%	57.9%	49.5%	44.1%
1988	31.8%	62.0%	47.8%	46.0%
1989	33.5%	57.8%	47.3%	44.2%
1990	31.7%	59.0%	47.3%	44.1%
1991	28.7%	65.0%	47.4%	46.0%
1992	34.6%	56.8%	46.8%	46.3%
1993	32.8%	59.1%	45.7%	47.3%

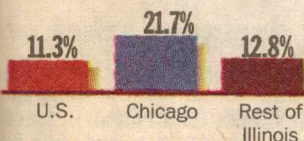
Reduced public school clout

- The heavy Catholicism of Chicago means that a significantly higher percentage of city schoolchildren are enrolled in private schools, nearly twice as high a percentage as the rest of the state and the U.S. It also means that there are fewer parents and politicians lobbying for adequate funding of public schools.

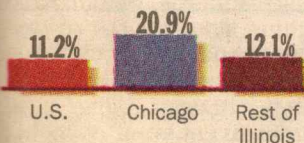
Private school enrollment

1990-91

As a percent of total



1992-93



1990-93 school enrollments

Public and private school enrollments; figures in thousands

YEAR	TOTAL	PUBLIC	PRIVATE	PERCENT PRIVATE
1990-91				
U.S.	56,448	41,217	5,232	11.3%
Chicago	522	409	113	21.7%
Rest of Illinois	1,613	1,407	206	12.8%
1992-93				
U.S.	47,871	42,496	5,375	11.2%
Chicago	520	412	108	20.9%
Rest of Illinois	1,720	1,512	208	12.1%

Sources: Tribune analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Center for Education Statistics, the National Education Association and the Illinois Bureau of the Budget.

Chicago Tribune/Terry Volpp

revolt.

In addition, there are structural problems with the state's tax system that limit the amount of revenue that can be raised.

Unlike most states, Illinois has failed to expand its sales tax to a wide range of services, such as repair work or landscaping. Yet, this is an area of increasing growth in the national economy, while spending on durable goods, the traditional objects of sales taxes, is shrinking.

Illinois' flat-rate income tax is another problem because it puts a relatively light tax burden on the wealthy, the one segment of the population that has shown income gains over the last decade and a half.

There's a grab bag of other factors as well, including such disparate elements as the trend among politicians to see the Illinois legislature as a career, the national debate over whether more money means better education and the strong Catholicism of Chicago.

And, of course, there is the stereotype of the Chicago Public Schools system as a chronically mismanaged institution that constantly demands more money but fails to educate its children adequately.

Suburban legislators routinely evoke this image to counter calls for increased funding for schools throughout the state.

"The Chicago Public Schools are an albatross around the neck of state policymakers who want to commit more money to education," says James Nowlan, a former Republican Downstate legislator who, until recently, was president of the Taxpayers' Federation of Illinois.

Ultimately, however, the answer most often given for Illinois' decline in school funding is: "Politics."

Democrats blame Republicans. Republicans blame Democrats. But it's not that simple. Both parties have played a role in the slip-slide in school funding. Indeed, they've acted in concert. Despite their rhetoric, they share a common belief that it isn't worthwhile politically to give much more than a modest amount to education.

To understand the school funding problems in Illinois, it's necessary to understand the nature of the state and the nature of its political culture.

Illinois arguably is the most

Divided state doles out unequal education for all

"We've been able to increase the property tax to hold our own," says Robert Haisman, president of the Illinois Education Association, the state's largest teachers union. But he's wrong. For more than a decade, the local money hasn't been enough. Since the early 1980s, school funding per pupil in Illinois from all sources—state, local and federal—has been less than the national average.

And Illinois' ranking among the states has slipped precipitously. In 1971, the state was 10th in per-pupil revenues. By last year, it had dropped to 22nd, according to preliminary data. And it's likely to slip even further when final figures are available.

This trend is dangerous for Illinois children. If their education isn't good enough, they'll be at a disadvantage when they're looking for jobs. And, more and more, it's a national job market in which our graduates seek employment.

It's dangerous for the Illinois economy as well. Good schools attract businesses and jobs; poor schools push them away. "If we continue to disinvest in our human resources," says Fred Hess, executive director of the Chicago Panel on Public School Finances, "a watchdog organization, 'we can expect businesses to disinvest in our state.'"

Both gubernatorial candidates—Dawn Clark Netsch, the Democrat, and incumbent Jim Edgar, the Republican—are promising to boost state funding for schools. But, if poor, in the 1992 fiscal year, Medicaid surpassed schools in receiving state money.

Schools, Medicaid and the Illinois budget

Figures are in thousands

YEAR	SCHOOLS BUDGET	STATE BUDGET	HIGH SCHOOL OF ELEMENTARY/ PCT.	FUNDING OF	MEDICAID OF	TOTAL PCT.
1980	\$13,573,583	\$2,581,090	19.0%	\$1,328,100	9.8%	9.8%
1981	\$14,685,503	\$2,666,276	18.2%	\$1,395,900	9.5%	9.5%
1982	\$14,365,174	\$2,645,978	18.4%	\$1,561,100	10.9%	11.1%
1983	\$14,689,066	\$2,513,069	17.1%	\$1,628,100	11.1%	11.1%
1984	\$16,515,507	\$2,615,031	15.8%	\$1,582,800	9.6%	9.6%
1985	\$17,878,267	\$2,799,543	15.7%	\$1,694,200	9.5%	9.5%
1986	\$19,578,180	\$3,171,433	16.2%	\$1,785,500	9.1%	9.1%
1987	\$20,558,071	\$3,394,519	16.5%	\$1,699,900	8.3%	8.3%
1988	\$20,770,821	\$3,315,650	16.0%	\$1,859,400	9.0%	9.0%
1989	\$22,965,336	\$3,498,048	15.2%	\$2,156,800	9.4%	9.4%
1990	\$24,375,043	\$4,011,720	16.4%	\$2,325,300	9.5%	9.5%
1991	\$26,042,073	\$4,101,867	15.8%	\$2,498,000	9.6%	9.6%
1992	\$28,585,020	\$4,148,873	14.5%	\$4,221,200	14.8%	14.8%
1993	\$30,781,967	\$4,264,175	13.9%	\$4,795,400	15.6%	15.6%
1994	\$31,489,944	\$4,412,932	14.0%	\$4,690,400	14.9%	14.9%
1995	\$32,531,971	\$4,776,665	14.7%	\$5,719,100	17.6%	17.6%

In recent years, under federal directives, Illinois' spending on Medicaid—health care for the poor—has skyrocketed. Meanwhile, the stream of federal revenue-sharing money was cut off by Congress in the mid-1980s. And, in many areas, property taxes rose forward.

Some of the reasons for Illinois' poor showing in school funding are, or appear to be, straightforward. Instead, whoever is elected will find reasons for not carrying out the promises. Or will find it impossible to put together a coalition of other politicians to fulfill those vows.

Decades of distrust in politics keep tax system untouched, schools below average

"Education has the misfortune of being everyone's No. 1 priority, but they want the other guy to pay for it," says former Illinois Schools Supt. Robert Leininger. Although the state government has long been known as one of the most tight-fisted in the nation in financing schools, few Illinois leaders realize just how poorly the state stacks up against its competition in total education funding.

The widespread belief is that Illinois is so rich that it's doing enough for its kids—that the low levels of state funding are being counterbalanced by high revenues generated locally, mainly through the property tax.

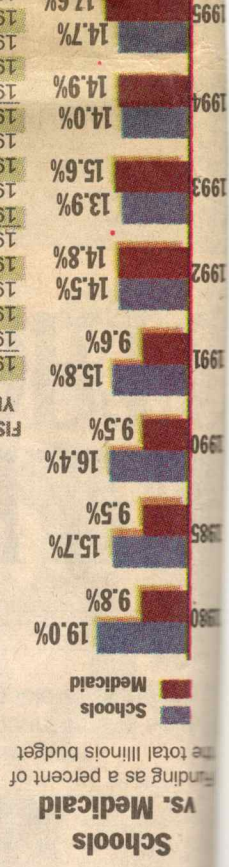
Patrick T. Reardon
URBAN AFFAIRS WRITER

Illinois had just an average commitment to education, school districts in the state would receive \$1 billion more each year than they now do.

That would mean \$889 more for each elementary and high school student.

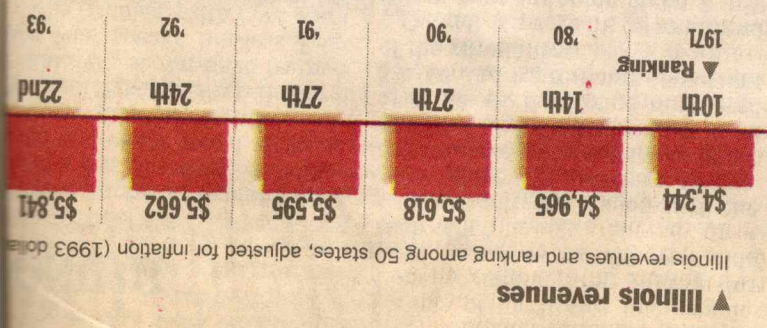
But Illinois doesn't have an average commitment to education. In fact, it's one of the worst in the nation in the portion of its personal income that's devoted to funding schools, a Tribune analysis of federal and state data has determined.

Other states—many of them much poorer than Illinois—are willing to make the financial sacrifices required to fill their schools with better teachers, more computers and better-equipped science labs, and to provide more individual instruction to students. In Illinois, schools take a back seat to almost everything else—



Illinois is rich, but not its schools

● Illinois ranks 9th among states in per capita income, but 22nd in revenues per pupil. In 1971, Illinois ranked 10th among the states in bank-rolling schools, but since then, the state's slipped significantly in the rankings.



Revenues per enrolled pupil: 50 states
Adjusted for inflation; 1993 dollars

STATE	1971 RANK	1980 RANK	1990 RANK	1993 RANK
U.S.	\$3,871	\$4,532	\$5,960	\$5,938

Alabama	\$17,106	41	\$2,412	48	\$3,313	45	\$4,130	46	\$3,830	48
Alaska	\$23,008	7	\$5,383	2	\$9,348	1	\$9,878	1	\$8,434	5
Arizona	\$18,119	36	\$3,871	18	\$4,285	29	\$5,122	34	\$5,054	37
Arkansas	\$15,994	49	\$2,323	50	\$2,961	47	\$4,161	45	\$4,231	45
California	\$21,884	11	\$4,053	16	\$4,806	16	\$5,627	26	\$5,309	28
Colorado	\$21,475	15	\$3,750	22	\$5,273	10	\$5,557	29	\$5,091	36
Connecticut	\$27,957	1	\$4,337	11	\$4,378	24	\$8,669	4	\$8,560	2
Delaware	\$21,735	13	\$4,497	7	\$5,495	5	\$6,241	17	\$5,757	23
Florida	\$20,710	19	\$3,426	28	\$4,383	23	\$6,167	17	\$5,757	23
Georgia	\$19,203	29	\$2,725	44	\$3,505	42	\$5,185	33	\$4,428	43
Hawaii	\$23,378	6	\$4,494	8	\$4,329	25	\$6,059	21	\$6,390	14
Idaho	\$17,540	38	\$2,875	41	\$3,432	44	\$3,970	48	\$4,118	46
Illinois	\$22,534	9	\$4,344	10	\$4,965	14	\$5,618	27	\$5,841	22
Indiana	\$19,161	30	\$3,515	25	\$4,297	28	\$6,124	37	\$6,238	15
Iowa	\$18,324	35	\$3,779	21	\$4,705	19	\$5,037	37	\$5,233	31
Kansas	\$19,874	21	\$3,231	33	\$4,764	17	\$5,571	28	\$5,425	27
Kentucky	\$16,954	43	\$2,697	46	\$3,042	46	\$4,732	41	\$5,103	35
Louisiana	\$16,588	45	\$3,202	34	\$4,115	32	\$4,955	43	\$4,671	42
Maine	\$18,775	32	\$3,288	32	\$3,652	39	\$6,114	20	\$5,968	19
Maryland	\$23,920	5	\$4,504	5	\$5,174	11	\$7,041	7	\$6,515	10
Massachusetts	\$24,475	4	\$4,501	6	\$5,282	9	\$6,972	9	\$6,897	7
Michigan	\$20,542	20	\$3,871	17	\$4,936	15	\$6,302	12	\$6,854	8
Minnesota	\$21,017	18	\$4,284	13	\$5,413	7	\$6,272	14	\$6,151	16
Mississippi	\$14,708	50	\$2,352	49	\$3,879	49	\$5,513	49	\$3,745	50
Missouri	\$19,559	26	\$3,348	29	\$3,780	37	\$5,355	32	\$5,250	29
Montana	\$17,413	39	\$3,508	26	\$4,981	13	\$5,668	25	\$5,122	33
Nebraska	\$19,757	23	\$3,149	35	\$4,180	30	\$5,913	23	\$5,243	30
Nevada	\$22,747	8	\$3,704	23	\$3,521	41	\$5,522	30	\$5,177	32
New Hampshire	\$22,169	10	\$3,337	31	\$3,921	35	\$6,230	16	\$6,395	13
New Jersey	\$26,732	2	\$4,697	4	\$5,805	4	\$9,676	2	\$9,893	1
New Mexico	\$16,333	46	\$3,078	37	\$4,322	26	\$4,826	39	\$4,797	40
New York	\$24,771	3	\$5,796	1	\$6,212	3	\$9,066	3	\$8,529	3
N. Carolina	\$18,688	33	\$2,807	42	\$3,489	43	\$5,066	35	\$5,110	34
N. Dakota	\$17,123	40	\$3,448	27	\$4,812	21	\$4,812	40	\$4,988	38
Ohio	\$19,627	25	\$5,259	3	\$3,902	36	\$5,676	24	\$4,845	21
Oklahoma	\$17,035	42	\$2,729	43	\$4,304	27	\$4,487	44	\$4,400	44
Oregon	\$19,447	27	\$4,117	15	\$5,460	6	\$6,277	13	\$5,549	24
Pennsylvania	\$21,241	16	\$4,209	14	\$5,093	12	\$7,313	5	\$8,494	4
Rhode Island	\$21,203	17	\$4,319	12	\$4,722	18	\$7,028	8	\$6,442	12
S. Carolina	\$16,810	44	\$2,701	45	\$2,912	48	\$5,063	36	\$4,813	39
S. Dakota	\$17,977	37	\$3,113	36	\$4,154	31	\$4,550	42	\$4,719	41
Tennessee	\$18,415	34	\$2,562	47	\$2,790	50	\$4,055	47	\$3,918	47
Texas	\$19,134	31	\$2,982	39	\$3,634	40	\$3,504	50	\$3,749	49
Utah	\$16,138	48	\$4,348	9	\$4,444	22	\$7,068	6	\$7,323	6
Virginia	\$21,544	14	\$3,345	30	\$3,988	34	\$6,028	22	\$5,436	26
Washington	\$21,773	12	\$3,665	24	\$5,312	8	\$6,166	18	\$6,020	18
W. Virginia	\$16,148	47	\$3,003	38	\$3,778	38	\$5,476	31	\$5,958	20
Wisconsin	\$19,822	22	\$3,821	19	\$4,689	20	\$6,406	11	\$6,798	9
Wyoming	\$19,724	24			\$6,246	2	\$6,619	10	\$6,036	17

1993 per capita income

STATE	INCOME RANK
U.S.	\$20,781

Alabama	\$17,106	41	\$2,412	48	\$3,313	45	\$4,130	46	\$3,830	48
Alaska	\$23,008	7	\$5,383	2	\$9,348	1	\$9,878	1	\$8,434	5
Arizona	\$18,119	36	\$3,871	18	\$4,285	29	\$5,122	34	\$5,054	37
Arkansas	\$15,994	49	\$2,323	50	\$2,961	47	\$4,161	45	\$4,231	45
California	\$21,884	11	\$4,053	16	\$4,806	16	\$5,627	26	\$5,309	28
Colorado	\$21,475	15	\$3,750	22	\$5,273	10	\$5,557	29	\$5,091	36
Connecticut	\$27,957	1	\$4,337	11	\$4,378	24	\$8,669	4	\$8,560	2
Delaware	\$21,735	13	\$4,497	7	\$5,495	5	\$6,241	17	\$5,757	23
Florida	\$20,710	19	\$3,426	28	\$4,383	23	\$6,167	17	\$5,757	23
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Hawaii	\$23,378	6	\$4,494	8	\$4,329	25	\$6,059	21	\$6,390	14
Idaho	\$17,540	38	\$2,875	41	\$3,432	44	\$3,970	48	\$4,118	46
Illinois	\$22,534	9	\$4,344	10	\$4,965	14	\$5,618	27	\$5,841	22
Indiana	\$19,161	30	\$3,515	25	\$4,297	28	\$6,124	37	\$6,238	15
Iowa	\$18,324	35	\$3,779	21	\$4,705	19	\$5,037	37	\$5,233	31
Kansas	\$19,874	21	\$3,231	33	\$4,764	17	\$5,571	28	\$5,425	27
Kentucky	\$16,954	43	\$2,697	46	\$3,042	46	\$4,732	41	\$5,103	35
Louisiana	\$16,588	45	\$3,202	34	\$4,115	32	\$4,955	43	\$4,671	42
Maine	\$18,775	32	\$3,288	32	\$3,652	39	\$6,114	20	\$5,968	19
Maryland	\$23,920	5	\$4,504	5	\$5,174	11	\$7,041	7	\$6,515	10
Massachusetts	\$24,475	4	\$4,501	6	\$5,282	9	\$6,972	9	\$6,897	7
Michigan	\$20,542	20	\$3,871	17	\$4,936	15	\$6,302	12	\$6,854	8
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Montana	\$17,413	39	\$3,508	26	\$4,981	13	\$5,668	25	\$5,122	33
Nebraska	\$19,757	23	\$3,149	35	\$4,180	30	\$5,913	23	\$5,243	30
Nevada	\$22,747	8	\$3,704	23	\$3,521	41	\$5,522	30	\$5,177	32
New Hampshire	\$22,169	10	\$3,337	31	\$3,921	35	\$6,230	16	\$6,395	13
New Jersey	\$26,732	2	\$4,697	4	\$5,805	4	\$9,676	2	\$9,893	1
New Mexico	\$16,333	46	\$3,078	37	\$4,322	26	\$4,826	39	\$4,797	40
New York	\$24,771	3	\$5,796	1	\$6,212	3	\$9,066	3	\$8,529	3
N. Carolina	\$18,688	33	\$2,807	42	\$3,489	43	\$5,066	35	\$5,110	34
N. Dakota	\$17,123	40	\$3,448	27	\$4,812	21	\$4,812	40	\$4,988	38
Ohio	\$19,627	25	\$5,259	3	\$3,902	36	\$5,676	24	\$4,845	21
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Tennessee	\$18,415	34	\$2,562	47	\$2,790	50	\$4,055	47	\$3,918	47
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Wyoming	\$19,724	24			\$6,246	2	\$6,619	10	\$6,036	17

Illinois revenues

● Although it's one of the richest states, Illinois has been below average for more than a decade in total funding

As a percent of U.S. average
Revenues per enrolled pupil