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News

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Thursday, April 27, 2006 5:50 PM CDT

Law would reform school mergers

By Matt Adrian
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SPRINGFIELD -- Often contentious school district mergers may become more palatable to parents under a proposal that is heading to the Illinois Senate.

Current Illinois law requires voters approve the proposed consolidation. However, potential mergers involving three or more districts can be scuttled if one district's voters oppose the move.

Under the proposed reforms, the districts that approved the consolidation would be able to go forward with it, while the other could continue operating as a single unit. The lone district also gets five years to join the merger.

Lawmakers want to take the sting out of mergers, which can help the bottom line of cash-strapped schools and provide more classes for students.

However, attempting to consolidate school districts can also divide communities.

"Whenever you mention what I call the 'C-word' in rural areas, people are concerned," said state Rep. Roger Eddy, R-Hutsonville, a co-sponsor of the reforms. "Schools are the part of their community that they associate with the vitality and the life of that community."

The proposal sailed through the House unopposed Wednesday.

Illinois has 875 school districts, 200 contain only one school. The state estimates that 700 of the districts contain five or fewer schools.

"There are a lot of rural districts where property values are going down and the population is declining," said Eliot Regenstein, education advisor to Gov. Rod Blagojevich. "There are districts... that have a hard time making it. For some of those districts this is in an option."

The measure also jettisons out-of-district tuition for elementary schools that are not part of a combined district which includes a high school.

Instead, a hybrid board with members from all affected schools would set a high school tax rate to cover costs.

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Adjacent school districts could also share a single high school, while keeping elementary schools separate.

The legislation is Senate Bill 2795.

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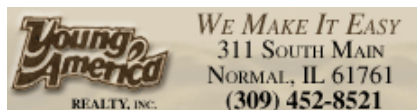
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