



Opinion Page - September 9, 2018

Isabelle Dienstag, Innovation Illinois Research and Policy Fellow

Labor Day has passed, and that means one thing for Illinois families — school is starting. Returning students are looking forward to seeing friends, while trying to forget about all the homework they're about to be assigned. Parents are happy their kids will have a steady routine again, but might be worried about their son making new friends, or how their daughter will do in school.

This is what the start of school should look like, but for communities across the state where Illinois' massive teacher shortage crisis has left classroom after classroom without teachers right before school's about to start, the end-of-summer mood is darker. Gov. Bruce Rauner had a chance to do something about this recently, and failed: He vetoed a minimum salary bill that would have greatly increased the number of teachers in Illinois.

The General Assembly must override his veto.

The governor has presided over the growing teacher shortage crisis for four years and done little to nothing to address this mounting emergency. Recently, he's claimed to show support for teachers by signing a law that makes it easier for out-of-state teachers, retired and substitute teachers, to pass licensure requirements in Illinois. Making it easier for teachers to become licensed in Illinois won't matter if teaching isn't a viable economic career choice.

The bill Rauner senselessly vetoed would require every public school district in Illinois to pay teachers a minimum salary of \$40,000 by the 2022-23 school year. The governor should have signed this bill, which was passed by the Illinois House and Senate, without hesitation or political horse-trading. How can you not support teachers?

Senate Bill 2892 provides that full-time teachers earn a minimum of \$32,076 for the 2019-20 school year, \$34,576 for 2020-21, and \$37,076 for 2021-22 until the full \$40,000 can be instated in 2022. Salaries would then be increased in line with the Consumer Price Index in the following years. For perspective, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average wage in 2017 in Jackson County was \$39,936, and in St. Clair County it was \$44,512.

Right now, many teachers make far less. According to the Illinois State Board of Education, there are 524 school districts out of over 850 that currently pay a minimum salary less than \$40,000. Some teachers make as little as \$26,800. Is it any wonder that districts — especially under-funded districts in central and southern Illinois — have trouble attracting and retaining teachers?

The majority of these low-paying districts are outside of the better-funded districts in Chicago and the collar counties. Research shows that not only are teacher shortages more severe in under-funded districts, they also hit vulnerable students the hardest: 30 percent of teacher vacancies in downstate Illinois are in special education classrooms.

Illinois and our governor need to offer teachers a future here so they can put down roots in a community and not have to leave for better-paying teaching jobs in other parts of the state, or in other states entirely. If we do not do more to support our teachers, September will see a lot of empty classrooms. Without our teachers, Illinois will continue to see the achievement gap widen, fewer students earning college degrees, and more high-paying jobs filled by people who were educated elsewhere.

Moreover, paying teachers actually works. Studies show that increasing teachers' salaries acts as an incentive that leads to an array of positive results. Not only are teachers more likely to apply to jobs with higher pay, a larger applicant pool increases the likelihood of a district hiring highly-skilled teachers. Salary increases also increase the number of applicants for hard-to-fill positions. One study even found that increasing teacher salaries by 10 percent is associated with a 3 to 4 percent decrease in high school dropout rates. Paying teachers more is good for teachers, but it is also good for students and families.

The bill encourages pay parity for teachers across Illinois, sets an example for other states, and sends a signal to teachers in and outside of Illinois that in this state we value our teachers and the remarkable work they do every day on behalf of our children.

Members of the General Assembly, don't let Illinois' classrooms stand empty: fix Rauner's mistake and override his veto of SB 2892.

