

March 24, 1996, SUNDAY, Late Sports Final Edition

**Edgar to Push Tax Proposal;**

**Won't Retreat Over Funding For Schools**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD-Even after Republicans battered Gov. Edgar's $ 1.9 billion plan to overhaul school finance in Illinois, the idea still can fly in the Legislature this spring, the governor said.

"I'm not ready to say this is a failed initiative," he said.

Edgar faced a barrage of criticism in the General Assembly, mainly from within the GOP's ranks, after he unveiled an election-year proposal to ask voters whether they want to pay more for education.

An Edgar-appointed panel last week proposed a constitutional amendment, which if approved by voters in fall, will raise the state's share of education funding from about 31 percent to 50 percent.

To do that, the group suggested a $ 1.9 billion increase in state income and other taxes that would be tied to a $ 1.5 billion reduction in property taxes, which now primarily fund education. The $ 400 million left over would be used to even up school spending inequities across the state.

While Edgar hailed the group's findings, he said his principle push to place a constitutional amendment on the ballot has been widely misinterpreted by his party as him pushing for a huge tax increase.

"We're not saying, 'Do it.' We're saying, 'Ask the people,' " Edgar said during an interview in Springfield.

"If I was in here saying I want you to increase the income tax and do this and that, I could understand they'd be weak-kneed," said Edgar, who in fact raised the possibility of an income tax increase in his speech to lawmakers last week. "I just don't know how you get in trouble politically when you ask people to express their point of view."

Senate President James "Pate" Philip (R-Wood Dale) said a tax increase is exactly how people will read Edgar's call for a fall vote. The ballot question, as written, won't pass the Senate, Philip said.

House Speaker Lee Daniels (R-Elmhurst) was equally pessimistic of the measure's chances in his chamber. But Daniels said he would favor an advisory referendum on education spending, not a binding constitutional amendment.

Both leaders sent members home this weekend to talk to voters and poll their district on Edgar's proposal. The leaders expect to get a report from the legislators early this week on the mood of Illinoisans on the issue.

The main concern of both Philip and Daniels is that Edgar's election-year maneuver with school taxes might threaten Republican control of the Legislature, where the party holds narrow majorities in both chambers.

Edgar said the Republican leaders shouldn't worry so much about what implications the tax question might have on the Nov. 5 elections.

"There's always an election around here. I think there could be more of a repercussion (this fall) if we don't do anything meaningful for education funding reform," Edgar said. "I think you get elected to do things. You don't get elected just to run for re-election."

Before the amendment can be placed before voters, both the House and Senate must approve its language by a three-fifths majority, meaning the GOP and Democrats must vote for it. The deadline for passage is May 5.

House Minority Leader Michael J. Madigan (D-Chicago) said he could support the proposal, which he credited to Edgar's 1992 Democratic gubernatorial opponent, Dawn Clark Netsch. But Madigan predicted Republicans ultimately will kill the plan.

Edgar clearly has put a great deal of his political reputation on the line -- one that was battered last week when his running mate, Lt. Gov. Robert Kustra, was upset in the U.S. Senate GOP primary. The conservative who beat Kustra, Al Salvi (R-Mundelein), has labeled Edgar's plan "a massive tax increase" that he will oppose.

Regardless of the critics, Edgar said that of all the ideas he has pushed during his five years in office, nothing tops the school-funding question -- a move that could ultimately help the state's most destitute school districts.

"I don't think the dollar guarantees education," he said. "But there isn't any doubt that if you have a range of between $ 3,000 being spent per student and $ 11,000 per student, the child at $ 3,000 will have less of an education."