

December 7, 1997, SUNDAY, Late Sports Final Edition

**153 school districts come out winners, but tax package not a boon to all**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD-Fast-growing school districts in Elgin, Aurora and Naperville and south suburban elementary schools emerged as the big winners besides Chicago in Gov. Edgar's education funding plan.

In the Chicago area, 153 of 283 school districts will wind up with more money next year because of the newly enacted tax package, a Chicago Sun-Times analysis of preliminary figures found.

"I feel like we won the lottery," said Arnold Drzonek, superintendent of Kirby Elementary School District 140 in Tinley Park, which expects to pocket nearly $ 3.4 million in additional money next year, more than any other south suburban district.

But while those districts await millions of extra dollars, nearly one in two Chicago area school systems -- many in north and northwest suburban Cook County -- will come up empty.

Worst hit are the region's 57 high school districts, of which only one -- Homewood Flossmoor High School District 233 -- will see more money next year under the plan.

The newly enacted $ 607 million package that raises the tax on cigarettes, telephone calls and riverboats and boosts late tax-filing penalties, benefits Chicago's schools the most.

City schools chief Paul Vallas estimates the system could receive as much as $ 132 million (though Gov. Edgar's latest estimate is $ 105 million) and already has earmarked some of the money to expand after-school and summer school programs.

Likewise in winning pockets of suburbia, school administrators are gearing up to use the windfall for gifted programs, beefed-up computer labs and to hire new teachers to lower class sizes.

Thirty-three of 44 south suburban Cook schools -- all but one an elementary school -- will get more money next year. Aurora's two unit districts will split a $ 7.8 million windfall next year.

In contrast, only four of 14 schools in the more affluent northwest suburbs of Cook County will see a difference, with the overwhelming majority there seeing no net gain at all.

"That is what it is supposed to show," Edgar aide Al Grosboll said of the regional differences. "The areas that have greater need are the ones that should be getting the new money coming in."

Rapid enrollment growth, steep property taxes, a low commercial tax base and a high percentage of poor children are all factors that determine how much money each school gets. Districts that spend less than $ 4,225 per student -- a minimum funding threshold set in the new plan -- all are due for increases.

Next to Chicago's big gains, the biggest single winner in the suburbs is Elgin Area Unit District 46, a sprawling 37,000-student district straddling the border of Cook and Kane counties.

The district expects more than $ 15 million in additional money from Springfield next year.

"What this means is there will be more opportunities for more children," said Bartlett resident Sandra Angelo, president of the U-46 school board, which has yet to determine how to spend its newfound cash.

Third on the list of Chicago area winners is Naperville-based Indian Prairie Unit Dist. 204, which under the governor's projections could see as much as $ 11.6 million more next year.

"Hey, I'll take it," said district school board President Mark Metzger. "Part of the reason we'll see such a huge infusion is the massive number of new students we've gotten. We added 1,800 more since the last school year."

Questions surfaced about why Naperville's seemingly affluent school district would be in line for a major infusion of state dollars just after it had opened a $ 62 million high school, which is believed to be the most expensive in Illinois.

"This is one instance that caused everyone to say, 'What's going on here?' " said Grosboll, one of Edgar's education point men. "But as wealthy as people believe that district is, when you take its property wealth and divide by the number of children currently there, you find they're not as wealthy as many think they are."

Though many south suburban elementary districts will gain money next year, many parents are upset that the bill did not contain guarantees for subsequent years. Yet they said they would not necessarily vote out legislators who voted against the tax package.

While millions more will flow to her Kirby Elementary School District 140, Tinley Park parent Bobbie Bouchard said the plan was "a good way for the legislators to weasel out of doing anything big for the schools. There are no guarantees after the first year."

Bouchard, who has a child at Grissom Junior High School, said of state Rep. Kevin McCarthy (D-Orland Park): "I give McCarthy credit for voting no."

But, she asked: "Do (opponents) have a plan that's fair and equitable? School funding has to be tied more to the income tax than property taxes, which are grossly unfair to seniors, or to sin taxes, which are unfair to the sinners and are regressive and undependable."

Edie Dobrez of Flossmoor said she would not oppose her state representative, George Scully, for his vote against the bill that brought $ 1.3 million to Flossmoor School District 161. She has a 3-year-old son, as well as daughters ages 6 and 8, and wants more substantial reform.

"I'm sure it was a tough vote for him, but I'm not going to hold it against him," Dobrez said.

Other critics are upset that the plan does not contain property tax relief or offer funding increases to high school districts.

Bloom Township High School District 206 in Chicago Heights is a poster child in the two-year battle to keep education funding reform on the Legislature's front burner. Bloom faces a debt exceeding $ 30 million.

"I don't think we at Bloom can hang on much longer," said Glenwood resident Mardelle Gundlach, whose child is a senior at Bloom Trail High School in Chicago Heights. "Our property values here have decreased to virtually nil. Our industry has left. We've lost 700 students in the last three years. And we've cut $ 8 million from the budget."

Because high schools get little financial help and property taxes remain high, Gundlach sees a bittersweet outcome. Twice -- last spring and last year -- she organized parents to march on Springfield to press for school funding reform.

"I think it was a victory for the children of Illinois that they did something," she said.

But while Edgar signed the education funding bill before cheering students at a Midlothian grade school last Thursday, Gundlach stayed away.

Contributing: Philip Franchine