Decisions are made every day the Legislature is in session that directly or indirectly impact school districts. As a school official, your voice is needed in Springfield to help keep unintended consequences of legislation out of the classroom.

As you prepare to engage with your Legislators, keep these tips in mind.

1. **Be mindful of when you communicate**—Ask about their communication preferences during sessions. Be persistent but also understand the timing of the issue you’d like to discuss.

2. **Know your issue and the process**—Understand the process (see the attached *How a Bill becomes a Law in Illinois*) and keep track of the status of the bill.

3. **Understand the need for give and take**—Like every good relationship this one has two sides. Making the extra effort to support your legislator goes a long way.

4. **Take advantage of the “off-season”**—When the legislators are not in session (typically June—October) is a great time to meet in person and open up the lines of communication.

### Time to Engage with Legislators

**DO**

- **BE FIRM**—Bring along facts and figures to support your case and be clear in your position.
- **LEAVE SOMETHING IN WRITING**—A single page, bulleted version of your argument they can refer back to.
- **COMPROMISE**—It’s better to get some things you want even if you can’t get everything. If you can’t defeat a bill, dilute it.
- **PERSONALIZE**—Understand how the issue specifically affects your district and say it in your own words.
- **KEEP YOUR WORD**—If you promise to provide information, drop everything and get it to them. This builds trust.
- **KEEP TRACK**—Follow the legislation through the process and update bill numbers and positions accordingly.
- **KNOW THE OTHER SIDE**—Understand the opposing view and give specific and factual rebuttals.
- **SAY “THANK YOU”**—If they helped your position, let them know. Show them your support by attending events when the legislature is not in session.

**DON’T**

- **BE ARGUMENTATIVE**—You can never win an argument with a legislator, so don’t start one. Never threaten or lose your cool.
- **WRITE A BOOK**—Your legislator doesn’t have time to read a 10 page historical document, rather they need common sense and simple arguments.
- **GIVE UP**—Be persistent in communicating your views. At the same time, don’t waste time lobbying opponents who are publicly opposed to your position.
- **WASTE THEIR TIME**—With form letters and mass mailings that don’t give new information.
- **Promise something you can’t deliver**—This is a quick way to lose credibility in the relationship.
- **COME UNPREPARED**—Be respectful of your legislators’ time, especially during busy in-session times.
- **EXPECT TO ALWAYS GET YOUR WAY**—Be willing to forgive, but not forget.
- **BURN BRIDGES**—Thank your legislator for considering your position. Restate your position and say you look forward to future discussions.
How A Bill Becomes Law in Illinois

FIRST HOUSE
- Bill drafted by Legislative Reference Bureau
  - Introduced
  - Read 1st time (per fl), referred to Rules Committee
  - Assigned to substantive committee
    - Hearing. Amendment(s) may be added
    - Recommended "do pass" or "do not pass" or not recommended
      - Full house votes to discharge
        - Full house doesn't discharge
          - Read 2nd time. Floor amendment(s) may be proposed
            -Bill dead
            - Read 3rd time. Voted on
              -Fails
              - Passes
                - Bill dead
                - Sent to second house

SECOND HOUSE
- Bill drafted by Legislative Reference Bureau
  - Introduced
  - Read 1st time (per fl), referred to Rules Committee
  - Assigned to substantive committee
    - Hearing. Amendment(s) may be added
    - Recommended "do pass" or "do not pass" or not recommended
      - Full house votes to discharge
        - Full house doesn't discharge
          - Read 2nd time. Bill sent to 3rd reading with committee amendment(s) or floor amendment(s)
            -Bill dead
            - Read 3rd time. Voted on
              -Fails
              - Passes
                - Bill dead
                - Sent to second house

GOVERNOR
- Places any kind of veto on bill
  - Approves bill
    - Bill becomes law
    - Returned to first house
- Refuses to recede from amendment(s)
  - Conference committee appointed
    - Conference committee recommends a compromise version of bill. If both houses agree with it, bill goes to Governor
- Refuses to concur in second-house amendment(s)
  - Sent to Governor
- Concurs in second-house amendment(s)
  - Sent to second house

- Item or reduction veto
  - Doesn't override
    - Doesn't restore
    - Item or reduction veto
      - Amendatory veto
        - Restores amount cut
          - Governor certifies that concurrence meets his objections
            - Bill becomes law in changed form
            - Governor wanted
              - Bill is law in form originally passed
              - Sent to other house
            - Does not matter
              - Bill dead
              - Sent to other house

- Total veto
  - Doesn't override
    - Overides
      - Bill dead

*Amendments proposed on the floor must go to the Rules Committee for approval before being considered.
What you learned in your school classroom will only get you so far in Springfield. Take an insider look at how the system really works from start to finish... and all the shenanigans that can happen along the way.
"I'm just a bill.  
Yes, I'm only a bill.  
And I'm sitting here on Capitol Hill.  
Well, it's a long, long journey  
To the capital city.  
It's a long, long wait  
While I'm sitting in committee,  
But I know I'll be a law someday  
At least I hope and pray that I will,  
But today I am still just a bill."

For the most part, the legendary (at least for folks my age) “I’m Just a Bill” skit from Schoolhouse Rock in the 1970’s is pretty accurate here in Illinois. A bill must make it through two legislative chambers and be signed into law by the Chief Executive whether in Congress in Washington, D.C. or in the Illinois General Assembly in Springfield. But, oh, the shenanigans that can happen on the way. That Schoolhouse Rock bill never came to Springfield to get mugged by a Rules Committee, stuffed into a “shell bill,” and tacked onto a provision in a 1,000 page “BIMP” bill that was voted on virtually sight unseen.

FOR THE VAST MAJORITY OF BILLS THAT ARE INTRODUCED, THE USUAL COURSE IS FOLLOWED. A BILL IN A SPRING LEGISLATIVE SESSION IN SPRINGFIELD WILL BE:

- Introduced in either the House or Senate.
- Read into the record on three separate days.
- Considered by a committee.
- Sent to the chamber floor.

If approved, sent to the opposite chamber to repeat the same drill there.

The process without any expeditious treatment will take about three months.

WHERE DOES A BILL REALLY COME FROM?

Sometimes the idea for a piece of legislation actually comes from the legislator who introduces it. Mostly, though, the idea has come from a constituent who has had a problem navigating the State’s bureaucracy, from an interest group or lobbyist, or from some other think tank or organization that the legislator belongs to. My favorite is when a legislator says (this is much more common to hear from a Congressman in D.C.) that “I wrote the bill that . . . .” In my 27 years working in and around the Capitol, I’ve never known a legislator that actually "wrote the bill." Legislators certainly make legislation happen, but it is staff, lawyers and lobbyists that usually do the actual writing. And in Springfield, truly only the lawyers at the Legislative Reference Bureau (LRB) write the official bill that is considered in the Capitol.

LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEES AND RULES AND HOW TO GET AROUND THEM

The General Assembly Rules in both the House and Senate versions allow for the use of committees. Standing committees are named in each chamber generally by subject matter. So, for instance, a bill that proposes to change the provision in the School Code regarding high school graduation requirements would likely be sent to the Education Committee in the Senate or the Elementary and Secondary Education Committee in the House.
When a bill is drafted and introduced, it will be “read into the record” in the chamber of origin. In the Senate, for example, there will be a day when the Secretary of the Senate (an appointed position selected by the Senate President) actually stands at the podium (the “well” as it is called by insiders) and reads the title of hundreds of newly introduced bills into a microphone before a usually totally empty chamber: “SB 230, a bill regarding education, SB 231, a bill regarding transportation” and so on. The Clerk of the House does the same thing in that chamber.

After the initial reading, the bill is sent to the Committee on Assignment in the Senate – in the House, they call it the Rules Committee. This committee decides which substantive committee to send a bill. Sometimes a bill is never assigned to a “real committee” and languishes forever in “Rules” or “COA.” This is the first ironclad gatekeeping device for the majority party.

The General Assembly Rules also require that a new bill be “posted” for a committee hearing at least six days before the bill will actually be considered by the committee. This is an attempt at transparency and for the public to become aware of legislation before the first vote is taken. And, really, this works pretty well.

Amendments, however, only need a one-hour posting notice before a committee hearing. Things can start to get a little sketchy about this point as legislation can be “fast-tracked” by deliberately attaching legislative language to a bill by amendment, thus avoiding the “sunshine” of the six day posting requirement.

The real problem with the General Assembly Rules is that they are just that, rules. They’re not in the Constitution, or in state statute, but in a resolution adopted by each individual chamber. So, upon occasion, the chamber can just vote to “waive the rule requirement” if a majority of the members vote to do it, it is done. That is the power of the majority party.

“I’m just a bill
Yes I’m only a bill,
And I got as far as Capitol Hill.
Well, now I’m stuck in committee
And I’ll sit here and wait
While a few key Congressmen discuss and debate
Whether they should let me be a law.
How I hope and pray that they will,
But today I am still just a bill.”

SECOND READING AND LEGISLATIVE TIME TRAVEL

After a bill is discharged from a committee, it goes back to the chamber floor and is read into the record for a second time. Second Reading is the amendment stage – the only time a bill can be amended. Many times the proposed amended language has already been agreed to in the committee hearing, but officially, the amendment is added on Second Reading on the chamber floor. Bills that the sponsor knows still needs some additional work could sit on the “calendar” (the House/Senate agenda) for weeks waiting to be amended.

But here again is a time ripe for questionable antics. The reason for the three separate readings of a bill is to ward against someone jamming through an idea all in the same day. Theoretically, if a bill is amended on Second Reading, it couldn’t be voted on for final passage until the next day at the earliest (when the bill would have its Third Reading). But the suspension of time and time travel is a regularly occurring phenomenon in the State Capitol.

Many times a bill will be moved from Second Reading to Third Reading properly, on separate days. But maybe a week later the sponsor decides the bill needs another amendment so the bill is “brought back to Second Reading.” Now it can be amended. However, and I am not making this up, the House Clerk merely announces that
the bill “has been read a second time previously” and the bill can be amended on Second Reading and called for a vote on Third Reading – final passage stage – not only the same day but in a matter of minutes. The tactic in most cases is benign and simply correcting a small glitch in the legislation. But the practice can allow for a deliberate skirting of the rules by tacking on a new or controversial amendment and get an immediate floor vote before allowing the public to comment.

SHELL BILLS AND OTHER QUESTIONABLE PROCEDURES
Sometimes the entire process is ignored from the start. Since there is a procedure for amendment and this requires a shorter hearing notice posting and therefore an opportunity for less people to see language before it is adopted, there are legislators who deliberately opt for this route. They will introduce a “shell bill” a piece of legislation that contains no substantive language but is moved through the process for later use. It might change the word “the” to “a” or “10” to “ten” in the Pension Code. Say the bill is approved by a House committee and then the full House and is sent to the Senate. It is discharged by the Senate committee still in the non-substantive form. Then on the Senate floor, an amendment is added to raise the retirement age in TRS to age 75. The bill is more than half-way through the process before anyone knew what the bill would ultimately do. Granted, it would need a couple of more votes but in this scenario those votes could be taken in a matter of hours instead of days or weeks.

WHAT DOES THE GOVERNOR DO?
This is not a rhetorical question. Once a bill is approved by both chambers the house of origin has 30 days to send the legislation to the Governor. The Governor, then, has 60 days to take action on the bill. So generally, a bill is introduced in January, the legislature meets in March and April to hold its committee hearings and adjournment is the end of May when most bills are called for final passage. The bills are sent to the Governor in June and he has until August to act. If the Governor vetoes a bill, it is taken up in the Veto Session in November and December. So it takes about a year for the entire legislative process. And that is how most legislation is handled.

But what about the bill that was written and submitted as a conference committee report (the final agreement between the two chambers when each had differing language for a bill) approved by both houses, sent to the Governor, vetoed, had the veto overridden and became law in the same afternoon? It really happened; it was the 2.2 pension enhancement bill in 1998. And they even had a “bill signing” ceremony that afternoon when the Governor actually amendatorily vetoed the bill! That is when you say “the bill was greased” as it moved quickly through the process with no resistance.

Only in Illinois.

“I’m just a bill
Yes, I’m only a bill
And if they vote for me on Capitol Hill
Well, then I’m off to the White House
Where I’ll wait in a line
With a lot of other bills
For the president to sign
And if he signs me, then I’ll be a law.
How I hope and pray that he will,
But today I am still just a bill.”