

Durflinger heads governor's panel

Group will hopes to make recommendation on regional offices of education in April

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Posted Feb 16, 2012 @ 10:18 PM

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MORTON — Mayor Norm Durflinger will play a key role in recommending to the Legislature and governor what the future should be for regional offices of education.

Gov. Pat Quinn has appointed the former school superintendent of Morton District 709 and former interim superintendent of Peoria District 150 to head a 15-member panel established by the Legislature last year to evaluate the offices.

At issue is the funding stream for the offices, along with how many there should be and the work they oversee.

Last year regional school superintendents' paychecks became a political football after Quinn vetoed funding for them and lawmakers had to craft a measure to pay them out of a pool of funds that goes to municipal governments and school districts.

"It was very tough on the regional superintendents not to have any salary for months," Durflinger said. "Certainly we'd like, on this commission, to keep that from happening again."

He also hopes that more permanent solutions can be found "so we don't have to look at this organizational structure for a long time."

Originally the legislation called for a series of recommendations to be made by August. But some lawmakers have pushed to get the document sooner in hopes of weighing its proposals at the same time they craft a budget for the coming year. That's no problem for Durflinger, who said "it's my full intent" to have a report compiled by April.

"It gives us an awful lot to do in less than six weeks," he said.

What those recommendations will be are, at this stage, unclear, with the group meeting Wednesday in Springfield - where they are likely to sit down most often to accommodate the number of lawmakers sitting on the commission. Durflinger himself is staying mum on any opinions he brings to the table, since "being the chair I need to be somewhat neutral on this until we get further into the process.'

Peoria County Regional Superintendent Gerald Brookhart has previously said that he expects the panel to recommend consolidating the number of offices statewide from the roughly 50 in existence today.

Durflinger accompanied Quinn on a trade mission to China last September and "on the last day I offered my services if anything needed to be done," an offer that resonated with the governor.

"The governor felt his extensive background in education made him an excellent choice to serve on the commission," spokeswoman Annie Thompson said of Durflinger. Durflinger "has done a significant amount on school leadership and school consolidation," particularly with his work as co-director of Illinois State University's Center for the Study on Education Policy.

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