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State Sen. James Meeks says higher state income tax will fix schools

Meeks says a state income tax increase will fix schools

By Brian Cox Special to the Tribune

December 4, 2009

State senator **James Meeks** drew national media attention last year when he took busloads of Chicago school children to New Trier High School in Winnetka to highlight problems plaguing many inner city schools.

Meeks, D-Chicago, returned to Winnetka this week to take part in a forum aimed at developing strategies to ensure that students in poor Chicago neighborhoods get an education that compares to what is offered in affluent suburbs.

Meeks told the roughly 70 people who attended the session -- "School Funding Reform: Equity and Excellence" -- that the problem could be eliminated by an increase in the state income tax. The event was held at the Winnetka Community House.

A bill he introduced in the state legislature would increase the income tax by two percentage points and generate an additional \$2 billion that could be used "to ensure all children in the state receive a quality education," Meeks said.

Meeks said he brought 1,000 Chicago school students to New Trier High School in September 2008 to draw attention to the plight of many inner city schools where dropout rates are soaring and where children often are crammed into overcrowded classes.

"We needed to shine a light on a very serious problem," he said.

The cost of not taking action could end up being much higher than an increase in the state income tax, said Ralph Martire, executive director with the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability in Chicago.

"If we consistently underfund schools in minority communities compared to the majority of white communities, kids coming out of those minority schools just aren't going to be competitive and they're not going to get good jobs," he said.

From 1980 to 2007, the wage gap between whites and blacks in Illinois increased by 100 percent, said Martire, who attributed some of the problem to school funding inequities.

"This is a very influential and affluent community," he said. "We want this community to say reform of our tax system and how we fund education is crucial for our state's economic viability, and we are behind it even though many ... will pay more taxes."