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## **Forum discusses options for schools beyond property taxes**

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ROSCOE — Rising property taxes that are necessary to keep schools afloat could have an adverse affect on the business climate in communities where taxes are steep, according to a panel of educators and business leaders.

Both groups said Wednesday they value strong schools but fear property owners can't afford to foot the bill much longer.

"Our residents pay a lot of taxes," Kinnikinnick schools Superintendent Robert Lauber said. "Anytime I have to go to (voters) for a referendum, the question I get here is, 'I already pay a bundle of property taxes; how can you ask for more?'"

Business owners, school officials and lawmakers sat on a Fairer Funding for Illinois Schools' panel to discuss ways to wean schools off of their reliance on property taxes. Participants and attendees recommended changes to the state's tax structure are needed, with much of the responsibility falling on lawmakers in Springfield.

Panelist Ralph Martire, executive director of the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, suggested legislators adopt a plan that would raise the state income tax while reducing the burden on property owners to fund schools.

"When the predominate funding sources are local resources, you're basically saying the quality of the public school system we can give your kid is tied to the affluence of the community," said Martire, who helped draft the proposal in the legislature. The quality of schools varies throughout the state because property tax rates vary among communities, he said.

A school district can spend \$9,000 per pupil, for example, but other can afford to spend significantly more, panelist Lauber said.

The crowded Kinnikinnick, Hononegah and Prairie Hill school districts all face upcoming referendums. With high property taxes, Hononegah School Board President Dave Kurlinkus, who attended the forum, said asking voters for more money will be a tough sell.

"It's not because people don't care about education," Kurlinkus said in interview. "They're just getting crushed already."

The talk also served to engage local business leaders — often swayed by high-taxing communities — in the school funding discussion, Fairer Funding for Illinois School's co-founder Tana Vettore said. Companies rely on schools to produce a skilled work force, while schools should look to them for opportunities such as internships and seminars, panelist Mark Podemski of the Rockford Area Economic Development Council said.

But when taxes run too high, potential new businesses might avoid the community or established ones might leave, some panelists said.

Vettore said companies need to partner with educators to continue exploring better ways to fund schools.

Wednesday's panel was the first of many upcoming forums, Vettore said.

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