

ICTA ILLINOIS COMMUNICATION AND THEATRE ASSOCIATION



SPRINGFIELD—The Illinois School Code currently requires that all students must complete one year of elective coursework chosen from fine arts, foreign language, or vocational education to receive a high school diploma. During its spring session, the Illinois legislature will consider Senate Bill 2510, which would amend the School Code by adding “forensic speech,” a language arts credit, to that list of electives. The bill is modeled after similar graduation requirements in 22 other states.

The Illinois Communication and Theatre Association’s Advocacy Committee will be monitoring the progress of the legislation. **This communique will explain SB 2510 and its implications. It is provided for informational purposes only.**

Below please find the language of the bill in its entirety:

SB 2510: “As a prerequisite to receiving a high school diploma, each pupil must, in addition to other course requirements, successfully complete one year chosen from (a) music, (b) art, (c) foreign language, (d) vocational education, or (e) forensic speech (speech and debate). Any forensic speech course under this subdivision (d) may not be used to satisfy the course requirement under subsection (1).”



The Illinois State Board of Education uses “forensic speech” as an all-encompassing term, allowing individual schools and districts the flexibility and adaptability to design their own speech- and debate-oriented language arts curricula. To use ISBE’s definition, “forensic speech” is applicable to an array of language arts elective courses that “offer students the opportunity to use oral skills” through any number of “methods, aims, and styles,” including but not limited to “formal debate, Lincoln-Douglas debate, expository speaking, radio broadcasting, oral interpretation, and dramatic interpretation,” with participation in extracurricular speech and debate activities being “encouraged.”



SB 2510 would not make forensic speech a graduation requirement, nor would it mandate that all schools teach forensic speech courses, nor would it move forensic speech from language arts to fine arts. The bill would *incentivize* students to take forensic speech-specific language arts electives and participate in speech and debate activities outside of the classroom. In short, SB 2510 would specify that speech- and debate-oriented language arts courses can be taken as diploma-requisite elective credit.

Similar legislation was proposed in the Illinois House and Senate last year. There was SB 1569 (which passed with a wide majority in the Senate, but was ultimately referred to the House Rules Committee), and HB 2258 (which passed unanimously in the House, but was referred to Assignments in the Senate). Both bills would have amended the School Code by adding the word “speech” to the list of diploma-requisite electives. However, several legislators raised questions about the generality of the word “speech” and how students, parents, guidance counselors, and colleges would interpret it. Rather than trying to “resurrect” the old bills, new legislation with clarifying language was proposed in late January.

“What is meant by the last line of the bill, regarding subdivision (6) and subsection (1)?”

The School Code provides that students must take four years of language arts courses. Individual school districts determine what specific language arts classes their students must take in order to meet this four-year requirement. Some districts still require a speech- or debate-oriented course as part of that four-year cycle. The majority of Illinois high schools do not.

The last line of SB 2510 ensures that these required speech- or debate-oriented courses cannot *also* be counted as “electives” to meet any new School Code provisions. In other words, it is a clause to safeguard students against “double-dipping.” (claiming that a required language arts course “also counts” toward the School Code’s elective course requirements).

Last year, teachers working in districts that currently require public speaking courses expressed concern that SB 1569 and HB 2258 would encourage administrators to turn their required classes into electives. The wording of SB 2510 would “disincentivize” any such curricular shifts, especially since most required public speaking courses do not match the description of “forensic speech.” Obviously, districts can change course requirements at their discretion. However, they could not point to SB 2510 as their rationale. This is one of the reasons this bill earned the support of the Illinois Education Association.



***“I teach a speech course that my district requires.
What would this bill do in my circumstance?”***

The bill, in and of itself, would not affect required classes. The bill would not require any revisions to your curriculum. It would not turn your required course into an elective course. If your district has already decided that speech should be a component of your school’s four-year language arts requirement, SB 2510 would not change that.



***“I teach a speech course that my district requires.
I also teach speech and debate electives.
What would this bill do in my circumstance?”***

The bill, in and of itself, would not affect your required class. It would, however, make your language arts electives more attractive to students. Your electives would become an official component of the School Code, as applicable to earning a diploma as any other course specified by the State.



***“My district does not have a required speech or debate course.
But I do teach speech and debate electives.
What would this bill do in my circumstances?”***

If SB 2510 were to pass, students could choose to take your electives and have them count as State-specified credit toward earning their diploma. Specifically, your electives would carry the same weight as any of the other specific electives referenced in the school code.



***“My district has neither a required speech or debate course,
nor does my district have speech and debate electives.
What would this bill do in my circumstances?”***

SB 2510 would provide a significant incentive for your district to write and approve forensic speech curricula. This would require you, and your colleagues, to advocate for the creation of those courses. But having forensic speech specified in the school code would clearly stimulate productive discussions with your administrators and within your school district.