



ADVOCACY UPDATE: SEPTEMBER 16, 2021



SPRINGFIELD—In 2021, the Illinois General Assembly proposed over 200 education reforms. Less than a quarter of those bills made it to the desk of Governor J.B. Pritzker. **Senate Bill 2354** was one of the few that received *unanimous* bipartisan support.

Prior to **SB 2354**, the Illinois School Code required that all high school students complete one year of elective coursework chosen specifically from music, art, foreign language, or vocational education. **SB 2354** adds “forensic speech” (speech and debate language arts credits) to that list. **SB 2354** brings Illinois’ elective graduation requirements in line with the School Codes of 22 other states.

REVIEW: In 2020, Illinois legislators proposed a near-identical bill. When COVID prematurely ended the 2020 legislative session, Senate leadership declared that any bills still in committee were “sine die” (adjourned “without another day”). In 2021, legislators proposed **SB 2354**. This new bill contains much of the old bill’s language.

This communique provides a foundational understanding of **SB 2354**. This information is provided **for informational purposes only**. It is **not** an endorsement.

FOR PURPOSES OF CONTEXT: Months before **Senate Bill 2354** was proposed, the Illinois General Assembly passed a separate, sweeping House Bill containing innumerable education reforms. One reform will limit the number of elective courses that the average high school student will be required to take. Currently, most Illinois high schools relegate rigorous communication education to their speech- and debate-oriented electives. Thus, limiting students’ access to electives will *further* limit students’ access to communication coursework.



Senate Bill 2354 was proposed, in part, to ensure that elective communication education courses do not fall by the wayside. **The bill is split into two parts.** The **first part** contains the following language: “As a prerequisite to receiving a high school diploma,” each student must successfully complete one year “chosen from (A) music, (B) art, (C) foreign language, (D) vocational education, **or (E) forensic speech (speech and debate).**”

PLEASE NOTE: Among other education reforms, the aforementioned House Bill also mandates that, by the 2028-2029 school year, Illinois high school students must enroll in two years of a foreign language. When that happens, per **Senate Bill 2354**, students may enroll in a third year if they do not wish to take music, art, vocational education, or forensic speech.



WHAT IS “FORENSIC SPEECH”? The Illinois State Board of Education uses this term to describe high school elective language arts courses that teach “how to use oral skills effectively in formal and informal situations.” According to ISBE, forensic speech courses are “often linked to an extracurricular program.” Participation in competitive forensics “is encouraged, but not always required.” ISBE uses “forensic speech” to distinguish electives (including, but not limited to, courses tied to competitive speech and debate) from required oral communication courses.

SB 2354 DOES NOT:

- Make forensic speech a graduation requirement.
- Mandate that all schools must offer forensic speech courses.
- Mandate revisions to existing speech and debate curricula.
- Require schools to sponsor speech and debate activities.
- Move speech and debate courses from language arts to fine arts.

SB 2354 DOES:

- Establish a foundation for speech and debate to play a role in how high schools are evaluated by the state.
- Incentivize school districts to foster and sustain elective speech and debate courses and extracurricular activities.
- Lay groundwork for improving teacher preparation programs.
- Give ICTA a greater role in providing professional development.



“I teach an oral communication ELA course that my district requires. What will this bill do in my circumstance?”

SB 2354, in and of itself, does not affect your class. It does not require revisions to your curriculum. It does not “convert” your required course into an elective course. It does not convert your ELA class into a fine arts class. Your district decided that an oral communication course should be a component of its four-year language arts requirement. **SB 2354**, in and of itself, does not change that.



“I teach an oral communication ELA course that my district requires. I also teach speech and debate ELA electives. What will this bill do in my circumstance?”

SB 2354, in and of itself, does not affect your required class. (See above.) It will, however, make your ELA electives more enticing to students. Your electives are now an official component of the School Code. As a result, students can take them as a State-specified prerequisite to a diploma.



“My district does not have a required oral communication course. But I do teach speech and debate ELA electives. What will this bill do in my circumstances?”

Because of **SB 2354**, students can take your ELA electives and have them count as State-specified credit toward earning a diploma. Your electives are now an official component of the School Code. As a result, they are as applicable to earning a diploma as any other course specified by the State.



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

SB 2354 provides a significant incentive for your district to write and approve forensic speech ELA electives. This will, however, require you and your colleagues to advocate for the creation of those courses. The fact that forensic speech is specified in the School Code can stimulate those discussions with your administrators and within your school district.

As mentioned earlier, **SB 2354** is split into two parts. The **second part** reads as follows:

A forensic speech course used to satisfy the course requirement under subdivision (1) may not be used to satisfy the course requirement under this subdivision (6)."

WHAT DOES THIS CLAUSE MEAN? Illinois mandates that all high school students must enroll in four years of language arts courses. However, the State does *not* mandate what specific language arts courses should be used to meet that four-year requirement. To maintain local community oversight, *specific* language arts courses are determined by individual school districts. In a *minority* of Illinois school districts, public speaking courses are used to meet part of the state’s four-year ELA requirement. The above-referenced line from **SB 2354** ensures that any required speech- or debate-oriented ELA course cannot *also* count as an elective on a student’s transcript. In other words, no student or school can claim that a required language arts course simultaneously “counts” as an elective requirement. The above-referenced clause prevents students and schools from “double-dipping.” Moreover, the spirit of the language suggests that any school with required ELA public speaking courses should keep them as such (“leaving well-enough alone” in schools where oral communication courses are currently required).

To be clear, at its own discretion, *any* Illinois school district can change its list of required ELA coursework (at a considerable cost to taxpayers.) However, because of the above-referenced clause, an administrator **cannot** point to **SB 2354** as a rationale for those changes. The bill is not a mandate, nor does it “encourage” administrators to “convert” required communication courses “into” electives. This is one of the reasons **SB 2354** earned overwhelming support from teachers unions, including the Illinois Education Association, and school administrator coalitions alike.