

Simon to host Classrooms First hearing in Central Illinois

Written by Kathryn Phillips

Tuesday, 25 October 2011 14:16

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Local technology director to discuss potential cost-savings of IlliniCloud

NORMAL – October 24, 2011. Lt. Governor Sheila Simon’s Classrooms First Commission will hold a public hearing at a Central Illinois community college this evening to solicit testimony from parents, taxpayers and educators on how K-12 school districts can improve learning and efficiency.

Among those expected to speak is Bloomington School District 87 Technology Director Jim Peterson. Peterson was invited to present about IlliniCloud, a non-profit cloud computing consortium he developed with other districts and technology leaders throughout the state that provides virtual servers, online storage and software for 150 school districts statewide.

The public hearing at Heartland Community College, which begins at 4:30 p.m., is the second of four such hearings scheduled this fall by the Classrooms First Commission, a statewide group tasked with finding ways to improve learning and efficiency at the more than 870 school districts in Illinois. The commission’s report is due to the Governor and General Assembly next summer.

“We are here to listen, discover efficiencies and promote what’s best for students,” said Lt. Governor Sheila Simon, chair of the Classrooms First Commission and the Governor’s point person on education reform. “Our goal is to work with local communities to find savings in backrooms, so that more money can be used to support classrooms.”

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IlliniCloud was launched two years ago and offers its services to school districts in Illinois for a small annual fee. Use of IlliniCloud could save districts 30 to 60 percent on information technology costs according to Peterson. This is particularly useful for small districts that often lack the resources necessary to develop adequate information technology infrastructure.

"Despite the economic burdens that Illinois school districts face, they still have to provide the same services for millions of students, staff and parents each day," Peterson said. "The IlliniCloud was created by districts for districts to provide and extend those services in a more efficient way."

IlliniCloud hopes to launch a statewide data collection and warehousing system that would allow districts to quickly generate reports to track student performance and analyze other data such as food service and transportation costs.

Dr. Joseph Pacha, an associate professor at the Illinois State University College of Education, is also scheduled to present research he conducted on what factors lead to school closure among elementary schools, junior high schools and high schools. These factors include changes in education funding, school enrollment, per-pupil operating expenditures and equalized assessed valuation. Pacha's research also found that among elementary schools, higher math scores decrease the likelihood a school will close.

"Most people believe that school closures come about as a result of lack of money and students," Pacha said. "But there are many other factors involved that if communities knew about them and worked to address them, they might have a very positive impact on the future of a school. Being able to identify those factors is what the study was all about."

The Classrooms First Commission members represent various stakeholder groups including teachers, school boards, principals, superintendents, parents and urban, suburban and rural areas. In its first phase of study, the commission will collect public input and review local and national research on educational efficiency and student performance.

"This is an important process for our education systems, and regional superintendents greatly appreciate the opportunity to participate and hear from those who really matter: the local voices," said Larry Pfeiffer, a central Illinois regional superintendent representing the Illinois

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Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools on the commission. “Regional superintendents are integral to these discussions and the process schools pursue to reorganize and consolidate. We're committed to ensure everyone is heard and these challenges are debated and resolved in the right way.”

Additional public hearings have been scheduled in Moline and Des Plaines.

To view the hearing schedule, watch streaming live video of the hearings, or to fill out an online survey regarding district efficiency, visit www.ltgov.il.gov .

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