



Chicago Muckrakers

Better Odds: Money for lottery tickets could be better spent on education

By AldenLoury, Wednesday at 7:00 am

While watching the drama of the Chicago teachers' strike unfold, it was clear the key underlying issue was money.

In addition to raises and job security, teachers complained about growing class sizes, the physical conditions of schools and the need for specialized services to better assist struggling students. Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Chicago Public Schools officials have said there just isn't enough money for all of that. And it shows every year when CPS scrambles to prune its budget down to the \$5 billion it needs to operate.

There's no doubt that Chicago schools need more money to buy new textbooks; pay for more teachers to lower class sizes; hire social workers, reading specialists, nurses and teaching assistants. The striking teachers also reminded us that their schools need air-conditioning, new roofing and other upgrades.

What you haven't heard much about, though, is the funds that could help meet these expensive needs. It's the hundreds of millions of dollars that Chicagoans spend on lottery tickets each year.

The Illinois Lottery was once lauded as a way to help fund public education, but now it's become a forgotten resource in discussions about how to boost revenue for schools.

For every dollar spent on lottery tickets in Illinois, just 30 cents actually goes to public schools, [according to the Illinois Association of School Boards](#). Another 58 cents is paid to players in prizes. And the remaining 12 cents covers commissions, bonuses and operating expenses. That means of the \$2.3 billion spent on lottery tickets in fiscal year 2011, just \$632 million went to the Common School Fund, the pot of money from which the state pays for elementary and secondary education.

And even that money doesn't truly increase money for education, [as journalists](#), including those with [The Chicago Reporter](#), and [school funding reform advocates](#) revealed long ago.

But the fact remains that Chicagoans, particularly those in black and Latino communities, spend millions on lottery tickets each year. The total spending was roughly \$600 million in fiscal year 2011 and if this money went straight to the schools rather than the Illinois Lottery, it would improve the quality of kids' education. In fiscal year 2011, Chicago was home to the state's nine highest lottery-spending ZIP codes and 16 of the top 20 ZIP codes.

The state's top three lottery-spending ZIP codes—60619, 60628 and 60651, each surpassing \$20 million in sales during fiscal year 2011—are majority-black ZIP codes on Chicago's South and West sides. Check [here for lottery sales and demographic data](#) for every ZIP code in Illinois.

In 60619, the area between 71st Street and 95th Street from the Dan Ryan Expressway to Stony Island Avenue, folks spent a whopping \$26.8 million on lottery tickets in fiscal year 2011. If people took just half of that money and donated it directly to the 20 public schools in 60619, it would mean an additional \$670,000 a year for each school.

That's the equivalent of nine additional teachers or one per grade level at a kindergarten through eighth grade elementary school. It's enough to potentially lower the first grade class sizes at Burnside Elementary Scholastic Academy from 30 students to 23 students. The money could also soften the blow of the \$950,000 budget decrease projected for Hirsch Metropolitan High School in fiscal year 2013, perhaps enough to prevent the more than \$460,000 in cuts to English, history, math and music instruction.

If people truly want to see their schools and their neighborhoods improve, maybe there's a better gamble in diverting their lottery money to their schools. Instead of giving schools 30 cents for every buck spent on the lottery, why not just give the entire dollar to the schools?