



We Can Do Better

Advancing Public Education in Illinois



EVERY STUDENT WORLD READY

A Question for Illinois Residents:

When it is time for our children to lead,
will they be ready?

Right now, the answer is no.

As we reported last November, in *The State We're In*, by almost any standard one might choose, we are not preparing Illinois students for the challenges of the 21st century.

For every four students who enter high school in Illinois: One will drop out. Two will finish school, but be unprepared for work or further education. **Just one will graduate ready for whatever comes next.**

As community activists, policymakers, educators, parents and business leaders, we owe the next generation better than that. All children deserve an education that prepares them for whatever path they may choose—that prepares them to be world-ready.

If that's the goal, how do we get there?

Over the last eight months, Advance Illinois has traveled the state to hear your ideas. We listened to you, the residents of Illinois; we listened to educators; we listened to students and parents; we listened to representatives of the greater community and to policymakers. We also delved into evidence-based studies and researched what other states and countries are doing. Assimilating all this information, we arrived at specific ideas and policies we believe could make Illinois—if it has the courage to embrace them—a national model for education excellence.

In travelling the state and the country, certain themes emerged, grounded in common sense and a deep-seated belief that education is the key to each child's future and to our collective well-being:

→ **People are at the core of good education.**

From engaged parents who are the first educators, to effective teachers who motivate and help students at various skill levels, to capable principals and superintendents who know how to manage people and resources to create a powerful culture—education is a people business. We are blessed as a state to have a great deal of talent in our schools but, as most are quick to point out, a dysfunctional set of rules and practices drives many away.

→ **Kids want to be challenged.** It may surprise some to hear this, but kids want to be challenged. As importantly, they want to see how their education relates to the world around them. They know when they aren't being pushed to do their best. They know when their materials are out of date and when their teachers are overwhelmed. And they blossom when they are challenged to stretch and allowed to pursue learning beyond the four walls of the classroom.

→ **Educators, students and families want to be measured on what matters.** While most everyone likes the idea of focusing more on results, they want to be held responsible for results that matter. Everyone needs to know how well students are mastering material, but schools and families also care about growth, about whether students are learning the wider skills that will serve them well beyond school, whether schools are safe, and how kids do when they go on to the next level.

We can do better.

→ **Everyone believes schools are out of date.**

People across the state are hungry for new technology and new ideas. Students don't understand why classes still take place in school between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m., when the Internet is always available and when hands-on learning is so engaging. Community colleges are anxious for better ways to reach students during the high school years. And everyone has ideas for how schools might put more time and greater flexibility to good use.

We do not pretend that the recommendations contained in this report are the only strategies Illinois should pursue. There are, of course, an unlimited number of things we might do to improve our schools. We must confront how our schools engage today's students, who bring a more complex set of problems to the schoolhouse. We continue to need a greater focus on early childhood, particularly for at-risk and bilingual populations. We are overdue for dramatic revisions to the state's funding system.

Instead, it is our considered view that these are some of the first steps the state must take if it is to begin the hard work of change—first steps in rethinking public education for this century.

The great news is that we have witnessed enormous energy in Illinois to improve our schools. While Illinois' economy continues to reel, we have good leadership in key places, and an unprecedented opportunity to take advantage of federal support. Some important

efforts are already underway, and additional hard work and immediate investments will position the state to reap significant dividends in the form of sizable stimulus dollars, improved student achievement and more equitable outcomes.

While the stakes are high, the timing is right. We rise not to criticize or castigate those who are working so hard now, but to offer our support to them and to the next generation.

As we said in our first report, their future is in our hands—and ours is in theirs.

Join us.



Jim Edgar
Co-Chair
Advance Illinois

Bill Daley
Co-Chair
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Robin Steans
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Executive Summary

Illinois students deserve the best education in the world

That means the most effective and talented teachers and leaders, the most innovative policies and challenging programs, the highest expectations and the most strategic support.

Will we give it to them?

This generation of young people is on track to be less-educated than their parents—for the first time in American history. This, at the same time the world and workplace are changing dramatically and rapidly—when students, more than ever, need high levels of skill in order to compete.

We can do better.

Advance Illinois has developed policy priorities and recommendations as a starting point for the state’s legislators and education leaders to put a world-class education within reach of every young person.

Let us underscore: If we want to dramatically improve education in Illinois, we must be bold. We must radically re-imagine the systems and policies that collectively shape the learning experience for Illinois’ children. We cannot tinker around the edges or avoid uncomfortable conversations. We must commit to genuine change, and we must do so now. Specifically, we recommend the following:

RECRUIT, DEVELOP AND EMPOWER THE MOST EFFECTIVE EDUCATORS

All other reforms—from greater funding to internationally rigorous standards—mean little in the hands of ineffective teachers and principals. Empowering teachers and principals to make critical decisions will help attract the sort of motivated and skilled professionals we need. At the same time, we need to strengthen the preparation we provide, give teachers better materials and support, and develop more strategic evaluation and compensation strategies. **Illinois should act to:**

- Evaluate teachers and principals based on their performance, starting with their impact on student achievement
- Evaluate and accredit teacher training programs based on the quality of their program and their graduates
- Award tenure and certification of principals and teachers based on performance, not coursework or years served
- Give schools and districts serving at-risk children greater control and flexibility to attract and hire effective teachers
- Use compensation to advance critical student and school objectives (expanded calendars, coaching and mentoring, effective instruction), rather than to reward advanced coursework
- In exchange for clear accountability, give principals and superintendents additional funding and flexibility to tackle some of our schools’ toughest problems

The recommendations we offer here are a starting point. If we can attract, train, support and empower effective educators, set our sights on world-class standards, provide essential supports and give schools and districts greater freedom to innovate within a framework of responsible accountability, we will have started to move in the right direction.

SET WORLD-CLASS EXPECTATIONS AND PROVIDE ESSENTIAL SUPPORTS

Top-performing states and countries have an important feature in common: they have world-class academic standards for their students. They also have a system of examinations that align to standards and provide useful information about student mastery. Yet raising the bar without providing help to reach the bar is a doomed exercise. We must make it easier for teachers to deliver high-quality instruction. **It's time for Illinois to:**

- Adopt internationally benchmarked college- and career-ready standards
- Raise graduation requirements to match college and career requirements
- Revise current assessments, agree on a mechanism for measuring student growth, and develop end-of-course exams to measure mastery of subjects throughout high school
- Make cutting-edge curricula and diagnostic assessments readily available to teachers
- Engage and inform parents, as the first educators, more deeply in their child's development and progress

EMPOWER LOCAL INNOVATION IN EXCHANGE FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESULTS

Illinois must embrace innovation in education and exchange more freedom for more responsible accountability. Though it is common sense that an elementary school in Cairo may have different issues than one in Moline, and that a high school on the west side of Chicago may require different strategies than one in Effingham, we continue to fund and regulate schools in a "one-size-fits-all" manner. Illinois must give schools and districts more control over their budgets, schedules and staffing.

When schools succeed—against a relevant and rigorous set of measures—they should be rewarded with continued or expanded support for their work, and effective strategies should be shared with others. Where schools fail over an extended period of time and across multiple measures, the state must be prepared to intervene. Our willingness to tolerate ineffective education must end.

As a starting point to empower innovation and accountability, **Illinois needs to:**

- Create an Innovation Fund, to support districts and schools willing to creatively tackle priority issues
- Build a world-class data system
- Develop the measures, capacity and strategies to constructively intervene in failing schools

Let's get started.

Together, we *can* do better.

Advance Illinois' Guiding Principles

By listening to Illinois residents and distilling the best research, we have developed a framework of education policy priorities that, when implemented, will help provide a world-class education to all Illinois youth. Throughout our deliberations, we have been guided by these core principles:

- A quality education improves the odds of success for all young people and anchors a state's civic and economic well-being.
- A 21st-century education begins at birth and engages families and communities.
- Effective teachers and principals are at the core of great schools.
- Improvement begins with high expectations for every student and every school.
- Results matter. We must focus on outcomes and employ quality data to understand how we are doing and put that knowledge to use.
- Innovative and far-reaching policies are the hallmarks of successful reform. Achieving them will require us all to move beyond old debates and come together around solutions that work for children.
- Sound education policy requires deliberate and persistent effort combined with honest collaboration and clear communication.
- Quality schools require adequate resources and the ability to use them wisely and effectively to promote student achievement.



Getting Results in Illinois: Goals for 2020

As Illinois seeks to improve its public schools, Advance Illinois intends to track the state's performance over time. Among other things, we will monitor the state's progress on the following measures:

Goal 1 – Stronger Academic Achievement

Illinois' academic proficiency rate on the Nation's Report Card (NAEP) rises to 50% in reading and math for all ages, placing it among Top 5 states.

- *Illinois currently trails more than half of all states with 29–37% proficiency¹*

	ILLINOIS	MEDIAN OF TOP 5 STATES	TOP STATE
Proficient or Above on NAEP			
4th Grade Reading	29%	42%	49% (MA)
4th Grade Math	37%	51%	58% (MA)
8th Grade Reading	29%	39%	43% (MA)
8th Grade Math	31%	41%	51% (MA)

Goal 2 – Smaller Achievement Gaps

The achievement gap in reading and math on the Nation's Report Card between minority/white students and poor /non-poor students shrinks to less than 10%. Looking ahead still further, we must eliminate gaps entirely.

- *Currently, the proficiency gaps in Illinois are roughly 20–35% in all areas, among the worst gaps in the nation.²*

	ILLINOIS	MEDIAN OF TOP 5 STATES	TOP STATE
Achievement Gaps on NAEP			
8th Grade Reading (White/Black)	28%	14%	10% (HI)
8th Grade Reading (White/Hispanic)	22%	12%	9% (AL)
8th Grade Reading (Non-poor/Poor)	24%	15%	12% (HI)
8th Grade Math (White/Black)	34%	16%	11% (OR)
8th Grade Math (White/Hispanic)	28%	17%	13% (HI)
8th Grade Math (Non-poor/Poor)	29%	18%	11% (DC)

Goal 3 – Greater College- and Career-Readiness

More high school students complete a college- and career-ready curriculum (90%) and fewer two-year and four-year college students require remedial courses (15%).

- *Currently, just 45% of Illinois high school students take a college- and career-ready curriculum, and Illinois' community college remediation rate is roughly 50%.³*

	ILLINOIS	MEDIAN OF TOP 5 STATES	TOP STATE
Percent Students College and Career Ready			
Completion of a College and Career-Ready Curriculum*	45%	77%	78% (TX)

Goal 4 – Higher Education Attainment

More students graduate from high school on time (85%), more students pursue postsecondary study (70%), and more adults complete postsecondary study (40%).

- *Illinois currently graduates 80% of freshman in four years, 55% of high school graduates enroll in postsecondary and just 36% of individuals over 25 have an associate or bachelor's degree.⁴*

	ILLINOIS	MEDIAN OF TOP 5 STATES	TOP STATE
Rates of Educational Attainment			
High School Graduation Rate	80%	87%	88% (WI)
Rate of High School Graduates Going to College**	55%	68%	73% (NY)
Associate Degree or Greater (for Individuals over 25)	36%	42%	45% (MA)

* ACT. ACT High School Profile Report. <http://www.act.org/news/data/08/statemenu.html>. This data is only for individuals taking the ACT and is self-reported, therefore data between states may not be comparable, due to different rates of ACT participation, 2008.

** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), school year 2005–06. The averaged freshman graduation rate is the number of graduates divided by the estimated count of freshmen 4 years earlier.

*** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Private School Survey (PSS)," 2003-04; and 2004 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Spring 2005.

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Recruit, Develop and Empower the Most Effective Educators

When it comes right down to it, the most critical support we can give our students, the most powerful resources we can provide, are highly effective teachers and principals. Why? Because the best curriculum will not sing in the hands of a dispirited teacher; the best compensation packages cannot entice faculty to stay in a school that is chaotic and poorly-led; and no amount of well-intentioned legislation and regulation will ever substitute for sound judgment applied by well-trained and motivated professionals at the local level.

ELEVATING THE TEACHING PROFESSION AND THE PRINCIPALSHIP

Advance Illinois recommends that Illinois:

Develop Meaningful Teacher Evaluations and Make Them Count

- Base teacher evaluation on performance, including the ability to promote student achievement
- Link professional milestones to job performance

Make Teacher Preparation Count

- Link accreditation of teacher training programs to the performance of graduates
- Evaluate current training programs

Ensure Effective Teachers Reach Disadvantaged Students and Areas

- Support efforts to recruit effective teachers to high-need areas
- Prohibit use of seniority in schools on the Academic Watch List

Support Districts to Use Compensation More Strategically

- Provide matching funds to districts willing to redeploy funds around strategic needs

Invest in Effective Principals and Empower them to Lead

- Define what it means to be an effective principal, and require more rigorous evaluation
- Revamp principal preparation and entry requirements
- Base certification on demonstrated effectiveness in the field
- Empower principals to be school leaders

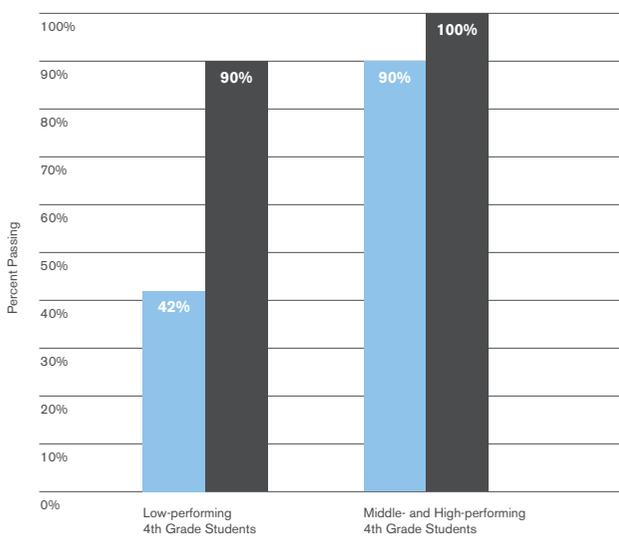
EFFECTIVE TEACHERS ARE ESSENTIAL TO STUDENT LEARNING

Being an educator is arguably the most important job in America: Teachers are the single most important factor in determining whether and how well students learn. Studies show that a teacher's influence on student achievement is 20 times greater than any other variable, including class size or poverty.⁵

While good teachers help all students, at-risk students stand to gain the most: Four consecutive years with a top-performing teacher can erase the black-white testing gap.⁶

In high-poverty, high-minority high schools whose teachers have above-average qualifications, students were almost nine times as likely to have college-ready academic skills as their counterparts in other high-poverty, high-minority schools with lower teacher quality.⁷

Good Teachers Help Close the Achievement Gap



3 Ineffective Teachers, Grades 5-7

3 Effective Teachers, Grades 5-7

Source: Education Trust. *Good Teaching Matters: How Well-Qualified Teachers Can Close the Gaps*, 1998

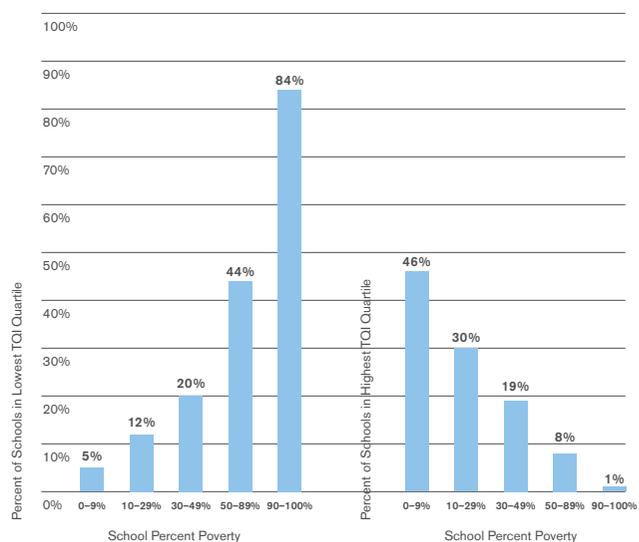
Mentoring Our Newest Teachers

While Illinois has recently adopted standards for high-quality mentoring and induction for new teachers, and set aside dollars for districts and schools willing and able to provide them, this sort of hands-on support for new teachers is not broadly available or well-measured. If Illinois is serious about classroom-based coaching and mentoring for young teachers, it should support high-quality local efforts and must develop ways to identify and measure efforts that are working, including collecting survey data on school climate and teacher effectiveness.

In spite of the powerful impact that good teaching can have on our most vulnerable students, and despite solid evidence that we have been shortchanging at-risk students, we have not recruited enough effective teachers to high-need schools and areas. The facts are striking:

- 84 percent of Illinois schools with the most low-income students had teachers from the bottom quartile in teacher quality.⁸
- Of those classes taught by less effective teachers, 89 percent were located in urban schools with high concentrations of poor and minority students.⁹

As Poverty Increases in Illinois Schools, Teacher Quality Decreases



Source: Education Trust. *Teaching Inequality: How Poor and Minority Students are Shortchanged on Teacher Quality*, 2007. And based on data from the Illinois Education Resource Council (IERC).

It's also true that being an educator is one of the toughest jobs in America. The system is practically designed to inhibit teachers from doing their best work:

- The training that teachers receive before they go in the classroom does not match the needs teachers report having once they enter the classroom.¹⁰ Most new teachers are left to sink or swim on their own, behind a closed classroom door and without help from more experienced teachers.¹¹
- Students move from grade to grade, classroom to classroom, with little regard for how much or how well they learned the content last year, and most teachers aren't given data on what their students do or don't know.¹²
- In most traditionally-organized schools, there isn't enough time in the school day to collaborate with other teachers to share data, align curriculum or strengthen instruction. Too many schools don't have the leadership or culture that would enable such professional learning communities.
- School principals too often don't have the skills, expertise, time or control over budgets and staffing to support teachers, align resources to school needs or build a great team.
- Personnel policies—those governed by state statutes, collective bargaining, district human resources offices and sometimes the “we've always done it this way” approach—do not differentiate at all among excellent teachers, average teachers, teachers who could improve their practice with help and those teachers who should seek employment in other professions.¹³
- Hiring and transfers in and out of schools are not governed by what really matters—whether teachers are a good fit and can help improve the school. For example, when budget cuts force teacher dismissals, the rule of thumb is “last hired, first fired.” How well a teacher contributes to the school's quality or to student learning does not matter.

As a result of all of this dysfunction, teachers have little incentive—or support—to be great or to help their colleagues be great.

In short, we ask teachers to beat the odds on a daily basis, without providing them with enough support and without addressing the fundamental working conditions, practices and policies that could elevate teaching into a truly great profession.

Policy Action: Develop Meaningful Teacher Evaluations and Make Them Count

Illinois has one of the weakest teacher review and development systems in the country. By statute, Illinois teachers need only be evaluated every other year, and these evaluations do not consider a teacher's impact on student achievement. In fact, in Chicago Public Schools, 93 percent of teachers who are evaluated receive “excellent” or “superior” evaluations, while 87 percent of schools did not issue a single “unsatisfactory” rating between 2003 and 2006.¹⁴

As a result, teachers rarely receive useful and timely feedback about what they can do to improve, rarely are evaluations used as a basis for targeted professional development and, perhaps more disturbingly, a teacher's actual performance has nothing to do with whether or not they receive tenure, whether or not they earn or renew certification, or how they are compensated. Accordingly, evaluations are largely meaningless.¹⁵



The Challenge of Defining Teacher Effectiveness

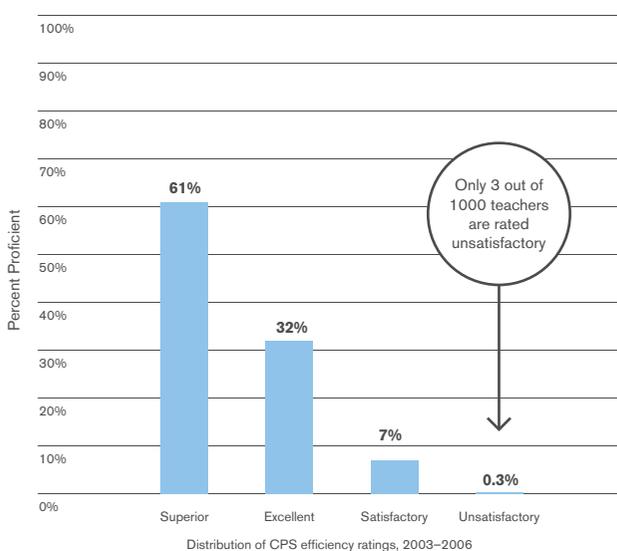
Defining teacher effectiveness is no simple matter. Educators disagree on how (or even whether) to measure a teacher's impact on student achievement, and the use of standardized test scores is complicated at best, given that many students are in untested grades, and growth can be hard to measure at the high school level where students move from biology to chemistry, from World History to U.S. History. However, the need to examine teacher effectiveness is clear, and a growing number of districts and states are finding ways to measure teacher impact by relying on multiple measures of student achievement, observation, samples of assignments, student work and more.

Moreover, the use of value-added data for the purposes of evaluating teacher preparation programs is more straightforward. Because programs produce teachers across a range of grades and subject areas, looking at the overall and average student growth achieved by graduates provides meaningful insight into program quality and should anchor the accreditation process.

→ **Base teacher evaluations on performance, including the ability to promote student achievement.** The National Council on Teacher Quality recommends that a teacher's ability to promote student achievement be a preponderant criterion in evaluating teachers.¹⁶ The state should require districts to regularly use substantive, performance-based teacher evaluations that assess teacher effectiveness based, among other things, on how well they drive student achievement.

The state needs to require frequent evaluations (at least annually for novice teachers) and provide a model evaluation instrument that is based on clearly defined standards, student performance, and classroom observations.¹⁷

Hardly Any Teachers Are Deemed Unsatisfactory in Chicago Public Schools



Source: The New Teacher Project. *Hiring Assignment and Transfer in Chicago Public Schools*, 2007.

Finally, the state will need to train administrators in any new teacher evaluation system, and hold them accountable for using it effectively. This should include ensuring that evaluations result in a range of teacher ratings. Unless school-level performance suggests otherwise, it will rarely be the case that the majority of teachers in a school earn either superior or unsatisfactory ratings.

→ **Link professional milestones to job performance.**

Unlike virtually every other profession, where performance drives management, decisions related to teacher certification, tenure, compensation, assignment, dismissal and layoffs are not linked to classroom performance. This needs to change.

First, the move from initial to full certification, and the decision to grant tenure, should be based on performance, not the length of time one has been a teacher.

Second, teachers who fall consistently short of performance standards should be supported to improve. If they do not, they should be dismissed. Though all teachers should be accorded fair due process rights, teachers whose performance is truly sub-par and who cannot improve can no longer be protected and allowed to remain in the profession.

Finally, layoff and transfer decisions should be based on performance history, rather than seniority which, except for the first few years of teaching, has been found to be generally unrelated to effectiveness.¹⁸

Opening Up Hiring at Low-Performing Schools

In 2006, California passed legislation (SB 1655) designed to free principals of low-performing schools to compete for teachers in the spring, when the best candidates are available, rather than being forced to accept veteran teachers who use seniority rights to secure open positions.

Policy Action: Make Teacher Preparation Count

Too often, teacher preparation programs are considered the weakest link at public colleges and universities. Undergraduate students know these programs are easy to get into and easy to get out of. In top-performing countries like Finland and Singapore, teachers are recruited from the top third of their class.¹⁹ In Illinois, as in most states, students admitted to colleges of education have lower grades and test scores than students in other undergraduate programs.²⁰

The content of what is taught in teacher training programs varies widely. It is often mismatched to what teachers say they need to know and be able to do once they are in the classroom, and against some of the skills and work we now understand matter in the classroom, including using data to inform instruction, involving parents, and more. And Illinois does not evaluate or hold teacher education programs accountable based on their graduates' ultimate effectiveness in the classroom.

As a result, a mounting body of evidence suggests that many traditional teacher training programs do not prepare candidates to improve student achievement.²¹ Understanding how Illinois' programs prepare our teachers is a necessary first step to addressing this challenge.

→ Link accreditation of teacher training programs to the performance of graduates.

Training programs should be evaluated based on how well their graduates are prepared for teaching, as opposed to the coursework they complete. In order to determine if programs are effectively preparing teachers, the state must first define effective teaching using a variety of measures including student achievement data, and then use that data as a basis for regular teacher evaluation. Then, Illinois should collect data on the performance of teachers once they are in the classroom, link that data back to colleges of

education and make that information publicly available. A stronger more results-oriented accreditation process will allow the state to promote effective training, and to improve, grow or close programs based on demonstrated impact.

Policy Action: Ensure Effective Teachers Reach All Students

Today, traditions, personnel policies and personal preferences combine to have an unintended, yet deleterious, effect on students: The most academically disadvantaged students tend to get the least experienced and least qualified teachers.

This has to change. We must place effective teachers in every classroom. It's the ethical thing to do for kids, and it's also the practical thing to do as we dramatically increase expectations for our students.

→ **Make it easier for struggling schools to hire and retain effective teachers.** The state should change some of the ground rules that currently work against the interests of struggling schools and schools with high numbers of at-risk students. The stakes are simply too high to allow other factors to dictate who teaches our children. As a starting point, Illinois should pass legislation ensuring that schools on the Academic Watch list be exempt from seniority rules that might otherwise govern decisions involving reductions in staff, transfers or hiring.

→ **Support local efforts to attract effective teachers to high-need areas.** One of the smartest investments the state can make is to put highly effective teachers with the students who need them most. Toward this end, the state should support local efforts to address the challenge of recruiting talented teachers to high-need areas. Because recruitment challenges run the gamut, from finding talented math teachers in rural areas to recruiting bilingual teachers in high-poverty neighborhood schools, the state should avoid implementing a statewide program, and instead make supplemental funding



Getting Serious about Teacher Evaluation

The New Teacher Project recently released a report on Illinois' teacher hiring policies called *The Widget Effect*. The title refers to the untrue idea that all teachers are essentially interchangeable. Reversing the Widget Effect depends on the ability of school systems to produce accurate and credible information on instructional performance that can be connected to personnel decisions. The report therefore recommends that states:

1. Create a performance evaluation system that fairly, accurately and credibly differentiates teachers based on their effectiveness in promoting student achievement.
2. Train administrators and other evaluators in the teacher performance evaluation system and hold them accountable for using it fairly and effectively.
3. Integrate the performance evaluation system with critical human capital policies and functions such as teacher assignment, professional development, compensation, retention and dismissal.
4. Adopt dismissal policies that provide lower-stakes options for ineffective teachers to exit the district and a system of due process that is fair but efficient.

available for districts with thoughtful plans to address demonstrated needs. Priority should go to districts willing to redeploy their own dollars first.

Local efforts on this issue should be undertaken with an understanding that the U.S. Department of Education has directed that states actively work to ensure quality teachers in all classrooms, and will be monitoring Illinois to determine what progress it makes in attracting effective teachers to high-need schools. To reinforce this work, the state should add a metric to its State Report Card that measures progress in this arena, using the Illinois Education Research Council's measure unless and until better measures become available.

“If a teacher is given a chance or two chances or three chances but still does not improve, there is no excuse for that person to continue teaching. I reject a system that rewards failure and protects a person from its consequences. The stakes are too high. We can afford nothing but the best when it comes to our children's teachers and the schools where they teach.”

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA, MARCH 10, 2009

Policy Action: Support Districts to Use Compensation More Strategically

Currently, more than \$400 million every year—more than \$200 per student—goes to reward teachers for completing graduate coursework and degrees, the vast majority of which are unrelated to teachers' assignments or needs.²² This large investment occurs despite the fact that, with minimal exceptions, there is no evidence that advanced degrees increase teacher effectiveness in the classroom.²³

At the same time, many schools and districts struggle to fill critical vacancies, others struggle to find money to extend the school day and year, and still others cannot afford to pay teachers to coach and mentor their younger colleagues.

→ **Provide matching dollars to districts willing to redeploy funds around strategic needs.** While the state cannot (and should not) be in the business of rewriting individual collective bargaining agreements, it should be prepared to reward districts and collective bargaining units willing to do away with the out-dated practice of providing automatic pay bumps for graduate degrees and certificates in favor of putting those dollars to more strategic use: lengthening the school day or year, attracting teachers in high-need fields, incenting high-performing teachers to teach in low-performing schools, rewarding outstanding performance, or coaching new or struggling teachers.

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IS THE KEY TO SCHOOL CULTURE AND PERFORMANCE

Any number of studies have looked at why some schools achieve under challenging circumstances, while other similarly-situated schools struggle.²⁴ To a study, these reports chronicle the overwhelming importance of people, starting with the school leader.

Effective principals attract and retain energetic and attuned teachers, promote a focused and coherent instructional program, know how to engage parents and the community and astutely deploy resources.

Surveys tell us that a positive work environment and a supportive principal are critical determinants of a teacher's decision to stay at a school or in the profession.²⁵ Likewise, a teacher working-conditions survey commissioned by the state of Illinois in 2008 (the "Illinois TeLL" survey) confirmed that school leadership is the most important factor in teacher retention, and showed a disconcerting lack of confidence among teachers in their principals.²⁶

Despite the importance of having effective leaders in every school, we know very little about who holds these positions in Illinois. What we do know is that the principal's job is extraordinarily complex, involving skills that range from instructional leader to budget director to personnel manager, and that, done well, the principalship is an all-consuming endeavor of long days, frequent evenings and year-round press.

We also know that sound judgment and vision are essential to making the myriad instructional, management and resource decisions that drive school-level success and do (or do not) create a powerful school culture.

If we mean to attract the sort of talent required for this position, we must set high expectations, empower effective leaders to do this complex job in a way that respects their responsibilities and talents and ensure leaders make good use of the tools at their disposal.

Better Evaluations Require Better Information

Illinois TeLL and similar teacher, parent and student surveys conducted by organizations like the Chicago Consortium on School Research provide crucial insight into a school's academic rigor and into the climate and professional culture of a school – information that has the potential to drive change. Accordingly, Illinois should commit to conduct such teacher and student surveys every other year.

Policy Action: Invest in Principals and Empower Them to be Effective

At present, Illinois grants more than 2,500 Type 75 certificates, the license required to be a principal or administrator in public schools, each year. Only a small fraction of these newly licensed administrators will ever become principals. Why? First, Illinois fills just 400 or so principal vacancies each year. Second, many candidates gain their Type 75 certificates simply as a means of boosting their salary, with little intention of ever seeking an administrative position.²⁷

What this means is that Illinois can and should afford to be much more selective in recruiting and admitting candidates. This involves moving beyond an admissions process that entails little more than filling out an application form and making a tuition payment, and creating a certificate that is exclusively for principals, rather than for an array of administrative positions.

Illinois is overdue to revisit and revise the content of its preparation programs to match up with new leadership standards and expanded skill sets. As it stands, for example, few programs train principal candidates in essential skills, such as using data to inform instruction, engaging parents and community partners, or evaluating teachers with an eye toward developing talent.

As importantly, the state does not have an agreed-upon way to measure principal effectiveness. Indeed, until recently, Illinois did not even require that principals be evaluated. It is essential that we get clear about the skills necessary to successfully lead a school, and equally clear about identifying success when we see it. It is this performance that should drive the training principals receive, their evaluations and development, and any decisions about which principals to certify and which preparation programs to accredit.

→ **Clearly define what it means to be an effective principal, and require more rigorous evaluations.**

Until 2006, Illinois did not require that its principals be



A Proven Principal Evaluation Tool

Robust principal evaluation will involve collecting new and different information on school quality and on the role of the principal in establishing a powerful school culture that leads to high performance.

As an example, researchers at Vanderbilt University have developed a new principal evaluation tool, VAL-ED (Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education), with the following core components: setting high standards for student learning; overseeing a rigorous curriculum and quality instruction; instituting a culture of learning and professional behavior; maintaining connections to the community; and holding leadership and teachers accountable for academic performance. The approach has been tested at more than 300 schools nationwide and is aligned with the national leadership standards set by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium.

evaluated. Now, principals are evaluated at least once every contract cycle. The next step is to ensure that these evaluations are meaningful.

Rigorous and research-based evaluation tools and methods are emerging around the country. Illinois should adopt a comprehensive, standards-based evaluation framework for principals that incorporates data on (1) student achievement and persistence, (2) academic rigor and support, and (3) teacher recruitment, impact, satisfaction and professional climate (including how effectively principals evaluate teachers).

→ **Revamp principal preparation and tighten entry and accreditation standards.** Per the recommendations of the State Leader Task Force, Illinois should toughen the basic entry requirements and standards required to be a principal.²⁸ With leadership from the Illinois State Board of Education, the Illinois Board of Higher Education and key Task Force partners, this work is well underway, and the General Assembly should promptly adopt recommendations as they come forward.

Once Illinois establishes more substantive and rigorous entry and program requirements, *all current programs should be required to reapply for accreditation against these new standards.*

Finally, going forward, accreditation of programs should be tied not only to the quality of the coursework and field experiences provided, but to the performance of graduates in the field—arguably the most important evidence of a program's impact.

→ **Base certification on demonstrated effectiveness in the field.** It is increasingly clear that a principal's ultimate effectiveness is virtually impossible to determine on the basis of background and training alone. Instead, the most reliable way to determine which principals have the skill set necessary to earn certification is to see how they perform in the field.

Accordingly, Illinois should move to a two-tiered certification system, with “standard” certification following “initial” certification—and coming after a period of time in the field, based upon a candidate's actual performance.

It is worth noting that Illinois has such a two-tiered certification system for teachers that adds little to the caliber of the state's teaching force. This is largely due to the fact that movement from initial to standard certification is not based on a candidate's performance. Linking standard certification to demonstrated performance—backstopped by publicly available data—is intended to make this a more rigorous process.

→ **Empower principals to be school leaders.** Not only must Illinois overhaul its system for recruiting, training and licensing principals, but the state and school districts should take steps to give effective principals the flexibility to build a school culture that challenges and supports students and teachers to excel. As it stands, principals have little control over the school schedule—both the amount of time available and how it is used—a situation that limits the ability to incorporate remedial and enrichment programming into the school day, to provide teachers time to collaborate or to integrate professional development into the calendar. Nor do principals exercise much control over their staffing (e.g., how many counselors they employ, whether or not they have enrichment positions) or over their budgets.

Freeing schools and districts to exercise greater control in each of these areas will take time and effort. As a first step, we recommend that the state make funds available to principals and superintendents with promising ideas for addressing priority areas, such as placing effective teachers with at-risk students, building stronger student supports, using teacher compensation more creatively to address academic priorities, and more. (See *Innovation Fund*, p.26)

2

Set World-Class Expectations and Provide Essential Supports

Little is ever accomplished in the absence of clear objectives, and it's an old business maxim that "what gets measured gets done." While the state has many essential roles to play in creating world-class schools, its most basic may be to set clear and rigorous expectations for student achievement and to clearly communicate how success at the student, school and district level will be measured. It is equally clear that our standards in Illinois have been too low.

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Advance Illinois recommends that Illinois:

Raise Academic Standards

- Adopt a common core of college- and career-ready standards

Adopt College- and Career-Ready Graduation Requirements

- Increase graduation requirements, particularly in math and science, and ensure relevance through meaningful career and technical equivalents

Strengthen and Align Statewide Assessments

- Align current tests with new standards and adopt an academic growth measure
- Develop end-of-course exams to more accurately reflect student mastery

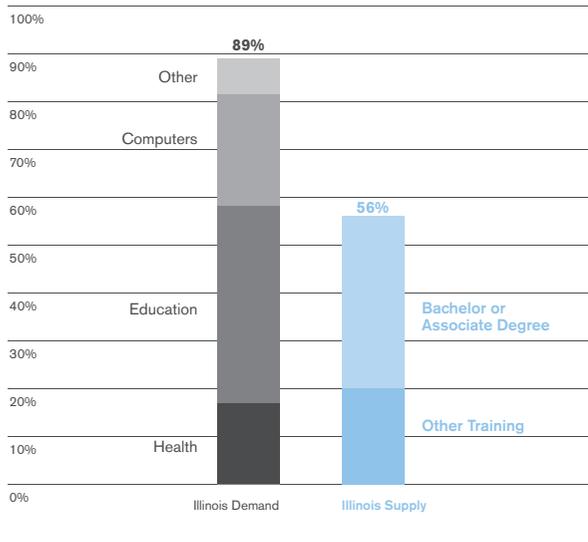
Give Teachers the Tools They Need to Succeed

- Make high quality curricula and assessments available for voluntary use

Provide Parents with Early, Relevant Information about Student Development and Progress

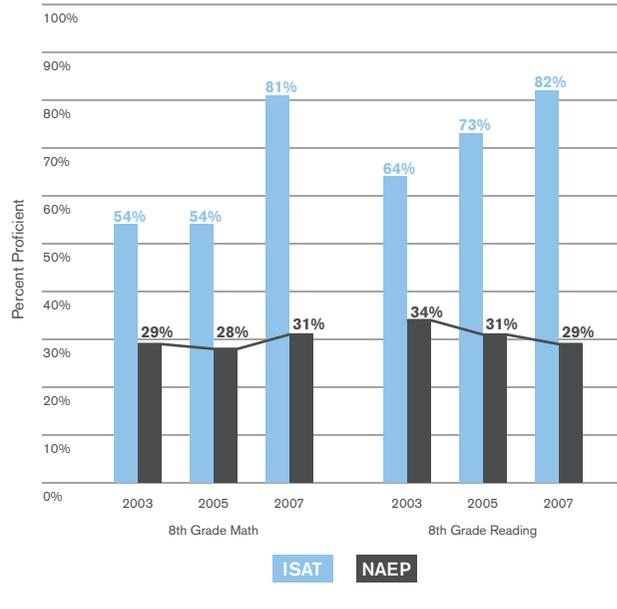
- Adopt a kindergarten readiness measure

Illinois Needs a More Educated Workforce



Source: Skills2Compete-Illinois Campaign. Illinois' Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs, 2007.

Illinois' State Tests Are Among the Easiest in the United States



Source: Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The Proficiency Illusion, 2007.

IT IS TIME TO RAISE OUR EXPECTATIONS

As President Obama has noted, the United States used to be first in the world in college graduation rates. We are now 14th—and slipping. Yet, most well-paying jobs require some amount of postsecondary training, and the skills required for success in further schooling and in the world of work are converging.²⁹ Our expectations of students, however, and our supports to help teachers educate students to the highest levels, have not kept up. Nationally respected organizations across the political spectrum have given Illinois mediocre and failing grades for the quality of our academic standards in core subject areas.³⁰

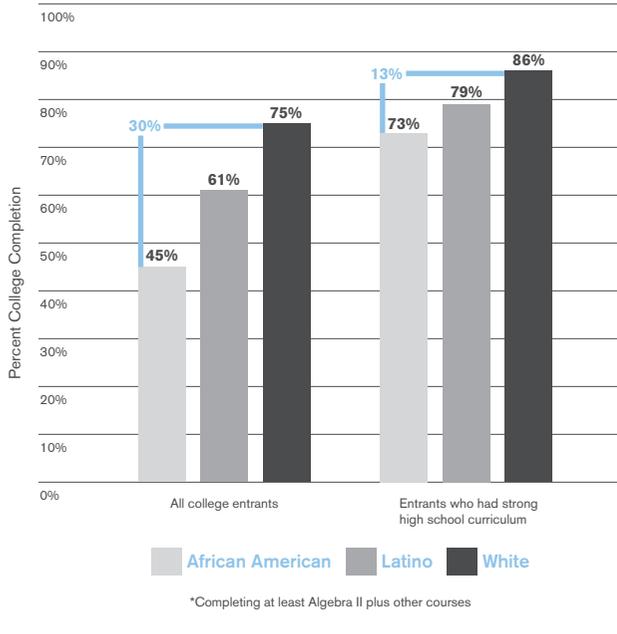
Such reviews are underscored on the state's assessments. While student scores on the Illinois Student Achievement Test (ISAT) show a rising trend, that success has not extended to more rigorous national tests, which place Illinois eighth graders in the bottom half of the nation in both reading and math, and show that fewer than one-third of fourth and eighth graders demonstrate "proficiency" in math and science.³¹

This gap underscores an ongoing mismatch between our state's expectations and objective measures of college and work readiness. We've been pretending that kids who score "proficient" on state tests are doing just fine. But "meeting standards" on our state tests—at all grade levels—does *not* mean that kids will be prepared for college or careers.

Ultimately, our flawed standards and low expectations boil down to a deplorable reality: Students who do well on the ISAT more often than not find they are unprepared for college-level courses and for a workplace that requires higher skill levels than ever before.³²

But if our students are falling short, it's because our expectations have been too low.

A Strong High School Curriculum* Improves College Completion and Narrows Gaps



Source: Adapted by Achieve and the Education Trust from the U.S. Department of Education, *Answers in the Toolbox*, 1999.

What it takes to earn a high school diploma in Illinois falls short of what is needed to succeed in postsecondary education or on most job sites. Many Illinoisans would likely be surprised to learn that the state's current graduation requirements don't match up with the enrollment requirements of many public institutions of higher learning.

While the average state requires students to take more than 20 credits to receive a standard diploma, Illinois only requires 16. In science alone, Illinois requires fewer than half the credits of the average state.³³

The result: Too many young people graduate from high school without taking advanced courses in key subjects.

Students pay twice and lose time when they go on to postsecondary programs only to take classes covering material that should have been taught in high school. Research shows that students who take enough of the right courses in high school are not only more likely to go on to postsecondary education, but to finish.³⁴

This is especially true for disadvantaged students. Low-income and students of color who take a rigorous curriculum in high school graduate from postsecondary programs at nearly the same rates as their more wealthy counterparts. In other words, taking rigorous courses in high school, especially math and science, *nearly erases the achievement gap*.³⁵

Policy Action: Raise Academic Standards

Fortunately, state leaders recognize that our state's standards are too low and need to be updated. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), Illinois Community College Board, the Illinois Business Roundtable and the Illinois governor's office joined the American Diploma Project (ADP) Network in 2008, an initiative dedicated to raising graduation standards across the nation. This is a terrific step to align expectations, measures, data and accountability to the goal of all students graduating from high school ready for their next step.

→ **Adopt a common core of college- and career-ready standards.** It is time for the state to accelerate its college and career readiness agenda begun through ADP.

ISBE has taken a leading role in working with more than 46 other states to develop a common core of academic standards aligned to college and career readiness and benchmarked against top-performing nations. Scheduled to be ready by the end of 2009, Illinois should act swiftly to adopt these standards when complete.

Policy Action: Adopt College and Career-Ready Graduation Requirements

→ **Increase graduation requirements.** New academic standards will signify college and career readiness, but the state needs to align these standards with the courses students are required to take to earn a high school diploma. Otherwise, students will continue to graduate unprepared for their next steps.

To develop college- and career-ready standards, the state needs to take action in three focus areas.

More math: Currently, Illinois students need only Algebra I and Geometry to graduate, but research shows that students need math through at least Algebra II in order to succeed in college and careers.³⁶ The state should require three or four years of math through Algebra II or its verified technical equivalent.

More science: Currently, Illinois students need to take two science classes. The state doesn't require these to be laboratory science—where students learn the scientific method, how to discover, how to investigate—nor does the state express a preference for which disciplines are essential for all students. At least one, if not both, of the science classes should be specified as laboratory sciences, and the state might consider adding a third science credit, as many states have.

More relevance: More rigorous courses for all students does not have to mean boring courses or a lockstep, one-size-fits-all approach. The state can encourage schools and districts to build more relevant learning experiences by designing the graduation requirements in a way that supports virtual learning (online courses), and that opens the doors to more varied curriculum or better dual enrollment partnerships with local community colleges and universities. Illinois has placed more attention in recent years on strengthening dual enrollment, and a statewide task force has released policy and funding options to ensure high quality and accessible dual credit options.³⁷

One of the most important ways to increase relevance is to improve career and technical education (CTE) by designing intentional CTE-based course sequences that meet high school graduation requirements. In particular, the state should support and approve CTE pathways—not just individual courses—that can be substituted as equivalents to traditional course sequences in math and science. These pathways should not sacrifice academic rigor, but can help prepare students for high-wage, high-growth jobs and further training.

Indicators of Illinois' Secondary-Post-Secondary Alignment

NO	Align high school graduation requirements with college and workplace expectations
NO	Align high school standards with college and workplace expectations
YES	Administer college readiness test to all high school students
YES	Develop a P-16 longitudinal data system
NO	Hold high schools accountable for graduating students college- and career-ready

Source: Achieve, Inc., *Closing the Expectations Gap*, 2009. Updated based on Illinois' 2009 passage of Senate Bill 1828.

“Should fate, as determined by a student’s zip code, dictate how much algebra he or she is taught? Such a system isn’t practical: Modern American society is highly mobile. And it’s just not right—every child attending U.S. public schools should be taught to high standards, regardless of where he or she lives.”

RANDI WEINGARTEN, PRESIDENT,
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

Policy Action: Strengthen and Align Statewide Assessments

→ **Align current tests with new standards and report on individual student growth.** Once a common core of standards is adopted, Illinois should align assessments to the new standards. This means reworking the ISAT in grades three through eight, emphasizing more rigorous and relevant content, as well as setting “cut scores” that are more consistent with other states and with national tests. The assessments should provide data on individual students’ growth over time—not just how well this year’s fourth-graders compare to last years’ fourth-graders. Elementary and middle school tests should align with the high school standards and tests so that scoring proficient in eighth grade means students are on track to be college and career ready in high school.

At the high school level, Illinois should continue to strengthen the Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE), particularly by ensuring that it measures the skills employers and college faculty say are needed, and then by using the test results to place students out of remedial coursework as they move on to postsecondary study or technical training.

→ **Develop end-of-course exams for core high school subjects.** We also need better and more regular measures of the standards and curriculum. End-of-course exams for core subjects are more sensitive to teaching and learning than a cumulative exam given near the end of high school, and can be used in conjunction with grades and other traditional measures to help schools more accurately judge whether students have mastered core material along the way and are ready for life after high school.



Raising Graduation Standards—and Getting Real Results—in Indiana

In 1950s Indiana, the ticket to a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle was sweat. Jobs in agriculture, the automotive sector and other manufacturing industries were plentiful and the pay and benefits were good enough to buy a house and raise a family. But the state's economy went through wrenching changes in the 70s, when its manufacturing sector took a nose dive, dramatically reducing the number of unskilled jobs available. Increasingly, manufacturing jobs required higher levels of education as industry became more specialized and lower-skill jobs were outsourced. However, few Hoosiers had postsecondary training or degrees. State leaders saw with clarity and alarm that Indiana was going to be left behind in a new global economy.

In 1994, the state established a single high school curriculum, called Core 40, designed to give students the best foundation for success in college and careers. Initially, Core 40 was a voluntary curriculum, but in 2005 the Indiana General Assembly adopted Core 40 as the required curriculum for all students.

Over this time period, Indiana has seen remarkable gains in moving more and more students out of general-education courses and into rigorous, college-prep courses—and getting more and more kids into college.

- In 1994, only 12 percent of Indiana high schoolers completed a college- and career-ready curriculum; in 2006, more than two-thirds did.
- In 1992, only half of graduating Indiana high school students went on to college, placing the state 34th in the nation on this measure. But by 2004, the state's ranking had shot up to 10th in the nation, with 62 percent of graduates going immediately on to college.
- At one selective Indiana public university, 85 percent of students who achieved the Core 40 diploma or Advanced Honors diploma in high school are earning a bachelor's degree within six years; without this preparation, only 60 percent earn a degree.

Source: Indiana Commission on Higher Education

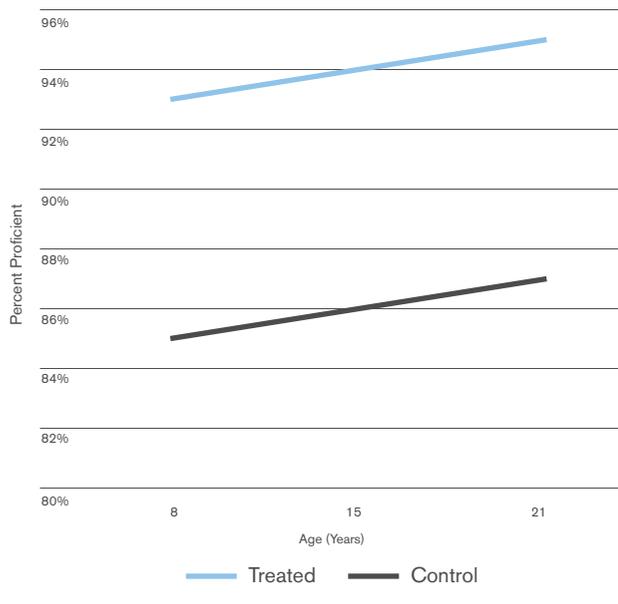


Starting At Birth

Reaching parents early is essential, and we applaud the efforts of organizations like Action for Children, the Ounce of Prevention Fund, and Voices for Illinois Children and of collaboratives like the Early Learning Council to push for expanded programs for our youngest children. State-supported programs for children aged zero to three typically involve significant parent outreach and training.

Such programming not only pays direct dividends for the children served, it also represents one of the most effective strategies for strengthening parent capacity—a powerful investment in the longer-term health of young people and families.³⁸

Reading Achievement is Much Higher for Young People in Strong Learning Programs



Source: University of North Carolina FPG Child Development Center. *Early Learning, Later Success: The Abecedarian Study*, 1999.

TEACHERS NEED BETTER TOOLS

If we are to raise expectations, then we must simultaneously give students, families and educators the resources and tools they need to be successful. If we are to get more students to graduate—and not just with a diploma, but with a diploma that means they are ready for college and careers—the state needs to invest in smart, strong supports for educators and families.

Too many of our teachers lack the curriculum and materials they need to teach our children to state standards. As one California educator recently explained, “Teachers should not be expected to be the composers of the music, as well as the conductors of the orchestra.”³⁹ Yet, that is exactly what we ask most teachers to be. Then we fill their classrooms with scores of children, many of whom don’t have even close to grade-level skills.

The state needs to give teachers much better materials and resources—such as curriculum materials and assessments that align with improved standards, professional development to use real-time formative assessment as part of daily teaching practice and more time to collaborate with peers.

Policy Action: Give Teachers the Tools to be Effective

→ **Make high quality curricula and assessments available for voluntary use.** When it comes to curriculum, Illinois education leaders would do well to partner with teachers, with other states, with subject-matter organizations and/or with national initiatives that provide model curriculum, lesson plans, assignments, scoring rubrics, and other tangible tools for teachers. The Internet offers unprecedented opportunities for the state to help teachers “point and click” to access materials that bring state standards to life, and the state is in an ideal position to develop a one-stop virtual library.

The Value of Formative Assessments

High-performing schools and districts typically use assessments, administered regularly throughout the school year, to measure student performance against curriculum standards and to provide more frequent feedback to educators, parents and students. They use the results to strengthen instruction, to target resources and to provide support to students and teachers who need extra help. The state should make high-quality diagnostic assessments aligned with new state standards available to teachers and schools.

PARENT ENGAGEMENT IS CRITICAL AND MUST START EARLY

Unfortunately for at-risk students, the achievement gap begins early: By the time they reach fifth grade, low-income children lag behind their middle-class peers by two and a half grade levels in literacy.⁴⁰ Over time, the achievement gap compounds; when students don't get the support they need to catch up, they begin to disengage. In other words, students begin the process of dropping out in elementary school.

Policy Action: Provide Parents with Early, Relevant Information about Student Development and Progress

Parent involvement and support at home are critical to student success. Despite this, teachers and principals receive little pre-service training in effective outreach strategies, and as a state we have not developed ways to measure parent engagement as a means of encouraging and understanding this piece of the learning puzzle.

As importantly, while some schools and districts are devising their own strategies to involve and inform parents, the state does a poor job of providing families with user-friendly information to help them support their children, particularly in the early years. Knowing what is expected of their child at each developmental stage, and understanding progress and gaps along the way, is an essential first step in strengthening a parent's ability to support student growth at home.

→ **Adopt a kindergarten readiness measure.** Illinois lags behind the nation in developing a way to measure students' school readiness. Having a robust and reliable snapshot of where students are developmentally as they begin kindergarten gives parents and educators a head start in identifying issues and directing resources where they are needed most. Given Illinois' considerable investment in pre-kindergarten access and expansion, such a measure also allows the state to better understand the impact of early childhood education programs.

3

Empower Local Leaders to Innovate in Exchange for Accountability and Results

Despite the technological and social advancements made in the world every day, our schools remain stuck in the past. If we want to achieve fundamentally different outcomes for our kids, we must allow effective local leaders to creatively respond to the challenges they face in their schools and districts. This means we must empower empowering principals and superintendents to make critical decisions and to innovate generally, and around priority issues: more students must be engaged and supported at every stage; achievement gaps must be eliminated; and failing schools must be turned around.

INNOVATING TOWARD SUCCESS

Advance Illinois recommends that Illinois:

Support Districts to Create Innovative Solutions to Critical Issues

- Create an Innovation Fund

Create a World-Class Data System

- Build a state-of-the-art longitudinal system
- Provide teachers with early warning data to support at-risk students

Hold Schools Accountable for Results

- Intervene in failing schools



The Trouble with State Mandates

Many of the problems facing families, schools, and districts are best addressed at the local level, rather than by broad or rigid state mandates. For example, Illinois has one of the worst student–counselor ratios in the country, with an average of one counselor for every 690 students.⁴¹ Old thinking might prompt the state to require more counselors in every school. In our view, this would be a flawed response. Why?

- *Illinois does not have enough trained counselors waiting in the wings to meet such a new requirement.*
- *This would be an extraordinarily expensive new mandate (Adding just one new counselor to every school would cost the state over \$200 million annually.).*
- *This would be an inefficient way to tackle the serious challenge of providing greater support to students for two reasons: (1) Some local schools/districts may have other strategies for providing student support that make more sense for their circumstances (lower class sizes, robust advisories, partnerships with local counseling programs), or (2) schools do not share the state’s commitment to enhanced counseling, and therefore lack the will and/or capacity to put additional counselors to good use. This does not mean the state should ignore this issue, or even that it would be wrong to have more counselors in every school. Instead, it suggests that the state support local efforts to respond to this issue, rather than forcing a particular solution across all districts.*

EMPOWER LOCAL LEADERS

Many of the problems facing families, schools and districts are best addressed at the local level, rather than by state mandates that are almost necessarily to broad or rigid. Once the state has put the right standards and measures in place, and invested in effective teachers and leaders, the state must find ways to support local innovation on critical issues—resisting the temptation to answer every challenge with a state-level mandate.

Instead, we propose that Illinois begin moving toward a system where the state is clear about its expectations and priorities, develops a sophisticated array of indicators to measure student and school success, and then supports innovative and effective local efforts.

Critical to this process is the availability of relevant and timely information at every level, so that families, teachers, principals, superintendents and policymakers can make informed decisions, calibrate programs, respond to areas of greatest need and expand successful strategies.

Policy Action: Support Districts to Create Innovative Solutions to Critical Issues

Our current system is based on centralized mandates, often compounded by restrictive local work rules. This results in a system where the state monitors what schools do and how they do it, rather than identifying goals and priorities and evaluating results. In this backwards universe:

- Principals have limited control over their staffing and schedules. This, despite the fact that Illinois has among the shortest school days and years in the country (with the United States having among the shortest annual calendars in the world)⁴² and despite ample evidence that more creative scheduling and staffing can generate expanded collaboration and development for teachers, and expanded remedial and enrichment opportunities for students.
- Despite powerful evidence that placing highly effective teachers with at-risk students can close the achievement gap, standard collective bargaining agreements typically prohibit the use of incentives to attract teachers to high-need schools, or to teach in high-need fields, and limit the ability to make layoff and other personnel decisions based on classroom performance rather than seniority.
- Seemingly in spite of its significant dropout challenge, Illinois has one of the worst student–counselor ratios in the country, with an average of 690 students for every counselor.⁴³

The Freshman “On-Track” Indicator

The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago extensively analyzed years of data from the Chicago Public Schools to identify who stays in school, who drops out and why. Their research found that grades and attendance are the two most important predictors of graduation in Chicago—more important than income or race or any other factor. Specifically, they determined that students who had not earned enough credits to “promote” to sophomore status with their peers were dramatically more likely to drop out than freshmen who remained “on-track” at the end of the year.

This information is transforming how many high schools in Chicago organize their freshman program, and how they support and advise their youngest students.

Charter Schools—Innovation that Works

We applaud the state’s recent expansion of charter schools available to children across Illinois, and encourage the continued growth and support of a robust charter system.

Charter schools are public schools, open to all students. In exchange for strict accountability for performance, charter schools are allowed to operate free from many of the regulations that apply to other schools. The mission-driven environment attracts entrepreneurial teachers and principals, and enables greater innovation in the classroom. The result? Charter schools typically outperform nearby public schools, and at the high school level have had notable success in graduating students and sending them on to further study. The state should work to replicate lessons and best practices from charter schools throughout the system, including some of the fundamental flexibility at their core.

• Instead of using teacher compensation to reward more hours, greater impact, peer coaching and mentoring, or work in a high-need school or field. Over \$400 million is spent in Illinois *each year* to reward teachers for getting master’s degrees or administrative certificates, despite the fact that there is no evidence that advanced degrees increase teacher effectiveness in the classroom.⁴⁴

Districts and schools must be given the support, resources and flexibility to innovate generally and in response to state priorities. Innovation should be grounded in evidence and driven by results.

→ **Allocate a portion of new education funding to a School Innovation and Performance Fund.** Increases in education funding from the state should be used to support innovation and reward performance. Specifically, Illinois should allocate a portion of any new education funding to establish an Innovation and Performance Fund.

“If you give people tools, [and they use] their natural ability and their curiosity, they will develop things in ways that will surprise you very much beyond what you might have expected.”

BILL GATES, FOUNDER, MICROSOFT

Instead of going automatically and by formula to schools and districts, the Innovation and Performance Fund would be available to all schools, but would send dollars to schools based on performance-driven applications. That is, schools and districts would:

- Present thoughtful, evidence-based strategies to raise performance in key areas
 - Demonstrate strategic use of existing funds
 - Agree to be held accountable for results at the end of a three-four year period (with the understanding that funding would continue for another multiyear period if agreed-upon objectives are met)
- **Create a state “Race to the Top” Fund.** In addition to a core Innovation and Performance Fund, Illinois should make an additional pool of funds available to schools and districts willing and able to take significant steps to tackle challenging, priority issues. (See sidebar.) Interested schools and districts would apply for up to \$500,000/school of annual support—again, with the understanding that funding would continue if performance goals are met.

Pursuit of Illinois “Race to the Top” funds should be voluntary and competitive, requiring only a commitment to accountability and innovation. If schools and districts make such commitments, they would be rewarded with substantial funding and flexibility to implement high impact changes.



How an Innovation Fund Can Help

Innovation dollars should be used to encourage thoughtful answers to the top challenges facing schools. Schools and/or districts should be supported to:

- *Find ways to extend the school day and year, permitting expanded teacher collaboration and development, and greater remedial and enrichment activities for students.*
- *Enhance the supports available to meet the broader social, emotional and physical needs students bring with them to school.*
- *Work with local collective bargaining units or superintendents to implement substantive new teacher and principal evaluation plans.*
- *Use compensation or other tools to recruit effective teachers to high-need classrooms and to fill critical vacancies.*
- *Pilot more strategic teacher and principal compensation strategies that reward key school/district goals.*

Policy Action: Create a World-Class Data System

New ideas are only as strong as the data that informs them. Illinois is overdue for a comprehensive, user-friendly data system that permits tracking of students over time and across early learning, school districts, colleges, and into the workforce. Illinois has historically collected limited data from local districts, and K–12 data hasn't been connected to data from early childhood or postsecondary institutions, so, we have not been able to analyze or compare the best ways to prepare kindergartners. We have not been able to determine which strategies lead to success in college or the workforce. And, we have not been able to compare the impact of a student's academic experience from place to place because we haven't collected data on student coursework or GPA. This has limited the ability of families, teachers, principals and policy-makers to make informed decisions.

→ **Implement a state-of-the-art longitudinal data system.** The General Assembly recently passed legislation paving the way to create a state-of-the-art longitudinal data system. We applaud the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), and the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) for their leadership in calling for this system, and to the collective membership of the Illinois Education Roundtable for its steady support. With more than \$9 million of federal grant dollars to get started, we encourage the state to make sure implementation follows the Data Quality Campaign's recommendations to get data into the hands of decision-makers, including teachers and parents, provide appropriate

oversight and outreach to encourage cooperation from all stakeholders and encourage collection of the widest range of data, including health and other data from beyond the school system. Finally, it is incumbent on the state to provide the resources and training to ensure principals and teachers use these data effectively at the school and classroom level.⁴⁵

→ **Provide teachers early warning data to support at-risk students.** More than 41,000 students drop out of school in Illinois *each year*—half of them from outside of Chicago, and the drop out rate is much worse for Latinos (44 percent) and African Americans (48 percent) compared to 23 percent overall⁴⁶. One of the most critical elements of a new data system needs to be the ability to analyze and predict which academic and non-academic factors contribute to whether students decide to stay in school. Often called “early warning indicators,” this sort of research-based information can help teachers and principals identify students at risk of dropping out—and take quick action to give students the support they need to stay in school.



No Child Left Behind and Illinois' "Failing" Schools

Currently, the state has over 500 schools on its Academic Watch List – a status they earned by failing to make "Adequate Yearly Progress" according to federal standards.

No Child Left Behind has focused people on results – a necessary and consequential first step. As a next step, we need to broaden the indicators used to measure school success and find ways to thoughtfully tailor benchmarks to accommodate individual school situations - without sacrificing expectations. In addition, it is important that Illinois differentiate among its "failing" schools to provide the right type of support. An otherwise high-performing school that is "failing" because its special education students have made insufficient progress is in a different situation than a school that posts low performance on multiple measures over many years.

Policy Action: Hold Schools Accountable for Results

If we are to move from a system of mandates to a system based on results, we must develop sophisticated measures of school performance and the capacity to respond when schools struggle.

Indeed, the most complex challenge facing Illinois may be the need for a thoughtful plan to intervene in chronically failing schools.

While the state has more than 500 schools on its Academic Watch list, many landed there as a result of targeted shortcomings, rather than as a result of broad-based failure to

educate. A much smaller number can be more aptly described as having entrenched and chronic problems which suggest a lack of capacity to serve students or improve on their own.

→ **Intervene in Failing Schools.** As the pressure grows to find a way to help these struggling schools, it is readily apparent that the state lacks the resources to do so. Having been in the compliance business so long and so thoroughly, ISBE has not historically needed to develop the sort of expertise or capacity required to tackle this knotty and sensitive problem. The situation needs to change—radically and quickly.

The state recently passed legislation (SB2119) creating a task force to examine the problems facing persistently low-performing schools and identify potential solutions. The task force will devise measures to identify which schools fall into the "chronically failing" category, explore national best practices for turning around struggling schools, and determine what state authority and capacity is necessary for the work at hand.

We encourage the task force to consider the lessons being learned in similar efforts around the state and country, and to move with all deliberate speed to craft a long-overdue state strategy for making a quality education available once more to some of the state's most vulnerable students.

Emerging Best Practice

School intervention should strive to achieve dramatic, not just marginal, improvement. Having studied school interventions around the country, Mass Insight concluded that successful efforts integrate three types of change, rather than pursuing one or another in isolation.⁴⁷

Program Change promotes comprehensive programmatic change with a focus on instructional strategies and design.

People Change recognizes the central importance of leadership and teaching and permits schools to bring on new leadership and staff.

Conditions Change allows leaders to make choices regarding programs and key resources including staff, schedule, and budget, and typically sets clear performance goals. Mass Insight cites the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) as an example of an effective integrated school "turnaround" model. Based in Chicago, AUSL focuses on strong teacher preparation and support, effective leaders, positive school culture, extended learning opportunities, and aligned content, instruction and assessment.

There is no shortage of work to be done to make our schools the best in the nation and the world. Some of our policies have budget implications. Others will require more vision than money. Regardless, any effort to move forward will falter if we fail to fix the way in which we fund our schools. However, as this report reflects, higher standards and results must undergird any funding reform, and deep change is necessary to make sure additional dollars drive performance.

It will take all of us working together to translate these recommendations into action, and to continue to advance sound efforts underway around the state. We are already working with partners on many of the priorities outlined here. We can do better... and so we will.

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