

A Vision for Partnership Between Districts and States

A Case Study of Illinois

By Dr. Stephen Frank, Jordan Ascher, and Rob Daigneau

Foreword

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Illinois is moving into a new era of accountability and support for its schools, while simultaneously implementing new standards and teacher evaluation systems. As a nonprofit education policy and advocacy organization, Advance Illinois felt it was important to investigate how Illinois can support districts in adapting to these changes. In particular, we wanted to look at how districts can better use their resources—including people, time, and money—to increase student achievement. Knowing that strategic change is difficult, we partnered with Education Resource Strategies (ERS), a nonprofit organization that has worked with states and districts across the country, to think strategically about how Illinois school districts expend their resources and how to implement evidence-based improvements.

Building off of their previous work with Illinois districts, the team from ERS interviewed leaders from a diverse set of districts to identify the barriers to and opportunities for change in Illinois. They then identified three key areas for further investigation.

First, not surprisingly, ERS identified the Illinois state funding system as a major barrier to ongoing improvement. The lack of equity and adequacy make innovation and improvement extremely difficult, especially in the schools with the most need. Furthermore, beyond equity at the state level, ERS' discussions with districts identified their inability to equitably distribute funds.

Second, the state can create infrastructure to support district improvement. This includes identifying those districts that are implementing best practice and creating networks of districts to support high-quality work. It is important to remember that support networks need funding and time to work. Funding for state support infrastructure can seem to be in conflict with sending funding directly to districts, schools, and the classroom. But without an infrastructure to scale innovation, there can be significant overlap in efforts and an inability to catalyze new efforts. The implementation of the new Illinois Learning standards, performance evaluation for talent management and support, and strategic planning for use of funds are three critical efforts that need ongoing support, good data, and model plans. The real barriers to change can seem

simple, but complex activities such as scheduling and targeted support structures for students often require districts to work together.

Third, ERS made direct suggestions for improvement that fall into two broad categories: how districts use time, and how they support, train, and compensate staff. Illinois has already started providing districts with the ability to innovate around seat time. The goal is to create paths to graduation based on a student's knowledge and capacity, rather than how much time they spent in a classroom. ERS writes that competency-based graduation requirements will "allow students to progress upon mastery while providing additional support to students who need it, thereby allowing districts to target limited resources toward the students who most need them."

This would be a big win for Illinois because it ensures that time and resources are used well, especially given how few hours students spend in school, relative to other states. Having a better understanding of the amount of academic time students get, which students get it, and what they get is critically important to improving student outcome. ERS highlights this as an area for further study.

While the allocation of academic time for students is incredibly important, ERS also makes recommendations about the state's role in guiding professional development and teacher compensation. As ESSA starts to be implemented, we need to think hard about how we organize, support, and distribute our talent. Too often, low-income and minority students are matched with inexperienced and unsupported educators. Developing models that reward a teacher's contribution and responsibilities is a difficult conversation, but one that the state should have with districts. For example, one of the districts that ERS interviewed provides more pay for bilingual teachers, an area where the state has a shortage. This type of innovative thinking is necessary if we are going to attract, support, train and develop staff for complex and challenging roles.

None of the suggestions here are easy. Ensuring equity at the state and district level will be hard work, as will developing a true statewide system of support for our educators. Finally, rethinking time for our students and roles for our teaching staff are intense conversations. Though there are best practices that districts can implement to improve performance, schools are complex organizations. Like any other organization, they need support to continuously improve. We believe this report provides some suggestions for how to create that system in Illinois, and we look forward to working with others to further examine these issues and develop appropriate state-level solutions.

—Ben Boer, Advance Illinois

Introduction: The State and Districts as Partners

The two million public school students in Illinois face an uphill path to academic achievement. Statewide, proficiency rates for fourth graders in math and reading are only 37 and 35 percent respectively. For children living in poverty, the results drop to 21 percent in math and 20 percent in reading.¹

Combining local, state, and federal dollars, Illinois districts invest \$27 billion (approximately \$13,000 per pupil) every year to educate students.² This investment has been criticized as both inadequate and inequitable. Since these important issues have received significant attention elsewhere, this paper only covers them briefly and instead focuses on two questions:

- *How well* are PreK-12 resources used in Illinois?
- What can the state (defined here as the State Board of Education and the General Assembly) and Governor do to *improve the effectiveness* of how resources—people, time, and money—are deployed in Illinois schools?

As essential as it is to fund education equitably and adequately, simply layering additional resources atop current educational practices may not be enough to improve student outcomes. In part, this is because traditional American educational structures channel a significant proportion of our public school resources toward strategies that research suggests are not particularly cost effective in improving student outcomes.

In Illinois and across the country, examples of such structural misalignments often center around class sizes, schedules, and teacher career path and compensation. These structural misalignments often prevent district innovation and lead to an inequitable distribution and inefficient use of existing resources.

Instead of constructing one-size-fits-all learning environments, schools could restructure teams and schedules to allow for differentiated instruction that responds to student needs and promotes faculty collaboration. Instead of traditional teacher salary schedules that increase automatically, do not link to teacher contribution or challenges, and provide few real leadership opportunities for excellent teachers, a teacher career path and compensation system could enable professional growth and reward teacher roles, skills, and impact.

To improve overall resource effectiveness, states must do more than create an equitable and adequate funding system. They must create a legal and regulatory context that supports districts in the difficult work of shifting away from legacy institutions toward instructional practices supported by research. Districts must be able to reimagine school days, restructure schedules, adopt dynamic grouping

strategies responsive to learning needs, create new opportunities for professional learning and instructional collaboration, and attract, retain, and develop a corps of excellent teachers.

More generally, schools and districts need to fundamentally change the way they allocate their people, time, and money in support of improved student outcomes.

States play an essential role in creating education systems that are excellent, equitable, and efficient. To hold districts accountable to these goals, the state can:

- **Allocate** funding to ensure adequacy, equity, flexibility, and predictability
- **Catalyze** district improvement through innovation and collaboration
- **Regulate** to empower districts and create accountability for student success

The state can use its considerable authority in these areas to enable district success by shifting its core focus from monitoring district compliance to partnering with districts and holding them accountable for student outcomes.

This is a moment of opportunity for education in Illinois. ESSA will devolve further control over goal setting, school funding, and accountability to the state level. Recent years have seen the passage of a new statewide accountability plan and a state teacher evaluation system. In the General Assembly, momentum for a new school funding system that could increase funding equity and a new way to measure requirements for graduation could allow schools to dramatically differentiate their resources to match student need.

In short, the state is poised for progress and has many of the tools it needs to begin the process of district transformation statewide.

“The state needs to dramatically change from a compliance organization to a capacity and professional learning organization.”

—Superintendent of a suburban district

Framing the Discussion with Themes from Superintendent Interviews

ERS combined its understanding of common district resource trends based on a decade of work with large urban school districts with information gleaned from interviews with Illinois superintendents. We adapted our national work to the Illinois context in three ways. First, we reviewed the in-depth resource analyses we conducted in Chicago Public Schools and School District U-46, a low-funded urban district near Chicago, to inform our hypotheses and proposals. Second, we reviewed education statutes and regulations in Illinois. Third, and most importantly, we interviewed a set of district superintendents from a diverse range of districts in the state to solicit their input on the resource issues they face.

A number of common themes emerged from these conversations with superintendents:

- There is a perception that state funding is both inadequate to meet districts' needs and inequitable among districts, and that proration of the state funding formula particularly disadvantages high-poverty districts.
- The timing of funding allocations leads some districts to develop their budgets on abbreviated timelines or make budgeting decisions without knowing what resources they will have when those decisions take effect.
- The state can support district innovation by sharing models of school improvement and best practice, while also offering reports on the quality and return on investment of various strategies.
- The state can deepen the support it provides to districts around data-informed decision making, and current state-generated reports such as the Illinois Report Card could provide even deeper insight to district leaders.
- The State Board can continue to shift toward clearer performance management, professional learning, and customer support and can consider focusing less on districts' compliance with resource mandates.

These themes inform the core of the findings and proposals we discuss in this paper, organized into three areas of state action:

- **Allocate** funding to ensure adequacy, equity, flexibility, and predictability
- **Catalyze** district improvement through innovation and collaboration
- **Regulate** to empower districts and create accountability for student success

State Role # 1: Allocate Funding to Ensure Adequacy, Equity, Flexibility, and Predictability

“Inequitable funding has to be addressed. This is, hands down, the biggest issue facing districts.”

—Superintendent of a large urban district

The Importance of State Funding

The way that states raise, aggregate, and distribute educational funding to districts significantly impacts the equity and adequacy of education funding as well as the degree of flexibility that local districts enjoy.

Funding for education comes from state, local, and federal sources, and states have a responsibility to ensure that all students receive equitable access to an excellent education. Because some localities lack the resources to fund education as richly as others, many states play a redistributive role to ensure the equitable allocation of funding across all districts.

Funding systems also vary in the mechanism by which funding is generated or how funds can be used. Some award staff or dollars for specific purposes (such as to support specific class size mandates or specific service models), while other formulas seek to maximize local discretion. Efforts to hold schools and districts accountable for student outcomes have helped spur a national trend toward funding systems that empower local flexibility and away from formulas that mandate specific practices.

Illinois’s Funding Practices and Challenges

A strategic state funding system embodies four principles: adequacy, equity, flexibility, and predictability. The following section analyzes the current state of these principles in Illinois:

- **Adequacy.** *The Illinois state funding system is often criticized as inadequate to meet students’ educational needs.* In terms of state (as opposed to local) funding, only three states contribute a smaller share than does Illinois.³ A 2013 study by the Education Funding Advisory Board found that in order to meet minimum standards of adequacy, Illinois would need to increase its guaranteed foundation funding level by more than \$2,000 per pupil, from \$6,119 to \$8,672.⁴ As a result of low and decreasing funding, the superintendent of a small, rural district reported having to cut their teaching staff by 25 percent, while an urban superintendent reported that funding limits the breadth of curriculum their district can offer high school students.⁵

- **Equity.** *Low state funding is particularly problematic for high-poverty districts that lack the property tax base to make up the gap between what the state provides and what their students need to learn.* Until recently, Illinois exacerbated this issue because it did not fully fund its own funding formula, but instead prorated all districts' state allocation by a fixed percentage.⁶ One superintendent noted that his high-poverty urban district, which receives more state funding than affluent neighboring districts, lost significantly more funding under this fixed-percentage proration in recent cycles than those neighbors. This funding gap between high- and low-poverty districts was the largest in the nation.⁷ Fortunately, the state is not prorating districts' allocations in 2017.

One aspect of the way the state funds its teacher retirement system exacerbates inequity as well: the state charges a higher pension contribution rate from districts for employees paid with federal funds than for those paid with other dollars. This disproportionately disadvantages districts that receive a large share of federal funds, which are generally targeted toward higher-poverty districts. Under this contribution system, the highest-poverty quintile of districts contributes more than \$50 per pupil on average, about five times what the lowest-poverty quintile contributes on average.⁸

In sum, Illinois students in high-poverty districts receive 19 percent less state and local revenue than low-poverty districts despite evidence that at-risk students require significantly more resources to achieve academic success.⁹ Though the state in 2017 recently targeted approximately \$250 million in additional resources to high-poverty districts, this represents a short-term fix, not a structural solution.¹⁰

Districts also have a responsibility to equitably allocate resources to schools and students. The state does not currently have clear authority to guarantee this type of equity, but ESSA may provide states with new ways to support districts in allocating additional dollars to high-need schools and students.

- **Flexibility.** *Effective school leaders need flexibility to organize staff, students, and the daily schedule in ways that develop staff, support individual students, and improve core instruction.* In Illinois, two-thirds of dollars are distributed through General State Aid and aid targeted toward high-need students, which can then be used flexibly by districts.¹¹ The remaining third of state dollars are categorical funds for special education, student transportation, bilingual education and other mandated programs. Later in this paper, we discuss the ways that the regulatory environment in Illinois both enables and restricts districts' flexibility over how they use their funding.

- **Predictability.** *Just as transformational system change depends on a budget process that is integrated into the district strategic development process, the state can more closely align the timing of its budget process to districts' planning cycles.* This way, districts know the size of their aid allocations in time to make staffing and programming decisions well before their budgets are due and school years begin. One superintendent reported that because the state does not offer timely information on district budget allocations, he must reduce his teaching force in the spring and rehire teachers as the school year approaches. Another reported that the timing of the state aid announcement reduces the urgency of his budget planning process—he doesn't want to develop a plan that will be rendered infeasible by the revenue he later receives.¹²

Those we spoke to said with one voice that Illinois's funding system requires reform. The General Assembly can consider legislation to restructure it based on the limitations and realities of the above principles.

“We make layoffs based on what we're projected to get, but because of the timing of state budget numbers, we have to reduce force in the spring and recall later.”

—Superintendent of an urban district

State Role #2: Catalyze District Improvement through Innovation and Collaboration

“The state could promote innovation. If there were innovation—and then replication—that would allow us to focus on what matters without letting other factors get in the way.”

—Superintendent of an urban district

The Importance of the State as a District Supporter and Partner

Together, the State Board and General Assembly have unique scale and authority. This reach allows the state to play a proactive role in promoting district transformation. Though the state cannot direct reform or restructure district resources, it can offer support and incentives to districts that create an environment of innovation and improvement.

The State Board can make this happen if it views itself as a coordinator of options and resources for districts, using its reach to ensure that districts can access myriad ongoing supports. In so doing, the state can lay the foundation for a sustainable network of statewide collaboration and support, in which districts can easily access key insights on designing and implementing transformative interventions.

Generally, the state’s role in fostering and supporting district strategy can be broken down into three main buckets:

1. **Create a context that fosters innovation** by linking districts to peer networks, research on resource strategies, and technical assistance.
2. **Ensure access to data** that supports strategic decision making.
3. **Intervene with intensive support** for chronically struggling districts.

Create a Context That Fosters Innovation

Districts benefit from access to insight, guidance, and examples as they seek to restructure their resources and assess the efficacy of interventions. The state can use its scale and knowledge to create a support infrastructure that provides districts with a rich array of actionable information from a variety of sources. There are several key ways in which the state can act as a hub of insight, support, and strategy.

- **Peer districts and district networks.** The state can use its insight into district performance and context to create appropriate networks and partnerships between districts, allowing high-flying districts from across the state to model successful practices. These connections can bear the immediate fruit of shared strategy and can create a new context of regular interdistrict collaboration.
- **Research on resource effectiveness.** The state can curate and spread research and knowledge that districts need to make sound resource choices. For example, the state can produce reports illustrating the potential return on investment of various resource strategies and provide consumer reports on the quality of vendors.
- **Technical assistance.** The state can connect districts with—and in some cases, provide—technical assistance around specific, widely shared priority issues.

“The state could be a leader and offer different models that I could hang my hat on—they could be the purveyor of research-based best practice.”

—Superintendent of a suburban district

- **Exploring strategies for effective school design.** As part of its focus on improving educational practice, the state can ensure support to districts on what ERS calls strategic school design: the alignment of each school’s people, time, and money to students’ specific needs. In our interviews, many superintendents said their schools did not always have structures to systematically create targeted student groupings and schedules that match resources to student needs in fluid and dynamic ways. Illinois could provide districts with options to jump-start thinking about new designs based on best practices exhibited in districts across the state. Districts could benefit from learning about various strategies, such as targeted and flexible intervention blocks, and see examples, such as sample schedules, to show how schools could make these ideas reality. The state can spread these ideas by linking districts to technical service providers, successful peer districts, or research-based best practice.

The state can support innovation and strategy in a variety of other domains, such as teacher career path and compensation, school leadership models, support for struggling students with a focus on English learners and special education pupils, professional development, and district and community partnerships around social and emotional support.

The state can also use its funding power to provide financial incentives for creative strategies. Illinois can develop a system of innovation grants for districts that can make a strong case for the efficacy of a planned intervention. These programs could be vehicles to pilot new practices, which, if proven successful, would then feed into the state’s broader efforts to be a hub of insight and guidance on strategic best practice.

How to Define and Target State Support: An Example

One way that Illinois can help districts improve is through its new balanced accountability measure.

The accountability measure includes both student outcomes and teacher professional practice objectives. Illinois has outlined five categories of evidence-based best practice for the professional practice component: culture and climate, shared leadership, governance, education and employee quality, and family and community connections.¹³

As the state develops its support strategy for districts, it can use these five areas and others to guide the resources it provides and the conversations it convenes. For example, state support could prove valuable in ensuring the success of the new teacher evaluation system laid out in the Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA).

Implementing the New PERA Teacher Evaluation Systems

Passed in 2010, PERA requires districts to design a new teacher and principal evaluation system that considers professional practice and student growth by the 2016-17 school year. For PERA to be successful, evaluators across the district need to implement the new system accurately. Illinois requires evaluators to complete a State Board-approved prequalification program, which includes training and review by an independent observer to ensure that the evaluator's ratings align with the State Board's requirements.

The next step is for the state to connect district leaders to the support they need to implement the evaluation system with fidelity and ensure that principals use the new evaluation data strategically. For instance, the state can provide districts with the correlation between principal evaluations of professional practice and student growth measures to see how closely the two match. Illinois can also offer best practices on how to use evaluation data to develop teacher growth plans, craft assignments that play to teachers' strengths, and create balanced teacher teams. As districts across the state work toward successful implementation, the state can connect peer districts to share prototypes and successful practices.

"There is a mandate to get [teacher evaluations] done and for districts to implement them, but where do you go to get help? Where can I get advice?"

—Superintendent of a suburban district

Ensure Access to Data That Support Strategic Decision Making

Beyond assistance on specific issues, the state can use its scale and authority to provide insights on all areas of resource use. Using data collected from districts for compliance and accountability purposes, the State Board can create reports for districts that link to information on a variety of resource choices.

Though most districts lack the resources or time to link the range of datasets required for this analysis, the State Board has the infrastructure to do so and can use it to improve district strategy without introducing any new mandates. Armed with the information to describe the resource choices they have made and assess whether those succeeded or fell short, districts can create transparent plans to improve resource effectiveness.

The state already shares metrics back to districts via the Illinois Report Card, which provides metrics such as funding and staffing ratios in comparison with state averages. The Student Information System contains broad and deep data on student outcomes.¹⁴ However, the state can invest further in transforming the data it already collects into metrics that support decision making, disaggregated to the student level and targeted to answer high-impact questions on the efficacy and equity of how districts use their resources.

These reports could shed light on a range of opportunities, including how equitably a district funds its schools, how well instruction is differentiated according to student need, how well the district retains its top teachers, whether excellent teachers are equitably placed in high-need assignments, and many others—all in comparison with peer districts statewide.¹⁵

If the state curates a set of key resource indicator reports and provides robust support to districts on interpreting and acting upon them, it can jump-start or aid the process of reallocating resources for student success in districts. Leaders can assess the effectiveness of each of their resource choices, consider the accumulated impact of their choices together, and chart a path forward as a result.

Intervene with Intensive Support in Chronically Struggling Districts

When other options have not led to results, Illinois can lead district turnaround through direct intervention and support. Under state and federal law, the state has the authority to intervene in schools and districts that are in the lowest 5 percent of performance.¹⁶ The State Board has discretion to determine the nature of the intervention, ranging from a needs assessment to more intensive support. In addition, ESSA will offer the state new latitude to target additional dollars and supports to the lowest-performing schools and districts and design a comprehensive turnaround strategy.¹⁷

State takeover is a solution best suited for districts grappling with governance issues. In North Chicago CUSD 187, one of two districts to date in which Illinois has intervened, the state replaced the existing board and superintendent.¹⁸ Since the start of the intervention, graduation rates in CUSD 187 have increased to 68 percent, up from 50 percent in 2011, the year before the state takeover. Student attendance has increased from 75 percent to 88 percent.¹⁹ This is a promising start, but there is still more work to do, as CUSD 187 still lags behind the state on other academic indicators.²⁰

Since state takeover, CUSD 187 has developed a new curriculum and assessment system, which includes common formative assessments at all grade levels, extended the length of the school day, and carved out time for teacher professional development within the school day for all teachers.²¹ The district has also reduced annual expenditures by over 20 percent.²²

State intervention can be a politically sensitive subject and must be carried out in a way that respects the unique needs of the district community. Turnaround efforts can be effective when the state focuses on creating lasting, collaborative relationships with communities and local leaders. Intervention must be targeted toward the systemic structures and district conditions that have impeded strategic change and student success.²³

State Role #3: Regulate to Empower Districts and Create Accountability for Student Success

The Importance of Policy and Regulation

The third area in which the state plays a vital role is policy and regulation. The General Assembly's power to set policies and the State Board's mandate to regulate those policies are broad. Together, they can create a policy context that is either more or less prescriptive of the actions districts have to take. The state, therefore, has the power to create a set of laws and regulations that directly empower and create accountability for student success.

To ensure districts meet key educational goals, states often create regulations that dictate or imply how districts must use their resources. For instance, the state may mandate that districts offer students a set number of years of instruction in a subject, that districts must provide teachers with a specific number of hours of professional development, or that districts must pay teachers more for each year of experience.

Each one of these regulations is geared toward a specific goal: respectively, that students master a set of subjects, that teachers improve and grow, and that districts pay more to teachers who are more likely to be effective. However, each of these example regulations tries to improve student learning through a proxy measure: seat time as a measure of mastery, hours of development as a measure of professional learning, and years of experience as a measure of effectiveness.

The state's prerogative to define success for students, teachers, and schools is essential, and it should hold districts accountable for student outcomes. However, when doing so, it can provide districts flexibility to address the drivers of student learning in context-appropriate ways.

Put simply, when states create and adjust their regulatory and accountability systems, they can hold districts accountable for ensuring excellent, equitable, and efficient outcomes while offering flexibility on the inputs districts use to reach those outcomes.

In Illinois, the state offers a range of policy flexibilities that districts can use to design effective instructional models. However, the state has policies that limit districts' ability to provide sufficient and differentiated learning time for students with a range of needs and prevent districts from managing their staff in a way that equitably serves all students.

Policies That Support Strategic Resource Use in Illinois

- **Class size mandates.** There are no state class size mandates, which gives districts the regulatory freedom they need to adjust the size of instructional groups to meet a range of student needs.²⁴
- **Teacher evaluation systems.** The rollout of the PERA evaluation system will allow districts to develop context-appropriate plans for fairly and faithfully assessing teacher performance.²⁵

- **Personnel management and reduction in force.** Recent changes to the state’s policies on reduction-in-force protocols and staff management will allow districts to base personnel decisions upon contribution and fit rather than simply seniority or tenure status.²⁶
- **Teacher-of-record laws.** The state does not have a strong teacher-of-record law, which elsewhere requires students to be taught by a certified teacher at all times. The flexibility to dynamically pair students with facilitators or noncertified supervisory staff could allow Illinois districts to pursue dynamic grouping, distance learning, and blended learning strategies.²⁷
- **Teacher recertification and professional development.** In Illinois, the state mandates that teachers participate in 120 hours of professional development seat time from approved providers every five years to achieve recertification.²⁸ In some states, analogous requirements are onerous, as they encourage “sit-and-get” professional learning when research suggests that a more job-embedded approach may yield greater dividends at less cost. However, Illinois allows a wide range of professional learning models to count toward the hour requirement, offering a key flexibility to district leaders.²⁹

Policies That Limit Strategic Resource Use in Illinois

- **Amount of academic time.** The state of Illinois mandates a relatively short school day and year. State data reports show that students in Illinois attend school for an average of 175 days, as opposed to the national average of 180.³⁰ The state’s minimum length for an instructional day is five hours, which is among the shortest baselines in the nation—though districts we spoke to exceed this standard.³¹ Even so, ERS’s analysis shows that annually, Illinois students spend, on average, one week less in school per year than the national average. Over a K-12 career, Illinois students spend a year and half less in school than students in Texas, which leads the nation in time in school.³² Students need sufficient time in school to learn, but superintendents report that a lack of funding and collective bargaining make it exceptionally difficult to increase academic time. Paired with an increase in funding to districts, the state could lengthen its mandates for minimum school day and year lengths, and in so doing increase the learning time available to students and flexibility for schools to differentiate instruction based on student needs.

Given the expense of this intervention, the state can consider ways to target extended time in cost-effective ways. For instance, the state could extend time in lower-performing schools as part of the support the state provides them, or the state could support districts in identifying community providers that can offer additional services beyond the traditional school day without the cost associated with extending the hours of all school staff. This can ensure students have enough time to meet rigorous standards and engage in motivating enrichment opportunities.

- **Seat time based graduation requirements.** High-performing schools ensure that learning resources are differentiated and flexible over time, allowing regular adjustment to each student's changing needs. But in Illinois, regulation restricts this differentiation. State law measures high school graduation requirements in years, ensuring that advancement for students is contingent upon time spent in a subject, not demonstrated mastery.³³ This model does not encourage differentiated delivery of instruction in a subject. Some students need more than a year to achieve proficiency and some need less, but under the current law, they are simply required to pass classes offered in standard units of time. This one-size-fits-all model does not serve all students. If the General Assembly replaces yearlong class requirements with learning standards based on student competency, districts could move to differentiate learning time, allowing students to progress upon mastery at their own rate while providing additional support to students who need it, thereby allowing districts to target limited resources toward the students who need them most.³⁴
- **Education- and experience-based teacher compensation.** Most Illinois districts base teacher compensation on step-and-lane salary schedules that link pay to education and longevity.³⁵ These scales generally pay all teachers without differentiation for contribution or role and do not necessarily tie closely to teacher effectiveness. As Illinois districts look to create compensation systems that attract and retain a high-performing teaching force, extend the reach of excellent teachers, and equitably match great teachers to student need, teachers and leaders can be understandably cautious about making large changes such as eliminating steps and lanes. Any method of linking compensation to student outcomes must be carefully vetted for fairness and effectiveness, and it is challenging for administrators, teachers, and unions to find common ground on the best approach. Therefore, even as they plan for long-term changes to their compensation systems, district leaders can consider a range of smaller, politically feasible reforms.

For instance, one district we studied offered teachers endorsed in Spanish instruction a bonus to increase the applicant pool in that hard-to-staff area and improve retention. Likewise, in hard-to-staff schools, bonuses or stipends can be a tool of equity, creating incentives for the best teachers to seek positions in high-need schools. District leaders can also consider assigning high-performing teachers additional roles, such as increasing their time with students or offering them opportunities to become teacher leaders. Conversely, districts can work to identify struggling teachers and invest in professional development or recrafted job opportunities to support their growth, rather than in an automatic pay increase. Districts have primary control over teacher pay, so a great deal of the responsibility for reform lies at the local level; however, there is a state role too. Through its work to catalyze effective district practice, the state can document and share effective compensation reforms, both incremental and ambitious.

Taken together, these three policy areas govern or influence how a significant share of districts allocate a significant share of their people, time, and money, and as a result are barriers to district flexibility. By lowering these barriers or clarifying their breadth, the state could enable districts to rethink the basics of their instructional models and direct resources to the uses that will most directly improve student learning.

Generally, the State Board and General Assembly can restructure policies and regulations to encourage district innovation while creating guardrails to ensure sound district practice and accountability that measures results.

This trade of flexibility for outcome accountability is the core of the state's strategic shift. However, districts control a significant share of the routines and decisions that strongly influence student learning. Therefore, a policy context that allows district flexibility does not guarantee that districts will seize this freedom to improve student achievement. This reinforces the state's essential role in fostering and catalyzing district resource transformation beyond just setting a context for it.

Conclusion

This is an exciting time of change for education in Illinois and across the country. The State Board of Education and the Illinois General Assembly have an opportunity to target their essential power in ways that will most improve education for students across the state.

The state's opportunity meets its authority in the form of three key actions that states can take to ensure the equity, excellence, and efficiency of their school systems.

- **Allocate** funding to ensure adequacy, equity, flexibility, and predictability
- **Catalyze** district improvement through innovation and collaboration
- **Regulate** to empower districts and create accountability for student success

These actions embody a vision for the role of the state that focuses on prudent flexibility and partnership with districts in exchange for outcomes accountability. In this way, Illinois can move—at both the state and district level—toward aligned strategies that marshal district resources to create equitable and excellent schools for all students.

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