Public Education in Illinois
Valuing Teachers, Students and Communities

Leading the Way in the Fight for the Progressive Agenda

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OUR MISSION

Citizen Action/Illinois is the state’s largest public interest organization and a progressive political coalition committed to creating social change both in Illinois and across the nation.
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We’ve heard the message before—in the media, in political campaigns, from policymakers and others. It has become fashionable in some circles to criticize public schools in Illinois—and the people who work and learn in them.

We are here to share a different message—an urgent message that casts another light on public education in Illinois. It is time to value public education in Illinois. To understand that our teachers and students deserve the best, no matter where they live. In this publication, we share specific themes and ideas that need to become reality in our schools.
The importance of education in the 21st century cannot be overstated. In a global economy, knowledge-based industries and a highly educated workforce are the keys to economic competitiveness and future prosperity. The critical ingredient for such achievement is allowing every young person to fully develop their intellectual and creative abilities.

Multinational corporations may not care if their engineers are based in Asia or the U.S., but the failure to provide a high quality education to every child clearly undermines our nation’s competitiveness while reproducing divisions among people on an international scale.

Let’s apply current realities to our own lives. If my child graduates from high school and goes on to college, but my neighbor’s child is among the far too many who drop out, it can add to the problems of gangs and drug use, of street violence and property crime. It also means a more poorly educated workforce, less incentive for value-added businesses to operate here and grow the economy. The result limits our tax base as well as the opportunity for our children to stay in or return to their community and find decent work. Without an educated workforce, why would a high-tech firm start here instead of Seattle? Why would a manufacturing plant choose a community in Illinois instead of moving to the cheaper land and lower taxes of Wisconsin?

When our education system doesn’t work, we pay the price—in neighborhood safety, in higher taxes, in a community from which people move away rather than stay in and prosper.

In the end, is the message we want to share with our teachers and students that they can’t achieve, can’t succeed, and that their schools don’t deserve the same resources as other schools? Of course not. Let’s value public education—so that students in our public schools can succeed in today’s world.

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Public school teachers are often in the crosshairs of debates about education in Illinois. We hear about their salaries and benefits. We hear about how they are among those responsible if students don’t perform at a certain level. What we need to hear more about is the extraordinary impact they make on our schools. When talking about public schools in Illinois, our starting point needs to be how much we value teachers.

What does that mean? For one, it means that all teachers should receive world class training and professional development, which research shows is the most important factor in improving performance for all educators. Effective professional development should address a wide range of topics, including leadership, resources, data, content knowledge, learning designs and outcomes. Unfortunately, not all schools have adequate resources to fund professional development.

Another key to valuing teachers in Illinois is supporting the certification of teachers by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, an advanced teaching credential that is the only way a teacher can achieve the Illinois Master Certificate, the highest credential an Illinois teacher can attain.

Teaching conditions and a school’s environment also make a big difference: not just class size, but infrastructure, access to materials, and more. The next time people criticize a neighborhood school, they should consider what resources that school’s teachers need to succeed.

In Illinois, we must also take a much closer look at wages, benefits and job security of teachers. Why does one teacher earn over $100,000 a year, while even the most qualified and experienced teachers in other districts may never approach making that salary? In Illinois, we know that enormous disparities in teacher pay are a reality.

Meanwhile, the voices of teachers in Illinois need to be heard. We need to pay attention to what teachers say about their everyday realities more than ever—as well as their future.
Which families in Illinois deserve to send their children to a high-achieving public school in their community, if that is their choice? The question shouldn’t have to be asked, should it? The answer is obvious: all families. Of course, we know that thousands of families don’t have that option. How can we improve our schools and better value public school students in Illinois?

First, we must focus in a different way on two mainstays of education: assessment and achievement. Standardized tests (as well as college entrance exams) have, of course, become an increasingly dominant way to measure students in recent years. They should not, however, completely supplant our focus on individuals. To help students achieve, we must focus more on individual student needs. For many students, we know, the immediate goal will be college and/or work. How can we help students as they strive to reach these goals?

There are many other key ways to value public school students. For students in many schools, having equal opportunities in career and technical education, equal access to technology and equal access to Advanced Placement courses is decidedly far from a reality. Likewise, extended learning time needs to benefit all students.

Class size also remains a key issue. Simply put, we live in a state where some students try to learn in classes that have more than 30 students. Other students try to learn in classes that have 20 students or less. That’s a huge difference. We all know, and research shows, that class size counts.

We can also value students by valuing the role of parents and community members in our schools. There has been considerable research on the impact parents and community members can have on education. Their efforts need to be supported.

There are large differences in funding among school districts within the same state. Some districts spend significantly more on education than another district just a few miles away. Per pupil funding: $5,953 (This figure represents 95% of what the state is required to spend).

Source: Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and published reports.
VALUING COMMUNITIES, STATE AND FEDERAL SUPPORT OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

> WE MUST ADDRESS THE INEQUITABLE SCHOOL FUNDING SYSTEM IN ILLINOIS
> COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES ALSO NEED TO BE FULLY FUNDED

Supporting our public schools means that public funds must provide adequate support for our schools. What that means has, of course, spurred considerable debate and controversy in Illinois in recent years. Why? Well, it’s well known that the school funding system in Illinois relies heavily on property taxes. It’s common for one school or district to be much better-funded than another. When we look at how our schools are funded in Illinois, that just confirms the need for a more equitable school funding system.

It is also essential that public community college systems and public universities need to be fully funded, managed effectively and viewed as a critical resource to building a prosperous state. Support, however, does not only refer to public support of schools. As members of a larger community, we also need to support accountability: any school receiving public funds should be held accountable for the use of those funds. We need to broaden what is often understood by “accountability.” Accountability can, and must, mean that students meet academic standards; schools meet fiscal responsibilities; and schools prepare students for life after high school.

Meanwhile, it has long been emphasized that Illinois must have high standards for its students and teachers. We also need to hold leaders who are in charge of school budgets to the highest standards for training, professional development and transparency.

We have received a message for many years that states cannot afford to support quality public education for all students. Few in the public sphere will say it quite like that—but we know how likely it is that students at one school are receiving a very different education than students at another school in the state. We believe the state of Illinois can embrace, and fund, a different system for schools that meets a worthy goal: quality education for all.

It’s common for one Illinois school or district to be much better-funded than another.

PERCENTAGE OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS IN ILLINOIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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SOURCE: Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE); analysis of 2011 State Report Card
Paul Gamboa 5th Grade Teacher, White Eagle Elementary School, Naperville

Paul Gamboa reflects on life as a fifth-grade teacher. “Being able to problem solve with students and seeing them learn how to handle life – that’s something I wouldn’t trade for anything.” Gamboa, who teaches at White Eagle Elementary School in Naperville, is also a local vice president of elementary schools for the Indian Prairie Education Association. When asked how he entered the teaching field, Gamboa says that he was a business major at college who said he “couldn’t care less” and “had no energy for what he was doing.” He got a job as a custodian at an elementary school, and a principal noticed how well he helped students resolve a scuffle and other issues—and eventually told him “there’s no doubt you were put on earth to teach.” He went back to school, and when he took a job as an aide at another school, he recalls working with an autistic student and learned about the world of special education. “One of the things I learned,” he says, “was how important it is to understand what the strengths of students are – and to play to that. Look at their assets.” Now, Gamboa is also pursuing a masters degree in educational leadership, a path that could help qualify him for a principal position (the degree would also qualify him for a teacher leadership position).

When he looks at broader education issues facing the state, Gamboa is outspoken about how the current funding system in Illinois is impacting schools. While it may be convenient in some quarters to say that critics of the system are merely looking out for their own schools, that would be misleading here. Gamboa is quick to point out that his school has a higher level of resources than most schools. “Our school is a beneficiary of how the system works, but the Illinois school funding system is abhorrent,” says Gamboa. “People around the state know this, and yet it continues. We have to say it, though – the reliance on local property taxes has really hurt many, many districts.”
Talking to Terry Spayer, who has been a teacher for 34 years, one quickly gets a sense of the passion he brings to his job. This year, Spayer is about to retire. He says he has one regret. “I wish I was not retiring,” says Spayer who has taught art at Hines Elementary School in Peoria for the last nine years (he has also taught kindergarten, first, fourth, fifth and sixth grades as well as physical education at various other schools). “I love my job so much and it’s difficult to walk away. I love teaching art, coming here every day and seeing how kids create.” He points to various projects students have created over the years, including a ceramic tile wall, 20-foot sculpture and even a duct tape fashion show.

The joy Spayer has felt in coming to school every day has even overcome what he sees as persistent and troubling issues in education today. In particular, he is concerned about the reliance on testing in schools. “Testing is important, but sometimes I think we base too much on tests,” he says. “In the process, we lose some of the kids because we don’t have as much one-on-one individual time as in the past.”

Meanwhile, Spayer, like other teachers, knows that lack of funding of schools continues, of course, to be a prevailing issue in Illinois in a huge number of districts. He takes a wide view that can help put things into perspective just as art does. “I don’t understand how there’s so much money for the Super Bowl or Olympics – billions – but not for schools. We need to understand what an important asset our schools are.” In the end, Spayer adds that even with the many troubling issues facing schools in Illinois, he’s sure of one thing. “I wish,” he says, “I was starting all over again.”
Josie Melendez  Assistant Principal, Elgin High School

Becoming a teacher was not something Josie Melendez had to question while in high school, college or in the workforce. “Since the second grade, I knew I was going to be a teacher,” says Melendez, who is assistant principal at Elgin High School and has worked in various ESL and English teaching as well as administrative positions in more than 17 years as an educator. Fifteen of those years were spent in the Chicago Public Schools, where she worked in three different schools. “I loved school and still love it,” she says. “I’ve never left. I want to help students make better decisions, and my job is to be their lighthouse.”

These days, she provides counseling and guidance to students to help address discipline issues, and works hard to get families involved as well. Melendez says that in many schools, students often don’t get the kind of guidance they need. “It’s often like when I was in school. I didn’t even meet counselors until I graduated and asked for a recommendation for DePaul,” she says. Melendez also says that schools need to boost professional development—and also encourage teachers to be leaders and work with principals and assistant principals.” As it stands, she says, it’s not unusual to see three or four people run a school. “It’s impossible to make the gains you want to make that way,” she adds. Amid frequent concerns about testing and funding, Melendez wonders how Illinois schools are preparing for the future. “The model of education is very outdated,” she says. “I see that in the classroom, and in the instruction we are giving. Technology is changing so fast. We are not really addressing what students need to know when they leave the building.” Then again, she adds, she’s more than eager to help meet the challenge. “I realized a long time ago,” she says, “that if we don’t push, nobody will.”
Chicago Teachers Union Quest Center addresses topical educational issues and provides professional development for 30,000 teachers and paraprofessionals working in the Chicago Public Schools.

For more than thirty years, Lynn Cherkasky-Davis has been an educator, pioneering advocate and innovator who has sought to improve schools. In her early years as a teacher, she founded a network of progressive teachers called Teacher Talk in Chicago in order to discuss issues of pedagogy, learn from each other and from research, and to improve schooling. Later, she and like-minded colleagues started their own public school on the south side of Chicago, a constructivist teacher-led, ungraded and non-graded school of choice for teachers and families. Cherkasky-Davis was the full-day kindergarten teacher as well as the school’s teacher-director.

In recent years, she has served as coordinator for the Quest Center, the professional development arm of the Chicago Teachers Union (at the Center she has directed “Nurturing Teacher Leadership,” a highly successful program that prepares teachers for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification, recertification and other professional learning offerings, and the development of teacher-designed curriculum aligned to the Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted by over 45 states).

In sum, she has been a staunch advocate for and practitioner of many key aspects of education – including full-day kindergarten, peer mentoring, interdisciplinary classes and programs, neuro-developmental science of learning, authentic assessment and parent and community involvement. Over the years, Cherkasky-Davis’ work has led to recognition in the field and media. When asked about student assessment, she says there’s a huge difference between what students are asked to learn for the ISAT test and how they really learn. She points to the importance of starting with standards when developing curriculum, instructional practices, and assessment tools. The Quest Center, under her direction (and with the support of a large staff and generous Innovation Fund grant) has begun developing units of instruction designed by teacher leaders that align to the Common Core State Standards. She adds that educators need to bring policymakers closer to what happens in schools. “Many policymakers have never worked in a classroom,” she adds. “Schools need to invite policy makers into the classroom to inform the high stakes decisions they make about schooling for our children.”
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