

DRAFT

IEA-NEA Proposals for Reforming School Quality and Accountability in Illinois

The Illinois Education Association-NEA's mission is to effect excellence and equity in public education and to be THE advocacy organization for all public education employees. Because of our commitment to excellence and equity and advocacy, we are involved in our Invest in Excellence campaign. This campaign is aimed at eradicating some of the largest school funding and student achievement gaps in the country. These funding and achievement gaps make a mockery of our mission.

Ultimately, this is about our students and their success. We do not believe that advocating for our members and their needs, interests, and aspirations is in conflict with what is best for our students. Yes, our members want to be well paid, have decent benefits, and to be fairly treated. But they also want to be part of powerful adult learning communities providing them the opportunity to continue to learn and grow as professionals. Most importantly, they want to make a difference for their students, to help them succeed in this increasingly complex world we live in.

We believe that when our students succeed, our members succeed, and IEA lives its mission.

So, our goal is to ensure that as many students as possible graduate from high school well prepared to succeed beyond high school. We want our students to get the education they need to be productive members of Illinois' society and economy.

Because that's our purpose, our mission, we have to start with "what," not "how much." What changes will it take to improve a state education system in Illinois, in ways that lead to better student outcomes? The answer, of course, is many. There should be no dispute that we have an ongoing human crisis in the thousands of students every year who drop out of the pipeline from high school to social and economic self-sufficiency. A systemic problem demands a systemic solution so the proposals here are intended as a coherent set of policies driving toward improved student outcomes.

A few issues we are mindful of as we offer our proposals:

This isn't just about a state system, it's about your school. Parents and community leaders rightly think first of their own school when considering the "state education system." But what many people don't realize is just how much state infrastructure stands behind every public school. This infrastructure includes funding streams, human resources policies, standards, assessments, technical support, and more. Improving that infrastructure improves the quality of *all* schools, those that are currently succeeding and those that are not. So a discussion of the state's education system is not a discussion about public schools in some other part of Illinois, it's a discussion of public schools in every community in the state.

Accountability is important, which is why misguided accountability is so problematic. Any accountability system focused entirely upon teachers and school support professionals excludes other stakeholders critical to student achievement and will not succeed. We have learned that unless the Federal and State government as well as local communities, school boards and administrators and parents live up to their obligations to the students of Illinois, the best of school and classroom accountability systems will fail. In other words, accountability must be shared.

Right now in Illinois, schools are "accountable" in two primary ways: they are accountable for complying with No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and accountable for being responsible fiscal stewards. Those two tasks are both important, but schools can achieve both tasks without necessarily improving the manner in which children are prepared for life after K-12. Our state should hold schools accountable primarily for how they move children toward success in life after high school. One lesson of NCLB has been that whatever accountability system is in place, schools will pivot to meet its requirements; accordingly, the wrong accountability system drives the wrong activity, but the right accountability system could drive the right activity.

Money is helpful, but it isn't a cure-all if spent poorly. Life gets more expensive, and like any enterprise, schools generally need to adjust for rising costs over the course of time. But beyond accounting for the rising costs of doing business, the state should be judicious in how it spends its money. We know that money is the most powerful tool the state has at its disposal; we urge the state to be willing to increase its spending to meet what is clearly an unmet need, but we also ask the state, in spending that money, to think carefully about how to make its spending most effective.

Schools are engines of change in communities. Education reform simply cannot be divorced from the larger set of community challenges that surround the schoolhouse walls. In fact they are inextricably linked. But the existence of those external problems is not a reason to shy away from education-specific reforms - if anything, those problems must drive us to seek more aggressive solutions to the problems in the school building. Schools are not simply reflective of their communities, but can also be catalysts for community improvement, and we must approach them as important beachheads in our work to make Illinois a better place to live and work.

College- and work-readiness is not a shorthand for narrowing the curriculum. We discuss college and work readiness because the baseline goal for all students is the ability to support themselves after high school. College or other appropriate workforce training, is the best way to ensure that they will be able to do so. But when we discuss college and work readiness, we do so not to reduce students to cogs in a machine. We believe deeply in well-rounded educations and in training young people to be active citizens in Illinois society. College and work readiness are necessary, but they are not sufficient for a comprehensive education and engaged citizenry.

Our problem is not the absence of success; it's the distribution. Some of Illinois' high schools are undeniably among the nation's finest - and others struggle to produce any graduates who are ready for college-level work. A successful accountability system at the state level will provide the right incentives to schools at both extremes of the spectrum, and every level in between. Bringing up the bottom at the expense of the top should not be anybody's goal; this must be about raising the floor.

There is no point in assigning fault for how we got to where we are; the causes are far too complex and subject to any number of interpretations. What matters is a recognition that to change where we are will require the coordinated effort of all parties involved: executive branch, legislative branch, districts, building leadership, teachers, other employees in the school building, parents and students themselves.

The state's teachers and support professionals are overwhelmingly unionized because they value and respect the decision-making power that comes with collective bargaining. Educational reform of any sort ought to embrace that role. While classroom teachers and support professionals alone cannot guarantee the success of the students they teach, their investment in any accountability system is essential. This investment will be gained by developing systems that can be adjusted to context and implemented via local negotiated agreements.

We offer these proposals to show what we think such a coordinated system might look like, in the hopes that Illinois can begin to move toward a policy set and funding scheme truly designed to improve student outcomes.

Outline

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I. Goals

We start with the simple proposition that the goal of the public education system is to prepare children for productive citizenship in society - which requires, at a minimum, graduating from high school ready for college and the workforce. This goal has never been clearly identified as the animating force behind the state's education policies, and we believe that it is critical for that articulation to take place.

II. Core Infrastructure

When the public education system succeeds, it supports a great teacher helping students interact with a rigorous curriculum. Many of those interactions happen every school day in Illinois, but not enough. To achieve our goal, we will have to increase the number of these interactions, and the policies we suggest here are meant to do just that.

A. Teacher Quality

Nothing is more important to the quality of a student's learning experience than the quality of our educators. The incentives for teachers - and those who train and support them - should be aligned with the goal of improving citizenship readiness. In that vein:

--Teacher preparation programs should be responsive to the needs of the field. Given the right incentives, teacher preparation programs (both traditional programs and alternative certification programs) can help attract into the field qualified candidates. These programs should train these qualified candidates by delivering a high quality rigorous curriculum that empowers them to meet the needs of today's students.

--Induction and mentoring needs to be supported. High-quality induction and mentoring pays off with better teachers who stay in the profession longer. School districts with resources already focus on the importance of induction and mentoring; the state needs to support the activity for all districts. Moreover, induction and mentoring programs should be extended to principals, superintendents, and school board members.

--Improved evaluation is essential. Principals and teachers alike largely agree that evaluation, as currently executed, does not work. Best practices are emerging in how to improve evaluation, and those best practices need to be systematized. Moreover, principals themselves should be evaluated more effectively by their superintendents.

--Professional development must be better focused and more effective. Used effectively professional development is a valuable tool for improving educator performance; used ineffectively, it is a waste of time and a meaningless box to check. The National Staff Development Council has developed standards that document

effective delivery of professional development and these standards should be referenced when developing any professional development. Illinois' professional development for all educators (support professionals, teachers, principals, and superintendents) should be reevaluated for focus on the state's newly-articulated goal.

--Teacher success should be rewarded. If a new state accountability system is designed to incent districts to ready children for college and the workforce, then those districts should incent their teachers to work toward the same goal. The performance of students on standardized tests is not a basis for determining teacher pay, but when a more complete accountability system has been developed, interested districts and teacher union locals should be able through the collective bargaining process to determine compensation packages that reward teachers for their work in achieving the district's goals.

--The state should continue to support National Board Certified Teachers. The state should continue its support of teachers pursuing National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification by providing scholarships for the NBPTS fees and mentoring support for those teachers working on their portfolios. Once the teacher has received National Board Certification, the state should also continue its support of the yearly incentive while maintaining the NBCT Master's certificate and maintain support for those who serve as mentors for individual teachers or schools. Additionally the state should continue to support efforts to increase the number of NBCTs in hard-to-staff schools.

--A focus on hard-to-staff schools. In many professions, the specialties that are hardest to fill end up having the highest salaries to attract candidates to the field. The state should incent districts and their teacher union locals to fill difficult positions that remain unfilled when tied to an existing salary schedule. The state should also incent districts and teacher union locals to attract the best candidate to teach in hard-to-staff schools. Moreover, programs like Grow Your Own can help develop quality educators with community ties who can help schools improve over the long term.

--Teacher failure should have consequences. Nobody benefits when inadequate teachers remain in the profession. Our system needs to improve the evaluation of teachers, to provide for the remediation of teachers identified as failing, and then, as it does now, provide a process for teachers who, after remediation, are still not providing a quality student experience to make a graceful and dignified exit from the profession. School leaders should have the training and information to make effective personnel decisions which ensure students receive the kind of experience they deserve. Nobody benefits when inadequate teachers remain in the profession

B. Administrator Quality

--High-quality leadership needs to be a system priority. Illinois has made strides toward improving the quality of its superintendent and principal leadership, and these strides must accelerate. Short-term incentives can attract top teachers to

struggling districts and schools, but those teachers will not remain if the district and building leadership cannot lead educational improvement. Illinois has many excellent superintendents and principals, but has not as a state ensured that strong leaders are in the schools that need them most.

--Administrator preparation programs should adequately prepare school leaders. Illinois colleges and universities certify 4000 new administrators every year. Our state needs approximately 400 new principals every year. Independent studies have identified a quality gap in the preparation programs provided by the variety of certified institutions in Illinois. This gap must be addressed and aspiring administrators must be better prepared to lead our schools effectively.

--Improved evaluation is essential. Evaluation systems for school and district administrators that are currently in place fail to adequately address quality assurance and continual learning. There are best practice models utilized in other states that should be studied and adopted in Illinois.

--Induction and mentoring needs to be supported. New principals receive a qualified mentor for their first year of practice. This program needs to be extended to superintendents and school board members. The quality of the mentor is critical to the success of any mentoring program and the high quality program standards in place should be followed.

--School Leadership failure should have consequences. Nobody benefits when inadequate administrators remain in the system. Improved induction and mentoring, professional development, and effective evaluation including feedback from those supervised by administrators are critical to ensuring all school employees are led by high performing administrators at the building and central administration levels in all schools. As with other school employees, those who are not successful when given proper support and supervision must be processed to a graceful exit from the profession. For those administrators directly accountable to school boards, those boards must take responsibility for the evaluation and professional development of these key administrators. No building, department, or district can provide optimal learning opportunities for all students when inadequate administrative leadership is allowed to remain in place.

C. Curriculum Quality

While curriculum decisions are traditionally local, those decisions are made against a backdrop of state policy, and it is that backdrop we need to change with subsequent curriculum alignment.

1. Standards

The Illinois Learning Standards represent our collective judgment about what it is children need to learn during their time in the public education system. There is widespread agreement within the educational community that those standards are outdated and need to be changed. The State Board of Education and the Board of

Higher Education have already voted to join the American Diploma Project network, which helps states learn from each other as they attempt to build learning standards that provide the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and work. Crisp, rigorous standards are the most effective, and Illinois has committed to moving in that direction. Following through on that commitment will go a long way to improving the college readiness of Illinois students. Illinois should also join the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a national effort to support a comprehensive approach to standards.

We also note that the state's commitment to implementing the standards needs to be expressed through support to local school districts. Simply rewriting the regulatory code where the standards are enshrined will not directly improve student outcomes. Schools -- particularly low-achieving schools -- need to be provided with targeted resources to help them implement the rewritten standards. One element of that needs to be ensuring quality standards-based instruction for our large population of English language learners.

2. Graduation Requirements

The graduation requirements should flow logically from the standards. Once there is agreement on the content students are expected to know, the state's course requirements for graduation should be amended to ensure that students are guaranteed to receive that content.

III. Metrics/Measures

A. Assessment

If our overarching goal is for students to graduate from high school ready for college or the workforce, then ideally, our system of metrics would tell us whether children are on track to meet the goal. First, our high school diploma would be set up to equate to college and work readiness. Then, for high schools, their actual graduation rate would be central to their accountability. And once we identify the characteristics of a college- and work-ready high school graduate, we can backmap through kindergarten, to determine what constitutes a steady progression toward college readiness. Our metrics would then tell us whether a child is on track to graduate college and work ready, or whether the child is behind the pace.

Our current set of metrics tell us nothing of the sort. The ISATs are not designed to tell us whether children are on a college- or work-ready progression. In fact, ISAT is not aligned to the Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE). They should be. Rewriting our standards provides a natural opportunity to revisit our assessment policy, and we should upgrade our assessments at the same time we upgrade our standards. We recognize that a new set of assessments tracking college and work readiness will cause a tremendous amount of short-term pain for districts and schools, as the percentage of students demonstrating proficiency will likely drop precipitously across the board. That may be a worthwhile price to pay for the superior information provided by an assessment keyed to a college and work readiness

progression, but state leaders need to be prepared to help educate the public about the transition.

Another critical metric is our high school completion rate. Quality educators want the opportunity to engage students for as long as is needed, but some state accountability systems create a perverse incentive to "push out" students who are behind grade level. Our metrics should always focus on giving every child a chance, and regardless of how far behind they may be, the incentive for schools should be to keep students engaged.

B. Data

We also must commit to closing the state's data gap. The most sophisticated schools in the state use rich data analysis to track student progress, and base interventions on data sources far more meaningful than the state's current accountability system. An improved state data system would provide all schools with the opportunity to use data to improve instruction. Moreover, it would improve accountability by making better data available to the general public and legislators. The data system must also be connected to higher education and workforce data, to allow for much more extensive analysis of what policies truly do improve student outcomes.

C. Combining Assessments and Data: Growth-Model Assessments

With improved assessment and data, we can move away from NCLB's exclusive focus on raw proficiency, and to a more realistic accountability based on *both* raw achievement *and* progress toward improved achievement. Ultimately, students will need to achieve at a certain level in order to qualify for college or skilled employment after high school; accordingly, raw achievement should not be ignored. However, for the purposes of holding educators accountable, the state must also focus on trajectory: if the student's raw achievement does not place them on the path to college readiness, did the educators working with that student at least move them closer to that path over the course of a year?

Take the example of an entering fifth grader reading at the second grade level. Over the course of the year, educators working with the child help him achieve a fourth grade reading level. Under No Child Left Behind, the result to the school is the same as if that child finished the year still reading at a second grade level. We need an accountability system that acknowledges the progress made by students and educators, especially with the high rates of mobility in some communities that leave schools dealing with a significant number of children that fell behind on another school's watch.

The danger of a pure growth-model system is that it could end up punishing schools that begin with high level of achievement, and that is surely wrong. Our accountability system must ultimately measure both raw achievement and progress, at all times creating incentives for schools to prepare all of their students for college and the workforce.

IV. Resources and Consequences

A. Resources

The argument for increasing spending on public education typically focuses on the strong overall correlation between increased expenditures and student outcomes. The argument against increasing spending typically focuses on the fact that some of our lowest-spending schools actually outperform some of our highest-spending schools. Both arguments have persuasive force. Our focus, then, is to steer the conversation to more productive territory, and to better define what *effective* spending is.

We note that when the "school funding formula" is discussed, what it means may depend on who is discussing it. To much of the public at large, the "school funding formula" is used to describe the balance of spending between the state and local districts (a balance that, despite regular increases at the state level, continues to skew all the more heavily toward local taxpayers). To insiders, however, the "formula" is the actual general state aid formula, which is the state's primary funding mechanism; general state aid distributes money to districts based on their enrollment and property wealth.¹

Nowhere in any of this discussion has been any focus on student outcomes. But we believe that if our goal is improved student outcomes, then student outcomes have to be a part of any discussion of resources. Imagine a funding distribution formula that focused on student outcomes (as measured by raw achievement or progress) in the following manner:

Districts that achieved unusually high-quality student outcomes particularly for at-risk populations, could be rewarded with "bonus" funds that could be spent in a discretionary manner.

Districts that achieved appropriate student outcomes would continue to receive annual cost-of-living increases to cover rising costs.

Districts that failed to achieve appropriate student outcomes would receive additional *targeted* resources - non-discretionary funds that would have to be used on certain strategies agreed to by the state and district. In essence, these districts would have to articulate a plan for improving student achievement, and then receive funding to drive the plan. Ultimately, of course, the purpose of the plan would be to move the district out of the lowest funding category, to the point that regular cost-of-

¹ The other most significant state funding stream is "mandated categoricals," in which the state tries to help districts make up for the enormous federal shortfall in spending on special education. The federal government falls desperately short of meeting its stated commitment to special education student, and while the state has recently focused more attention on holding up its end, local districts still end up absorbing significant costs to deal with their extremely important special education commitments.

living increases would be sufficient to sustain student achievement - or, even better, that the district would achieve at high rates entitling it to bonus funds.

The current funding formula, when combined with tax caps and the many vagaries of property tax law, confronts school districts with a whole host of variables when trying to craft a budget. For districts with limited property wealth, those choices can be heart-wrenching, because even with full community support they may not be enough to provide the kind of education the children deserve. We believe that the calculus would be much simpler for districts if it were reduced to the following: if you successfully kept your students on a path toward college and work readiness, you will get a cost of living increase from the state to keep doing so; if you didn't, any increase in funding will be tied to agreed-upon strategies for improving the classroom experience - and sufficient to execute the strategies.

B. Consequences

Illinois is one of six states recently chosen by the U.S. Department of Education to participate in a 'differentiated consequences' pilot. The pilot proposal itself has its supporters and detractors, but the overarching point should be that it's time to reevaluate how the state interacts with local districts, particularly the ones with the poorest record of student achievement. It is extremely unlikely that we can improve student achievement by punishing our lowest-achieving school districts; we can, however, improve student achievement by engaging our lowest-achieving school districts and changing the way they approach their work.

Any school that does not have its students progressing toward college and work readiness may want some kind of assistance, but that assistance should vary depending on the difference between the school's achievement and the progression toward college readiness. Districts facing small gaps, or gaps affecting a relatively small subset of students, should receive focused attention directed toward the subject of the gap. On the other hand, districts facing the most significant across-the-board shortfalls need something altogether different. With those districts, the state should use the lever of its resources to drive significant positive change, primarily by implementing some of the strategies described below.

Wherever possible, the state should enter into the process seeking partnership with local districts, and districts should be free to reject the partnership. However, if the application of additional resources still does not bring improvement - or if the district rejects the partnership but then fails to improve performance on its own - then more dramatic consequences may be appropriate. Any accountability system that is to be taken seriously must at some point create real consequences for adults who, given the resources and opportunity to improve outcomes for children, fail to do so.

We also believe strongly that when success happens at either the state or local level, it happens according to plan. Accordingly, once the state has articulated the goal, the local planning process should be re-keyed to that goal, and focus explicitly on how the district will move students toward the goal identified by the state,

including the implementation of the strategies described below. Local planning must involve the local union(s) and actively engage members of the community, so that it reflects not only best educational practices but the considered will of people most crucial to school success.

C. Revenues and Pensions

How much money it will take to actually support the goal of college and work readiness is impossible to calculate without further definition of what the state will support and what it won't. But we know that a plan will require new sustained revenue, potentially coordinated with changes to local property taxation. The bargain struck long ago was that education in Illinois would be a local function, with the state taking a more limited role in education policy, but leaving local communities to fund the system themselves. That bargain may not be the most appropriate balance for where we find ourselves today, particularly given that No Child Left Behind has dramatically increased the importance of state education policy.

The new bargain must, however, be an actual deal, not simply a set of state-imposed mandates without the money following. If the state, in collaboration with educators and local communities, identifies a policy set that will lead to improved student outcomes, then it must recognize that it has a significant role in providing the resources needed for that policy set to succeed. All children in Illinois schools face an increasingly global marketplace, and local districts alone may not be equipped to prepare their students for that world. This new bargain must not be about expanding the state role for the sake of expanding the state role, but about redefining the roles of the state and local districts in ways that ensure all students have the best chance to succeed. Our hope is that the annual discussion of resources for education will become framed in the language of student outcomes, and how much money is needed to ensure that students are graduating from high school ready for college and work.

We also recognize that the state's pension debt is a critical element of any revenue discussion, and that sorely-needed capital funding for school construction must be part of the equation as well. The purpose of these proposals, however, is to articulate the education policy set that state general funds should support on an annual basis.

V. Strategies

We have identified the goal of college and work readiness, and emphasized that quality teachers and quality content are the key building blocks of achieving our goal. Beyond that, however, there are a variety of strategies that may be used to improve the amount of time spent on high-quality interactions between teachers and students. We offer a non-exhaustive list of those strategies below, and emphasize that other research-based strategies may also be appropriate. Our lens, however, is that each of these strategies must be implemented with a clear eye toward improving the readiness of our students for college and work. Many of these strategies may impact school employee working conditions and will require collective bargaining.

Many of these strategies also address or are related to interventions used in Response to Intervention or (RtI). Currently, all school districts in Illinois are currently in the process of addressing Response to intervention which integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavior problems.

Preschool for All: Much of the achievement gap has opened by the time children enroll in kindergarten, and Illinois leaders should be commended for their support of Preschool for All, a comprehensive birth-to-five plan to provide early learning to those parents who want it. Illinois should continue its support for this extremely important building block of school success.

Full-day kindergarten: Illinois funding supports districts that maintain ongoing full-day kindergarten, but not the transition to its creation. Accordingly, the state should authorize short term transitional funding for districts seeking to implement full-day kindergarten.

Extended learning time: When students are receiving quality instruction on relevant material from excellent teachers, the main variable in their learning will be the amount of time they have to interact with those teachers. Extended day and extended year programs can increase the level of interaction, particularly for those students most at-risk.

Reduced Class Sizes: Another manner of ensuring that individual students can have more interaction with their teachers is reducing class sizes. Research-based class size reduction plans will help some children maintain a progression toward college and work readiness.

Professional Development: The research is clear and compelling. Staff development that improves the learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district. Districts must provide teachers with the time to participate in such communities.

Parent and Community Engagement: Increasingly schools are succeeding with research-based models of parent and community engagement. Funding targeted to help build community around schools - particularly those with low attendance and completion rates - could help ensure that the students most at risk remain engaged in their education.

Multigenerational Learning Models: Many children in Illinois public schools have parents who never completed (or even experienced) a formal public education, but who would welcome the opportunity to advance their own education. Educational programs targeted to parents - ideally in coordination with the education of their children - could lead not only to improved student outcomes, but to strengthened communities.

Dropout Recovery: Illinois already supports successful programs to re-enroll students who have dropped out of school. With improved data, Illinois could do more to help dropouts return to school and improve their future prospects.

School Climate: Students who feel uncomfortable at school drop out and fall off the college and work ready progression. Tracking stakeholder satisfaction and school climate could help schools improve the environment for students and professionals.

New School Models: Increasing the number of charter schools allowed statewide would provide new opportunities for innovation.

Career and Technical Education: Many students have the interests and ability to thrive in today's fast-growing career and technical fields. High-quality standards-based CTE is a critical component of getting them there, and Illinois must be committed to supporting the development of quality curricular sequences keyed to overall learning standards.

STEM Initiatives: Many sophisticated 21st-century jobs require science, engineering, and mathematics backgrounds. Illinois' commitment to the Illinois Math and Science Academy shows that it understands the importance of high-end achievement in these areas. Broadening its commitment to a wider range of schools would improve student opportunity and expand the hiring pool for current and future Illinois businesses.

Dual Credit and Dual Enrollment: Dual credit and dual enrollment programs are already popular as a method for college-bound students to start college with extra credits. To realize their full potential, however, Illinois could add a focus on pathways to college credit for at-risk students, developing student-friendly course sequences that begin in high school and lead to an associates degree. Early college high schools combine new school models and revised dual credit policy.

Advanced Placement: Advanced Placement courses are a widely recognized tool for improving college readiness, and expanding their availability while maintaining quality would help at-risk students prepare for college.

Technology and Digital Learning: Rapid advances in technology should be put to use in the classroom. It is important to remember that the use of technology is not a goal in itself, but a tool in preparing children for college and work - but it is an increasingly important tool, one that our education system must embrace.

Financial Accountability: With additional resources comes an increasing responsibility to be good stewards of public funds, and greater transparency in fiscal reporting should be coupled with any increase in spending.

Governance: Illinois has authorized the creation of a P-20 Council, which can play a valuable role in steering high-level policy at the state level. Moreover, to the

extent new policies require greater support from the state, the state should ensure that its agencies are able to carry out their responsibilities.

VI. Higher Education

Ideally, Illinois education policy would provide a seamless web from early learning through K-12 through higher education through the workforce. Right now it clearly does not. But we stop to recognize that the work of public school educators cannot occur in a vacuum. Higher education and workforce interests must be an active participant in developing the state's standards and data systems, among other policies, and should commit to more comprehensive tracking of outcomes for high school graduates (and dropouts). Other significant reforms to consider in connecting secondary education with higher education and the workforce:

--More meaningful use of work-ready assessments. Illinois students already take portions of the WorkKeys examination, which can be helpful for measuring the workforce readiness of high school students. But they do not take enough of the WorkKeys to provide meaningful feedback to employers. A new equilibrium is needed, where high school students have the ability to demonstrate their readiness for work while still in high school, and employers commit to using the results of readiness assessment in meaningful ways.

--More meaningful use of college-ready assessments. All Illinois 11th graders take the ACT college admissions test as part of the PSAE. But Illinois' high school assessments are not useful for higher education placement decisions, including community college placement. Integrating higher education placement with mandatory or optional high school examinations would not only emphasize the seamlessness of the education continuum, it would provide meaningful feedback to students in a more timely manner.

--Application and financial aid policies tied to the state's overarching goal. Research has shown that many students who do complete K-12 college-ready end up not enrolling or enrolling in a college ill-suited to their needs, in many instances because they did not understand the application process for either admissions or financial aid. In addition to more and better information for students and streamlining the process, Illinois should consider implementing policies that tie financial aid to its high school completion goals, with the state and students making earlier commitments to each other in order to emphasize the importance of high school completion.

--Increase the production of quality postsecondary credentials, and better integrate Illinois' educational, research, and innovation assets. The Board of Higher Education, through an extensive Public Agenda process, has identified these areas as critical to the health of the Illinois higher education system.

VII. Conclusion

A. Why This Matters At Every Level

If executed correctly, our hope is that the strategies outlined here will help at every level:

Students: Currently the primary focus of accountability is proficiency on state examinations - state examinations that are not keyed to any college- and work-readiness progression. That means the accountability system drives attention away from students who meet proficiency standards but are not on a college- and work-readiness track. Moreover, for students who are not meeting proficiency standards, it does not differentiate between those who need a little help, and those who need a lot. An accountability focused on having students ready to succeed at college or work after high school graduation should focus schools on the individual student's needs - and by acknowledging both raw achievement and progress, should help the school focus on developing an aggressive but realistic plan for getting the student to where he or she needs to be. And having a range of strategies such as dual credit, CTE, AP, and the like will benefit students, by increasing the chances that they will be able to access an educational setting that feels right to them.

Schools: School administrators and teachers have been understandably wary about the prospects of school funding reform tied to "accountability." And indeed, if "accountability" is all about micromanaging and punishing local schools and teachers, they might well reasonably prefer the status quo. But if accountability is focused on what should be the major purpose of education to begin with - creating public school graduates who can thrive in our society - then accountability should help educators achieve their goals. Educators must be intimately involved with the process of developing the learning standards that will stand at the heart of the state's accountability system, and should be given the tools needed to succeed within it. Once the accountability system is in place, it should focus on providing the resources educators need to succeed; for some that will be simply a cost of living increase, for others more money coupled with significant technical assistance. Schools that succeed should be freed from bureaucracy and oversight, and schools that do not should be given the right kinds of supports to improve their performance. While it is important in an accountability system to have consequences for failing to do the job, those consequences must be thought of as a last resort, after detailed analysis and well-considered support efforts have failed.

Communities: The fates of schools and communities are highly intertwined, as many parents with means choose where to live primarily based on the educational opportunities available for their children. Our goal must be that every public school in Illinois would be one that parents would consider relocating to have their children attend. To accomplish that will require significant engagement from communities to help schools succeed, but the payoff will be an increased number of graduates ready to contribute to those communities.

The state: If state government is being asked to provide new resources for education, it has the responsibility to ask for something in exchange. But what the state really needs is not the ability to usurp the role of local school boards - what it needs is qualified high school graduates. Our polity and economy depend heavily on

maintaining a steady stream of well-educated public school graduates, and if we cannot continue to produce graduates who are capable of being productive citizens of Illinois, we will be surpassed by other states in every important metric. Whether viewed as a social justice issue about giving students a real chance to build their own future as citizens, or an economic issue of driving Illinois' business success, having more Illinois high school graduates who are prepared to succeed in college or work is simply good for the state. So if the state is prepared to invest more in the education system, it has the right to demand that the system be focused on that outcome.

B. The New Bargain

In sum: Set the right goals for students. Make sure the people entrusted with getting students to the goal have the right training and qualifications, and the right content to provide. Measure the progress of students. Direct resources to improving the performance of students (and schools, and districts) that are not on the right track. And implement strategies that are proven to achieve the goals identified for our students.

Taken as a whole, the reforms described here amount to an entirely new bargain among the state, its districts, and its educators. The state sets a broad goal and gives the district resources to move toward that goal - and over time, how much freedom and flexibility the district gets is heavily dependent on how effectively it uses its freedom and flexibility. Because we know that incentives (both positive and negative) impact human behavior, we seek to align the incentives of the system with its ultimate goal. An observer encountering the Illinois education policy set for the first-time would be hard-pressed to discern a coherent goal from the existing policy infrastructure; accordingly, we suggest beginning with the goal, and building the policy set around it.

We know that the transition from the current system to the one we describe will be far from painless, at both the state and local level. We have attempted to describe our proposed reforms simply, knowing that they all have the potential to be enormously complicated. But we start from the belief that student outcomes should be at the core of every decision made about the system's policies. We also then believe that if a system is designed that actually achieves better student outcomes, decision-makers at both the state and local level will find the resources to fund it. We hope, in the months and years ahead, to work with policymakers and the public to define and build that system.