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## FROM HERE TO EXCELLENCE

The second in a series

# Coming up short

January 31, 2007

In Illinois, we spend \$20 billion each year to educate two million public school students.

Is it enough?

How do we know what's the right amount?

In 1997, legislators asked an important question: What would it cost to provide just an adequate education for every child? That is, what would it take for students to learn what they're supposed to learn in school?

Lawmakers created the Education Funding Advisory Board, or EFAB. The panel's charge: Determine the minimum amount needed to provide a decent education to the average Illinois child--one with no special disadvantages.

The board carefully studied efficient school districts, those in which at least two-thirds of students performed at grade level. The methodology employed by EFAB is widely used across the country and considered to be financially conservative. It recognizes districts that achieve good results while keeping costs down.

According to EFAB, Illinois should spend at least \$6,405 a year in the classroom to provide an adequate education to each child.

But the state requires districts to spend only \$5,334 per student. If poorer districts can't come up with that amount, the state makes them whole. That still leaves a gap of \$1,000 between the state-mandated amount and what EFAB suggests. (In fact the gap is even higher. The EFAB estimate hasn't been updated for two years.)

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Yes  No

Yes  No

Yes  No

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[Only 19 school districts in Illinois](#) meet the EFAB number. The cost to bring the other 855 districts up to par: \$2 billion a year.

Wait a minute. How can we say Illinois comes up short when it spends an average in federal, state and local money of \$10,000 per student?

There are two answers:

Spending varies wildly between school districts, depending on local wealth. That skews the average. Lake County's Rondout School District 72, for example, spends about \$14,000 on each student's instruction per year. Steger School District 194, in southern Cook County and northern Will County, spends only \$3,800 per student.

The estimate of \$6,405 to provide a minimum education excludes the substantial extra costs needed for special education, low income and non-English-speaking students. It costs much more to educate those students, and [we have more of them these days in Illinois](#). Often the schools that have modest local wealth have the greatest number of such students.

Federal and state lawmakers have come up with all kinds of rules for the services that schools must provide to special education students. And for good reason: Their needs had been ignored for too long. But money has never followed the mandates.

School enrollment in Illinois rose 6 percent in the last decade, but the number of special education students shot up 25 percent. More kids are being diagnosed with autism, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, asthma and developmental delays.

Special education gobbles an ever-growing share of education dollars. Ten years ago, 13 percent of the total state and federal education dollars in Illinois went toward special education. Last year, 20 percent did. It costs \$8,500 a year extra, on average, to educate a child with disabilities in this state, according to the Illinois State Board of Education. That figure dovetails with national averages. Kids with the most severe disabilities can cost a school district more than \$100,000 a year.

In 1975, the federal government committed to providing 40 percent of special education costs. But the feds never met that promise. Today, federal money covers only 14 to 17 percent of costs in Illinois.

In 1985, Illinois began to provide \$8,000 a year per special education teacher, which at the time constituted a third of an average certified teacher's salary. The reimbursement never budged, but salaries did. Today, the state pays the same flat fee, but it represents only 14 percent of the average teacher's pay.

That leaves local taxpayers to cover the yawning divide.

Example: In 2004, Riverside Elementary District 96 spent \$1.6 million on 120 special education students. The state and federal share: Just \$400,000. Twice in the last 13 years, the district has asked for and received substantial tax increases from local taxpayers, largely to cover special education costs.

Illinois schools are forced each year to shift nearly \$500 million in local revenues intended for regular

education students into special education. Why? Largely because state and federal officials aren't living up to their commitments.

Last year, [Lombard School District 44 had to divert \\$275 per student to cover the state's special education shortfall](#). North suburban Sunset Ridge School District 29 had to divert about \$425 per student, according to an analysis run for the Tribune by the Metropolitan Planning Council.

It also costs more to educate a poor child. Illinois has [20 percent more poor children](#) than it had a decade ago. It costs 150 percent more to educate a student who grows up in poverty than it does to educate a middle- or upper-class child, according to the Center for Policy Research at Syracuse University.

But Illinois doesn't come within a whisper of providing that much more for low-income kids, even counting federal poverty money.

Federal aid policy shortchanges poor students in Illinois. The federal government guarantees a minimum amount of poverty money for each state. So states with relatively few poor students reap far more money per student than more populous states. For example, Illinois has 34 times as many poor children as Wyoming does, according to the Washington, D.C.-based Education Trust. Yet Wyoming receives twice as much federal money per student as Illinois does. Federal dollars also are tied to how much each state government spends on education. That puts Illinois, which ranks 47th in state support for education, at further disadvantage.

More children who don't speak English are entering Illinois schools. They, too, cost more to educate; yet federal money for bilingual education has been frozen for four years.

From Belleville to Barrington to Belvidere, anecdotes abound of financial hardship and the need for more education spending.

A couple years ago, Troy School District 30C in Plainfield cut all art, band, choir, Spanish, computer, technology and broadcasting programs, and laid off support staff. The district, in a booming area, has been adding 200 to 300 children a year, but state and local revenues haven't kept pace.

Advanced Placement classes at Mather High School in Chicago jumped from 18 students last year to 28 this year because of budget squeezes, according to Principal John Butterfield. That's the minimum: 28 students in the school's most advanced classes.

The state's schools creak and moan under the strain of so many growing financial pressures.

For two decades, policy debates on how to improve school funding in Illinois have focused primarily on the gap in resources between our richest and poorest districts. Indeed, school funding inequities here are an embarrassment. Only New York shows a larger gap in revenues between its highest and lowest districts.

Let's go back to Rondout and Steger. Why is there such a difference in spending?

Affluent Rondout residents spend lavishly on their students, and can afford to do so. The result is what you would expect: success. When well-educated parents send their well-prepared 5-year-olds to a well-equipped school with well-paid teachers, the odds are that, 13 years later, a kid will emerge ready for college.

But property values in Rondout are much higher than in Steger. Property in Steger is taxed at more than twice the rate as property in Rondout, yet it generates less than half as much income. Raise the tax rates higher, and schools run the great risk of driving businesses and residents away.

Still, the complaints about education do not emanate just from poor and middle-class areas of Illinois, as they did in the 1990s. They come from nearly everywhere.

Quality in all schools needs to be education's coin of the realm. Are the 874 public school districts in Illinois equipped to give all children the education they need?

The answer is no.

*On Friday: What taxpayers should demand in exchange for more money.*

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