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FROM HERE TO EXCELLENCE

Smarter schools for Illinois

In our minds, we are generous to our schoolchildren. And, to a point, we are. Last year we paid \$20 billion in taxes to support education in Illinois, in the hope that our young people would flourish in excellent public schools. And, to a point, they did.

Broader excellence is within sight. This state has so many educators, so many schools, of which it can be proud. And it could be proud of so many more, from our cities to our suburbs to our rural communities.

Conventional wisdom dictates that the relative affluence or distress of those communities tells us which Illinois schools need help and which don't. Not so. Our impoverished schools pose enormous challenges. But they're not the only ones. Educators in virtually every school across this state need more support to do the jobs being asked of them.

The way we fund those schools divides us into warrior tribes. The way we fund those schools is ... inadequate.

We're not spending enough dollars. And we're not getting enough for the dollars we spend.

As is, this exchange--dollars invested for performance displayed--doesn't serve our children as well as it should and comfortably could.

Moving public education in Illinois from here to excellence would help the one-third of our students who fail to meet even the most basic, minimum standards, and who risk falling further behind. But make no mistake: a better education system would benefit students in every public classroom from Zion to Cairo.

This is the time to reform how Illinois finances its schools. This is also the time to reform how school districts spend that money. Today, the Tribune

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- Yes
- No
- Huh?

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launches a series of editorials that will explain exactly how that can be done.



Smart Illinois politicians of both major parties know that continued reliance on rising property taxes to carry the bulk of education costs only invites the kind of voter revolt that makes schools a public enemy.

Many of those politicians also sense a moment of opportunity in [Illinois' prosperous economy](#). It's fashionable to badmouth this state's climate for businesses and workers. But slowly climbing state tax receipts suggest that the Illinois economy is healthy enough to take a fresh look at the state's options and responsibilities.

This editorial page usually expresses skepticism about tax increases. But we will argue in this series that there is a substantial need to put school funding on a more stable footing. That will cost each of us more money--and allow us to insist that our schools deliver much more.

Another reason why this is the time: The culture of public education is changing for the better. The nationwide standards movement and federal No Child Left Behind law have introduced educators to a hitherto unknown accountability for what does, or doesn't, happen in their classrooms. Schools today operate under unprecedented pressure to perform.

Improved measures of what does and doesn't work in the classroom now allow creative educators to explore wide rivers of data about what helps students learn and perform. In Illinois and elsewhere, that research can empower families, communities, whole states, to expect specific outcomes in return for the tax dollars they contribute to public schools.

Put short, it wouldn't be difficult to raise the bar. Illinois educators now know better than ever before how to drive academic achievement for students all along the talent spectrum. The question is whether those educators have the resources to improve student achievement--and the willingness to reform a school system handicapped by the way things always have been.

As stakeholders in education, all of us citizen-taxpayers understand what we want: world-class instruction for our progeny. A better shot at competing in a global economy. And the business community that is hoping to employ those children understands what it needs: a workforce prepped to compete in the age of knowledge.

Right now, though, there's an imbalance. The demands made of our schools continue to surge, yet we fail to provide the necessary money for them to meet those mandates.

Consider: Most state governments foot about half of the tab for public education. Property taxes and other local taxes cover much of the rest, with 7 to 10 percent chipped in by the federal government.

In Illinois, though, [state aid accounts for less than 34 percent of school costs](#). The resulting [overreliance](#) squeezes businesses and homeowners. Local school districts wind up with profoundly inequitable amounts of money per pupil.

These editorials will address three questions:

- How much revenue is needed to provide every child with an adequate education?

- What is the most efficient way to raise money for schools without putting too much burden on the state economy?
- How should that money be spent to give every schoolchild a fighting chance to succeed?

Unless Illinois voters and their legislators coalesce around good answers for those three questions, expect a decades-long pattern of mediocrity in education to continue.

Schools will demand more money. Lawmakers will respond with modest funding increases--they've barely matched inflation for the last five years. And a rising share of the customers our schools serve, the children of Illinois, will continue their slide through an education system that doesn't offer them the right resources, or demand real reform of the education industry.

In these editorials you'll read no vague pleadings for "more money for education." Instead you'll find specific ideas for how to align the system's incentives and rewards with rising expectations, and how to smartly leverage new money to give students better outcomes.

The core belief that underlies this series: The most crucial variable in a child's education outside the home is the quality of the teacher at the head of the classroom, and the leadership of the principal outside the door.

Research confirms that. Illinois has 153,000 public school teachers. The least-experienced and most poorly prepared of them fill our weakest schools, according to a recent [report](#) by the Illinois Education Research Council. That report and others show that just [a few years with an excellent teacher can lift a struggling student](#) to the surface.

Education has no shortage of crying needs: serviceable buildings, sufficient textbooks, functional buses, safe playgrounds, well-crafted curriculums. But for too long, "more money for education" hasn't been matched by uniformly better personnel delivering that education.

This isn't a landscape of unrelieved failure and sorrow. Many schools in Illinois succeed; many others show impressive gains, despite the hurdles of teaching students who have physical or mental challenges, come from poor homes, don't speak English.

Yet education in Illinois still falls short of excellence. [Only two-thirds of the state's school children meet minimum standards](#) in reading, math, science and social studies. Worse, a mere 55 percent of high schoolers meet minimum standards. Illinois continues to show lackluster progress on national tests.

There is a corrosive habit of citizens, and their politicians, to weight only what a different funding scheme would mean for *their communities*.

Illinois needs to outgrow this penchant for school financing that can't look beyond economic self-interest. There are plenty of reasons for Effingham taxpayers to care about Hinsdale school children, for Hinsdale taxpayers to care about Harvey school children, for Harvey taxpayers to care about Effingham students. We've just never acknowledged as a state that the future economic health, workforce and leadership of Illinois depend on better educating *all* of our children. And yes, all children can learn.

What's especially enticing is the wealth of research in recent years on how schools can turbo-charge that

process. In this series you'll read about better strategies for teaching children to read, for improving teacher training, for making principals better managers.

We need a new compact between taxpayers and schools. The solutions are discernible. A new movement that demands more accountability in public education has prepared the way. Once schools are on firmer financial footing--rather than lurching from state budget to state budget--Illinois can implement statewide some basic improvements that smart districts here and elsewhere have developed.

This is the ideal time--the necessary time--to make that leap.

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