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In return for more money ...

February 2, 2007

Educators and advocates for more school funding complain that Illinois taxpayers don't supply enough money to adequately educate elementary and high school students in this state.

We agree--although we reached that conclusion only after investing five months of research into how Illinois funds its public schools. In the next installments of this series, we'll lay out precise strategies for improving the quality of Illinois teachers' and students' performance. After that, we'll spell out what we think is a fresh and common-sense plan for funding those overhauls without overtaxing this state's citizens or the businesses that employ them.

But the need to raise school funding is only half of what we see as an urgent agenda. Local public education in Illinois is accustomed to doing what it pleases. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg unwittingly spoke for many frustrated taxpayers in Illinois and elsewhere when he declared in December: "The fact is, our education system looks a lot like the U.S. auto industry in the 1970s--stuck in a flabby, inefficient, outdated production model driven by the needs of employees rather than consumers. ... [M]ediocrity and failure are tolerated, and excellence goes unrewarded."

Yes, Illinois definitely needs to better fund public education. And in return for more money, we need to insist that Illinois educators be more accountable for their good or bad performance, more transparent about how they spend our dollars, and more willing to embrace rigorous, research-driven strategies for teaching our kids.

Asking that Illinois educators help overhaul the policy world in which they live--by reforming their pension rules and ending their resistance to termination for lousy teachers, to name two snag points--is the quo without which Illinois taxpayers shouldn't contribute more quid. Any plan for giving the necessary additional billions to schools needs to overcome deep-seated objections that repeatedly have doomed new school funding proposals in Illinois.

Some taxpayers, particularly in Chicago's affluent suburbs, resent the current funding formula, which sends relatively few state dollars to their schools. These citizens live in communities that spend generously on public education. They feel they've fulfilled their obligation to the schoolchildren of Illinois.

Still other taxpayers suspect that additional state funding would settle futilely over public education like rain upon a desert, vanishing into parched sand without producing much in the way of new growth. To these citizens, education is a monopoly in which insiders--in school district offices, in faculty lounges and in Springfield corridors of power--would rather protect each other than reform their sclerotic industry.



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This state's educators and their advocates have never championed the bold reforms that could overcome that opposition. It's almost as if they'd rather joust at windmills than change.

But imagine how much more receptive to higher taxation Illinois citizens might be if lawmakers, school officials and teachers offered these improvements in return:

- State law should demand that any new money go only to districts that agree to spend it on one of the seven education strategies that future installments of this series will explain and explore. Pennsylvania now requires its school districts to apply for this sort of additional funding to support a set list of best practices. The net effect is to steer taxpayers' extra efforts into proven ways of bolstering student achievement.

The bulk of this money would go to districts willing to boost the performance of students by embracing tactics--such as smaller class sizes in the lower grades--that certifiably produce results. Poorer and improving schools could draw money at greater rates than affluent, already high-performing schools. All applications and funding decisions would be visible on a Web site so districts could see which applications for the extra millions succeed and which fail.

- If school districts take that money but don't produce results, they would face consequences. Here's one logical repercussion: If a school fails to significantly improve, that school would have to wait two years before it could reapply for more money. Here's another: Expand charter school authority to qualified area institutions, such as universities. Would-be founders of charter schools need approval from local districts to open. Too often, school officials find reasons to keep the tax dollars for themselves.

- Another task for Springfield: With state pension obligations threatening to bankrupt Illinois, it's insane to funnel new teachers into a pension system with defined, and unaffordable, benefits payable decades from now. You want to teach? Then accept a slew of pension reforms that have been stalled in the legislature by lobbyists for teachers and other public employees.

- And about those relatively few lousy teachers: In 2005, reporter Scott Reeder of the Small Newspaper Group fought past bureaucratic obstacles to learn that only two tenured Illinois teachers a year, on average, get fired for incompetence. Five more get fired for misconduct. That's seven teachers out of almost 100,000 tenured educators. Tenure in Illinois protects mediocrity. Firing a bad teacher is so costly that many districts find it cheaper to wait for him or her to retire. Taxpayers would volunteer more dollars for schools if legislators would reform this culture of overweening protection for people who can't do their jobs.

- Ever try to learn how your local school spends money? Not the big budget categories, but the line items where the real action plays out? Schools in Chicago are launching a superb, Web-based disclosure that will let parents compare apples to polished apples at every school in the city. Think your school spends an inordinate amount on administrators and security guards, but goes cheap on after-school programs and teacher development? Check it out.

The State Board of Education should establish a standard format for use by every school in Illinois. Your school wants more state money? Then your school shows citizens how it spends the money it has. That added transparency would create more confidence that districts are good stewards of hard-earned tax dollars.

- While we're admiring sunshine as a disinfectant: Parents and other taxpayers occasionally are startled to find their supposedly well-funded, well-run schools on a state watch list of financially failing districts.

Sometimes, incredibly, even school superintendents and business managers don't realize how problems have slowly accrued on their watch. Springfield could force real accountability--and better protections for taxpayers--by telling local officials who submit financial reports to the state that they'll be stripped of their certifications if their numbers are wrong--or if they don't identify growing financial problems in their schools. Think of this as Sarbanes-Oxley for the public sector: If you sign this financial report to the state, you personally guarantee that it's accurate.

- One other small but potentially illuminating outreach: a brief, standardized survey that asks teachers and parents about the quality of life at each school. If 90 percent of the parents say their tax dollars are well spent, or 70 percent of teachers say they don't have the resources necessary to do their jobs, then everyone learns something. Wilmette District 39 Supt. Glenn "Max" McGee, a former state superintendent, conducts short parent and teacher surveys every other year, which result in school improvements. Illinois Education Association Executive Director Jo Anderson suggests all districts conduct short, five-question surveys online or by telephone and post them on the front page of that school's report card. Smart ideas don't have to be big ideas.

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Roll a bowling ball down any Main Street and you'll hit citizens who deeply resent being cheated in the past by promises that (a) an Illinois lottery would solve school funding, and (b) 51 cents of every new state revenue dollar will go to educate our kids. In truth, much of the increase in education spending has gone into expenses outside the classroom. The money hasn't had the promised effects on the delivery of education in public school classrooms.

Time and again, Illinois taxpayers--through their legislators--have refused to provide the vaguely phrased "more money for education." Our hunch is that those taxpayers are wise to what University of Wisconsin school finance specialist Allan Odden has concluded: When schools get more dollars but don't face companion constraints on how it's spent, "What you get is last year's program at a higher cost."

Our conviction, for education as for most government enterprises, is that citizens will accept higher taxation only if they're confident the money will be well-spent.

Make public education in Illinois more answerable to the citizens who pay the freight, we believe, and they'll be much more likely to accept their share of a greater tax burden.

Sunday: Classroom ideas that work

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