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## **Civic leaders, foundations, educators launch Advance Illinois, a new Illinois bi-partisan education reform organization**

*New report shows alarming gap between education, job requirements; Illinois falling behind world faster than rest of U.S.*

**CHICAGO, November 18, 2008** –Jim Edgar, former Governor of Illinois, and Bill Daley, former U.S. Secretary of Commerce, came together today with Illinois civic and business leaders and the Bill & Melinda Gates and Joyce foundations to launch Advance Illinois, a bipartisan effort to push toward improved public education in Illinois.

At events scheduled in Chicago and Springfield, Advance Illinois released a report, “The State We’re In: Advancing Public Education in Illinois,” that shows Illinois education lags the rest of the country at a time when the U.S. is itself dropping behind much of the world.

“Illinois public education is falling behind the rest of the world at an alarming rate and we must act decisively, now, with sweeping, systemic change to get back on the path to future prosperity,” said former Illinois Governor Jim Edgar, co-chair of Advance Illinois. “This is an urban as well as a rural problem, and a Downstate as well as a Chicago challenge. We need to make every student college-ready, career-ready and world-ready. We know by looking around the country that it can be done.”

The report issued today documents that just 22 percent of high school students are college-ready across the four ACT testing areas, and fewer than 30 percent of Illinois students demonstrate proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests, placing the state at or below national averages in all areas and at all grade levels. National studies compiled on the organization’s Web site ([www.advanceillinois.org](http://www.advanceillinois.org)) show the requirements of the Illinois Student Achievement Test (ISAT) are well below similar tests in other states, and that our standards need to be sharpened and raised.

“State standards and graduation requirements should help students get ready for college and careers, but they don’t,” said former U.S. Commerce Secretary Bill Daley, co-chair of Advance Illinois. “Sadly, that means that if your child is reaching what we define as proficiency in Illinois, he or she is not necessarily equipped for life after school. We must apply an impartial and research-driven approach that will focus on bold and measurable solutions for improving public education. It has worked in other states and it will work here.”

School reform means not only improving schools but driving home the message that students and parents must share in the responsibility.

“School reform begins at home,” said Patricia Watkins, executive director of the TARGET Area Community Development Corporation. “We must come to the rescue of schools and teachers, but students need to be more invested in their future and parents must be more invested in the academic lives of their children.”

The report demonstrates the urgent need to fix state policies that determine the quality of Illinois schools. Within the next six years, 89 percent of jobs in Illinois’ fastest-growing sectors will require some education or training beyond high school. But only 56 percent of Illinois adults over the age of 25 have any post-secondary education, creating a significant economic and employment gap.

“Our state’s businesses, large and small, need employees who can meet job requirements that grow more and more demanding,” said James Bell, President and CFO, The Boeing Company. “Without a well-educated workforce, businesses lose market share, which means employees can lose income or even their jobs, and entire communities suffer.”

The Advance Illinois board of directors also includes Joseph Fatheree, Illinois Teacher of the Year 2006-2007, from Effingham High School. He believes reform means ensuring teachers are empowered to help students succeed.

“Great teachers want accountability and fair standards,” said Fatheree. “My personal experience and national research show teachers are above all else looking for stronger administrative and community support that will allow them to be more effective. That means having the tools we need in the classroom. That means well-trained principals. That means parents who are involved in homework.”

Advance Illinois plans consultations with state and national experts and a “listening tour” across Illinois over coming months. The group plans to issue major new policy recommendations to strengthen the state’s education system next year.

"The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and our philanthropic partners have great confidence that Advance Illinois' can take on and solve this very real and serious problem," said Steven Seleznow, Deputy Director of Education Programs at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "We must all find ways to use our resources to seek out strong solutions that can ignite change."

Illinois’ lack of preparedness is made more acute by the fact the state has one of the largest achievement gaps in the nation. The gap in math scores between poor and non-poor students is the second-highest among all 50 states. The gap between African-American and white students is the 6<sup>th</sup> largest among 43 states in a recent study mentioned in the new report.

“When they leave school, our students are no longer competing with each other for jobs, they are competing with graduates from around the world,” said Miguel del Valle, City Clerk of Chicago and former chair of the Illinois Senate Education Committee who sits on Advance Illinois’ board. “Advance

Illinois will help ensure our students are prepared by serving as a decisive independent voice representing the public interest.”

Illinois’ average or below average ranking nationwide is all the more worrisome because the U.S. itself has slipped significantly on worldwide education measurements. The U.S. has been surpassed by other industrialized countries in terms of the percentage of adults with a college degree. And over the past five years, the U.S. has lost ground in achievement as well, dropping four spots among 29 developed nations in terms of math (from 20<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup>) and science (from 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup>).

“Along with much of the nation, our state has moved too slowly and made too few changes to an outdated education system,” said Dennis Hastert, former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and a member of the Advance Illinois board of directors. “Fixing it must be a statewide effort that is based on similar, successful models in other states. It is not just a moral imperative; it is also the surest path to preserving economic growth and social freedom.”

While Advance Illinois will not issue policy recommendations until next year, existing research shows that there are best practices in other states and other nations that can boost student achievement.

“Best practices from around the world boil down to common sense: we need to attract and support top-notch educators, must demand the highest standards for instruction, be clear about what success looks like and ensure our schools deliver the best possible experience for every child,” said Robin Steans, Executive Director of Advance Illinois. “That’s not yet the case in Illinois.”

### **Third-party endorsements for Advance Illinois:**

**Mary Ellen Guest, Executive Director, A+ Illinois:** “A+ Illinois welcomes the leadership, resources, and commitment of Advance Illinois to the fight for education reform. The group’s analysis of the condition of Illinois education brings a renewed sense of urgency to our missions.”

**Jerry Stermer, President, Voices for Illinois Children:** “Voices for Illinois Children is thrilled to have a powerful and committed ally focused solely on the interests of students.”

**Jeff Mays, President, Illinois Business Roundtable:** “The Illinois business community applauds Advance Illinois’ focus on finding solutions that bring accountability, efficiency and measurable results to improve educational outcomes.”

**Jo Anderson, Executive Director, Illinois Education Association:** “Teachers are on the front-lines, and know better than anyone the crisis in education facing Illinois families. Advance Illinois can be a force to help ensure we are informed by the most recent, rigorous research and best practices nationally as we address the crisis and move forward together.”