

THE BURNHAM 2.0

IMMEDIATE ACTION STEPS

There has never been a moment quite like this one for identifying next action steps for education policy in Illinois.

We support sustainable and predictable revenue for public schools, so we are very concerned about the FY 10 Illinois state budget – and the prospects for the FY 11 budget look even worse. Education is an investment, and if made properly, the long-term payoff can be substantial. Illinois made measured but noticeable progress this decade in treating education as a priority rather than an afterthought, but if FY 10 is a harbinger of things to come, we are poised to make a major retreat.

We certainly are not ignorant of the other pressures facing the Illinois legislature. Within our group, we have widely divergent views on such pressing issues as whether to increase taxes and revamp the revenue structure, how to deal with the weak condition of the state's pension funds, what to do about rising health care costs, and to what ethical standards we hold our government officials. All of these issues are important, and we know that all of them are interrelated in ways big and small. Further, we know that all of these issues are ones on which the status quo is unsatisfactory to many, but change is difficult to achieve. However, while we take no group position on those issues here, we all understand and agree that the state must come to grips with them. While these immediate action steps and plan focus solely on education policy, we recognize that there is a broader context in which these education policy changes will be considered and enacted.

As alarming as the condition of the state budget is, we can take some comfort in the unprecedented investment the federal government is making in education. It is unlikely that the level of support provided through the 2009 stimulus will be sustained, but we do anticipate that in the next few years the federal government will spend more money and take a more activist policy role. That could be a boon to us, but not if the state uses federal involvement as an excuse to do less. Instead, the federal government's ambitions should be a spur to our own.

The situation is urgent; every year that goes by, thousands of children are underserved because we have left work undone. We have seen the federal government's effective use of leveraged funding, and it is time for Illinois to do the same. Perhaps some day we will look back and agree that the state budget deficit spurred us to rebuild the system in a better way, rethinking how we spend discretionary money and putting the dollars we have to better effect. Perhaps the darkening outlook will force us to fundamentally change how we deliver service, how we value great teaching, and how we think in the present about the future of our state's children. Or perhaps we will look back and see that some other state or nation took advantage of the opportunities that we squandered. As of now, however, we believe the better course remains within our grasp.

What we present in the Burnham 2.0 is a vision for the long-term future of our state's education system. In the best of times what we recommend could not be implemented in a year, and these are not the best of times. So while we know we must be aggressive, we also must be realistic. Yet the opportunity to win federal Race to the Top dollars, if Illinois acts decisively on these issues, could be a salve during these harder times.

What follows are suggestions for immediate action steps, categorized according to Race to the Top guidelines. There are action steps that help meet each of the four reform areas plus some suggestions for making education funding a priority – one of the Department of Education's selection criteria. Immediate, thoughtful action in these areas will boost our chances of obtaining significant federal funds – and more importantly, will be good for students.



Standards and Assessments

Adopt New Learning Standards. Illinois is one of 46 states that has signed on to create common state standards, a national initiative spearheaded by governors and state education agency heads. Illinois has been participating in the American Diploma Project Network, a group of 34 states committed to learning standards that are more rigorous, focused, and easier for teachers to use. In addition, Illinois is joining the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, committing the state to learning standards that develop the skills children need to succeed after high school.

We expect the state will soon adopt high-quality learning standards that are anchored in both age-appropriate early learning standards at the one end and college and career readiness at the other end, with an appropriate progression in between. Additionally, for the standards to improve student outcomes, the state should develop the supports necessary to make them useful to teachers for improving classroom instruction. More than five years after our existing standards were adopted, in a survey by the University of Illinois, not a single high school in the state reported having "emerging new infrastructure to support a standards-led system," let alone the "predominance of a standards-led system." We cannot

allow that to happen again. We are pleased that the state plans to adopt new standards, but its job will not be complete when the code is revised. We urge the state to help provide materials, training, and professional development that will make the rewritten code meaningful to teachers and students. This would be an excellent use of Race to the Top funds (if the state obtains them), and other federal funds could also be used for this purpose if state funds are unavailable.

Adopt New Assessments. The revision of state standards will force Illinois to change its assessments – and that gives us an opportunity to improve

on state tests (particularly in grades 3-8) that are widely considered inadequate. Our tests are not vertically aligned, and do not implement assessment best practices used in other states and countries. Indeed, parents and policymakers cannot easily determine from our current tests the most important piece of information the assessments are supposed to provide: is my kid – are our kids – making enough progress toward graduating from high school ready for what comes next? The group of states creating common state standards will subsequently develop aligned assessments. Until those better assessments arrive, we know the State Board is working to be able to answer that question immediately as well as it can based on our current tests, and we urge it to promptly identify a temporary solution. **We urge the State Board to aggressively pursue a complete upgrade of our assessment program, using federal funds wherever possible to drive Illinois toward an assessment system that measures growth and gives parents, educators, and policymakers an accurate picture of student preparedness.**

We note that the state already spends a good deal of money on assessments. While there are costs to improving them, we would rather spend money on assessments that provide students and educators with what they need, rather than spending money on assessments that do not. Federal funds could play a key role in funding the improvement.

Define the Mission of the P-20 Council to be College and Work Readiness. The Illinois legislature has created a P-20 Council, to help create a more integrated set of policies connecting early learning through K-12 through higher education and the workforce. We urge Governor Quinn to charge the Council with focusing on key college- and work-ready policies. One example of an area ripe for discussion at a P-20 Council is our performance metrics – how are we going to define student and school success? And how are we going to develop assessments (including standardized tests and other measures) that do a better job of measuring student success than the ones we have now? Those discussions require input from early learning, K-12 educators, higher education, business, and others – making the P-20 Council an excellent forum for the discussion. **We ask Governor Quinn to press the P-20 Council to promptly begin defining the state's goals and metrics for student and school performance.**

Data Systems

Implement the P-20 Data Bill (SB 1828). There is widespread agreement that improved data is critical to



building a better education system – and the President and Congress agree, requiring improved data collection as a condition of receiving stimulus funds. The General Assembly passed SB 1828 this spring to create a real longitudinal data system in Illinois covering early learning, K-12, and higher education. Illinois has already received a \$9 million grant from the Institute of Education Sciences to help implement the system, and more federal funding is being targeted specifically to help states implement better data systems. **We ask the State Board, in developing the data system, to pay close attention to how instructional and operational data can best be made accessible and useful to parents, educators, policymakers, and others, and to begin creating a culture of data-driven decision-making.**

Effective Teachers and Leaders

Improving Teacher and Principal Effectiveness and Reducing Inequities in the Distribution of Quality Teachers. In the plan, we identify several strategies for elevating the profession in Illinois, including improving teacher and principal preparation, supporting induction and mentoring, improving evaluation, and refocusing professional development. We already attend to these issues, but not always in ways that foster teacher

professional growth or focus on student outcomes. The state can play a valuable role in driving improvement, and getting more bang for our buck. **A statewide academic growth metric should be created so that federal, state, and local money spent on professional development, mentoring, and induction can be spent much more effectively than it is today. A better metric would also be an anchor for improvements to our evaluation of classroom instruction, and the content of our teacher and principal training programs.** Moreover, while our primary goal is to raise teacher and principal effectiveness across the board, we must also be cognizant of, and willing to address, the fact that many of the students who need great teachers and principals the most are the students least likely to have them.

For our state's Race to the Top application to succeed, we will have to identify better strategies for measuring teacher effectiveness, making those measurements meaningful, and ensuring that the effective teachers serve the children with the greatest need. Discussions of how to do that have been underway, but Race to the Top puts pressure on those discussions to yield prompt results. **We call upon key participants to think boldly about these issues and to move quickly to agree upon how best to evaluate student progress and teacher effectiveness.**

Keep Momentum Going for Improved Mentoring and





We know some proven strategies for improving school performance, most of which center on providing intensive support and focusing on improving the quality of instruction and leadership. We also know what won't work – low-intensity approaches, or piecemeal approaches that cannot help struggling schools become organized communities of teachers and students focused on learning. The federal government has challenged us to put more resources into turning around our lowest-performing schools, and in doing so we need to begin implementing the strategies that have been demonstrated to be effective. **We need to use federal leverage and funding to define a real strategy for helping the lowest-performing schools, and then continue to use federal leverage and funding to see that the strategy is implemented.** Among other things, this will involve more clearly defining school success, and developing capacity inside and outside the Illinois State Board of Education to tackle the challenge of transforming chronically struggling schools.

Induction. Over the last few years, Illinois has started to focus on improving mentoring and induction for new teachers and for principals. A multi-stakeholder work group has developed a high-quality approach for the state, but the approach is not fully implemented. We need to continue our support, and continue working to better systematize our approach to mentoring and induction – including policies to ensure consistent quality, and to develop analogous programs for new superintendents and other district and school leaders. **We know what successful mentoring and induction should look like, but mentoring and induction programs should start being held accountable for their quality and results, and we should start measuring which mentoring and induction programs are providing the greatest return on investment.**

Expand the number of innovative-model public schools, including charter schools. Legislation passed this year allows for an increase in the number of charter schools in Illinois, answering the call of President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to provide more charter school opportunities. As we reassess our overall strategy for improving college and work readiness, we know that charter schools should play a meaningful role in improving student outcomes. With the opportunity provided by the new legislation, our conversation should start focusing on how we can increase the number of innovative-model public schools – including charter schools – in a manner that most effectively serves our larger goals.

We also believe that innovation is not and should not be limited to charter schools. Creative models have been successfully implemented in numerous non-charter

Turning around the Lowest-Performing Schools

Improving the Lowest-Performing Schools. Illinois has many schools whose overall performance is unacceptable. As discussed in the main plan, we support aggressive strategies that, as a first step, would require these schools to articulate a plan for student achievement, with the state providing resources targeted toward funding the plan. While the state should enter into the process of improving the lowest-performing schools by seeking partnership with local districts, if the additional state resources do not bring the needed improvement, then the state should be able to take more drastic measures. There must be consequences for adults throughout the system who, given the resources and opportunity to improve outcomes for students, fail to do so.





capable stewards of public money. While we cannot focus on financial accountability to the exclusion of academic accountability, **we support financial transparency and accountability measures that give members of the public a better understanding of how their tax dollars are being used to improve student achievement.** In the context of a stable state funding system, it would be appropriate for there to be a standardized annual third-party financial analysis of all school districts, which would help us to measure and compare operational efficiency in a manner correlated with academic performance, and also provide for the early identification of districts with pending financial and facility challenges.

Expand the 0-3 Set-Aside in the Early Childhood Block Grant (SB 1412). One critical area in which Illinois has been proud to lead the nation is early childhood education. In addition to an outstanding preschool program for 3- and 4-year-olds, Illinois supports our youngest learners with an 11% set-aside in the Early Childhood Block Grant (our primary early learning funding stream) for programs reaching infants and toddlers. Demand for high-quality infant-toddler programs is enormous, and recently passed legislation would allow the set-aside to expand to 20% as new funds become available. Unfortunately, a cut to the Block Grant in FY 10 has set back progress in expanding service to at-risk young children. **In general our recommendations steer clear of calling on the General Assembly to "just add money," but this is one area where we believe restoring the cuts – and returning to the state's previous trajectory of expanding access every year – is entirely necessary.** In the long term, the investment will more than pay for itself.

schools. In addition, we can do more to help schools improve instruction through better use of technology and virtual resources.

Charters are opportunities, and we must be careful that those opportunities are used well. As with non-charter schools, we need to be transparent about how charter schools are performing, and take appropriate actions to address situations where charters are not performing adequately. President Obama and Secretary Duncan, while ardent supporters of charter schools, have been clear that failing charter schools should be shut down. We see the newly-authorized charters as a great opportunity to improve student outcomes. **Accordingly, we ask local authorizers to be vigilant in ensuring that newly approved charters will maximize that opportunity. The state can help by publishing easily understood data about charter school performance, to help inform parents and policymakers.**

Making Education Funding a Priority

Financial accountability. We entrust school districts with our most precious resource – our children – and our primary focus must be on how children progress as students. We also know, however, that for school districts to maintain public trust, they must demonstrate that they are

