

“Race to the Top” Report

Executive Summary

Illinois Can Win the “Race the Top”

Illinois has an historic chance to earn up to \$400 million in new, discretionary funds to drive planned reforms in classrooms throughout the state. State leaders must act boldly to take advantage of this rare opportunity.

The \$400 million comes from the U.S. Department of Education’s “**Race to the Top**” competition. The competition asks states to make critical reforms that support student achievement and close achievement gaps.

Many of the reforms called for in “Race to the Top” are consistent with existing state priorities. Securing these competitive dollars can spur **immediate action** on the reforms and help pay for their implementation.

This is an Education “Race” Worth Winning

In a new report, *Advance Illinois*, the education reform advocacy group chaired by Bill Daley and Jim Edgar, shows how reforms called for in the “Race to the Top” will benefit Illinois children in the long run, and how Illinois can better position itself for these historic federal dollars.

Specifically, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is seeking reforms that:

1. Raise academic standards;
2. Ensure the best teachers and leaders in every school;
3. Build better data systems; and
4. Turn around our struggling schools.

The report outlines how these “Race to the Top” reforms closely align with a Healthy System for Illinois schools.

In fact, state education leaders **were already working toward these goals** when the “Race to the Top” competition was announced. Federal funds will help support implementation of related activities.

How “Race the Top” Can Help Deepen and Extend Good Efforts Already Underway

Reforms like these are already at work in some parts of the state, including **Bloomington, Champaign, Evanston** and **Arlington Heights**. In the report, *Advance Illinois* notes how reforms like the ones undertaken in those districts can improve its student performance. In today’s difficult fiscal climate, educational and political leaders should welcome an opportunity for new, discretionary funds, combined with methods to leverage existing resources more wisely.

What Illinois Needs to Do to Win the “Race the Top”

Illinois is “on the bubble” in this competition, neither a front-runner nor out of the running.

Only a handful of states will be awarded “Race to the Top” grants, so Illinois must make the legislative and regulatory changes to set it apart from other states, some of which have already been taking strong action.

The report recommends Illinois’ political leadership focus its near-term work on legislation to:

- Revise how teachers and principals are evaluated;
- Open more pathways to teaching, especially for those who want to teach math and science; and
- Strengthen its strategy for turning around struggling schools.

The report also lays out the additional work Illinois needs to undertake in all four areas of the “Race to the Top.”

1 Standards and Assessments

How Can We Improve Our Odds of Winning?

To be competitive, Illinois must:

- **Stay the course on strengthening standards and assessments**, including participation in the American Diploma Project and the multi-state Common Core Standards Initiative with the goal of measuring a broader set of skills;
- **Define kindergarten readiness and college readiness**, to provide early indicators of progress and clear paths to college and career, emphasizing STEM;
- **Outline implementation strategies** for how the newly developed standards will be rolled out to districts, schools, and classrooms throughout the state, including training so that teachers, principals and superintendents can put new standards to work;
- **Strengthen and support implementation of formative assessments** designed to measure interim student progress toward new standards, including support for local district training and adoption; and
- **Adopt a common method for measuring student academic growth** over the school year – a key component of a stronger evaluation system.

To be **BOLDER**, Illinois could:

- **Design and implement a broader, more strategic state report card** to capture a picture of Illinois' educational health against national and international benchmarks, including early childhood and post-secondary success, etc.;
- **Adopt and conduct statewide school climate surveys to measure** school safety, professional working conditions, student and parental engagement; and
- **Introduce 21st century innovation in assessments.** Examples include on-line testing and high school end-of-course exams so students can be tested in subjects like Algebra I and Algebra II when they complete the course, rather than arbitrarily in their Junior year.

2 Great Teachers and Leaders

How Can We Improve Our Odds of Winning?

To be competitive, Illinois must:

- **Pass legislation revising how districts evaluate teachers and principals**, including student performance as an evaluation element, and linking evaluations to certification and tenure decisions;
- **Continue the work of the Illinois Principals Association and the Large Unit District Association to strengthen principal evaluation**;
- **Strengthen access to alternative certification**, especially for math and science teachers;
- **Raise entry requirements for teacher and principal candidates** including changing rules surrounding entrance exams, as well as working with teacher certification programs to elevate the academic caliber of those entering the profession; and
- **Give districts and schools the resources and flexibility to attract and support effective teachers and principals, and ensure those strong educators reach the most vulnerable students.**

To be **BOLDER**, Illinois could:

- **Link accreditation of teacher and principal preparation programs and expansion of alternative certification programs to the performance of their graduates in the field**; and
- **In struggling schools, base “reduction in force” decisions on performance, rather than seniority.** Where schools are chronically failing, student needs are not being met, and the stakes are the highest, ensure that personnel decisions are based on performance rather than on seniority.
- **Expand leadership mentoring and development efforts with proven track records.** Programs like the National School Administration Manager Project have demonstrated success in developing instructional leaders.

3 Data Systems to Support Instruction

How Can We Improve Our Odds of Winning?

To be competitive, Illinois must:

- **Strengthen our data capacity** by designing and implementing a cutting-edge system that makes use of all available data at the student, teacher, classroom, school, district, and state levels from early childhood through post-secondary;
- **Put data to use.** Establish clear performance goals and metrics and provide tools for teachers, principals and superintendents to inform instruction and management;
- **Ensure that data is user-friendly** by convening a collaborative group of stakeholders and conducting significant local outreach to ensure that data is collected, reported, and made available in ways useful to local schools and districts;
- **Build data links to teacher and principal preparation programs**, so that aspiring teachers and school districts understand program strength;
- **Provide coordinated governance** via a clear strategy for managing data collection, establishing guidelines, and structuring best use of data across systems from early childhood to higher education; and
- **Continue to develop and sign data sharing agreements.**

To be **BOLDER**, Illinois could:

- **Create a public web interface to provide user-friendly, readable data, public access, and transparency.** The state is looking to partner with vendors with demonstrated success implementing complex data systems; and
- **Invest in an ongoing Education Research Collaborative** to dig deeply to illuminate strategies that work versus those that aren't working, and thereby guide policy and long-term decision-making in a more results-oriented system. Illinois can build on its bench strength of higher education and research institutions, as well the experience of the Illinois Education Research Council and the Consortium for Chicago School Research.

4 Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools

How Can We Improve Our Odds of Winning?

To be competitive, Illinois must:

- **Launch a state Partnership Zone** including identification of experienced school turnaround partners and continued work with key stakeholders to ensure maximum talent attraction, investment, and buy-in;
- **Give struggling schools more flexibility to use resources and freedom from key mandates** to creatively tackle longstanding challenges, including the need for stronger student and social supports. Couple these with strong focus on results; and
- **Encourage the Intervention Task Force** to move expeditiously to issue findings.

To be **BOLDER**, Illinois could:

- **Establish an Innovation Fund** that would provide districts with flexible dollars in exchange for compelling plans to use research-based strategies to tackle targeted issues (e.g., attracting effective teachers and principals, extending the school day or year, lowering student/counselor ratios, creating or expanding community school programs, etc.) Schools/districts that meet agreed-upon outcomes within three years would continue to receive enhanced funding.



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Reaching Our Goal

In fact, Illinois has already taken strong steps related to “Race to the Top” thanks to good leadership from the State Board of Education, the Board of Higher Education, and the Community College Board, as well as key legislators. Their work this spring to raise the cap on charter schools and create a longitudinal data system, along with recent moves to convene a P-20 Council and a School Intervention and Innovation Task Force, have strengthened the state’s “Race to the Top,” and are all signs that the work yet to be done can be accomplished in the Spring 2010 session.

For the full report or more information on “Race to the Top,” including other states’ efforts, please visit www.advanceillinois.org.