
The Rail

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Exposing entrenched union power – and standing up for children and families

By Matt Paprocki, President and CEO, Illinois Policy Institute.



I am excited to announce a brand new, data driven, full-length documentary produced by the Illinois Policy Institute: CTU Local 1: The Rise of America's Most Powerful Teachers Union.

For the past decade, the Chicago Teachers Union has increased their political spending – endorsing socialist candidates for city council, providing political contribution to Kim Foxx and now running socialist candidates for mayor of Chicago.

Meanwhile, Chicago students' academic performance has plummeted, with four out of every five students unable to read at grade level. Only 15% met proficiency in math.

As the union becomes more powerful and political, the children are left to suffer.

Yet, according to new polling, a plurality of people in Illinois don't have an opinion

on the Chicago Teachers Union, because nobody has told their story – until now.

Our documentary on the Chicago Teachers Union will expose the entrenched corruption and failed leadership of CTU.

We tell the story of teachers like Ifeoma Nkemdi, who opted out of CTU in 2019 because she was tired of the pomp and circumstance. She said she could not stand behind an agenda to politicize education as a status symbol.

People are realizing that public sector unions like CTU don't represent the interests of students and working families, but have become radical political activist groups expanding their power and profit.

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It's not fair that children get stuck in a corrupt system and aren't given the opportunity to receive a quality education. This is why we're continuing to fight for school choice to give these kids a chance at a brighter future.

That's why Gov. J.B. Pritzker was compelled to follow the will of the people and flip his stance on the Invest in Kids Act, which gives low-income families options outside of failing public schools.

It's not fair that children get stuck in a corrupt system and aren't given the opportunity to receive a quality education. This is why we're continuing to fight for school choice to give these kids a chance at a brighter future.

It's your contribution to our commonsense mission that is making this important work possible. You give children and their families hope and opportunity.

In this edition of *The Rail*, you'll read the following articles from our writers and policy experts:

- An explanation of why it's time for Illinois to embrace school choice, from Ep. 64 of the "The Policy Shop," our weekly podcast offering policy solutions to Illinois' fiscal crisis.
- A breakdown of Chicago Public Schools student test scores, which are worse than pre-pandemic levels.
- Everything you need to know about new Illinois laws now in effect, especially the controversial SAFE-T Act.
- An analysis of government ethics complaints, which hit a new record in 2022.

- The personal story of Charlie Ross – how he's struggled with high taxes and what he thinks could make Chicago a beautiful city again.

Starting with this January edition of *The Rail*, we are bringing you two new, exclusive features:

"Illinois Forebears" highlights a pivotal Illinoisan in the history books whose leadership can be our guiding light as we work toward Illinois' renewal. There's no better way to start this off than with Abraham Lincoln.

It's your contribution to our commonsense mission that is making this important work possible. You give children and their families hope and opportunity.

Finally, in this *Rail*, you'll hear about our belief in honest and transparent government accountable to taxpayers, not special interests.

Together, we're building momentum and moving the needle on public policy. I'm confident we can make 2023 a great chapter in Illinois' comeback story.

Thank you for your commitment to restoring Illinois' freedom and prosperity.

In liberty,



Matthew T. Paprocki
President
Illinois Policy Institute

Why it's time for Illinois to embrace school choice

From The Policy Shop, Ep. 64



Pandemic school closures put a spotlight on education, as parents struggled to make e-learning work or looked for alternatives to public school. That scramble introduced many people to the concept of school choice – a public policy philosophy that gives students educational options instead of restricting them to whatever public school is in their ZIP code.

Why does choice matter? Because no two kids learn the same. Some learn better in a large public-school setting. Others thrive in a smaller setting – or in a STEM program, or fine arts magnet school ... you get the idea.

Illinoisans like school choice: In Illinois, more than 60% of voters support school choice, including 66% of Democratic voters, 71% of Black voters, and 81% of Latino voters. The opposition persists with scare tactics and rhetoric that seeks to villainize beneficiaries and advocates of the program.

Illinois is home to a successful school choice pilot program. Here's how it works: The Invest in Kids Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which passed in 2017, allows individuals and corporations to donate money for private school scholarships and receive a tax

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credit of 75 cents for every \$1 donated. Scholarship money is awarded to families whose income does not exceed 300% of the federal poverty level: a family of four earning \$73,800 or less would qualify. And it has been working well. Empower Illinois reported the average annual household income of participants is \$38,000, and 49% of participating students are Black or Hispanic. These households otherwise wouldn't be able to afford private school tuition but want their children to be able to attend schools that best fit their needs. With 26,000 families on the waiting list, it seems there is plenty of demand for the program.

Scholarships are good for students:

Research by the Urban Institute shows tax credit scholarships raise high school graduation rates, college enrollment and college attainment of recipients — mostly children from low-income households. In Florida, for example, scholarship recipients were 12% more likely to go to college. Those who had received a scholarship from grades eight to 10 were two percentage points more likely to graduate college.

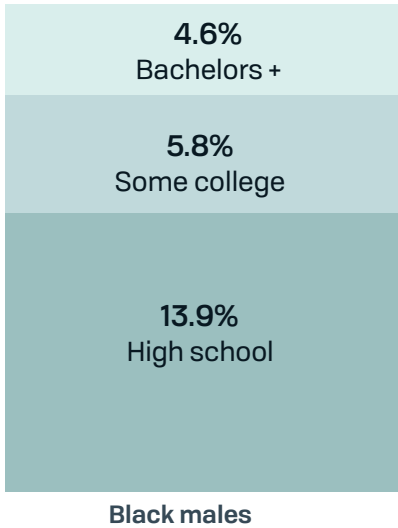
Eighty-nine percent of students at Chicago Public Schools are minorities – mostly Black and Hispanic – and the public school system is failing them. Seventy-five percent

of students at the lowest-performing public elementary schools in Chicago failed to meet standards on state exams. More than 20% of these students scored in the lowest category in reading, meaning they had a difficult time determining the main idea of a persuasive essay or the plot of a short story.

And research has shown how education and jobs improve health outcomes and reduce crime. Even before the pandemic, states with higher unemployment rates had higher crime rates – both in terms of higher homicide rates and higher property crime rates, according to data from the FBI.

Education boosts job prospects more for Black men

Prime working-age Black males increase their labor force participation more for each additional level of education than white males



Source: Current Population Survey

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How choice changes lives: Jennifer Rodriguez and her daughter, Teresa, of Joliet, Illinois, know the disruption and chaos losing the scholarships can cause. Invest in Kids started when Teresa was a freshman at Joliet Catholic. “Then she received it sophomore year, but junior year she did not receive it,” Rodriguez said. “That was a rough year. I was doing whatever I could to make it work, but there were a couple of times where I really did fall behind making the payments. I had received an email stating that if I didn’t get caught up that she possibly wouldn’t be able to return.”

A counselor helped find money, plus her tax return let her pay off the tuition debt. But the trouble wasn’t over. “She was waitlisted her senior year. I debated pulling her out of school for senior year. Being on the scholarship waitlist was scary because I thought, ‘I don’t know if I can do this again,’” Rodriguez said.

“Luckily she did get it for senior year also, so that’s been a godsend. I pretty much cried because that was just a big relief off my shoulders, knowing that I wouldn’t be scrambling and trying to make ends meet to give her this opportunity.”

Senate Bill 3618, House Bill 5461 and House Bill 5391 would expand scholarship opportunities for low-income students and families. They were introduced by state Sen. Antonio Muñoz, D-Chicago, state Rep. Angelica Guerrero-Cuellar, D-Chicago, and Rep. Mike Zalewski, D-Riverside.

Invest in Kids, Illinois' tax credit scholarship program for low-income kids, is on the chopping block. Will the state make it permanent or kill it at the end of 2023?

Unions v. parents: Illinois Families for Public Schools is urging parents to call lawmakers and allow the Invest in Kids Tax Credit Scholarship program to expire, ending 37,000 scholarships that have helped low-income students in Illinois.

But hundreds of parents with the opposite perspective recently traveled to Springfield to tell lawmakers to make the tax credit scholarship program permanent. They have shared how their children struggled in public school but have thrived in private schools they could not have afforded without the program.

Invest in Kids, Illinois' tax credit scholarship program for low-income kids, is on the chopping block. Will the state make it permanent or kill it at the end of 2023?

Pritzker's pivot: Unions are sweating because Gov. J.B. Pritzker did an about-face on the program, saying he supports school choice now. As education reform advocate Corey DeAngelis writes in *The Wall Street Journal*, Pritzker "said that his budgets 'have ultimately included the relatively small Invest in Kids Scholarship Program' because he had 'assurance from the advocates' that they would 'support increased public school funding.' His support may be measured and conditional, but explicit support for school choice is a major shift for Mr. Pritzker."

Invest in Kids is facing its biggest legislative challenge yet as the program is set to statutorily sunset on Dec. 31, 2023, unless the General Assembly takes action to save the program.

The end? Invest in Kids is facing its biggest legislative challenge yet as the program is set to statutorily sunset on Dec. 31, 2023, unless the General Assembly takes action to save the program. The program enjoys significant bipartisan support from legislators, and even Pritzker. Momentum is certainly on the side of families, but it will be important that more voices join the call to "Remove the Sunset" and allow families to continue benefiting from a program that has far exceeded its expectations.

THE [POLICY] SHOP

The Policy Shop is a weekly podcast tackling Illinois' most important issues.



Chicago Public Schools students test scores worse than pre-pandemic

CPS student proficiency rates remain below pre-pandemic levels and demographic achievement gaps persist in newest release of statewide test data.

By Hannah Max

Test data released by the Illinois State Board of Education once again shows the Chicago Public Schools system has not prepared students to meet proficiency in core subjects.

Nearly 80% of Chicago Public Schools students cannot read at grade level. Just 15% met proficiency in math.

Students in Chicago and statewide are still performing worse than they did before the pandemic. But in Chicago, the rate of students failing to meet proficiency in reading and math is greater than the statewide averages.

Nearly 80% of Chicago Public Schools students cannot read at grade level. Just 15% met proficiency in math.

Chicago's low-income students fared even worse in the recently released data, based on test results from spring 2022. Yet the Chicago Teachers Union and other union

allies want to end the Invest in Kids tax credit scholarship program providing low-income students and families with other learning options.

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Proficiency rates fail to return to pre-pandemic levels

Even prior to the pandemic, Chicago public students in third grade through eighth grade struggled to meet grade-level proficiency in reading and math, with just 27% and 24% of students at proficiency in 2019, respectively. But today, ISBE reports just 20% of students are

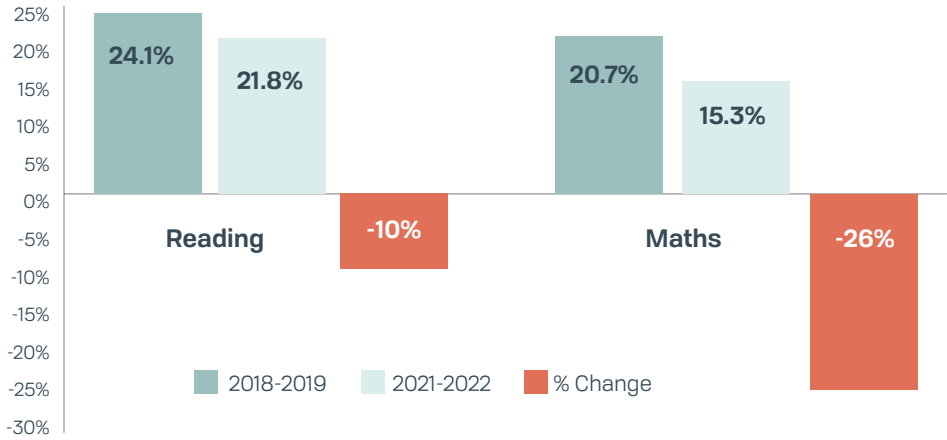
reading at grade level and only 15% are proficient in math.

Among CPS students who entered high school this fall and had their

middle school years interrupted by the pandemic, 10% and 26% fewer students are considered proficient in reading and math, respectively, since spring 2019.

Chicago 9th graders lost proficiency since spring 2019

CPS students in 5th grade in 2018-2019 saw 10% fewer proficient in reading and 26% fewer proficient in math on their 8th grade Illinois Assessment of Readiness exams in 2021-2022.



Source: Illinois State Board of Education

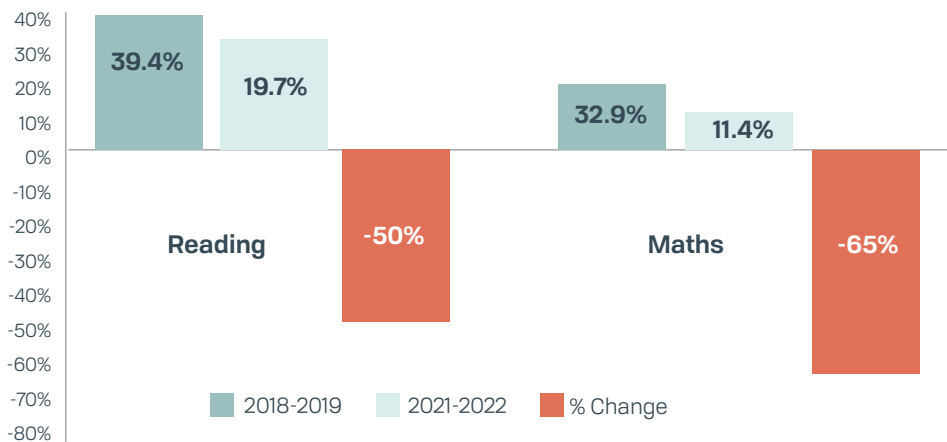
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Students who were in third grade in 2018-2019 and finished sixth grade this past spring fared even worse. Among these

students, 50% fewer were at grade level in reading and 65% fewer scored proficient in math compared to 2019.

Chicago 7th graders lost proficiency since spring 2019

CPS students in 3th grade in 2018-2019 saw 50% fewer proficient in reading and 65% fewer proficient in math on their 6th grade Illinois Assessment of Readiness exams in 2021-2022.



Source: Illinois State Board of Education

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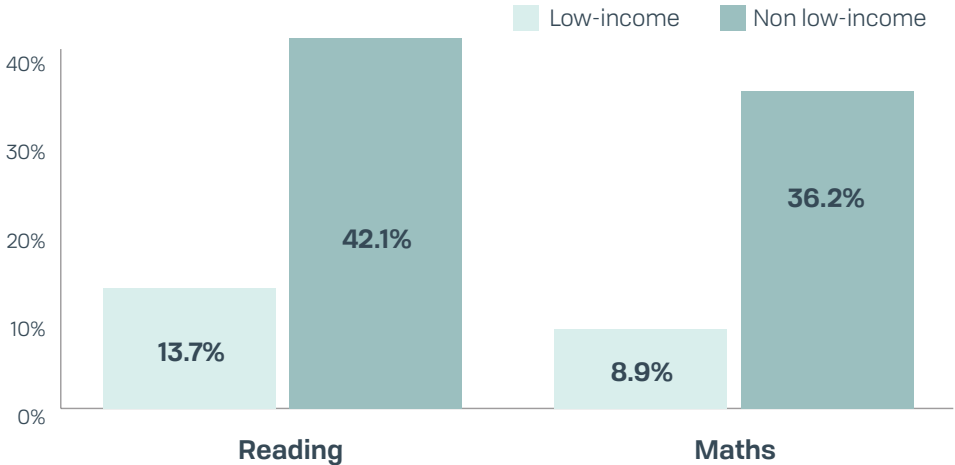
Demographic achievement gaps persist

It is concerning to see steady declines among district students. But an added

concern is the even greater rate at which low-income students have failed to meet proficiency.

IAR shows income-based achievement gaps among CPS students

In Spring 2022, there were 28 percentage points in reading and 27 percentage points in math difference in number of students scoring at grade level on the Illinois Assessment of Readiness between low-income and non low-income students in grades 3 through 8



Source: Illinois State Board of Education

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Just 14% of low-income students* in grades 3 through 8 met proficiency in reading and 9% in math in 2022. Compare that to Chicago public students who do not come from low-income families. On average, the rate of proficiency for these students is 28 and 27 percentage points more in reading and math, respectively, compared to low-income students.

Chicago Public Schools students are not receiving the preparation they need to perform at grade level, and it is even more challenging for low-income students.

Invest in Kids Act offers opportunities for low-income students

That's where the Invest in Kids Act steps in to provide a choice for families and students who can't afford schooling options outside the public system.

The Invest in Kids Act encourages donors to fund scholarships for low-income children so they can attend the school

of their choice. Donors who contribute to a scholarship-granting organization get an income tax credit equal to 75% of their donation. Students must come from a household with an income below 300% of the federal poverty level.

“It’s a huge help for many families like us, that don’t earn a lot, but we want to help our kids to get a head start, to get an education better than what we had”

Empower Illinois, the state's largest scholarship-granting organization, has awarded 37,000 scholarships worth \$280 million since the program started in 2018. It reports the average family applying for a scholarship has a household income of \$43,000.



Maria Rodriguez didn't think she had a choice of where to send her kids until she learned about tax credit scholarships.

"It's a huge help for many families like us, that don't earn a lot, but we want to help our kids to get a head start, to get an education better than what we had," she said.

Sheila Passehl and her husband also didn't think private school was an option for their son because it was too expensive, but then they received a tax credit scholarship through the Invest in Kids tax scholarship program.

"The tax credit scholarship program needs to continue to exist so that we can continue to educate our children the way we, the parents, choose to have our children educated"

The program expires on Dec. 31, 2023, and families who have benefited from the scholarships are asking lawmakers to make the program permanent to keep their kids in the schools that offer the best fit for them.

"The tax credit scholarship program needs to continue to exist so that we can continue to educate our children the way we, the

parents, choose to have our children educated," Passehl said.

Lawmakers this spring need to make the Invest in Kids tax credit scholarship program permanent.

"Low-income students are those who receive or live in households that receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families benefits; are classified as homeless, migrant, runaway, Head Start, or foster children; or live in a household where the household income meets the U.S. Department of Agriculture income guidelines to receive free or reduced-price meals, per ISBE's 2022 Illinois Report Card Glossary of Terms.



Hannah Max is a policy research assistant with the Illinois Policy Institute.

What you need to know about new Illinois laws now in effect

New laws signed by Gov. J.B. Pritzker impact education, public safety, agriculture and labor.

By Perry Zhao

While much of the recent political spotlight in Illinois concentrated on the state's gubernatorial election and the passage of Amendment 1, over 180 new laws passed by the General Assembly took effect on Jan. 1, 2023. The 103rd General Assembly was inaugurated Jan. 11 following the Nov. 8 elections.

Several laws are anticipated to have potentially far-reaching consequences on Illinois' existing policies on education, public safety, agriculture and labor.

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SAFE-T Act

A hot-button topic in the 2022 election cycle, provisions of the SAFE-T Act replaced the state's current cash-bail system with a pretrial release framework intended to eliminate inequality for defendants who can't afford to post bail.

Under the new system, judges have a heightened discretion to release or detain defendants awaiting trial based on their threat to public safety or likelihood to flee or obstruct justice.

The bill also requires increased training for police officers and phases in a mandate that all police departments use body cameras by 2025. It loosens the requirements for complaints against

officers and would end so-called "prison gerrymandering" by counting prisoners as living in their last known residence for the purposes of legislative redistricting.

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Trauma-informed school boards

Senate Bill 2109, filed by Illinois state Sen. Karina Villa, D-West Chicago, and signed into law by Gov. J.B. Pritzker on Aug. 27, 2021, mandates school board members to receive training on "trauma-informed practices."

Practices include "the prevalence of trauma among students, including the prevalence of trauma among student populations," and "the effects of implicit or explicit bias on recognizing trauma among various students in connection with race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation," among other things.

Senate Bill 2109 mandates school board members to receive training on "trauma-informed practices."

Such training may be provided by an association established under the Illinois



School Code. The Illinois State Board of Education has the power to adopt rules with respect to administering this law.

Changes to employee sick leave

Senate Bill 0645, filed by state Sen. Michael E. Hastings, D-Frankfort, modifies the Employee Sick Leave Act by mandating rights afforded under the act are the minimum standard in any negotiated collective bargaining agreement.

Interestingly, this is a diminishment of collective bargaining rights which Amendment 1, granting employees the exercise of their “fundamental right to collectively bargain,” purports to protect.

The Employee Sick Leave Act required that any sick leave granted to employees is usable by that employee for sickness of a family member, but left room for negotiation in any collective bargaining agreement. The bill’s changes are a minimum standard in collective

bargaining agreements that could not be reduced in negotiation.

Interestingly, this is a diminishment of collective bargaining rights which Amendment 1, granting employees the exercise of their “fundamental right to collectively bargain,” purports to protect.



Perry Zhao is a policy intern with the Illinois Policy Institute.

Report: Illinois government ethics complaints hit new record in 2022

Illinois' Executive Inspector General reported a record number of complaints, some alleging financial mismanagement and conflicts of interest.

By Dylan Sharkey

Illinois' Office of Executive Inspector General received a record-high 3,075 complaints – over 700 more than the prior year – covering employees who ultimately report to Gov. J.B. Pritzker, including allegations about misuse of public funds and conflicts of interest.

The fiscal year 2022 report detailed 291 revolving door determinations – a 55% increase in a year – in which a state department administrator accepted a private-sector job. Ethics laws prohibit certain state employees from immediately taking a job they impacted as an administrator.

Of the 291 state employees seeking non-public employment, four were prohibited from doing so unless they waited one year after leaving their government job.

The report also details wasteful spending of taxpayer dollars. The Illinois Department of Human Services awarded \$54,000 in payments meant for child care services to an individual who falsified documents about serving children from low-income families.

Other allegations included conflicts of interest between administrators' professional and personal lives. One

instance involved the then-Chief Information Officer for the Teachers' Retirement System.

The former TRS executive oversaw contracting to a firm where he and a family member were listed as employees on corporate documents.

The inspector general's budget grew 24% compared to the previous fiscal year, allowing it to expand staff and conduct 88 investigations.

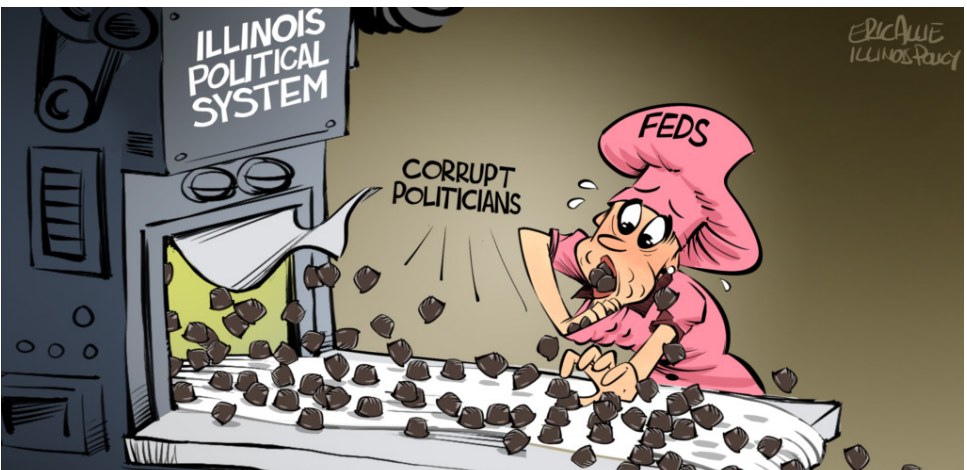
Inspector General Susan Haling said her office is crucial to ensure taxpayer money is spent well.

"It is my strong belief that the OEIG's oversight can help improve the quality of work in the State as well as root out waste and wrongdoing," Haling wrote in the report.

The OEIG's office monitors 170,000 employees in executive agencies, public universities and regional transit boards.



Dylan Sharkey is the assistant editor with the Illinois Policy Institute.



Your Story - Charlie Ross

Telling the story of policy through everyday Illinoisans.



"My commute to work is only about 10 minutes, but I frequently go out of town to visit friends and family in Indiana or Kankakee and gas is \$1 to \$1.50 cheaper out there. The gas taxes and gas prices hit me really hard because now it costs almost \$100 to fill up and before I was filling up for \$40."

"And I only make so much every week. So when the cost of food and gas go up and fewer people are coming in for cuts, it's making it really difficult to just survive day to day."

"[For] supplies like hair oil, neck ties or Barbicide, we have a hard time getting them and prices for everything have gone up. On a good week, I might run out of supplies every three days. On slower weeks, they might last a week or two. I have to buy everything myself and I have a hard time with some items because they're out of stock or they're not restocking as quickly. We always get it, but it's taking longer."

"Everything is going up and people are seeing certain services, like hair, as less important. So they might wait an extra week to get serviced. If they usually come in once a week, now they might come twice a month – which hurts our bottom line on top of the fact that the cost of everything has gone up."

"It's really unfair that they doubled the gas tax. I feel like people behind the scenes

that are already rich are using the middle class and poor to stay in that position. Politicians don't feel it as much because they're already in a good position, but they're adding extra pain for people already struggling."

"And it is terrible that businesses are facing more tax hikes because of the unemployment trust fund and after the election. We, as small businesses, are already trying to survive from COVID and now inflation and supply chain issues. I feel the government keeps taking from people that are only making pennies or dollars, taking from those that don't have them. The high taxes here hurt lower- and middle-income families and small businesses."

"If they lower taxes and remove automatic tax hikes, more people will

"If we can fix our reputation, our image and our taxes, I'm sure more people will want to come do business here because it's a beautiful city."

want to come here because people want to go wherever the money is, where they can make some money."

"That's why people are leaving."

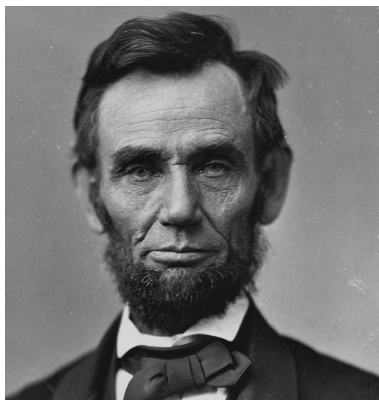
"Chicago has a bad reputation because everyone talks about the violence, so businesses don't want to come to Chicago. If we can fix our reputation, our image and our taxes, I'm sure more people will want to come do business here because it's a beautiful city."

CHARLES ROSS

Barber
Chicago, Illinois

Illinois Forebears

Profiles of those who built a free and prosperous Illinois



“We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Abraham Lincoln
Gettysburg Address, Nov. 19, 1863

Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, delivered the Gettysburg Address and helped pass the 13th Amendment to abolish slavery in the United States. He served as president during the most contentious period of American history – and ultimately saved the republic.

We remember Lincoln for these successes that built a more perfect union, but we forget about his long series of failures along the way.

His private life was filled with tragedy. He lost his mother when he was 10. His sister died in childbirth. The love of his life died soon after their engagement. The woman he married perpetually nagged and scolded him. While dressing for the wedding, he was asked where he was going. He replied, “To hell, I suppose.”

Throughout his life, Lincoln struggled with melancholia, which today would be considered clinical depression. To make his misery worse, he failed in business, paying off the debts of his awful partner for 17 years.

He lost his first election for a seat in the Illinois House of Representatives. He failed to get an appointment to the United States land office. He ran unsuccessfully for the

United States Senate. He lost when he ran for vice president.

But Lincoln’s perseverance paid off when he was elected the 16th president of the United States in 1860. He didn’t get to the Oval Office by family privilege, elite fraternities or Ivy League connections – he was a poor farm boy with hardly any formal education.

Yet he saved a nation.

He once wrote, “All through life, be sure to put your feet in the right place, and then stand firm.”

Lincoln’s steadfast commitment to a noble ideal helped him overcome. It was a painful fight with many setbacks, but he left an enduring legacy.

His dedication and perseverance should be our guiding spirit as we work to restore freedom and prosperity in the Land of Lincoln.

Making our vision manifest

By Aidan Grogan

One of the main beliefs we hold at the Illinois Policy Institute is that government should be effective, efficient, honest and transparent. It should be accountable to taxpayers and residents in need, not to political special interests.

We strive to be an informative and reliable source for not only policy analysis, but also commonsense solutions to what ails Illinois. We tell the stories of forgotten Illinoisans ignored by a corrupt political system that values power and personal gain more than constituents' welfare.

One special interest we keep an especially close eye on is public sector union bosses, which have been a huge driver of Illinois' unfunded pension crisis. This costly burden is being recklessly thrown onto the shoulders of regular Illinoisans.

We tell the stories of forgotten Illinoisans ignored by a corrupt political system that values power and personal gain more than constituents' welfare.

Public sector union bosses and their political cronies are making life unaffordable for countless hard-working people. Some Illinoisans feel the only way they can make ends meet and provide for their families is to move to another state.

The radicals who run these unions say they are standing up for workers' rights, the oppressed and the downtrodden. They claim to care about children and the poor in underserved communities.

But just as parents who love their children would not pass along to them

their debts, our state's leaders cannot profess to care so much about working families while making them – and future generations – foot the bill for their own fiscal irresponsibility.

Everything we do is to empower these people and make this a state they are proud to call home.

Parents who love their children couldn't bear seeing them run away from home. If Illinois' leaders truly put the people first, they wouldn't allow bad policy to make residents flee the state.

To us, Illinois is more than just Chicago and Cook County – it's also the farmers, truck drivers and mom-and-pop shop owners from small towns across the state. Chicago Teachers Union leaders and activists may have no connection to these people and places, but we do.

And we tell their story.

Everything we do is to empower these people and make this a state they are proud to call home.

Because of you, we offer hope to millions and remind them it's not too late to turn around Illinois.

Thank you for giving us the ink to write Illinois' comeback story.



Aidan Grogan is the development writer with the Illinois Policy Institute.

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