



# BUILDING BETTER SCHOOLS:

A PRO-STUDENT, PRO-COMMUNITY GUIDE FOR  
ILLINOIS SCHOOL BOARDS

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2025

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Illinois school boards have considerable discretion in creating pro-parent, pro-transparency and pro-taxpayer policies. This handbook provides five policy areas board members can pursue to help ensure the best educational and financial outcomes in their districts.

## KIDS FIRST: IMPLEMENTING EFFECTIVE LITERACY PRACTICES

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**THE PROBLEM:** Research shows students who fall behind in reading skills, especially in lower elementary grades, drop out at much higher rates than their classmates. Illinois has a problem: just 31% of third-grade students met or exceeded reading proficiency standards on the state's end-of-year assessment in 2024.

**THE SOLUTION:** Focus on student outcomes, specifically improving literacy rates.

### WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

- Provide an early universal reading screening for every student in first through third grades to identify reading deficiencies early in the school year.
- Provide reading interventions for any student demonstrating a reading deficiency.
- Notify and keep parents engaged in their student's reading deficiency diagnosis and intervention.
- Ensure schools use science-based instruction methods to teach reading.
- Determine grade promotion decisions with parents and teachers for students whose reading deficiencies are not remedied by the end of the school year.

## COST CONSCIOUSNESS AND RESPONSIBLE BUDGETING: BALANCING DISTRICT NEEDS WITH TAXPAYERS' ABILITY TO PAY

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**THE PROBLEM:** Illinois' property taxes are the highest in the nation. School districts are responsible for nearly 60% of all property tax bills, collecting nearly \$23 billion annually. This figure has increased by \$6.4 billion, or 40%, in the past 10 years alone. It was the main driver of property tax increases in the past decade. Without a well-structured budget plan, these tax increases can be expected to increase.

**THE SOLUTION:** Explore all other viable options before raising property taxes or levies.

### WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

- Take a zero-based budgeting approach that prioritizes improving educational outcomes.
- Evaluate administrative cost savings, such as consolidating school districts into unit districts to eliminate unnecessary or duplicative administrative spending.
- Consider linking staff levels to enrollment to prevent overcrowded classrooms and avoid bloated payrolls when enrollment declines.
- Explore the closure and sale of unused or underutilized facilities when enrollment and classroom space allow.
- Achieve and maintain healthy reserves, generally considered to be two months' worth of expenses, ensuring the district has enough operating revenue to avoid borrowing if tax collections are delayed but doesn't hoard taxpayer dollars.
- Pledge to not increase the district's property tax levy.

## FAIR CONTRACTS: ENSURING WHAT'S BEST FOR BOTH EMPLOYEES AND THE COMMUNITY

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**THE PROBLEM:** District contracts should be fair to both employees and residents. During negotiations, school employees are represented by their unions, with the school board representing the interests of students and taxpayers. While board members have an interest in a competitive contract for school district employees, they also have a duty to ensure reasonable costs to residents.

**THE SOLUTION:** Commit to contracts that will not place the district in the position of deficit spending.

### WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

- Focus negotiations on wages, benefits and conditions of employment – the traditional subjects of bargaining – and what is best for students.
- Keep the school district from agreeing to provisions tied to the political or social matters some government unions may push for.

## TRANSPARENCY: GENERATING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT THROUGH CURRICULUM LISTS AND ACCESS

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**THE PROBLEM:** Studies have shown students do better academically when their parents are involved. But it's hard for parents to provide support when they aren't fully aware of what their children are learning. Parents have a right to know what is being taught to be able to make informed decisions about their children.

**THE SOLUTION:** Advocate for district-wide transparency in matters relating to curriculum, professional development and spending decisions.

### WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

- Provide a list of curricula and other education materials on the school website.
- Give parents access to hard copy and online materials.
- Offer parental notice and opt-out abilities for controversial curricula and surveys.

## INCLUSIVENESS FOR ALL STUDENTS IN THE DISTRICT: EXTENDING ACCESS TO ALL DISTRICT FAMILIES THROUGH PARTIAL ENROLLMENT

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**THE PROBLEM:** Children are not identical. Some students living within the district benefit from alternative learning situations, but typical district policies exclude them from extra- or co-curricular school activities. As the children of taxpayers in the district, they should be eligible to participate even if their primary education takes place outside a public school. Privately educated students take no money away from the school district. Their parents' taxes still fund public education without requiring space or resources in what may be crowded facilities.

**THE SOLUTION:** Advocate for policies that would allow nonpublic school students residing within the district to participate in extracurricular and co-curricular district activities.

### WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

- Allow students to participate in extracurricular and co-curricular activities if they are in the district and registered as a part-time student with the public school.
- Define part-time registration to include students who pay applicable district fees and attend one course in the public school.





# KIDS FIRST:

## Implementing effective literacy practices

### THE PROBLEM:

**Few Illinois students have mastered foundational reading skills by the end of third grade – a critical milestone in a child’s reading formation.**

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In 2024, just 31% of Illinois third-grade students met or exceeded reading proficiency standards on the Illinois Assessment of Readiness. That means 7 in 10 third graders could not read at grade level. Illinois students’ performance on the most recent national reading assessment revealed similar struggles: just 30% of fourth graders met reading proficiency standards in 2024.

That’s bad news for Illinois. The first years of school are critical, when students build a firm foundation of literacy skills to become strong readers so they can develop into strong learners. Students transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” from fourth grade onwards. If a student struggles to read at grade level by the end of third grade, up to half of the printed fourth-grade curriculum is incomprehensible.

Research shows students who fall behind in reading skills, especially in lower elementary grade levels, drop out at much higher rates than their classmates. A student’s likelihood to graduate high school can be predicted by their reading skill at the end of third grade.

But there is hope for Illinois school students. Other states have implemented reading reforms that work.

### THE SOLUTION:

#### Local reforms

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Many states have passed legislation to align reading instruction with evidence-based practices to improve the literacy and academic achievement of students. These evidence-based practices are called the “science of reading.”

A federally funded report by the National Reading Panel in 2000 first outlined five essential components of effective reading instruction as the basis for the science of reading:

## 5 PILLARS OF EARLY READING

### Phonemic awareness



Ability to **hear sounds** in words. It helps children learn how to blend sounds together to read words.

### Phonics



Understanding **letters** represent individual **sounds**. It helps children recognize words, which helps them learn how to spell new words.

### Fluency

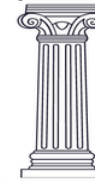


Ability to **read smoothly** and accurately with expression. Fluent readers read text accurately and with expression at their own pace.

### Vocabulary Comprehension



Number of **words a child knows** and understands the meaning of. A large vocabulary helps create a better reader and writer.



Understanding what is **read or heard**: it makes sense and can be related back to other things known about or experienced in life.

Source: Institute for Multi-sensory Education

@illinoispolicy

States such as [Colorado](#), [Mississippi](#) and [Florida](#) offer models for Illinois to reverse the low reading proficiency rates plaguing the state's children. Their evidence-based solutions can ensure Illinois students are well equipped for success through high school graduation and beyond.

But Illinois local school boards don't have to wait for state lawmakers to enact needed literacy reforms statewide. Local school boards understand their students best and are best suited to ensure their students are well equipped with the reading instruction needed to thrive academically.

Illinois is a local-control state, which means "the governing and management of public schools is largely conducted by elected or appointed representatives serving on governing bodies, such as school boards or school committees, that are located in the communities served by the school," [according](#) to the Great Schools Partnership's Glossary of Education Reform.

That means local school boards are given significant autonomy over decision making within their districts. According to the [Illinois Association of School Boards](#), "The Illinois Constitution grants boards of education latitude in governing their school districts, subject to state laws and regulations."

If the state were to adopt the suggested policy reforms below, school boards and local school districts would be required to adopt, implement and enforce the literacy policies. But there is nothing stopping local school boards from proactively enacting literacy reforms at the local level.

## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

### Five steps to improving literacy

Illinois school boards should consider the following five policy recommendations to ensure every Illinois child has access to quality literacy instruction and support. While implementing all five of these evidence-based reforms would ensure the best results, they can be implemented individually as a local school board sees fit. Whichever path the board takes, a focus on literacy reform would make those local communities more attractive to families.

## **1. Provide an early universal reading screening for every student in first through third grades to identify reading deficiencies.**

Illinois schools aren't required to provide universal reading skills screenings or diagnostic reading assessments to students. But it's important for schools to identify reading problems early in elementary years so they can help struggling students catch up to their grade by year's end, especially by the end of third grade.

Illinois' comprehensive literacy plan created by the state board of education outlined the importance of assessments such as universal screenings, benchmark assessments and diagnostic assessments to support students' literacy.

School districts should administer a universal screening assessment for first through third graders within the first 60 days of the school year to identify students with a possible reading deficiency.

## **2. Provide reading interventions for any student in first through third grades with a reading deficiency.**

School districts should develop and implement an individualized reading intervention program immediately following a first- through third-grade student being identified as having a reading deficiency. The reading intervention program should be developed by the student's school and teacher. The program should provide, at a minimum, one-on-one reading instruction which addresses the five foundational components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency and oral skills, and reading comprehension.

School districts should equip teachers to continue implementation of a student's reading intervention program until the student demonstrates grade-level reading competency.

## **3. Notify parents and keep them engaged in their student's reading deficiency diagnosis and intervention.**

It is important for parents to be engaged in their student's reading remediation as studies have shown students do better academically with parents involved.

School districts should notify parents within 10 calendar days if their first- through third-grade student has been identified as having a reading deficiency. Schools should also schedule a meeting with the parents to discuss the specific reading difficulty and the individualized reading intervention program.

The notification and meeting should communicate to parents the research showing reading competency by third grade is a critical milestone, explain their student's reading deficiency and how the teacher identified the deficiency.

Parents should have access to the individualized reading intervention program once it has been developed by the teacher and school. Parents should be able to work alongside the teacher and school to support reading success.

Schools should continue to keep parents informed about their child's reading deficiency and the interventions offered through a quarterly progress report until the student's deficiency is remedied.

#### **4. Ensure schools use science-based instruction methods to teach reading and eliminate the use of “three-cueing.”**

School districts should use instructional methods which are rooted in the science of reading and review current instructional materials used for foundational reading skills to ensure they align with the science of reading.

For example, districts should focus on the five foundational components of reading as identified by the National Reading Panel in 2000:

- phonemic awareness
- phonics
- vocabulary development
- fluency
- comprehension.

Districts should not use the outdated practice of “three-cueing,” which leans on pictures and context to encourage students to guess at new words. Using this method to teach foundational reading skills has been shown to hinder reading proficiency.

Schools and teachers may need support on how to tailor instruction to the five foundational components of reading and the science of reading. To that end, local districts should focus on implementing progressive development focusing on the science of reading for their lower grade teachers.

#### **5. Discuss and determine grade promotion with parents and teachers for students whose reading deficiencies are not remedied by the end of the school year.**

Many states have implemented policies to retain third graders who are not prepared with the reading skills needed to enter the fourth grade. The decision to promote or retain a struggling student, particularly in the transition from third to fourth grade, should be taken more seriously by Illinois schools.

Illinois school districts should host an end-of-year meeting between the teacher and parent of a first-through third-grade student with a reading deficiency to discuss and decide whether the child will advance to the next grade level.

If a student still struggles to read even with an intervention plan, schools should give written notice to the student’s parents informing them of the deficiency and scheduling a meeting to discuss potential grade-level retention as a reading intervention strategy.

The end-of-year parent meeting should discuss at least the following: the serious implications of entering fourth grade with a reading deficiency, the specifics of their student’s reading deficiency, whether the student can handle next year’s work and the potential effects on the student if they are retained.

The decision to retain or promote a first- or second-grade student should be made collaboratively by the school, teacher and parent, but parents should be given the final say.

For a third-grade student struggling to read at the end of the school year, the decision to retain or promote should also be made collaboratively, but the local school district superintendent should approve any decision by a school, teacher or parent to advance a third-grade student with a significant reading deficiency.

# COST CONSCIOUSNESS AND RESPONSIBLE BUDGETING:

Balancing district needs with taxpayers' ability to pay

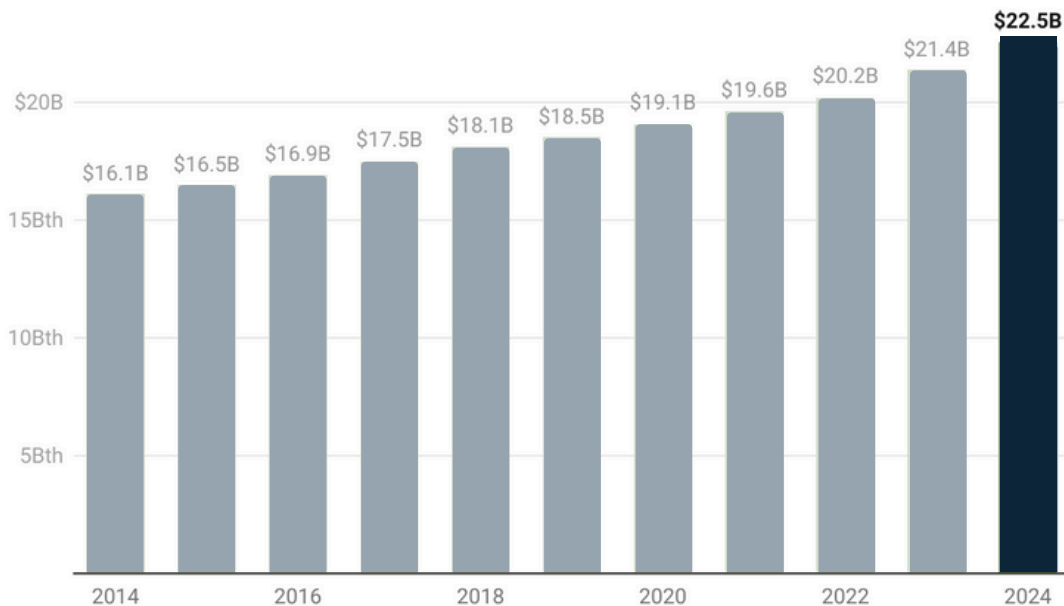
## THE PROBLEM:

**Illinoisans pay the second-highest property taxes in the nation; school districts are responsible for nearly 60% of Illinois property taxes.**

Property taxes are the costliest tax bill paid by most Illinoisans. The typical Illinois homeowner pays more than \$5,000 in property taxes annually, the highest rate in the nation relative to home values. Taxes paid to school districts are responsible for nearly 60% of all property taxes statewide, taking in nearly \$23 billion annually. That figure has grown by more than \$6.4 billion, or 40%, during the past 10 years, representing the majority of growth in property tax bills during that time.

## Property taxes for school districts hit \$22.5B in 2024

Property tax levy for elementary, high school and unit districts 2014-2024



Amounts are for extension year 2013-2023, which represent taxes payable in 2014-2024

Chart: @illinoispolicy • Source: Illinois Department of Revenue • Created with Datawrapper

Even residents who rent their homes are affected, as landlords pass along the high property tax burden in the form of higher rent. This is part of the reason why Illinois' housing affordability is the lowest in the Midwest and median rents are almost \$300 per month more expensive than any state in the region. Regardless of whether you own or rent your home, Illinois' sky-high property taxes affect your bottom line.



The situation is unsustainable for Illinoisans who already pay the highest state and local tax rates of any state in the Midwest, and the 7th highest combined state and local tax rate in the nation. Without a well-structured budget plan, these tax increases can be expected to continue. There are opportunities for improvements in school district budgeting that can yield cost savings and efficiencies that would improve local finances without the need to increase property taxes.

## THE SOLUTION:

### **Prioritize educational outcomes in spending while implementing responsible budgeting practices that maximize current revenue**

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Illinois' school districts need a sustainable budgeting framework that prioritize students and educational outcomes, while maximizing the efficiency of each dollar spent on education. This begins with an in-depth evaluation of district finances and current expenditures to identify the types of spending that are yielding the best results for students as well as expenditures that should be redirected to more fruitful purposes. It also includes implementing a sustainable plan for future expenditures based on the needs of the district and maintaining healthy reserve balances to cover unexpected expenses or fluctuations in revenues.

States such as Florida, Texas and Georgia have implemented elements of zero-based budgeting to identify and continue spending on efficient programs, while avoiding tax increases and even closing deficits. Eight states, including California, require zero-based budgeting methods be considered when developing executive budget proposals. Even school districts such as Atlanta Public Schools have implemented these practices to align spending on district priorities in the midst of financial constraints. There are 25 states, including Illinois, that implement performance-based budgeting practices in their budgeting process, which requires reporting on outcomes related to specific programs and spending proposals.

There are also more obvious areas for potential cost savings such as reductions in administrative expenditures, which are among the highest in the nation in Illinois, and closure and sale of underutilized facilities that often carry expensive maintenance costs for districts.

To create a sustainable future for school district finances, districts should develop plans to maintain staffing ratios based on enrollment levels and seek to maintain healthy reserve balances to insulate budgets from unexpected expenses or changes in revenues.

There are five key concepts that school districts should keep in mind when developing their budgets. They can improve the overall finances of the district as well as increase public goodwill when school board members create sustainable budgets that save taxpayer money.

# WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

## Five key concepts for responsible budgets

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### 1. Zero-based budget approach

Unlike a traditional budgeting approach that uses previous spending as a baseline to appropriate funding in future years, school districts should adopt a zero-based budget approach. Zero-based budgeting methods focus on allocating resources intentionally, prioritizing the most important expenditures for your goals first and justifying each specific expense to ensure alignment with these goals. In the case of school districts, the most important goal should always be to prioritize educational outcomes. This means every expense should be evaluated and reviewed on the basis of how successfully or unsuccessfully it serves the purpose of improving student outcomes. Spending should then be re-evaluated on a consistent basis to ensure expenditures are serving this purpose and allow for the re-allocation of resources from less successful to more successful areas of the budget.

### 2. Evaluate administrative cost savings

Illinois is home to 866 school districts, the fifth most in the nation. Half of these districts only serve one or two schools, leading to one of the lowest students per district ratios in the nation. As a result, there are many duplicative layers of administration, crowding out funding that could go to classrooms and driving up property taxes. Illinois schools spend \$552 per student on administrative costs, the sixth highest in the nation.

One major opportunity for cost savings would be to explore ways to limit these administrative expenses. The most obvious would be to begin consolidating school districts. This would not necessarily mean closing or combining any schools, but rather simply benefitting from the economies of scale, pooling administrative resources and yielding more efficient spending on the administrative side. This is evidenced by the lower spending levels observed in Illinois' unit school districts – districts that are comprised of both elementary and high schools – compared to high school or elementary-only districts. Unit districts spend \$2,500 less per student than elementary districts and \$6,000 less per student than high school districts on average, in large part because of lower levels of administrative expense and more efficient spending across the district as a result of having one central office serve a greater number of schools. This type of consolidation, particularly among the smallest districts, is a proven, sensible strategy to reduce costs and improve student outcomes.

### 3. Explore the closure and sale of underutilized facilities

Many school districts have unused or underutilized facilities. These facilities carry significant maintenance and utility costs for districts, despite their relative lack of use. School districts should explore the closure and sale of these facilities when appropriate and expected future enrollment and classroom size permit. This will not only provide potentially significant sources of one-time revenue but will also lower ongoing annual expenses that can be directed towards classrooms and relieve pressure on growing property taxes.

#### **4. Consider linking staff levels to enrollment**

Staffing for many positions – particularly teachers and administrators – should scale with enrollment to ensure that students have adequate access to instructors and other resources, while maintaining fiscal stability. This means identifying the best staff-to-pupil ratio for schools, pursuing this target staffing level and then maintaining these ratios as enrollment changes over time. The ratio will likely vary based on the demographics and needs of students within each district.

As a result, districts with growing enrollment will see staffing levels grow accordingly, helping students maintain access to vital resources and avoiding overcrowded classrooms. In districts with declining enrollment, the potential reduction in staffing levels will avoid bloated payrolls and budgetary stress on communities with reduced capacity and need to pay for these positions.

As a result, districts with growing enrollment will see staffing levels grow accordingly, helping students maintain access to vital resources and avoiding overcrowded classrooms. In districts with declining enrollment, the potential reduction in staffing levels will avoid bloated payrolls and budgetary stress on communities with reduced capacity and need to pay for these positions.

Statewide, there has been a 6% decline in public school enrollment during the past 25 years, but 55% growth in the number of administrators and 8% growth in the number of teachers. Student outcomes on standardized tests have been declining in recent years. This phenomenon highlights both the unsustainability of growing staffing levels amid declining enrollment, but also that solely focusing on increasing staff-to-pupil ratios is not a cure-all for improving student outcomes. Additionally, Illinois' pupil-to-teacher ratio is already below the national average, meaning students already have greater access to teachers than students in other states

#### **5. Maintain healthy reserve balances**

It is important that all school districts maintain healthy reserve balances. This includes not only accumulating reserves to handle potential temporary interruptions in revenue receipts or unforeseen expenses, but also avoiding the excessive hoarding of taxpayer dollars. The Government Finance Officers Association generally recommends units of government maintain no less than two months of reserves for general purpose governments. However, they also note units of governments such as school districts may be able to sustain lower reserve balances in practice, as their revenues – such as property taxes – and expenses tend to be more stable and predictable than other units of government.

Given these recommendations, it is advised that school districts strive to achieve and maintain reserve balances equivalent to two months, or 60 days, worth of normal expenditures. This level of reserves will help ward off budgetary pressures in the unlikely event of revenue declines or interruptions and provide a revenue source for unforeseen expenses between budgeting periods. Maintaining this level of reserves will also ensure property tax funds are not unnecessarily hoarded, providing taxpayers protection from unexpected increases in their property tax bills in the event of extenuating circumstances while aiming to keep property taxes as low as fiscally responsible.

# FAIR CONTRACTS:

Ensuring what's best for both employees and the community

## THE PROBLEM:

**Negotiating contracts that are fair to both employees and residents is tricky under Illinois law.**

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District contracts should be fair to both employees and residents. But in Illinois, government employers, including school boards, are in a difficult position.

While employees have a union representing their needs, school board members must represent multiple interests at the bargaining table. They want to both support their teachers through a competitive contract while also ensuring the contract is affordable for taxpayers.

Government unions in Illinois – which includes teachers unions – hold significant power over government employers. And while local unions are typically led by local teachers and staff, they are fueled by state and national teacher union affiliates that have their own agendas.

*Government unions hold tremendous power under Amendment 1*

Illinois is the only state to have an expansive “workers’ rights amendment,” more commonly known as Amendment 1. The language of Amendment 1 is broad. It not only provides government employees a “fundamental right” to unionize, but also allows government unions to demand virtually anything in negotiations and prohibits state lawmakers from ever restricting that right.

Typical collective bargaining involves wages, hours and other terms or conditions of employment – such as raises, health care benefits or vacation days. These are the traditional subjects of negotiations that have a long history of case law guiding states and courts on their meaning.

But Amendment 1 adds “economic welfare” to the mix. “Economic welfare” is undefined in the amendment and does not appear in state law labor provisions. It could mean virtually anything.

It has paved the way for state and national teachers union affiliates – such as the Illinois Education Association and Illinois Federation of Teachers – to push a new strategy for negotiations called “bargaining for the common good.”

*The push for “bargaining for the common good”*

“Bargaining for the common good” is a euphemism for using union contract negotiations to tackle issues such as racial justice, climate justice and immigration. Instead of debating those issues through the normal democratic process – such as in the Illinois General Assembly or local city councils – those issues are taken up at the bargaining table. Yet no matter a school board member’s political bent, these are issues that don’t belong in a union contract.

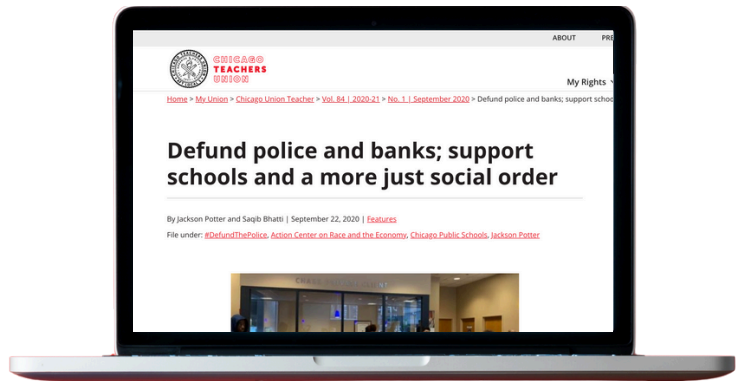


While pushed by the [National Education Association](#) and [American Federation of Teachers](#) – the national affiliates of Illinois’ state and local teachers unions – this strategy started with the Chicago Teachers Union.

As CTU Vice President Jackson Potter has [said](#), “The 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike is often referenced as inspiration for an approach to contract negotiations called Bargaining for the Common Good.” After that strike ended, CTU worked to “[spread the new gospel](#)” of putting “things on the table that hadn’t been on the table before.”

What exactly has CTU pushed for? Recent CTU demands have [included](#) “police-free schools,” cash for asylum seekers and carbon neutrality in the district, among [others](#). The union has also [pushed](#) for defunding the police and banks.

While smaller districts may not have seen such demands yet, they should be prepared for the eventual trickle-down effect of this strategy.



## THE SOLUTION:

### Balancing interests within the district’s budget

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Both the power of government unions and the agendas pushed by non-local union affiliates place school board members in the difficult position of trying to balance what’s best for teachers, who are their friends and neighbors, with the wellbeing of the students in their trust and the taxpayers footing the bill. Difficult, but possible.

School boards should commit to contracts that are fair to all parties. That starts with understanding the [laws](#) governing union negotiations in Illinois.

While Amendment 1 allows government unions to demand anything in contract negotiations, that doesn’t mean school boards must cave to those demands. It takes two sides to negotiate an agreement. In the end, the main goals should be:

- Keeping the district from deficit spending
- Focusing negotiations on wages and benefits for employees and not political issues
- Focusing on what’s best for students.

## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

### Taking a pro-teacher, pro-student, pro-taxpayer pledge

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Pledge as a school board, via board resolution or informally as individuals, to the following:

- Focus negotiations for new union contracts on wages, benefits and conditions of employment – the traditional subjects of bargaining – and what’s best for teachers and students.
- Refuse to place political or social activist provisions in the contract.
- Commit to contract provisions that taxpayers can afford without deficit spending.

# TRANSPARENCY IN EDUCATION:

## Generating parental involvement through curriculum lists and access

### THE PROBLEM:

**Illinois students are struggling, and parents need access to curriculum to best assist them.**

Illinois students are in trouble. Despite modest gains in 2024, just 41% of Illinois students in third through eighth grades met proficiency standards in reading that year, according to the Illinois State Board of Education. Just 28.4% were proficient in math. By 11th grade, only 31% were reading at grade level and 26% performed math proficiently.

Those numbers dipped even lower for lower-income and minority students.

While there are many ideas on how to improve student academic achievement, there's one thing school districts can do now to help parents better assist their students: maintain a policy of curriculum transparency.

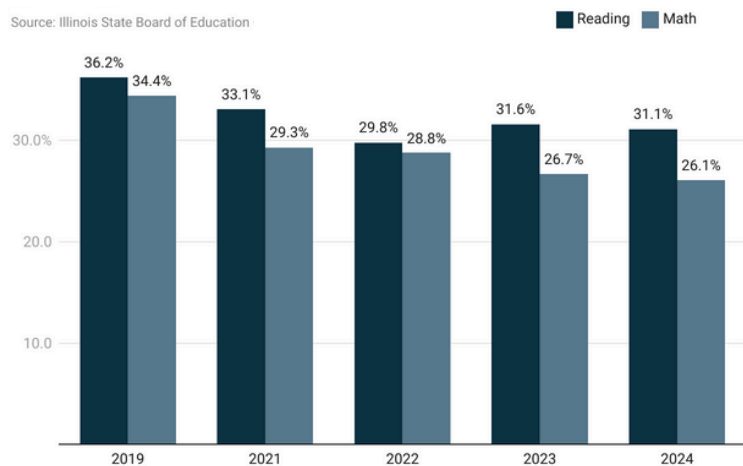
Studies have shown students do better academically when their parents are involved. As the Harvard Graduate School of Education reports, “several decades of research points to several benefits of family involvement for children learning, including helping children get ready to enter school, promoting their school success and preparing youth for college.” Children who have parental support with homework tend to perform better in the classroom.

But it's hard for parents to provide support when they aren't fully aware of what is being taught, especially as many districts move from textbooks to digital materials. Individual school boards can address this problem now without waiting for the state to pass legislation.

#### Illinois 11th grade reading, math lag 2019

Percentage of all Illinois students meeting or exceeding English language arts and math proficiency standards on the SAT.

Source: Illinois State Board of Education



### THE SOLUTION:

**Online transparency and parental access to materials**

District policies on curriculum transparency are a reasonable first step in better ensuring parents have the foundational tools they need to be actively involved in their students' lives. Such transparency would bring both accountability to school districts as well as improve the relationship between parents and district teachers and administrators.

Here are two steps districts could take to ensure parents know what their kids are being taught and are equipped to step in and help them work toward academic success.

### **STEP ONE: Online Transparency**

In Illinois, local school boards have control over curriculum and other policy decisions. Creating a curriculum transparency policy falls directly under their authority.

Each school district should disclose on its website the following:

- The procedures the district uses related to lesson plans. How does the district review and approve lesson plans?
- A listing of the teaching and staff training materials and activities the district used during the school year. What is the focus of professional development for the year? What entity provided the professional development trainings?
- A listing of the learning materials and activities used for student instruction, organized by subject, grade and teacher. What textbooks, articles, videos, websites and other materials are being used in the classroom, in assemblies, etc.?

Such a policy would not require the digital reproduction of the materials cited but would provide a starting point for parents and community members wanting to know what is being taught during the school year. To avoid excess work for educators, the district could use a collaborative online document or spreadsheet that allows multiple authorized users to update or add to posted content on an ongoing basis, or it could appoint one or more administrative employees to gather and update the data.

### **STEP TWO: Parental access**

Parents seeking to better understand what their children are being taught deserve access to the materials. A robust curriculum transparency policy would include access to materials upon written request. It would also include time for the district to respond without burdening its normal operating procedures.

Traditional textbooks were easier for parents to access. With many schools now using digital technology, the policy should include providing temporary remote access or login credentials to materials for review for at least a 24-hour period. The district could use collaborative spreadsheet software or other means to provide the information through a point person or office worker without further burdening teachers.

The school board should also commit only to contract with material providers, including subscription-based materials, that allow parents and guardians of enrolled students to review the materials.

Establishing such a policy would demonstrate the district values and encourages transparency between parents and the schools. It would show a school district is making every effort to be open with parents and involve them in their children's educations.

# WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

## Model policy

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Local school boards can use the following model policy to bring educational transparency to their district. It can be modified to meet the particular needs of the district. For example, it could be introduced and approved incrementally. In addition, the timing requirements of posting curricula and materials could be modified.

### **SECTION 1. Purpose**

The district values and encourages transparency between parents and the schools, and therefore the district shall make every effort to be as transparent as possible. The purpose of this policy is to ensure public transparency in schools' instructional, training and learning materials and to give parents and the public reasonable access to review such materials.

### **SECTION 2. Online Transparency**

A. Each school shall disclose on a publicly accessible portion of its website all of the following:

- The procedures or processes in effect for the school principal or other staff to document, review or approve lesson plans or the learning materials and activities used for student instruction at the school.
- A listing of the teacher and staff training materials and activities used at the school in the current school year.
- A listing of the learning materials and activities used for student instruction at the school in the current school year, including at least the following, organized, at a minimum, by subject area, grade and teacher:
  - Textbooks, articles and other required reading materials; videos and audio recordings; digital materials; websites; instructional handouts and worksheets; applications used with a smartphone, laptop or tablet; materials and topics presented at grade-level or schoolwide assemblies; guest lectures; action-oriented civics learning assignments or projects; service-learning projects.
  - The title, author or organization, and if accessed online, the internet address, associated with the material or activity.

B. Each school shall list the required materials and activities online not more than 10 school days after the first use of each material or activity and in a manner that is accessible via the school website for at least two years and electronically searchable or sortable at a minimum within each separately posted section or course.

C. The listing of materials and activities pursuant to subsection (A)(3) shall be created and displayed in searchable or sortable electronic formats. The school may use collaborative online document or spreadsheet software or an online learning management system that allows multiple authorized users to update or add to posted content on an ongoing basis, provided the information is publicly accessible via a posted link on the school website.

D. This section does not require:

- The digital reproduction of the learning materials or activities.
- The posting or distribution of any material or activity in a manner that would constitute an infringement of copyright under the copyright act (P.L. 94-553; 90 Stat. 2541 to 2598; 17 United States Code sections 101 to 1332).



- The listing of materials and activities used only for individualized special education instruction as part of an individualized education program, as defined in 20 United States Code sections 1401 and 1412, or only for a student with a disability under section 504 of the rehabilitation act of 1973 (29 United States Code section 794).

E. For purposes of this section:

- "Action-oriented civics learning assignments or projects" includes assignments or projects that require students to contact elected leaders or advocate for a political or social cause or to participate in political or social demonstrations.
- "Guest lecture":
  - Includes a presentation or educational event conducted by an outside individual or organization, including those facilitated by the school's staff.
  - Does not include student presentations given by students enrolled at the school.
- "Lesson plan" means the daily, weekly or other routinely produced guide, description or outline of the instruction to be provided by a teacher to students at the school.
- "Service-learning projects" includes both of the following:
  - Any requirement to participate in internships or other forms of collaboration with outside organizations after regular school hours for course credit or as a class project or assignment.
  - The specific internships or organizations selected by students if the selection is made from a list of specific internships or organizations provided by the school or its staff.
- "Used for student instruction":
  - Means assigned, distributed or otherwise presented to students in any course for which students receive academic credit or in any educational capacity in which the school requires the student body to participate or in which a majority of students in a given grade level participate.
  - Includes learning materials or activities from which students are required to choose one or more from a selection of materials that is restricted to specific titles, such as titles of books in a teacher's classroom library.

### **SECTION 3. Parental Access**

A. Neither the board nor any staff employed thereby and acting in the course of his or her official duties shall purchase or contract for copyrighted learning materials to be used for student instruction at the school, including the renewal of subscription-based materials for which students are provided individual login credentials or access via electronic personal devices, unless provision is made to allow parents and guardians of enrolled students to review the materials within 10 school days of the submission of a written request to the school. The means of provision shall include at least one the following:

1. Providing access to the materials at the school site during the school's normal hours of operation within 10 school days of written request.
2. Providing temporary remote access or login credentials to at least one copy of the materials for review for at least a 24-hour period following each request, not to exceed one request per material per household during each 30-day period.

B. The parent or guardian reviewing copyrighted digital materials shall not be required as a condition of reviewing the materials to enter into terms of a nondisclosure agreement nor waive any rights beyond complying with federal copyright law. "Nondisclosure agreement" means a confidentiality agreement or contract provision that prohibits the disclosure of information by a party to the contract.

# INCLUSIVENESS FOR ALL STUDENTS IN THE DISTRICT:

Extending access to all district families through partial enrollment

## THE PROBLEM:

**Taxpaying families are excluded from district activities.**

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Illinois residents pay the highest property taxes in the nation, and on average nearly 60% of property taxes go to local school districts.

Yet thousands of parents are paying taxes and getting nothing from their public school districts because their children are homeschooled or attend private schools. In many districts, their children are prohibited from participating in any district activities, even if they attend public school part time.

Kids aren't one-size-fits-all. Neither are their educational needs. Whether it be for academic, health, religious or other reasons, thousands of parents throughout Illinois have decided a full day of public school, five days a week, isn't right for their children.

Those families still pay taxes. Yet their children are denied access to extracurricular and other school district activities their taxes support simply because their children's educational needs differ.

## THE SOLUTION:

**Allowing nonpublic students to register part-time and participate in activities**

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Many school boards have proactively adjusted their policies to allow all resident children to access district activities with minimal attendance requirements. Interested school boards should rest assured that this is a viable policy:

- Some of the state's top schools already allow nonpublic school students to participate in district activities.
- Sports and other activities are not at risk, because current law and sports association policies already allow school boards to open district activities to nonpublic school students residing in the district as long as they meet minimal attendance requirements.
- School funding is not at risk because it is not based on enrollment.
- A school district could receive additional funds from nonpublic school students via registration and other fees by allowing them to participate in activities.
- Underlying all of this is a basic principle: taxpayers should not be locked out of a system they pay for.

All of this is explained in detail below.

### **Top schools already allow nonpublic school students to participate in district activities**

Illinois school board policies run the gamut in terms of outlining the minimum attendance required to participate in school activities. But some of Illinois' top schools allow nonpublic school students to participate in district activities with minimal attendance requirements.

Take Adlai Stevenson High School District 125, which had the highest combined average SAT scores in 2024, according to the 2024 report card data from the Illinois State Board of Education, and is ranked the best district in Illinois by the review website Niche.com. Its school board policy manual provides a nonpublic school student is eligible to participate in interscholastic competition and non-athletics extracurriculars as long as the student “attends” a district school. There is no minimum requirement of attendance hours listed.

Similar language is used in other school districts, including Barrington Community Unit School District 220, Indian Prairie Community Unit School District 204 and Lake Forest Community High School District 115. Stevenson’s policy 6:190 also explicitly defines “extracurricular activities” and “co-curricular activities,” something not all school board policy manuals include.

Another example: Washington Community High School District 308’s school board policy 7:40, which allows nonpublic students to participate in activities if they are enrolled in just two class periods during the regular school day. Its policy 6:190 also provides detailed definitions of “extracurricular activities” and “co-curricular activities.”

### **Sports and other activities are not at risk, because current law and sports association policies already allow school boards to open district activities to nonpublic school students residing in the district as long as they meet minimal attendance requirements**

Neither Illinois law nor sports associations in Illinois prohibit nonpublic school students from participating in extracurricular activities as long as the students meet minimum guidelines. In fact, both the Illinois High School Association and the Illinois Elementary School Association explicitly allow nonpublic school students to participate in sports with minimal requirements.

Illinois law allows students to attend public school part-time under the following conditions:

- The request is made by May 1 of the previous school year.
- There is enough space available in the school.
- The child lives within the attendance zone of the school.

There is no minimum number of hours required to be considered a “part-time” student.

When it comes to activities, Illinois school districts are required to allow nonpublic students to participate in any “extracurricular component” that is part of a course in which they are enrolled. The Illinois State Board of Education explains, “For example, a homeschooled student enrolled in band at a local public school would be allowed to attend band practice after school if after-school practice was a required part of the course.”

The Illinois High School Association requires high school students to attend just one course at the member high school each semester. IHSA bylaw 3.011 provides the following (emphasis provided by the IHSA): “A student must attend a member school and may only represent in interscholastic competition the member school the student attends... **A homeschool student must be taking and passing at least one credit bearing course at the member school and enrolled in a program approved by the member school on a weekly and semester basis in which they are taking and passing a minimum combined total of twenty-five (25) credit hours of work.**”

The Illinois Elementary School Association has no daily course attendance requirement for middle school students, but they must meet other guidelines as provided in bylaw 2.034. For example, their school must certify the student is meeting the minimum academic eligibility standards for participation.

Notably, because both the state board of education and Illinois case law consider homeschool as “private school” for legal purposes, the IHSA and IESA provisions should apply to private school students as well.

### **School funding is not at risk because it is not based on enrollment**

Opponents may argue that allowing nonpublic school students who reside in a school district access to district activities will encourage other families to also choose private school or homeschooling. They may claim it will decrease enrollment and therefore funding to the district.

But a district will not lose any state funding if families choose to homeschool or attend private schools. State funding is not dependent on enrollment numbers.

In 2017, Illinois adopted an “evidence-based funding” formula, which does not rely solely on enrollment numbers for funding. The formula includes a “base funding minimum,” which the Illinois State Board of Education describes as a “hold harmless provision.” It guarantees a district will not receive less money than it did before.

“Per statute, the Base Funding Minimum amount grows annually,” according to the Illinois Association of School Boards. When asked in an interview if the base funding minimum will ebb and flow based on the number of students in a district, Michael Jacoby, the executive director of the Illinois Association of School Business Officials, answered unequivocally, “No.” He explained the law would have to be changed in order for funding to be converted to per-pupil funding in the future.

This base funding minimum is further explained in the Illinois Association of School Boards’ May/June 2023 Journal, in which a supervisor within the Illinois State Board of Education explains, “Each year that districts receive Tier Funding, that funding becomes part of the next fiscal year’s BFM, so districts are always receiving at least the funding that they received the year prior.”

In other words, a school will not lose funding if enrollment goes down.

### **A school district could receive additional funds from nonpublic students via registration and other fees by allowing them to participate in activities**

A school district that allows a nonpublic school student to participate in district activities with minimal attendance requirements will be receiving registration and other fees from the student’s family without taking on the expense of educating the child. They also receive taxes from that family.

For example, the family of a homeschooled child participating in public school marching band would pay 1) the regular school registration fees, potentially pro-rated for the period of the day the child attends band class, plus 2) any band or other activity fees required for participation. The district would not be expending any additional resources on that child. That’s registration money the district would not have obtained otherwise.

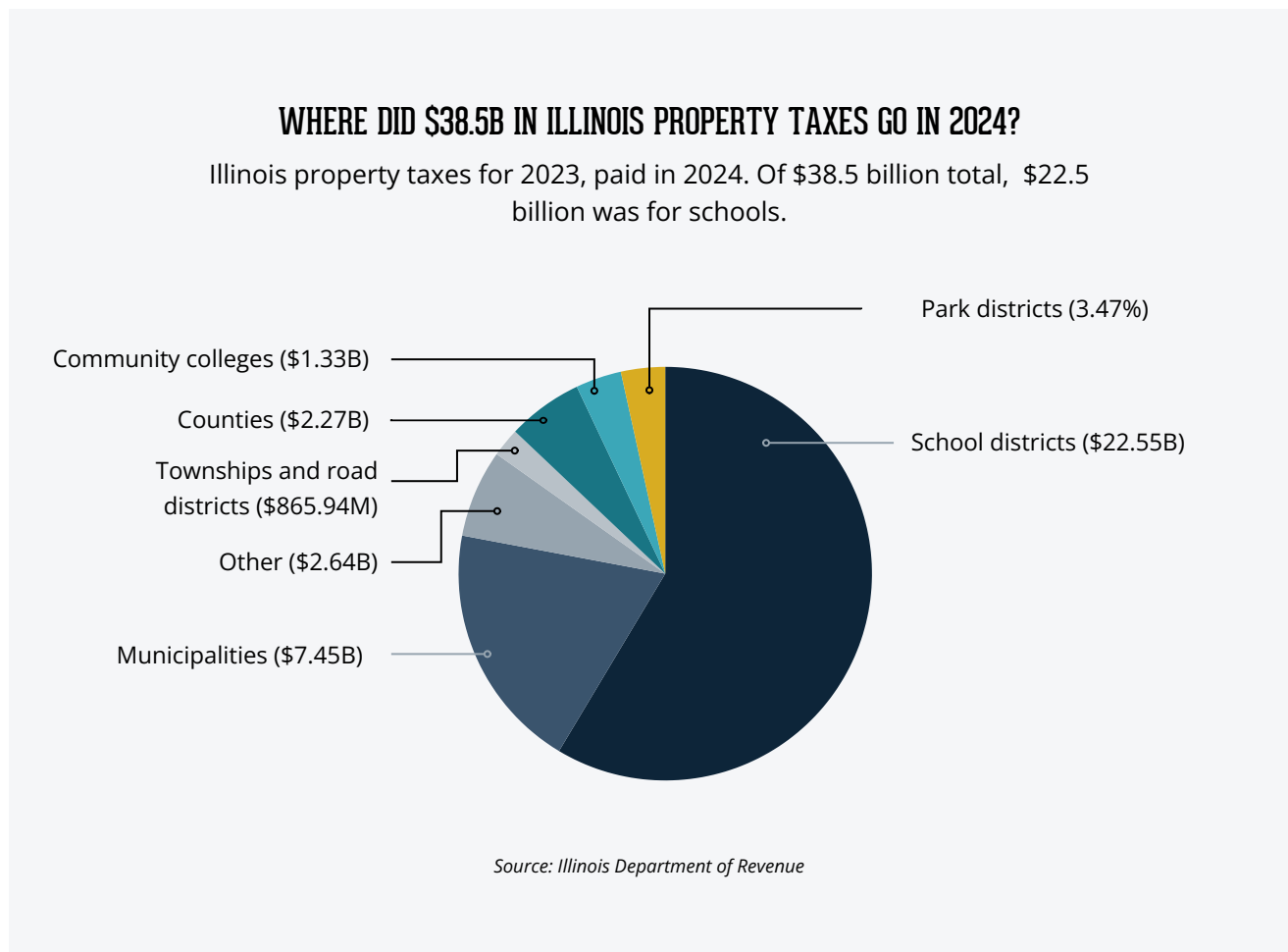


With year-over-year enrollment in Illinois public schools dropping 13 times in the past 15 years, allowing nonpublic school students to participate in extracurriculars could act as a bridge to register them as part-time students for the classes in which they do enroll and receive some fees.

### Taxpayers should get what they pay for

Illinoisans paid a median \$5,089 in property taxes, according to 2023 data available from the U.S. Census Bureau. The largest share goes to school districts, according to the Illinois Department of Revenue.

In fact, for extension year 2022 (*i.e.*, taxes paid in 2023), nearly 60% of Illinois property taxes went to school districts.



Even residents who rent their homes are affected, as landlords pass along the high property tax burden in the form of higher rent.

Whether owning or renting their residences, thousands of Illinois parents who have children in private school or who homeschool are paying for school district services they do not get.

## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

### Minor amendments to current board policy language

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School districts can easily allow students to participate in extracurricular and co-curricular activities by 1) allowing them to register as a part-time student with the public school and then 2) defining part-time registration to include students who pay applicable district fees and attend just one course in the public school.

Most school district policies use the same number and titles for their provisions, making such changes fairly simple. Section 7:40, entitled “Nonpublic School Students, Including Parochial and Home-Schooled Students” is already in many if not most school board policies.

The first part, on “Part-Time Attendance,” can be amended by adding a simple sentence: **“Part-time attendance is defined as attending at least one course as a registered student.”**

The part on “Extracurricular Activities, Including Interscholastic Competition,” can be amended to state the following:

“A nonpublic school student is eligible to participate in: (1) interscholastic competition, provided his or her participation adheres to the regulations established by any association in which the School District maintains a membership, and (2) non-athletic extracurricular activities, provided the student **attends at least one course** in a District school. A nonpublic student who participates in an extracurricular activity is subject to all policies, regulations, and rules that are applicable to other participants in the activity.”

This would allow nonpublic school students to participate in sports under IHSA and IESA rules. It would also allow students enrolled in co-curricular activities, which is already allowed under Illinois law, to participate in any interscholastic competitions associated with those activities.



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