

BUILDING BETTER SCHOOLS: A PRO-STUDENT, PRO-COMMUNITY GUIDE FOR ILLINOIS SCHOOL BOARDS

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

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

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

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

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

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.