



# State Policy Discussion Guide

## Education

Illinois has made significant public investments in early childhood development and learning programs. Research shows that kids in preschool are more likely to be good readers, graduate from high school and attend college. Illinois' landmark Preschool for All program has helped give tens of thousands of children a leg-up, yet thousands more children still lack access to early learning opportunities. Many of these children who enter school unprepared will never catch up with their classmates.

Similarly, many K-12 students lack access to a high-quality educational experience. Too many schools struggle with out-of-date textbooks, overcrowded classrooms and buildings that are falling apart. Inadequate resources make it difficult for teachers to prepare students for success in a rapidly changing world. Illinois' school-funding system has helped create significant disparities across the state: despite recent increases in schools' General State Aid, per-pupil spending varies widely from district to district — as does academic achievement. Illinois consistently ranks second-worst in the nation for the size of the per-student spending gap between the state's wealthiest and poorest school districts.

### Questions:

- How would you help ensure that the families of all young children in your district and throughout Illinois have access to high-quality preschool programs and other early learning experiences?
- How would you help ensure that Illinois schools can prepare *all* students with the skills to succeed in college and the high-tech jobs of the 21st century? How would you ensure that at-risk and special-needs students receive the supports necessary for their success?



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## Health

A child's future depends on a healthy start. When children have access to quality health care, the benefits go far beyond their physical health to include increases in their likelihood of academic achievement and other future successes. Yet too many children and adolescents face barriers to affordable, convenient and high-quality health care. Illinois has greatly expanded access to health care for low-income children through Medicaid, the State Children's Health Insurance Program and the All Kids insurance efforts. However, the proportion of children without health insurance in Illinois is still the highest in the Midwest. In addition, minority children are less likely to have health insurance than white children.

There is also an urgent need to address children's mental health and strengthen their social and emotional development. When youngsters struggle with social and emotional difficulties, every aspect of their lives can suffer. One in five Illinois children has a diagnosable mental illness, yet more than two-thirds of these children receive no services at all. Many mental health problems are preventable or can be minimized through early interventions. Illinois must continue to support ever-improving efforts to build a comprehensive, coordinated mental health system that includes a range of strategies — prevention, early identification and intervention, and treatment services for children of all ages.

### Questions:

- What are your views on supporting programs that would ensure that all Illinois families and their children have access to high-quality health care — such as an expansion of Family Care insurance or other ways of ensuring affordable health coverage for all families?
- What measures would you favor to increase Illinois children's social and emotional health supports and build a strong, statewide mental health system that includes prevention, early identification and intervention, and treatment for children of all ages?



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## Family Economic Security

Low- and middle-income families in Illinois face an uncertain economic future. Unemployment is on the rise, and the family poverty rate is increasing. Too many families also lack basic “assets,” from college educations to decent housing to savings accounts. Meanwhile, our current state and local tax structure is too regressive, treating low- and middle-income Illinoisans very unfairly. One effective solution would be to improve upon existing supports such as the Illinois Earned Income Tax Credit, which helps offset some of the disproportionate tax responsibility borne by low-income, working families. Illinois also could increase the outdated standard exemption of its personal income tax, and create a state version of the federal Child Tax Credit, in order to provide families with even more relief. Additionally, state leaders could pursue other new policies to help Illinoisans build assets and save for important day-to-day needs or unexpected emergencies.

### Questions

- What measures would you support to ease the unfairly large burden of state and local taxes borne by low-income families, and to help them better meet their households’ daily needs?
- What policies would you consider to boost access to critical assets — such as affordable housing, college education, and savings accounts — that so many families must struggle to obtain and maintain?

## State Fiscal Integrity

A wide range of state services depend on a solid base of revenues — from schools and roads to prevention programs and health and human services. None is truly secure as long as our current tax structure remains unable to keep up with even the most basic costs of inflation and population growth. Lower-income households pay a greater percentage of their income in state and local taxes than wealthier households. A fundamental fiscal challenge for Illinois government is how to generate revenue to meet both ongoing obligations and newly emerging needs without increasing the already unfair tax responsibility of low- and middle-income families.

### Questions

- Will you remain open-minded to weighing every possible option for fixing our state’s fiscal and policy problems — including fair consideration of whether to raise taxes?
- What are your views on reforming Illinois' outdated revenue system to improve adequacy, fairness and stability?