



BUILDING BETTER LIVES

## Achieving fundamental fairness in kids' learning & well-being

*Testimony for the House Elementary & Secondary Education Committee*

September 30, 2008 – South Holland

Good evening to you, Chairman Smith, to members of the House Education Committee and to our local hosts, Representatives Miller and Davis and Senator Meeks. I'm Jerry Stermer, president of Voices for Illinois Children, a statewide, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization of children's advocates. We work across the major issue areas – education, health, families' economic security and the state's overall fiscal integrity – to improve the lives of kids of all ages, throughout our state. Our aim is to help children grow up healthy and happy, safe, loved and well-educated. Children are our top priority and our bottom line.

Thank you for the opportunity to address a topic that's one of the most fundamental to our strength and well-being as a state: How to more fairly and effectively support our children's learning.

Fairness is a fundamental concept we teach our children. Even some of our youngest kids can grasp the basics of what we mean by "fairness," and why it's important to treat each other with the respect and dignity we all deserve. So, why can't we adults seem to get it right?

We continue to fail our children on multiple levels of fairness today, threatening dire consequences tomorrow. We're cheating the future that we and our children hold in common by shortchanging the training of Illinois' workforce at a time of heavy economic competition, both globally and state by state. We're squandering precious opportunities to prepare children to become the best possible leaders of their future families, communities and state.

There are at least three ways we need to aim for greater fairness in helping children to learn and to grow:

First is **fairness in funding our children's basic learning needs**. It's well-documented that state resources today account for less than 30 cents of every dollar spent on children's learning. The resulting pressure on property taxes drives most of the wide differences we see between schools – between classrooms that can afford to issue every student a laptop computer and those using torn textbooks that still refer to the Soviet Union in geography lessons.

Do any of us really believe a South Holland child's education is worth \$8,600 less than that of a child in one of Illinois' wealthier school systems – let alone \$2,000 less than the state average? If not, why do we maintain a system that treats these children so differently – resulting in the nation's second-largest test-score achievement gap between kids from poorer school districts and wealthier ones?

Giving every child a fairer, equal shot at the basics does not require us to throw out the structure of our school-funding system. But it does mean we must dramatically increase state funding for its basics – the "foundation level," poverty grants and mandated categoricals such as special education – even beyond the

admirable increases you've approved in recent years. This would lift-up many schools and particularly help those on the bottom while avoiding harm to those at the top, easing schools' overreliance upon property taxes without losing the important stability of those tax dollars. It's important to remember that our current foundation level of \$5,959 per pupil still falls significantly shy of the \$6,405 recommended by experts just to ensure that two-thirds of kids are meeting state learning standards. That goal is actually closer to \$7,204 per pupil today, if we account for inflation.

Our second approach to fairness involves **fairness in the quality of children's education**. It's not just about more money, but how that money is invested.

More fairly guaranteeing a solid learning experience for every child begins with increasing schools' general state aid, representing and supporting the basics. But we also must invest much more deliberately in strategies that are proven by research to strengthen the quality of children's learning. These include:

- **Early childhood education.** In recent years, the shared commitment of policymakers, parents and advocates has helped Illinois to emerge as a national leader in preschool. But we should continue to sharpen our focus on the first five years of children's lives, which lay a foundation for their future success or failure. We cannot afford to rest on our laurels, as tens of thousands of children – including too many at-risk youngsters – still lack access to the high-quality preK experiences their parents want.

We're not yet treating young learners as fairly as they deserve or as research demands. In the context of a big-picture revenue solution that can substantially boost education resources, we should plan to devote 15 percent of new elementary and secondary education funding to the preschool and developmental services that can pack enormous bang for our buck.

- **Well-trained teachers.** Caring adults are key to children's healthy and educational development. We can't expect kids to do better without the best-prepared instructors we can provide them. The solution includes stronger teacher mentoring and induction programs, as well as efforts to place the best teachers in the classrooms that struggle most.
- **Other crucial supports, both inside and outside the classroom.** Children's healthy social and emotional development is essential to their academic success and overall well-being. Yet up to 80 percent of children and youth who need mental health services never receive them. That makes the work of the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership particularly significant – helping to connect students with the help they need and their parents want, and building bridges between schools and the community-based providers with expertise to meet kids' needs.

After-school programs such as Teen REACH are vital, too. These provide youths with tutoring and other healthy alternatives to alcohol and drugs, violence and sexual activity. But historically, our Teen REACH resources have only supported services for about a quarter of the young Illinoisans who need such help – a level we've got to improve.

The third major component of fairness is one that's too often and too quickly overlooked: **fairness in the way we raise revenues for children's learning** and other important, statewide needs. Our current tax structure is anything but fair, placing the heaviest burden on the low- and middle-income families who can least afford it. In many cases, these are the very same families who send their children to the schools that struggle most, compounding their kids' troubles: Both their schools and their homes lack sufficient resources to support well-rounded opportunities for learning and healthy development.

We must provide families with more fairness not only in how state revenues are spent, but in how they're raised in the first place. Voices has outlined a straightforward approach that calls for a state income tax increase that could generate revenues for our most pressing needs and accommodate three important tax-relief measures:

- Target tax cuts where they're needed most – for working families earning less than about \$40,000 a year – by **increasing the Illinois Earned Income Tax Credit**;
- Focus an extra layer of tax relief where it's particularly important – families raising dependent children under age 17 – by **creating a state-level Child Tax Credit** that piggybacks on the federal CTC; and
- Help families at all income levels, by **raising our state income tax's outdated, standard exemption** of \$2,000 per person. While helping households across the board, this would have the greatest effects on low- and middle-income families.

Each of the three variables of this “Fairness for Working Families” strategy can be tweaked and set at various levels in order to channel aggregate tax cuts to households below specific income thresholds. This would help us make our tax system fairer and based a little more on families' ability to pay, even as we're raising the revenues we need for schools and other pressing state priorities.

We should note here that property tax relief has formed a major and costly component of many past proposals for fixing school funding. However, no proposal to date has efficiently targeted enough relief to the low-income and low-property-value areas whose homeowners often need such help most, leaving the lion's share of that relief to wealthier areas of the state where it's arguably needed much less. Unless a school-funding reform package were made sufficiently large enough to support across-the-board property tax relief as well as accommodate other vitally important needs, a better approach would be to limit such relief to closely targeted areas. Or, we could deal with property tax relief altogether separately.

It's difficult to teach children any lessons that we don't live ourselves. It's time for us to show them what fairness really means, in deeds as well as words. If we can't demonstrate such a basic concept for our children, how can we expect them to adequately demonstrate for us the finer points of algebra and composition-writing?

Thank you, and I'd be happy to answer any questions.