



One Child, Many Needs

The Vital Learning Link Between Education and Human Services - and Why Kids Need Both

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By Sean Noble

“Achievement gaps” of many kinds mar our children’s learning and menace their future. Too many children fall short of basic, grade-level expectations, as seen in standardized exams. Overall, one out of three students falls short of state standards for reading, math and other subjects.¹ Look within those sobering results further, and even more startling gaps appear: low-income, Latino and African-American youngsters score even further behind their peers. No matter the angle from which we view the situation, nearly every segment of children needs to do better than we now help them to do.

National education goals call for us to ensure that children can meet such seemingly common-sense standards as reading at third-grade level when they’re in third grade.² But government benchmarks or no, as caring adults, we want to help children succeed in school and life. There are many ways to attempt to bridge the achievement gaps that threaten young lives. Certainly, high-quality teachers, good textbooks and adequate school facilities are important to children’s academic performance. However, a child’s educational achievement – not to mention success beyond school – also depends upon a number of other significant factors. Many of these factors exist outside the classroom, the school day and the academic year. In fact, some researchers have found that as much as half of the gap between black and white high school seniors’ test scores is directly attributable to differences apparent in those groups of youngsters as early as the first grade, factors at play before they even began their formal educations.³

A youngster who enters kindergarten without high-quality preschool experiences is much less likely than her peers to succeed academically, and generally falls further behind them throughout her school years, research shows. A child who is sick, hungry or suffering from emotional problems cannot focus well upon his studies. Mobility associated with families’ search for affordable housing disrupts the continuity of a child’s education, as he moves from school to school; outright homelessness exacerbates such troubles even further. Similarly, poverty’s wide-ranging effects seem to doom many children’s learning from the start.

Schools cannot do it alone

There is growing recognition that if we want to improve children’s educational well-being, we must stop the erosion of their school supports – and that this work begins with the reform of Illinois’ fatally flawed education-funding system. We must ensure that the quality of a child’s education doesn’t depend upon his street address. We must make every Illinois school a place for student growth, not stagnation. Yet it is no less important that we simultaneously halt the erosion of a host of other supports upon which children and families depend, supports typically and collectively known as “human services.” Many of these services face dangers equal to or worse than those faced by schools. And it would be terribly shortsighted to ignore the children’s needs that human services represent, for two primary reasons.

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A child’s educational achievement depends in large part on factors outside of the classroom. To improve educational achievement, we must stop the erosion of children’s school supports - chiefly by reforming Illinois’ flawed school-funding system - while simultaneously halting the erosion of human services upon which children and families depend. A child who is sick or hungry can’t focus on his studies. A kindergartener without quality preschool is more likely to fall behind her peers.



First, studies clearly demonstrate that protecting the many services critical to children’s development is not only the right thing to do, it’s the smart thing to do. There’s an undeniable, research-tested connection between students’ learning and the nonschool factors in their lives – factors that hinge upon substantial state supports. Considering that students spend only about 13 percent of their time within classroom walls,⁴ we cannot seriously expect to attend to all of children’s needs working solely through schools.

In fact, a recent Educational Testing Services study illustrated an “unambiguous” link between two sets of numbers: the poor test scores of many low-income and minority pupils, and such out-of-school factors as low birth weight, hunger, and student mobility.⁵ “This research shows that the ‘achievement gap’ is not only about what goes on once kids get into the classroom; it’s also about what happens to them before and after school,” said Sharon

Robinson, President of ETS’ Educational Policy Leadership Institute, which conducted the study.⁶ Still other research hints that “home and family factors” might account for as much as 49 percent of students’ academic success – outpacing the effects of such factors as teacher qualifications and class size.⁷

Secondly, there are important fiscal reasons for shoring up human services as well as reforming school funding. It’s widely acknowledged that Illinois suffers from a “structural deficit” due to our inadequate, unfair and out-of-date system of state revenues. State policymakers of both political parties agree with economists on this point: Over time, the rising cost of simply maintaining our current level of state services – even if adjusted for inflation and population growth – far outpaces our ability to pay for them.

The gap between our needs and our capacity to meet them grows every year, and we already see the rapid deterioration of many services for children and families. In recent years, our state has frozen or even cut back on virtually all our human services programs.⁸ Any recent spending growth in our state budget can largely be traced to increases in Medicaid and education – and in FY2005, school’s general state aid increases have barely kept pace with the rate of inflation.

If we do nothing to improve our revenue situation, our schools and human services will fail more and more children. But if we fix only education funding, we allow services for children and families to continue to founder – and soon, we would have to carve resources from the “schools” side of the ledger to compensate. Neither of these scenarios bodes well for our future.

“If we want to make significant progress”

Richard Rothstein is a research associate at the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., and has spent years studying the school “achievement gap” between African-American and white students. He laid out his findings in his 2004 book, “Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap.” In this impressive work, Rothstein traces black children’s lower test scores to their generally lower socio-economic conditions. He draws upon a wealth of research to illustrate the strong relationship between lower social class and the nonschool factors that hinder academic achievement. Rothstein calls it folly to expect to improve children’s learning without tackling these out-of-school factors.

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“Three tracks should be pursued vigorously and simultaneously if we want to make significant progress in narrowing the achievement gap,” Rothstein writes. “First is school improvement efforts that raise the quality of instruction in elementary and secondary schools. Second is expanding the definition of schooling to include

crucial out-of-school hours in which families and communities now are the sole influences. This means implementing comprehensive early childhood, after-school and summer programs. And third are social and

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economic policies that enable children to attend school more equally ready to learn. These policies include health services for lower-class children and their families, stable housing for working families with children, and the narrowing of growing income inequalities in American society.”⁹

Certainly, government efforts alone cannot solve a child's every problem. Absolutely no government program can substitute for the care of loving parents and families – a child's first and best teachers. However, it is incumbent upon government to help families when it is able and needed to do so to fill in some of the blanks created by poverty and other harmful factors. To do any less would be to shortchange children, which shortchanges the future of all of Illinois.

If we mean to better support children's educational well-being, we must substantially bolster all of the different state supports that influence their learning, from schools to human services. This is more than just a common-sense truism; it is increasingly borne out in research into these and other topics. This issue brief highlights such

research, and cites a few of the many examples that illustrate the ways in which Illinois' revenue problems already are dismantling important supports for children and families. (For complete analyses, please refer to the annual state budget studies prepared by the Budget & Tax Policy Initiative of Voices for Illinois Children, www.voices4kids.org.)

Early education

Young children who benefit from high-quality preschool programs are more likely than their peers to perform better in school, both academically and behaviorally, according to a host of studies. Many are one-third less likely to be arrested for juvenile crimes, but more apt to graduate from high school and attend college as well as avoid dependence upon public financial assistance as adults.¹⁰

Yet according to national teacher surveys one out of three children enters kindergarten unprepared for school.¹¹ That corresponds roughly with the number of at-risk children eligible for – but not served by – the federal Head Start and state-supported preKindergarten programs in Illinois, state officials estimated in 2000.¹² As recently as FY2003 the statewide waiting list for preK

services stretched to nearly 11,000 names,¹³ not counting the thousands more children who had not even been screened for eligibility due to the state's limited resources. Illinois has wisely begun to improve early learning programs' access, quality and coordination, so that all young children are able to benefit if their parents want them to participate. However, we have much work left to do in preK, child care, Head Start and other developmental

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services for children birth to age 5. We must continue to ensure that each of these individual programs is strong for the children who need them. We must help these programs to work together better to form a true system of early childhood supports. And although voluntary home-visiting programs (such as Healthy Families Illinois and Parents Too Soon) help the families of more than

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4,500 young children with parenting “coaching” and links to other supports, communities’ actual needs far outstrip current resources.

Poverty

High poverty rates correlate with lower IQs, according to research by the University of Virginia. In fact, in the study, poverty aggravated inadequate educational opportunities and other related, environmental factors to account for 80 percent of the IQ-score deficit seen among very poor children; the low-income students’ scores lagged as much as 40 points behind those of wealthier peers with maximum environmental advantages.¹⁴ Poor children are less likely than their affluent peers to grow up in households that are cognitively stimulating, and they’re more likely to be raised by parents who have completed fewer years of schooling, which can negatively affect their educational attainment.¹⁵

Low-income children consistently score lower than their better-off peers on nearly all standardized exams. And the disparities don’t end with exams - only 71 percent of low-income Illinois students graduate from high school.

Standardized test results reflect children’s socioeconomic status. For example, about 39 percent of fifth-graders failed to meet state standards for reading in 2004, but among poor children, that figure soared to nearly 58 percent.¹⁶ While about 46 percent of eighth-graders fell short of math



standards, nearly 68 percent of their economically disadvantaged peers did so. Low-income children consistently score significantly lower than their better-off peers on nearly all such exams. And the disparities don’t end with exams. Illinois high school students’ 86.5 percent graduation rate compares with a rate of only 71 percent among low-income students.¹⁷ Altogether, more than one out of every 10 children still lives in poverty in Illinois; among Latino children, that figure is one in five and, among black youngsters, one in three.¹⁸ (These statistics reflect the federal poverty guidelines; many experts agree the true picture of poverty is bleaker still.) In fact, Illinois public schools’ low-income enrollment rose slightly to 39 percent last year, reflecting a startling, 10-point increase during the past 13 years.¹⁹

Obviously, initiatives combating poverty are absolutely crucial to help ensure these children’s success in school and life - among them, job training, child-support enforcement and the state and federal Earned Income Tax Credit. Illinois has seen success in each of these efforts, just as it has in raising the minimum wage in 2004 and 2005, but more must be done to strengthen them.

Health

Children in poor health are more likely to be absent from school as well as to have physical and emotional problems that interfere with academics.²⁰ Cognitively, children who are exposed to lead are also impaired. These children have decreased IQ²¹ and achievement-test scores, particularly in reading,²² as well as increased dropout rates and poor grades overall.²³ Asthma is associated with poorer school readiness among young children,²⁴ as well as with decreased attention, memory and achievement among older children.²⁵ Asthmatic children are more likely to miss school and often are unable to participate in many school activities due to their illness. Social-emotional

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problems have a debilitating effect on many children’s learning.

More than one in 10 Illinois children still lack health insurance.²⁶ Our state has made strides to reduce that number in recent years, expanding the KidCare program for low-income children and the new FamilyCare insurance initiative for their parents. Yet too many children still fall through the cracks, and we are losing ground in some areas - for example,

cutting schools' substance-abuse prevention efforts by \$2.4 million in FY2004. We must continue to pursue preventive health care for all children, to guarantee they grow up healthy and well-educated. This care includes better mental health services for children who need them to thrive inside and outside the classroom.

Nutrition

Poor nutrition can combine with inadequate educational opportunities early in a child's life to erode his or her learning potential. In a study by Emory University, such children's academic achievement scores tracked about 33 percent behind those of peers who received good food and good schooling; moreover, the latter group showed sizeable intellectual gains in adulthood.²⁷

It requires no great stretch of the imagination to understand that hungry or

malnourished children cannot perform as well as they should in school. Yet Illinois cut free breakfasts and lunches for low-income students by \$1.18 million in FY2004. This is clearly the wrong policy direction to take, especially considering Illinois' school-breakfast participation rate ranks 48th in the nation, with more than 183,000 children going unserved.²⁸ In fact, even as school-breakfast rates rose nationally, Illinois' participation fell by more than 2,300 youngsters in 2004, and the state even cut back on emergency food and housing services by about \$300,000 in FY2005.

A more positive note was struck by the General Assembly's January 2005 passage of the Childhood Hunger Relief Act, which calls upon school systems with many students in poverty to provide them with more school-breakfast and summer-meal services; now, we

must ensure we properly fund this initiative.

Housing and mobility

Ask any teacher to name the factors that most frequently frustrate children's learning, and she is likely to include mobility - the incidence of children changing schools during the academic year, breaking up the continuity of their learning. Lack of good, affordable housing exacerbates this problem for too many children. In fact, one out of every six Illinois children switched schools at least once during the 2003-04 year,²⁹ and many changed schools multiple times. State education officials are so cognizant of the effects of mobility that, in making important "state report card" calculations, they discount the standardized test scores of students who moved into a school district after Sept. 30

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each year.³⁰

“Fair market” monthly rent for a two-bedroom dwelling in Illinois was \$823 during 2004.³¹ Among very low-wage families, this obviously would claim much more than 30 percent of household income, the generally accepted standard for affordability. In fact, fully half of

top end of the compulsory school age by one year,³⁴ mandating that teenagers stay in school until they’re 17 – a worthy goal that cries out for more resources, not fewer.

Out-of-school-time supports

Good after-school programs provide children with structured environments

after-school and school-safety efforts were cut by \$17.7 million in FY2003, including elimination of the Safe to Learn project and trimming back the Teen REACH program for at-risk youths aged 6-17. During FY2004, only a veto override saved Teen REACH from a further \$551,900 in cuts at a time when funding limitations already were forcing the program to turn away three out of every four applicants. In FY2005, about \$697,400 was cut from the general pot of funding available to Teen REACH, meaning many programs have had to turn away still more vulnerable youths.³⁷ And in the past three years, the Summer Bridges/Extended Learning Opportunities programs – out-of-school efforts to help struggling students to reach learning standards – have been slashed by about \$4 million from funding levels that already were far too low to help all the children who need it. We need to invest further in such efforts, not fall behind.

Support all of children’s needs

Copious, careful research demonstrates that children’s learning success hinges largely upon how we meet their learning needs. Illinois children’s standardized test scores and other measurements of their well-being indicate their learning success is still wanting – and recent state budget decisions hint at some of the reasons why. The bottom line: We all must do better to support children so they can do better in school and life. Our collective responsibility requires that we strengthen the individual building blocks that form a foundation for children’s learning – and to recognize what these blocks truly



Illinois renters couldn’t afford fair-market rent on a two-bedroom dwelling last year,³² and the overall affordability of Illinois’ rental-housing market ranks a dismal 40th

in the nation.³³ In order to ensure the stability of children’s education, experts say, their housing must be stable and affordable for their families.

Finally, chronic truancy from school constitutes another brand of mobility that devastates the continuity of students’ learning. But in the past two years, Illinois has cut its anti-truancy efforts by about \$3.4 million and its alternative education programs by about \$200,000. This comes at a time we have raised the

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for learning outside the classroom and school day. They provide opportunities for mental and physical growth. Research shows they simultaneously

help children to avoid involvement in drugs, alcohol, sex and other delinquency, particularly during the after-school hours that police refer to as “prime time for juvenile crime.”³⁵ Staying out of such trouble is crucial to staying on the road to success in school and beyond.

Still, Illinois’ after-school programs remain far too limited, leaving as many as 89 percent of school-aged children with working parents unserved.³⁶ In fact,

involve. In researcher Richard Rothstein's estimation, we must:

- **Improve school efforts** that raise the quality of children's education;
- **Expand the definition of "schooling"** to include crucial, out-of-school time influenced chiefly by families and communities – and thus better support preschool, after-school and other learning opportunities that take place outside schools; and
- **Pursue social and economic policies** that help children to learn, policies involving but not limited to families' health, housing and economic security.

"Better school practices can probably narrow the (achievement) gap," Rothstein declares. "School reform, however, is not enough."³⁸

Several statewide, public-policy-and-advocacy efforts reflect this thinking. The Early Learning Illinois campaign (www.earlylearningillinois.org) aims to ensure that children are healthy and happy, ready to learn and eager to succeed by the time they enter

kindergarten, through the improvement and expansion of preschool opportunities.

The goals of the A+ Illinois campaign (www.aplusillinois.org) are to make school funding more fair and adequate, while reducing property taxes and protecting the range of services vital to kids' and families' well-being. This work should be done in the bigger context of state revenue reforms that also can reduce state and local taxes' disproportionate burden on low-income families.

Finally, the work of the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership (www.ivpa.org/childrensmhtf/) is crucial to supporting youngsters' social

and emotional well-being. We should pursue its policy recommendations to give more children access to the services that many need but now lack.

The choice is ours: to help children thrive, or allow them to falter. To heed research or ignore it. To pay now, or pay later. "Paying now" means investing in preventive efforts to bolster children's future – at least \$6,000 per pupil³⁹ in school, and several thousand dollars more per child outside the classroom. "Paying later" is gamble that includes prison costs of \$21,000 per adult (\$65,000 per juvenile in detention facilities),⁴⁰ personal costs to crime victims, the price of unemployment, the loss of potential earnings and a host of other calculations that add up to the squandering of a bright future. Let's make the right commitment for children, their future and that of our entire state.

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Endnotes

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About Voices for Illinois Children

Voices for Illinois Children is a statewide, non-profit, non-partisan public awareness and advocacy organization that works with families, communities and lawmakers to build support for practical public policies that improve the lives of children. A recognized leader in child advocacy, Voices informs and inspires thousands of people to speak up and take action in order to ensure that children's basic needs - family, education, economic security, health, safety and the arts, recreation and culture - are public and private priorities. James J. Mitchell, III, is the chairman of the Voices for Illinois Children Board of Directors. Jerome Stermer is president.

About the Budget & Tax Policy Initiative

Investing in our children's health, education, safety and welfare is the long-term, common-sense approach to preserving and enhancing the well-being of children, their families and all citizens. Smart investment decisions require good information, sound analysis and timely action. Voices for Illinois Children's Budget & Tax Policy Initiative analyzes the state's revenue and spending policies to help policymakers and advocates set priorities and make wise fiscal decisions for the short- and long-term. Ann Courter is the Initiative's director. The Initiative is supported by grants from the Ford Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Chicago Community Trust.