

CONCLUDING ESSAY:



Making Strides Toward a Better Education System



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As State Superintendent, I am privileged to meet many of our most dedicated teachers and school leaders across Illinois. I hear stories of struggle and success as educators strive to create engaged learning environments, whether for a class of curious preschoolers or eager high school seniors who are ready to move on to their next stage of life. I am always struck by the sense of passion and responsibility with which educators take on each new day and endeavor.

At the state board, we believe it is part of our very mission to share that responsibility and accountability with the approximately 870 school districts in our state. Our job is to help all students prepare for success in careers and postsecondary education.

I truly believe we are making strides toward a better educational system for all children in Illinois.

Last year, the State Board of Education created a roadmap, of sorts, with three important goals for pupils and educators to help guide our decisions as a state agency. The simple and straight-forward language of these goals belies the momentous efforts that will bring them to fruition.

- Every student will demonstrate academic achievement and be prepared for success after high school.

- Every student will be supported by highly prepared and effective teachers and school leaders.
- Every school will offer a safe and healthy learning environment for all students.

Illinois also took an important step last year toward preparing students for college and the future by joining the American Diploma Project (ADP). The project will help guide our efforts to align Illinois Learning Standards to internationally competitive college and career-ready benchmarks that are responsive to demands of the 21st century. This is an exciting initiative that will increase the rigor and relevance in teaching and learning for more than 2 million Illinois students.

Illinois has joined more than 30 other states in the ADP but will be among the first states to not only use national benchmarks, but also to look at what other countries require of their students.

We are beginning the process of reviewing and revising the Illinois Learning Standards for the first time in more than a decade. This 18-to-24-month undertaking will ensure that the learning standards for kindergarten through grade 12 are aligned to postsecondary and work demands and meet national and international expectations.

Instructors in primary and secondary schools, community colleges and higher education institutions will work collaboratively through the ADP to reach agreement on requirements for students leaving high school. We all know that too often high school graduates must start with remedial courses when they enter postsecondary institutions. Reading performance assessments among high school students nationally and statewide show a 25-year decline. Cohesion between the various educational systems will help improve achievement at all levels.



Overall, our goal is to have fewer, clearer and more rigorous Illinois Learning Standards that effectively align to college and career readiness expectations.

Our vision to improve the future social, emotional and mental aptitude of our children and future leaders begins long before they enter Illinois classrooms. We recognize learning begins at birth. We know a strong foundation will prepare children for later school success.

For more than two decades our early childhood funding, the Prevention Initiative, has supported intense, coordinated services for the most at-risk families with children ages birth to 3 years. The Prevention Initiative receives 11 percent of total state early childhood funding, which has increased annually under Illinois' Preschool for All, growing from \$184 million in 2002 to \$380 million in fiscal year 2008.

Preschool for All makes Illinois a leader in the crucial area of early childhood development. Illinois' high-quality, state-funded pre-kindergarten program was ranked first nationally for enrolling 19 percent of the state's 3-year-olds, according to a report published by the National Institute for Early Education Research.

Last year, legislation was enacted extending the historic childhood program to June 30, 2010, providing access to early education for all 3- and 4-year-olds. To date, the program has served more than 175,000 children statewide with a goal to continually increase funding until all children whose families want them in preschool have access to it.

While launching and expanding new programs, we remain steadfast in our efforts to remove lingering obstacles to academic achievement. We continue to work to close the achievement gap among students and to ensure that more students of color are going

on to postsecondary education. We continue to fund literacy programs that help the state's earliest learners, as well as their families, improve their skills and reach their full potential.

So much more needs to be done. We will continue to work together, as agencies and organizations and individuals to develop the best ideas and harness resources to help all students reach their potential.

Voices for Illinois Children has long led the way toward such collaboration and advocacy on behalf of our youngest residents and future leaders. We are grateful for Voices' leadership and vision to give all children a chance to succeed in life and achieve their dreams.

