

November 2016

**VOICES FOR ILLINOIS CHILDREN**

# Agenda to Build Better Lives



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## DEAR FRIENDS,

This year, I was proud to take over the helm of Voices for Illinois Children — an organization with an accomplished history of helping children and families across Illinois. Yet, so many of our state’s residents face immense challenges following the Great Recession and a state budget crisis that continues to play itself out.

It is a vital time for our state and for Voices. Our elected officials must determine if we will be a state that provides opportunities for all of its citizens through its public investments and policies or whether we will turn our backs on those most in need.

Voices remains energized and committed to fighting for adequate public investments in three broad categories:

- Education
- Health and Human Services
- Strong and Economically Sustainable Communities

In addition, we must be mindful of the impact state budget and policy decisions have on communities of color and continue to work towards reducing inequities across the state.

Regardless of race, family income, or geographic region, every Illinois child should have the opportunity for a bright, healthy future and a productive life. This report outlines steps we believe the state must take on behalf of Illinois children and families. If it does so, we will all benefit from the results.

I hope you will join us in our efforts.



**Tasha Green Cruzat**  
President, Voices for Illinois Children

# VOICES FOR ILLINOIS CHILDREN AGENDA TO BUILD BETTER LIVES

Voices for Illinois Children celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2017. In our first 30 years, Voices and our partners have achieved many victories on behalf of children and families. We have significantly reduced the number of children without health insurance, dramatically expanded access to high-quality preschool and home visiting, and helped create a children's mental health system that meets needs that are too often ignored — to name just a few.

However, Illinois is at a critical moment in its history, and its residents and policymakers must decide what they want the future of our state to look like. Voices will play a vital role in laying out a positive vision for how public investments in children, families, and communities are essential to putting Illinois on the right path. In so doing, Voices will continue to play a critical role in leading and collaborating with dozens of our partner organizations who work to secure public investments and build strong service delivery systems in their specific areas of expertise.

The Great Recession threw families' economic security into turmoil. More children were living in poverty in 2015 compared to before the recession. Although rates have improved, there were still nearly 559,000 children living in poverty in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Overall, nearly 40 percent of Illinois children are low-income, living below 200 percent of the poverty level or less than \$48,500 for a family of four.<sup>2</sup> And Illinois' children living in poverty are increasingly children of color. Meanwhile, the state's failure to enact responsible budgets backed by sufficient revenue continues to undermine critical public investments that are necessary to create a brighter future.

In a series of discussion groups and key stakeholder interviews around Illinois over the past year, Voices heard from Illinois residents who are concerned about the well-being of children today and in the future. While they see isolated opportunities for progress in many areas, the overwhelming sentiment was that communities now believe that they are on their own—with those fortunate enough to live in wealthier areas doing well, but those in communities lacking significant financial resources increasingly left behind.

Against this backdrop, Voices for Illinois Children has never been more important. With a renewed sense of vigor and purpose, Voices will stand with families and communities to take on Illinois' biggest challenges to create a brighter future for children, who are the foundation for a stronger state.

## Voices' Unique Role

As an independent, nonpartisan advocacy organization that champions strong public policies and investments for all Illinois children, Voices can cut through the policy fog to show policymakers how they can improve the wellbeing of children, their families, and their communities. Driven by our Kids Count data, our Fiscal Policy Center expertise, and our proven ability

### Advocate for adequate tax revenue to invest in children and their families

- Investments in early childhood education and programs
- Investments in youth and their communities
- Racial equity impact assessments

### Improve Tax Fairness

- A non-flat state income tax
- Doubling the state's Earned Income Tax Credit
- Child Tax Credit

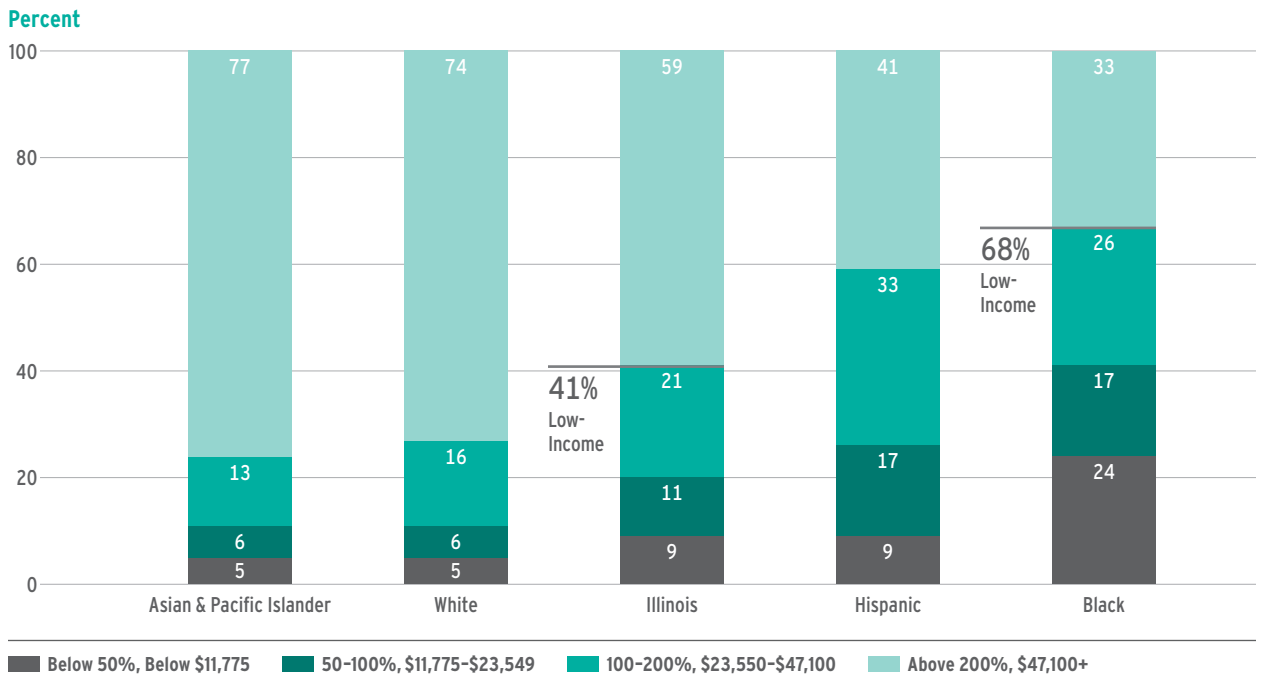
### Strengthen Family Economic Security

- Paid family and medical leave
- Children's savings accounts

### Strengthen Educational Outcomes

- Children's early math skills
- Addressing chronic absenteeism

## Black and Latino Children More than Twice as Likely to Be Low-Income Compared to White Children



**SOURCE** Voices for Illinois Children analysis, Kids Count Data Center, U.S. Census Bureau, 2013 American Community Survey, Income levels based on 2013 federal poverty level for a family of four.

### Voices' Agenda for Building Better Lives

In shaping our Agenda for Building Better Lives, Voices for Illinois Children connected with both communities and partner organizations to ensure that we are operating in the most effective advocacy space for children and families. The result is an agenda that harnesses the unique strengths of our organization and enhances the work being done by our coalition partners to help Illinois children and families build better lives.

to help shape public policy conversations, Voices is uniquely positioned to make crucial policy choices clear and—as our name suggests—be a strong voice on behalf of children and their families.

Voices' unique assets offer us the ability to take on one of the most fundamental aspects of what ails Illinois and threatens children and families: the state's finances. After years of insufficient revenue to fund necessary public services, even to pay for enacted appropriations, the 2015 income tax cuts further crippled our state's finances, leaving little revenue to make the crucial public investments we need to build thriving communities. With billions of dollars less in revenue each year, Illinois cannot pay for the most basic investments in children and families.

In addition to ensuring robust public investments, Voices realizes we must do more to identify and help remove barriers to opportunities that inhibit success for many children. Because of systemic barriers facing

## Building a Stronger Illinois Requires Recognizing History, Advancing Equity

The large disparities we see in children and families' wellbeing are not an accident, but rather are rooted in centuries of history. This is particularly the case with black Americans and the legacy of nearly 350 years of enslavement, a century of Jim Crow laws that lasted through the 1960s, and ongoing institutionalized racism that continues to this day. In Illinois, restrictive housing covenants were used to prohibit the sale of homes to blacks and Jews, while "redlining" meant blacks could not access mortgages to buy in many communities because they ran afoul of the FHA's "protection against adverse influences" that

included "infiltration of inharmonious racial or nationality groups." Discriminatory public policies and private practices that occurred with virtual impunity shaped not only cities like Chicago, but also smaller cities and towns around Illinois. In fact, several years ago the Rockford Register Star showed how discriminatory local property deeds shaped what the city looks like today.

Discriminatory housing policies is just one area that has contributed to today's large inequities. Others include budget policies that have too often neglected the needs of communities of color and tax

policies that disproportionately tax communities of color. To advance equity now, we therefore must recognize that children and families do not start with a blank slate. We must recognize and address the roots of current inequities, identify the barriers that children, families and communities face by engaging directly with those most impacted, and advance policy solutions that remove these barriers and create opportunities. Only then will we be able to fully benefit from Illinois' tremendous untapped human potential, which is necessary for creating a stronger state for us all.

**SOURCE** Brian Leaf, "Property Deeds Tell A Story of Discrimination in Rockford," *Rockford Register Star*, August 29, 2015.

blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans, including low-wage work and restricted access to social services, health care, and educational opportunities, their children are more likely to live in poverty and face more barriers to success than white children.

Through our Kids Count project, Voices has a key role to play in better highlighting not only racial, ethnic, gender, and other disparities, but to dig deeper to expose why these disparities exist and what must be done to address their root causes. Kids Count and other state and local data consistently show that income and living in areas of concentrated poverty is related to a child's healthy development, educational opportunities, and safety.<sup>3</sup> Yet, compared to their white peers:

- black infants are half as likely to survive to their third birthday;<sup>4</sup>
- less than half of black children birth to age two have a parent with secure employment (compared to three-quarters of their white peers); and<sup>5</sup>

- black infants and toddlers in Illinois are six times more likely and Latino three times more likely to live in areas of concentrated poverty.<sup>6</sup>

Voices believes that for Illinois to reach its full potential we must advance equity for all Illinois children, families, and communities, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, place of birth, or where they live.

### Voices' Policy Priorities Strong, Equitable Public Investments

Voices champions public investments in children, families, and communities because, without these investments, too many children will lack the opportunities they need to reach their full potential. These investments must be *equitable* to correct the negative effects of poverty, systemic racism, and lack of opportunities facing many children. This means investing *more* in communities that have the least resources.

Without billions of dollars in new revenue, history will doubtlessly repeat itself, with children, families, and communities of color being hit the hardest.

Voices strives to address, equitable public investments across three broad categories:

- Education
- Health and Human Services
- Strong and Economically Sustainable Communities

To have an educated population who enjoy good health, economic security, and communities that are safe and vibrant, we must have strong public investments that invest in children and their families, and remove barriers that limit their opportunities. However, we also recognize that these three categories of investments are not mutually exclusive and that public investments are almost always interrelated.

In our recent Kids Count Issue Brief, we demonstrated how cuts to higher education funding have reduced opportunities for many young parents, jeopardizing not only their futures but their children's as well. Similarly, we showed how cuts to child care eligibility have made it more difficult for many parents to afford the quality child care that allows them to work or go to school while ensuring their children's safety and healthy development.

**Sound Budget and Tax Policies that Enable Strong, Equitable Public Investments**

The importance of the state budget to children, families, and communities cannot be overstated. Public investments are inherently budget related, and without responsible budget and tax policies, sustainable public investments are not possible.

Illinois' history of skipping or underfunding pension payments, structural deficits (causing the state to pay bills in the next fiscal year because of inadequate revenue), and having courts mandate expenditures in the absence of a budget have resulted in the state accumulating a greater and greater backlog of bills. As of October 2016, the state's backlog of bills totaled more than \$9 billion.<sup>7</sup>

The debt that Illinois is now taking on, particularly after the large 2015 income tax cuts, must eventually be paid down. Such

debt burdens our children's future and reduces the policy choices available to future generations. If Illinois does not raise billions of dollars in new revenue, the state will have no practical choice but to continue gutting public investments (including in PreK-12 education, which has largely been spared in recent years). With further cuts, history will doubtlessly repeat itself, with children, families, and communities of color being hit the hardest.

As our elected officials make the difficult decisions on our state budget, they need to gauge the impact of those decisions on communities of color. Such assessments require independent analysis of proposals to ensure policymakers have critical data and community perspectives while debating state policies and appropriations. Seattle and King County, Washington both have undertaken **Racial Equity Impact Assessments Initiatives** that consider likely equity impacts of proposed policies and funding decisions. The United Kingdom has, since 2000, required all units of government to conduct Race Equality Impact Assessments to "preempt the possibility that [the government agency's] proposed policy could affect some racial groups unfavorably."<sup>8</sup>

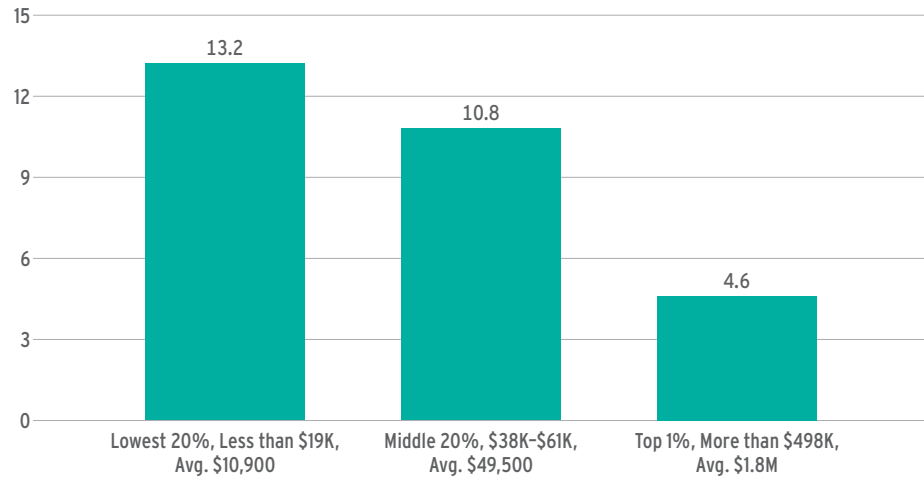
Voices' Fiscal Policy Center will continue to clarify the consequences of different policy choices and build a strong case for equitable budget and tax policies that will sustainably invest in our state's future.

**Improving the Fairness of Illinois' Tax System**

Illinois desperately needs to raise additional revenue to meet its needs, but it must also do so in a fairer way. Currently, Illinois has the fifth most unfair state and local tax systems in the country.<sup>9</sup> The 20 percent of Illinois taxpayers with the lowest incomes (average annual income, \$10,900) currently pay 13.2 percent of their incomes in state and local taxes.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the top 1 percent of taxpayers (average annual income, \$1.8 million) pay only 4.6 percent of their incomes in state and local taxes.<sup>11</sup> Creating greater fairness in our tax code and asking the wealthy to pay their fair

## Low-Income Illinoisans' Pay Higher Share of Income in Taxes Compared to the Wealthiest

### Percent of income tax paid in taxes



**SOURCE** Voices for Illinois Children analysis, Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, Who Pays? 5th Edition.

share will not only raise more resources to make sound public investments in our state, but will boost local economies, improve the overall economic security of low-income children and families, and reduce racial and ethnic disparities.

While Voices will continue to champion **amending the state constitution to allow for a non-flat state income tax** that is based on ability to pay, there are other ways to improve tax fairness even within the existing flat-tax system. For example, as part of any legislation to raise new revenue through the state's flat income tax, Illinois should **double the state's Earned Income Tax Credit**. By increasing the state's EITC, Illinois would both offset the harm from higher income tax rates while increasing the amount a low-income family can keep to make ends meet and generate economic activity in their local communities.

Illinois should also adopt a **Child Tax Credit** that is tied to the federal credit. Together, Census Bureau data shows that the EITC and CTC reduce child poverty more than any other measures in the United States.<sup>12</sup> In 2015, the EITC and CTC lifted 4.8 million children in the

United States out of poverty.<sup>13</sup> The EITC and CTC also have been shown to increase prenatal care, decrease maternal stress, boost parents' employment and earnings, improve children's performance in school, and even increase high school completion and college attendance.<sup>14</sup>

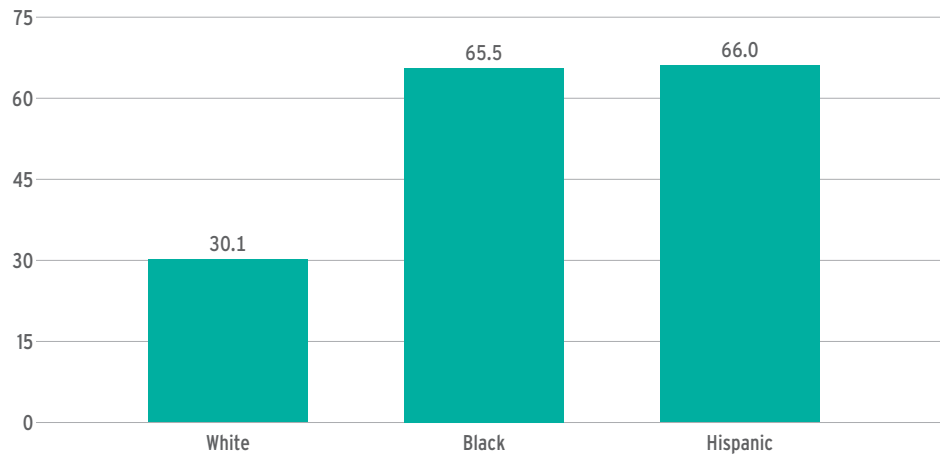
Currently, our state applies sales taxes to nearly all goods, which take up a large share of low-income families' income, but taxes very few services, which take up a larger share of high-income families' income. Together, these policies cost the state several billion dollars a year in much-needed revenue.

### Cost-Effective Public Investments — Early Childhood and Alternatives to Youth Incarceration

While Voices supports a broad range of public investments that are necessary to strengthen our state, **investments in early childhood** such as those in home visiting, Early Intervention, child care, and preschool are perhaps the most important public investments Illinois can make.<sup>15</sup> Investments in early childhood can alter the trajectory of children's lives, setting

## Two-Thirds of Black and Hispanic Households in Illinois Lack Savings to Cover Emergencies and Plan for the Future

Percent



**SOURCE** Voices for Illinois Children analysis, CFED Assets & Opportunity Scorecard, *Survey of Income and Program Participation, 2008 Panel, Wave 10*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, 2013. Data calculated by Haveman Economic Consulting. Definition: Percentage of households without sufficient liquid assets to subsist at the poverty level for three months in the absence of income, 2011.

them up for success in their schooling, careers, and lives, both reducing future costs and growing a stronger economy. High quality early childhood investments are particularly important for reducing racial and ethnic disparities. Voices will continue to make state investments in early childhood, backed by adequate revenue to pay for those investments, a top priority. Voices also believes that Illinois must recommit to long-term goals of ensuring that all children and families have access to high-quality preschool, home visiting, and child care.

Illinois must also choose to **invest in youth and their communities** rather than spend on expensive and ineffective youth prisons. As our recent Fiscal Policy Center report, *Invest in Youth—Not Prisons*, showed, Illinois currently spends nearly 30 times more money incarcerating one youth than serving one youth through Redeploy Illinois, the state's main community-based alternative to incarceration that has been far more effective at improving public safety and promoting rehabilitation.<sup>16</sup> Illinois needs to be smart about its spending, and redirecting

spending from ineffective youth incarceration to far more effective community-based alternatives is where we must start. We must also prioritize expanding community-based services for youth of color who frequently do not have access to the same services as their white peers.

### Strengthening Families' Economic Security

In addition to many of the tax fairness policies noted above, Illinois can enact a number of other policies to improve the economic security of children and their families. Illinois should **adopt paid family and medical leave insurance policies** (similar to unemployment insurance) to enable workers to care for sick family members or a new child. Without these policies, Illinois and much of the United States is an outlier among advanced economies in paid time-off for parents.<sup>17</sup>

Currently, workers who have (or adopt) a child or who have a sick family member frequently cannot take time off without losing their income. In the past few years, however, more states have been setting up insurance systems that are paid for in full



or in part by employee contributions. Thus, when a worker must tend to him/herself or care for a family member (including a new baby), they receive benefits from an insurance system that they have paid into. California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island currently have paid family and medical leave laws. (The State of New York has approved a measure that becomes effective in 2018.) These other states' experiences show the laws did not negatively affect businesses. In fact, many employers reported improved employee morale and retention.<sup>18</sup>

Another way to improve children and families' economic security is by helping them build and protect assets. Voices has long supported **establishing a Children's Savings Account for every child born in Illinois**. With a small investment at birth, every child can start life on the right financial foot, and parents can make tax-free contributions to their children's account. These accounts have been shown to support early childhood development,

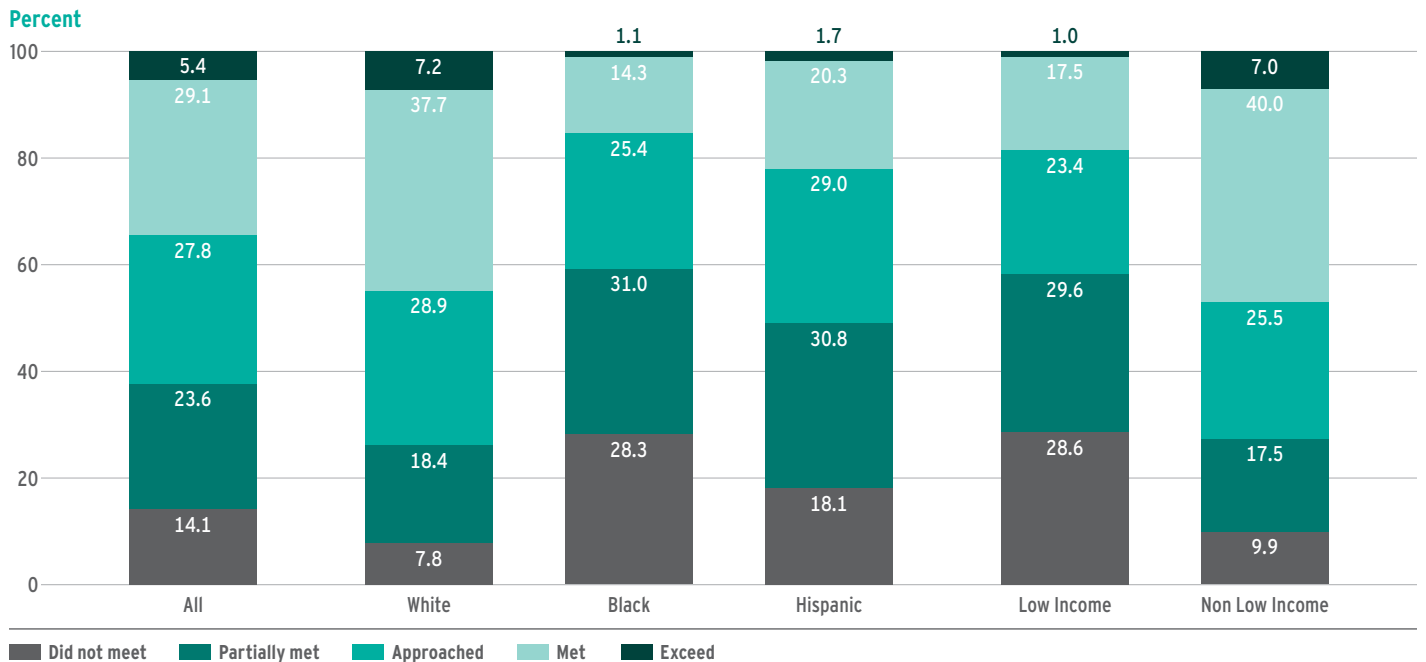
build children's financial skills, increase children's aspirations to attend college, and even improve high school and college completion rates.

While both paid family leave and Children's Savings Accounts would benefit families of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, they would most impact children and families of color. Black and Latino households have access to far fewer resources than white households;<sup>19</sup> the median net worth of white households is 13 times higher than that of black households and 10 times higher than Latino households.<sup>20</sup> Two-thirds of black and Latino households lack assets such as savings accounts with funds to address family emergencies or planning for the future.<sup>21</sup>

### Improving Young Children's Early Math Skills

Voices is currently taking part in an initiative of the CME Group Foundation to improve young children's early math skills.

## Too Few Illinois Elementary Students Meet Standards in Math



**NOTE** Race categories are for Illinois 3rd graders. Low-income categories are for Illinois 8th graders.

**SOURCE** Voices for Illinois Children Analysis, Illinois Report Card, [www.illinoisreportcard.com/State.aspx?source=Trends&source2=Parcc&Stateid=IL](http://www.illinoisreportcard.com/State.aspx?source=Trends&source2=Parcc&Stateid=IL)

The reasons children are absent are many and complex, including child sickness, parental sickness, transportation problems, and, later on, youth disengagement.

While children are taught from an early age to identify letters, sounds, and words in developing their literacy skills, we have not devoted the same effort to promoting the importance of children developing math concepts from birth to kindergarten.<sup>22</sup> This contributes to the low percentage of Illinois elementary school students who are meeting standards in math; in 2015, only 37 percent of 4th graders were at least proficient.<sup>23</sup> By high school, only 19 percent met PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) math standards.<sup>24</sup>

To help provide more young children with a solid foundation in math skills, Voices has partnered with the Illinois Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (ICAAP) to develop early math materials to give medical and child care providers. These providers can then work directly with parents to ensure that they have the tools they need to help their children develop foundational math skills. Voices is also in the process of developing a website and materials to raise awareness about the importance of early math skills. When we improve young children's understanding of early math concepts and help them develop early math skills, we set them up for success in school and life by giving them a strong foundation for math skills that are increasingly important in our modern economy.

### Chronic Absenteeism from School

Attending school (whether preschool or K–12) on a regular basis is critical to children's educational development. If students are not in the classroom, they miss out on vital instruction, and once behind, it is often extremely difficult to catch up. Yet, data from the U.S. Department of Education shows that 13 percent of all K–12 students—and 20 percent of high schoolers—are chronically absent from school (meaning they miss 15 or more school days per year).<sup>25</sup> The reasons children are absent are many and complex, including child sickness, parental sickness, transportation problems, and, later on, youth disengagement. The problem of chronic absenteeism is disproportionately

higher for children living in poverty and children of color (who disproportionately live in poverty).

In Illinois, more than a dozen school districts have more than a quarter of their students who are chronically absent.<sup>26</sup> A recent study found that 40 percent of preschoolers in Chicago Public Schools were chronically absent, and those who were chronically absent were five times more likely to be chronically absent in second grade.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, Illinois does not have the tools in place to know the full scope of the problem in the state. Each school district in Illinois uses their own definition of what constitutes attendance for the day. Voices will work with its partners to advocate for standardized definitions and improvements in data collection to better understand and identify the underlying causes of absenteeism and promote state investments to combat the problem.

### Tackling Long-Term Challenges Requires Starting Now

There's no doubt that Illinois faces challenges. Our state's budget crisis is undermining public investments that create opportunities for children and families. And, we have not done nearly enough to reduce the stark inequalities caused by systemic racism and other forms of institutionalized discrimination. Left unaddressed, these failures will continue to weaken our state.

The good news is that we can address our challenges if we have the courage to not ignore them. By raising adequate resources in a fair and sustainable way, we can end harmful cuts to public investments and begin the process of paying down our state's unpaid bills. Through data and strong community engagement, we can identify barriers to opportunities for low-income communities of color and change policies, institutions, and the allocation of resources that stand in the way. When we do these things, we will not only help individual children, families, and communities thrive, but we will also build a stronger economy and state. Voices for Illinois Children is ready to help lead the way.

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## Voices for Illinois Children

Voices for Illinois Children works as a catalyst for change to improve the lives of children of all ages throughout our state.

We are committed to the well-being of every child. All children, regardless of circumstances, are vital to the preservation of a vigorous democracy. We believe children do well when they grow up in strong, supportive families, and that families do well in supportive communities. We believe in focusing on preventing problems by employing comprehensive, well-researched strategies to improve children's education and health care and to strengthen their families' economic security and the social services on which they depend.

For 30 years, we have helped parents, community leaders, and policymakers understand and respond to the issues facing children and families. Together, we have affected the well-being of an entire generation of Illinois children through achievements in early childhood education and care, K–12 education, health care, children's mental health, child welfare, family economic security, and afterschool and youth development.

Voices raises awareness of the needs facing children and families, builds strong partnerships focused on solutions, convenes stakeholders to explore data, generates public support and political will for needed improvements, and works to ensure implementation of strong policies and programs.

### OUR MISSION

Voices for Illinois Children is an independent advocacy organization that champions strong public policies and investments for all children in our state.

Special thanks to the KINETIK team for the design and production of this report.

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208 South LaSalle Street  
Suite 1490  
Chicago, IL 60604-1120  
312.456.0600

[www.voices4kids.org](http://www.voices4kids.org)

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