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For “United We Learn” Policy Forum, May 14, 2009
At New Trier High School, Northfield, IL

As a student I represent the consumer in the education system and, as a consumer, am intimately familiar with both the successes and failures of Illinois’ schools. On the one hand some Illinois schools churn out college ready students, many of them having taken college level courses since their freshman year of high school, but on the other many Illinois schools continually fail our students by establishing low expectations and settling for mediocrity when students fail to reach even those meager standards.

However, success exists in Illinois schools; the challenge is uncovering and cultivating it. The road to success in education truly begins from birth, thus our proposed policies begin there as well. We have couched our policy proposals in terms of both their moral and economic benefits.

As it says in the Illinois State Constitution, every student deserves a “high quality education.” Starting from the premise that every child is inherently valuable, the only action congruent with America’s deeply held values of universal opportunity and fundamental equality is to take every measure to ensure that all students receive an outstanding education.

Furthermore, any action to improve schools simultaneously improves the welfare of society as a whole as a person’s education level is directly related to future taxes revenues and incarceration rates, which is a gaping money pit. Money invested in education now will save the state money later and will build the foundation for a strong economy in Illinois.

I would like you to consider three policy proposals:

The first is Early Childhood education:

Research consistently and strongly affirms the necessity of teaching and caring for children properly during the early years of life. From birth to four years of age, children

create foundational neural connections. It is considerably more efficient to form proper connections at the outset than attempting costly and usually unsuccessful remediation later in life. The economic benefits of early education programs like the Nurse Family Partnership and the Perry Preschool Project are respectively \$2.88 for every \$1 spent and \$17 for every \$1 spent.

In the early years of children's lives 85% of their brains develops. To think that we are wasting that critical opportunity is appalling. If we surrounded children with a language rich environment and had them work with trained teachers we could recapture that crucial time in a child's life and begin to reverse the educational difficulties that start right from birth.

I am becoming more and more convinced that if we aggressively addressed the issue of Early Education we would take an enormous stride in reducing juvenile crime and the dropout rate and we would give a new generation of impoverished children a chance to climb out of their desperate situations. If you remember only one part of this speech and take only one stand on education reform, make it early childhood education and get behind such groups as Ounce of Prevention.

The second is policy regarding teachers:

Any plan to improve American schools should focus on helping schools develop great teachers and should give teachers the opportunity to maximize the impact of their influential and critical roles in students' lives.

First: Professional Development

Few teachers are taught effective instructional strategies or provided with strong support structures. To develop a high performing teaching force, schools must develop the talent they hire. Quality professional development programs target successful teachers, train them to recognize good teaching, and ask them to lead discussions with other teachers in communities of practice that focus on improving teaching strategies.

In the words of the Harvard School of Education's Tony Wagner, we have "really only moved our 19th-century one-room schoolhouses into larger buildings." Unlike nearly every other profession Teaching is rarely collaborative. Schools should focus on creating an environment in which teachers move freely between classrooms and are encouraged to use the new strategies they learn from other teachers. No person can be expected to fully grasp the enterprise of teaching immediately nor should any teacher expect his learning to be complete after even decades on the job. We must foster a culture of continual improvement and expect nothing less than excellence.

Second: Hiring Effective Teachers

Research consistently demonstrates that traditional certification requirements do nothing to increase teacher quality; instead, subject area knowledge, level of literacy, selectivity of college, and a teacher's personality contribute significantly to teacher effectiveness. Limiting traditional certification requirements in favor of other indicators will increase the teaching pool and if schools employ intensive interview processes they will increase their teaching quality. Teach for America is an essential example here; that program does not use traditional certification requirements instead they employ a comprehensive

interview process that captures the intellectual and personal characteristics of quality teachers.

Third: Identifying Effective Teachers on the Job

In order to continually improve, schools must consistently and thoroughly evaluate their teachers. Schools should employ a variety of evaluation techniques to get a full picture of their teachers. If schools evaluate their teachers with frequent administrative and teacher evaluations, yearly or more frequent standardized testing of students, and National Board Certification, schools can effectively identify both poor and outstanding teachers. Such identification is critical to provide support to struggling teachers, to provide bonuses for extremely successful teachers, and to recommend teachers for dismissal.

Fourth: Tenure and Firing

Teachers, students, administrators, parents, unions, and policy makers must recognize that teaching is an incredibly difficult job with terrifically high stakes. We recommend that tenure no longer be granted to teachers as a matter of course three or four years after they are hired. Tenure should remain a part of the system for effective teachers and should be granted at the discretion of the school and school district. School districts should identify a minimum requirement for reaching tenure and deny teachers tenure with credentials falling below that requirement. Our current system burdens schools with ineffective teachers that repeatedly fail students. To improve education in Illinois, chronically poor teachers that are unresponsive to professional development should be fired because the education of students is too precious to waste.

The third and final proposal is enacting a system of accountability and redesigning the funding structure:

The current education system is marred by a culture of complacency, and the current regulatory system stymies even powerful efforts to introduce progressive school reforms. We support giving schools unprecedented ability to allocate funds where they see fit. With this system every Illinois school can become a laboratory developing new teaching strategies. The state should give districts the job of holding schools accountable for student performance and subsequently the state can hold the districts accountable for their district's performance. In order to identify techniques that work, the state should analyze precisely how schools spend money on students and connect this spending to students' test scores and their eventual success in college. With this system the state will have a comprehensive picture of where to spend and where not to spend, eventually saving the state money and increasing the quality of Illinois schools. Our education system will be revolutionized not by planned intervention but encouraged experimentation and widespread adoption of successful teaching methods.

Effective school administrators and critical school districts provide the foundation of this system. Districts should focus on capturing administrative talent and empowering them to make creative decisions about student instruction. If every person in the system, including the students, critically evaluated their schools and encouraged change, Illinois and America will build a foundation for success.