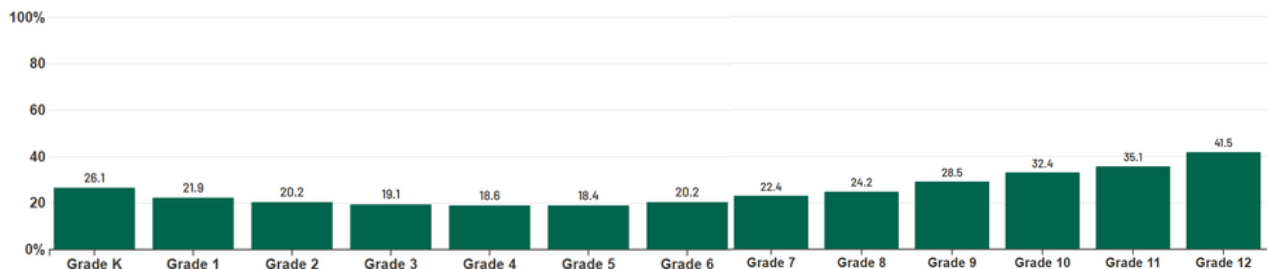


TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Chronic Absenteeism Focus Groups.....1	Literacy and Justice for All.....3
Academic Acceleration.....1	Budget Priorities.....3
Tax-Credit Scholarships.....2	Meet the Team: Karina Donayre.....4

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM FOCUS GROUPS

Chronic absenteeism remains a huge problem in Illinois schools, but especially in high school. Kindergarten and first grade, which also experience fairly high absence rates, saw some progress from the prior report card. However, high school absenteeism rates have been persistently stubborn and hard to move, peaking at 41.5% in grade 12.



Last year, Stand conducted focus groups with parents and high school students themselves who were chronically absent. Participants had thoughtful feedback, some of which was connected to larger social problems than a school could solve (such as poverty, community safety, and chronic health conditions), but many ideas offered actionable solutions that school leaders and policymakers could implement immediately.

Here are several recommendations coming from the focus group conversations:

Ensure every student has a positive adult relationship in the school building.

Encouragingly, most parents who joined the focus groups generally had positive feedback about their children’s schools, or at least, certain individuals within the school who they perceived to be on their side in tackling a tough problem. That sentiment was not universal; some participants thought no adults in the building were positive support for their families and the struggle to get disengaged students out of bed and into class. Formalizing systems to ensure someone notices when a student is not in school and connects with the student to let them know they were missed helps students feel a sense of belonging in their school community and gives them motivation to show up.

Don’t over-penalize tardiness. One recurring theme, which came up in nearly every group: showing up to school late was often punished more harshly than not coming at all. Participants spoke of in-house detentions issued after some number of tardies and corralling students in a

“tardy tank” if they were late then making them wait until the next period to go to class. The most egregious examples we heard from two parents were schools that charge monetary fines for tardiness (a practice that is likely already against state law).

Minimize dress code violations. Several participants mentioned issues related to dress code violations as a source of conflict/children sent home for incomplete uniforms. A shared closet at the school could minimize absences for these sorts of infractions. Allowing hats and scarves can minimize absences when some hairstyles may require many hours of work that sometimes remain unfinished at the start of a school day.

Limit cell phones. Anxiety, bullying, and peer conflicts were recurring themes. This is critically important to address for reasons that stretch beyond absenteeism, and multiple projects are trying to tackle it (the new mental health screening law, the Childhood Adversity Index, and the Whole Child Task Force). One moderately resolvable subtheme is

the relationship between social media and student anxiety. Much of this is outside schools, but schools can limit on-campus cell phone use.

Provide alternative school options and programs. Two parent participants had students who struggled mightily with attendance at their home school and found alternative schools to be a better fit. Another spoke about the career pathway program their student began as a major motivation for her to turnaround her poor attendance. Similarly, several participants talked about the importance of extracurricular activities in motivating students to attend.

Improve busing. Another recurring theme was the apprehension some students feel walking along dangerous routes to school, and the herculean task some parents face in having to drive multiple children to multiple schools in different directions. Cuts in busing and bus driver shortages may be, in part, to blame for a perception that school transportation is less reliable and accessible than it once was.

ACADEMIC ACCELERATION

One excellent piece of news for Illinois is that enrollment for early college credit is up significantly – 9%. In fact, that’s double the rate of growth year-to-year that we have seen in the prior five years. We reached out to some of the schools with the highest increases to hear how they did it.

Notably, a 2023 report by The Illinois Workforce & Education Research Collaborative (IWERC), part of the University of Illinois System’s Discovery Partners Institute, found that as Dual Credit rates grew in Illinois, Dual Credit equity gaps also worsened. More students had access to early college coursework, but that access was not equitably distributed. Upon looking at the highest growth districts in the state, it was encouraging to see large numbers of high schools in Chicago Public

Schools and School District U-46 topping the lists.

Principals we interviewed at some of these schools spoke about the internal barriers they faced as they built up their programming. Shifting the mindsets of staff that these rigorous courses were within the capabilities of their students started off as a barrier, but as programs grew, so did the confidence of school stakeholders. None of the schools with younger Dual Credit programs spoke about contentious partnerships or those sorts of barriers that we often hear from schools with bigger, more established programs with lots of offerings.

For these more veteran Dual Credit programs, barriers were less likely to be about mindset; those doubts seem to resolve quickly once programs are

established and students prove themselves capable. However, qualifying for admission was an ongoing battle. Experienced schools have found ways to support students to pass their placement exams in a few ways: offering tests on site, providing studying support before re-takes, and requiring transitional math as the default course for juniors, so they can automatically qualify with a passing grade. These are some strategies that have proven effective.

Many of the districts with the highest rates of Dual Credit have tapped into CTE Dual Credit, a great opportunity for students to earn early college credit while also gaining exposure to a career pathway. While this is an untapped



opportunity in many areas, it may not be an easy feat in many districts where teacher credentialing can be tricky.

Finally, scheduling flexibility was a recurring theme throughout

interviews. Schools with recent growth, but still-low rates, managed to accommodate accelerated courses during the school day, often swapping an English course for a Dual Credit English course. But for districts that have doubled down on

accelerated course opportunities, restructuring the whole school day was often a prerequisite. These schools baked in lots of flexibility to morning schedules, for example, so that students could attend community college courses on the

college campus, CTE courses at an area career center, or work-based learning at a job site. Transportation for these ventures was a challenge for many schools as well.

FEDERAL TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIP: TO OPT IN OR NOT?

You may have been hearing recently about the federal tax-credit scholarship program. It refers to a provision of H.R. 1, better known as the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act” (OBBBA), giving taxpayers an up-to-\$1,700 credit on their federal income taxes if they contribute up to \$1,700 to a “Scholarship-Granting Organization” (SGO) starting in 2027. That’s a dollar-for-dollar credit, and there’s no cap on the number of taxpayers who can use it. So, this has the potential to become a huge program.

Everywhere I look for information about this new federal OBBBA scholarship law, I find arguments from ideologues who are already well entrenched in their feelings about school choice forcefully advocating that Illinois opt out altogether or stridently declaring that we’d be stupid not to take the free money. (For example, numerous organizations sent a letter to Governor Pritzker encouraging opt out, while Comptroller Mendoza editorialized in favor, four Democratic Governors are on the record saying they will not participate, while one Democrat and all Republican Governors have opted in, and a non-binding ballot question organized by the Illinois Policy Institute in numerous Illinois counties passed favorably in the March primary.)

What I see is a whole lot of gray area and questions. To be sure, this isn’t the kind of program I would have designed or supported if my goal was to improve educational outcomes and opportunities for the kids left furthest behind in the current system. Looking at the federal law, there are no restrictions on the quality of the programs, requirements for measurement of results, provisions against discrimination of who enrolls, or attempts to balance where scholarships are awarded to enhance equity. Upper-middle class students are just as eligible for scholarships as the most impoverished students.

But the fact is that the program exists. Illinois taxpayers are eligible for the tax credit whether or not Illinois opts in for our students to receive scholarships. There is no impact on state revenues. The federal coffers have potential to take a big hit, and it’s anyone’s guess whether that will result in lower allocations to public education in future years vs. getting added to a growing deficit vs. spending on military, Medicaid, SNAP, or other programs – but again, Illinois taxpayers will still be

able to donate – at no cost to themselves – to scholarship programs in Indiana or Iowa whether or not we participate.

Governors essentially have the unilateral power to identify SGOs; there’s no need for legislation, consensus from education agencies, or anyone else. OBBBA requires SGOs to be non-profit organizations that spend at least 90% of funds on scholarships, grant scholarships to more than one school, and verify that family income is less than 300% of the area median income (which is about \$360,000 for a family of 4 in the Chicago area).

A lot of the questions about the program will come down to the federal regulations, which the Treasury Department is expected to adopt around June. So far, it looks like many types of scholarships would qualify – tuition to private schools; tutoring, afterschool programs, and summer camp for students in public schools; career development and workforce training for high schoolers; extracurricular activities; and probably lots of other things I’m not thinking of yet, among a broad ecosystem of programs. The key is that there must be a non-profit set up to administer the scholarship.

The main question on my mind isn’t what can be funded, so much as it is what can be blocked from funding. How much power will governors have to pick and choose who gets on their list? The jury is still out on that.



What are the pros of opting in?

In an era of unprecedented federal actions against public education, this could be an opportunity to boost funding and open doors for students. Every public school, after-school program, park district, and tutoring provider could choose to partner with a nonprofit that meets the criteria to qualify as an SGO, widely disseminate information to their constituents to raise funds, cast a wide net to reach the neediest populations of students, and provide opportunities for students who otherwise couldn’t

afford them for tutoring, enrichment, and summer camp. Even better, statewide nonprofits could intentionally organize to fundraise from the areas of the state that have the most income and award scholarships in areas with the least resources – mitigating the inequities that would be likely if left to local nonprofits raising and gifting in wealthy areas and leaving poorer regions without scholarships.

Regardless of federal regulations, this scenario could happen. But it would strongly depend on intentionality in the creation and promotion of SGOs that prioritize equitable opportunities for public school students.

If federal regulations allow, the state could also add more guardrails: lower income thresholds for scholarship recipients; a prohibition on scholarships to entities that discriminate based on disability, sexual orientation, or religion; and a requirement that schools accepting scholarships release some kind of audit and report on program effectiveness.

And more importantly, Illinois taxpayers still qualify for the tax credit regardless of whether Illinois participates. If Illinois doesn’t opt in, our neighbors who have already opted in (Indiana, Iowa, and Missouri) will market to Illinoisans to donate across the border, as will states across the country.



What’s the case for opting out?

Even in the best-case scenario, unless federal regulations allow states to impose further guardrails, the majority of scholarships are likely to go to private schools. That could have some negative repercussions if lots of bright students leave their public schools, courted by private schools. (Some research on similar programs shows a lot of scholarships go to students who are already in these schools, in which case, it seems the impact on the public school might not be so dramatic.)

If scholarships do indeed drain public schools of significant students, Evidence-Based Funding (EBF) will reflect the decreased enrollment, the school will be closer to its adequacy target, and its funding could be impacted. However, it’s highly unlikely the state will discontinue its promise of allocating \$300 million to EBF, so the same amount of state funding should continue going to schools. Still, if students going to private schools are concentrated in particular districts, those schools could net a smaller increase from EBF tier money.

At the macro-level, there’s no direct connection between the drain on federal resources through the tax credit and the federal education budget. But it wouldn’t be a surprising leap to see a justification for a budget decrease if the tax credit generates significant funds for scholarships. Whether or not Illinois participates, this scenario could happen – though if fewer states participate and fewer people are persuaded to take the credit, the total hole in federal tax receipts would be lower.

So where does this leave us? My personal conclusion is that I’m not comfortable leaving the gray area until the federal regulations are unveiled. There are bills pending requiring Illinois to opt in and others requiring opt out. It doesn’t seem like the right time for any of them... yet. I think Governor Pritzker has the right idea: wait to see the fine print before we get in over our heads.

This section was written by Jessica Handy, Executive Director of Stand for Children Illinois, and adapted from her March 2026 blog post.

Literacy & Justice for All



WHAT'S THE STATE OF LITERACY IN ILLINOIS?

- ▶ Illinois is in the middle of the pack nationally. Our 8th graders rank 26th on the national report card for English Language Arts.
- ▶ Our overall reading scores are slightly above the national average.
- ▶ Illinois was identified as one of three states to recover our pandemic era learning loss.

HOWEVER...

- ▶ Even with Illinois's recently-changed cut scores on our standardized test, about half of Illinois students are not proficient readers.
- ▶ 41% of Illinois 4th graders cannot even read at a "Basic" level on the National report card.
- ▶ Illinois's opportunity gaps are some of the highest in the country.

What Has Illinois Done Recently to Improve Literacy Outcomes?

ISBE developed a statewide comprehensive literacy plan in January 2024 and supporting tools, including a curriculum rubric, training modules, and a local literacy plan template (SB 2243 (Lightford/Mayfield)). The plan is optional for school districts, but subsequent legislation required turnaround providers working with the lowest-performing schools (HB 4902 (Faver Dias/Lightford)) and ISBE-approved professional development providers (HB 1368 (Faver Dias/Lightford)) to align their support with the plan.

SB 2243 also required ISBE to reform their assessment for the grade 1 – 6 educator license to include sufficient items to produce a literacy subscore. The pass rate for the literacy portion of the assessment will be publicly reported for each educator prep program beginning next year.

Though Illinois is still one of the few states without mandatory early literacy screeners, SB 1672 (Belt/Mussman) requires school districts to report what screeners are used by 2027.

Several budget items and ISBE expenditures have also supported literacy in recent years, including \$1.5 million for implementation of the literacy plan, \$3.5 million for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, and annual increases of about \$75 million for the Early Childhood Block



Grant and \$350 million for Evidence-Based Funding. ISBE added investments of ESSER funds to support six tutoring hubs across the state and instructional coaching services through Regional Offices of Education (ROEs).

What Can We Learn from Other States?

Check out the April 10 episode of The Daily (a podcast of the New York Times) about "The Mississippi Miracle," which chronicles Mississippi's historic rise from 49th in the nation in literacy to the top ten!

Many states have taken heavier-handed approaches to literacy reform than Illinois, though not all have seen the results they wanted. But many experts have noticed a recent "Southern surge." Mississippi is the most noteworthy of these outliers, having risen from 49th in the country to the top ten. Successful states seem to have in common that they pursue multiple, coordinated strands that work in concert with each other to maximize outcomes. These include: Educator Preparation Program alignment; research-based teacher training; job-embedded literacy coaching for teachers; high-quality instructional materials; and individualized student supports to meet the needs of struggling readers. Importantly, these strands of work are overseen by strong state-level literacy leaders and dedicated funding.

Where Should Illinois Invest to Improve Literacy?

High-quality, job-embedded literacy coaching is among the most effective interventions to support improved student literacy outcomes; however, the structure of coaching must be aligned with research. Effective coaching focuses on specific research-supported practices, incorporates active learning, invests in in-classroom

support, offers teachers feedback and dedicated time to reflect on their practice, provides teachers with models of effective practice, and occurs over an extended period of time. But some coaching models are not effective, like those models that focus only on building teachers' content knowledge or strategies not supported by research, long lectures that are disconnected from classrooms and students, or PD day schedules with no provisions to apply learning.

Stand believes that among the most effective investments Illinois can make would be the creation of regional instructional coaching hubs. Funding could be allocated to each Regional Office of Education, Intermediate Service Center, and Chicago Public Schools to hire at least one literacy coach, with additional resources to those offices serving regions with the highest numbers of students in the lowest proficiency range. This system depends on having dedicated staff at the State Board of Education to support these coaches with centralized training and oversight aligned with the literacy plan and statewide networking.

An appropriation of \$10 million could fund coaches for each ROE, ISC, and CPS, with an additional 35 coaches for the neediest regions and state support infrastructure to manage the network.

The Illinois Early Literacy Coalition has proposed an additional \$60 million in targeted investments to support Educator Preparation Program reauthorization audits, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support assistance for school districts, and Early Literacy Grants for evidence-based literacy reforms for districts with high-quality local literacy plans adopted.

BUDGET PRIORITIES

May is here, and with it, billions of dollars of funding requests as the legislature works to wrap up their budget negotiations by the end of the month. Here are some critical education priorities:

EVIDENCE-BASED FUNDING. +\$450 MILLION.

The Evidence-Based Funding (EBF) law establishes a "Minimum Funding Level" of an additional \$350 million each year, \$300 million of which is distributed based on the EBF "tiers" and the remaining \$50 million for property tax relief grants. At this rate, a student entering kindergarten will graduate high school before the system is fully funded. \$450 million expedites the path to full funding at a time when 80% of Illinois' students still attend underfunded schools.

MANDATED CATEGORICALS. +\$100 MILLION.

The so-called "MCATs" fund transportation, special education, and other required programs. Continued underfunding of MCATs consistently undermines EBF, which does not take these particular programs into account when calculating adequacy targets.

LITERACY FUNDING. +\$10 MILLION.

Despite the Comprehensive Statewide Literacy Plan's implementation being the #1 academic priority for ISBE, it received just \$1.5 million last year. States that have seen the most literacy progress have coordinated multiple strands of work – including educator preparation, teacher training, curriculum, and screening – with dedicated funding for evidence-based strategies to improve outcomes. (See page x for more on literacy investments.)

CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION. +\$5.9 MILLION.

The demand for modernized Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs is consistent, bipartisan, and common sense. Over 80% of the public supports increased CTE investment, making this the most popular program among numerous also-popular college and career training investments polled. \$5.9 million would provide a 10% boost to the CTE allocation. At a minimum, \$1.3 million is needed to phase in the next increment of the improved CTE funding formula without creating winners and losers.



Role at Stand: Marketing & Communications Manager
Hometown: Oak Park, IL
Education: Illinois College – Political Science & International Studies
Currently Reading: Working on Me by Nikki Patin
Favorite Teacher: Ms. Glick was my favorite ESL teacher! She always made me feel excited and ready to learn.
Favorite Subject in School: I always enjoyed all types of artistic and creative classes in school! Some of my favorite classes include ceramics, photography, and guitar classes.
Why Stand for Children? I'm excited to begin advocacy work surrounding education. My family moved to the US, hoping to give my brother and me access to education and strong careers. I strongly believe all children, regardless of immigration status, should have access to adequate public education.



SIGN UP FOR OUR EMAIL LIST
 to receive the latest education advocacy updates in Illinois!



FOR YOUR CONSTITUENTS:
 Share a paid fellowship opportunity with a CTE student in your district!!



SUMMER LITERACY SUMMIT INVITATION:
 If you have literacy advocate parents in your district, pass along this invitation to join our coalition!



Stand for Children Illinois
 @StandIllinois
 @IllinoisStand

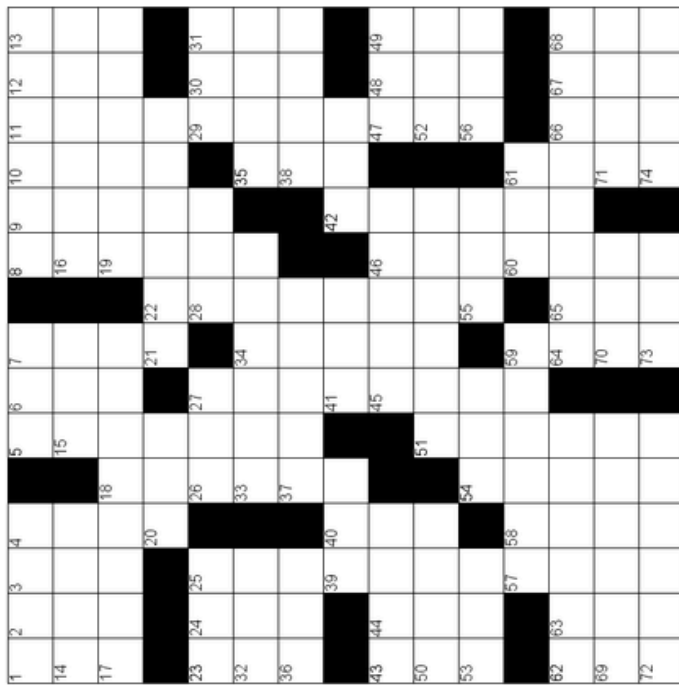
ABOUT STAND FOR CHILDREN

Stand for Children is a unique catalyst for educational success and social progress, to create a brighter future for us all.

STAND'S LEGISLATIVE TEAM

AIMEE GALVIN agalvin@stand.org (815) 341-3471
 WILL COUSINEAU wcousineau@cgagroup.com (217) 502-9991
 LIZ BROWN-REEVES liz.brown@gmail.com (217) 502-3703

CROSSWORD: SYMBOLICALLY ILLINOIS



- ACROSS**
- South Asian garment
 - Web addy
 - Soaked
 - In business
 - New prefix
 - One of a kind
 - *Illinois MUSHROOM
 - Decline
 - Petroleum
 - Bedelia of children's books
 - Domestic national law enf. agy.
 - Workplc. safety field
 - Ideological suffix
 - Meas. of profit
 - Cheerios grain
 - Hunts
 - Waistband
 - Airport stat
 - Fictional baby-bringer
 - Sums
 - Reclined
 - Pledge
 - Nurse asst.
 - Similar
 - Laxative alternative
 - Yield
 - Without ice
 - Encourage
 - CEO's colleague
 - Quaint hotel
 - The ____ (soulmate)
 - Forensics subj.
 - Snail mail equiv. of attachment
 - Goatee, mutton chops, and chin strap
 - Limb
 - Satisfy
 - *Illinois BIRD
 - Vomiting
 - The ____ of the moral universe...
 - Back of the neck
 - Infiltrate with bugs
 - To an extreme degree
 - Ogled

- DOWN**
- Steep in juice
 - Kwik-E-Mart proprietor
 - Excel error code or sports ofcl.
 - Intel.
 - Drowsy
 - Sis, bro, or cous
 - Copacabana showgirl
 - Pressure
 - Nightmare ____ Street
 - Mech. to connect to network
 - *Illinois DANCE
 - Grp inc. France, Spain, Germany, etc. (pl)
 - Snider, Winters, or Reynolds
 - Test of a small tissue sample
 - *Illinois WILDFLOWER
 - Enemy
 - Flying mammal
 - *Illinois SANDWICH - maybe soon!
 - Vacuumed (in Britain)
 - Ancient
 - ____ A Wonderful Life
 - Incorrect
 - Prohibit
 - Picnic insect
 - False report or rumor
 - Singer DiFranco
 - Barbie beau
 - *Illinois BUTTERFLY
 - Ages
 - List of book pg #s
 - Agitation
 - Driving stop above IL highway
 - Simplicity
 - Review
 - Coal excavation site
 - ____ Wei Asian Kitchen
 - JK ____ OP
 - Painting, dance, or music
 - A vote against
 - Mimic
 - Guided