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PUBLIC SCHOOLS COULD BENEFIT BIG FROM TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIPS

IT WILL TAKE FORETHOUGHT AND INTENTIONALITY TO MAKE THE PROGRAM WORK FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL KIDS

Democrat-led states across the country are grappling with one big bewildering question: should we opt in to the Federal Tax Credit Scholarship Program (FTCS)? On the one hand, it is a flawed federal law that was not designed to maximize equity and public schools. But on the other hand, it is already the law and every taxpayer, regardless of whether our state opts in, already qualifies for the tax credit. Nothing Illinois does will change whether Illinois taxpayers qualify for the credit; the only thing we can do is decide whether Illinois students will have access to scholarships.

Stand convened a working group to dig into the policy and adopt a recommendation for our state. **Our consensus? Illinois should opt in.**



And we should be intentional about prioritizing public schools and underserved students as we think about implementation.

Perhaps you’re thinking that this sounds like Invest in Kids. Both of them are tax credits to fund scholarships, but there are major differences. For one, Invest in Kids only supported private schools. The FTCS supports a broad ecosystem of schools – public and private. While Invest

in Kids offered a tax credit for up to \$1 million in donations per donor, the FTCS is a \$1,700 credit; it will generate scholarships only if a large volume of middle class people choose to donate. **If 30% of eligible Illinois taxpayers donate, Illinois would see nearly \$2 billion in funding.**



The most compelling reason to opt in is simple: Illinois taxpayers can send their “donation” (at no cost to themselves) to a scholarship fund anywhere in the country. If Illinois does not participate, other states will reap the benefits, recruiting Illinoisans to donate to programs in our neighboring states. But that is not the *only* reason to participate. There is tremendous potential to raise significant funds to support tutoring, enrichment, dual credit, workforce development programs, and after-school activities in public schools.

Equitable implementation and access for public school students comes down to the question of “Scholarship Granting Organizations” (SGOs), which are the vehicle to receive donations and issue scholarships. SGOs hold the key to the castle. Private schools have SGOs that have operated

in Illinois, but public schools will need to identify SGOs as partners. Several promising multi-state SGOs are already hard at work, including Education Superhighway, which will fund high dosage literacy tutoring for public school first graders who are behind in reading. Other public schools are looking to their education foundations as potential SGOs. In a well-designed program, communities could come together to support their public schools with scholarships as school staff, city employees, and large employers systematize payroll deductions for taxpayers who choose to participate, automatically funneling donations to a partner SGO supporting the local schools.

We supported Governor Pritzker’s decision to wait for the federal regulations to come out before opting Illinois in. That seems like wise policy. Unfortunately, those regulations, which we expected to see in June, are now likely to come in September. If Illinois is truly going to make this as accessible as possible for public school students, we have to work on standing up SGOs with that mission. That takes time. And time is ticking. So, we think it is time to move it along—opt Illinois in and get to work prioritizing public school access!

|                                    | INVEST IN KIDS                               | FEDERAL TAX SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM                                    |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| TYPES OF SCHOLARSHIPS              | Only for private schools                     | Eligible for private, public, after-school, camps, extracurricular |
| FAMILY INCOME LIMITS FOR STUDENTS  | 300% FPL (about \$100k family income)        | 300% AMI (about \$360k family income)                              |
| TAX CREDIT PER TAXPAYER            | 75% credit up to \$1 million                 | 100% credit up to \$1,700                                          |
| PROGRAM COST                       | Cannot exceed \$75 million                   | No upper limit                                                     |
| SCHOLARSHIP GRANTING ORGANIZATIONS | 8 SGPs in IL awarded 10k annual scholarships | Many SGOs expected; can be national/multi-state                    |

# HIGH SCHOOL READINESS: PREPARED FOR LIFE

High school should prepare students for life after graduation—whether that’s attending a 4-year university, enrolling in an apprenticeship program, or earning a credential through a community college.

But we know that life after graduation is rarely linear for any of us and students’ post-graduation paths may take them in and out of the workplace as they pursue additional certifications or change industries.

Yet, both the data we collect to mark success and the requirements we set to graduate all put an out-sized focus on one path: university enrollment.

While Illinois should continue to make it easier for students to access college, the high school experience should be as unique and diverse as Illinois’ students and the futures they choose.

## LIFE ISN'T LINEAR



## RETHINKING POST-GRADUATION READINESS

There is mounting evidence that the traditional high school experience is falling flat with Illinois teens.

Chronic absenteeism is stubbornly high for all grades, but particularly problematic in high school. Statewide, nearly half of all seniors are chronically absent, meaning they are missing 10% or more of school days. (Illinois Report Card)

Chronic absenteeism is a worsening problem for many Illinois subgroups,

particularly students of color and students from low-income households. Layering these statewide findings with national research that tell us students who are more engaged in the classroom are significantly more likely to feel prepared for and optimistic about their futures and less likely to be chronically absent from school (Walton Family Foundation-Gallup 2025).

This new generation of students are excited to explore career paths that are

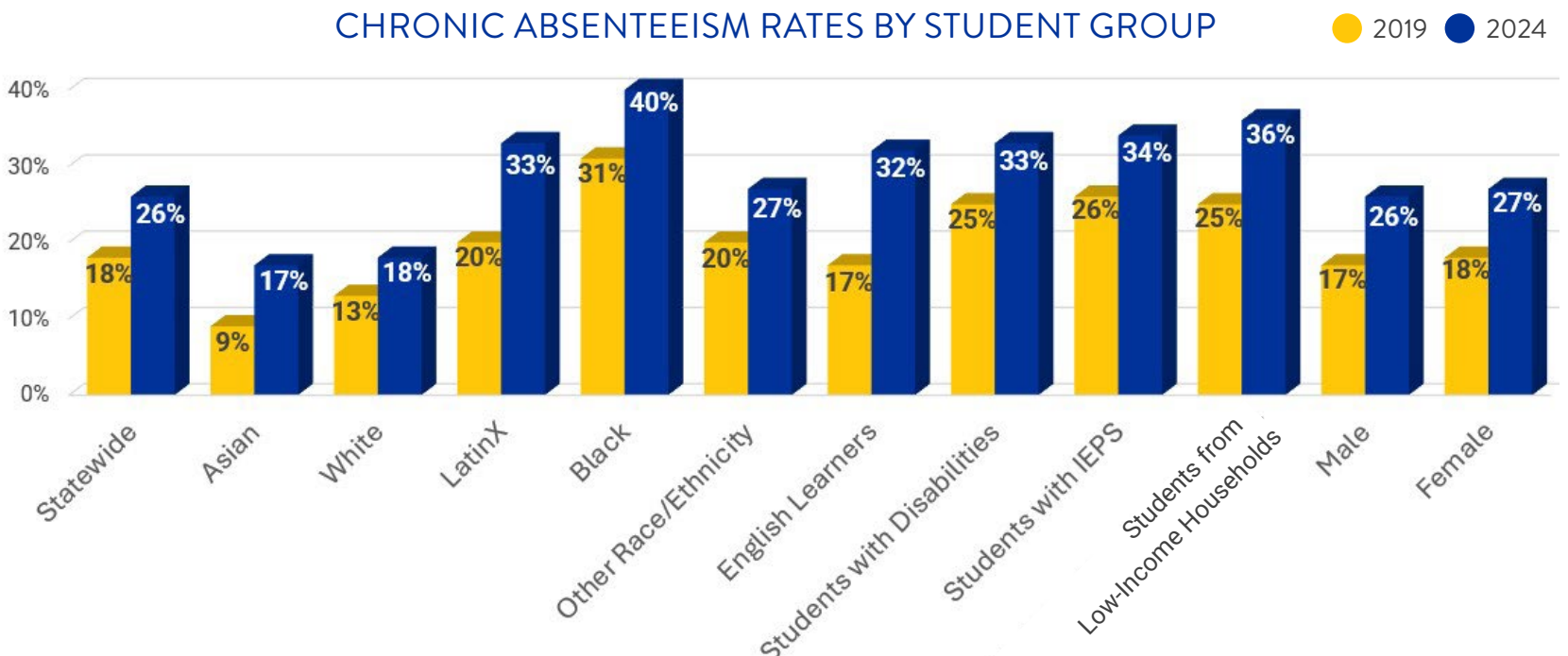
more likely to take them to trade school than university. The number of students at public, two-year schools that focus on vocational and trade programs grew by nearly 20 percent from 2020 to 2025 (National Student Clearinghouse 2025).

Illinois high school graduation requirements prioritize coursework designed for 4-year college admissions but offer very little flexibility for high-quality experiences like apprenticeships and career

and technical education (CTE) courses.

CTE courses have come a long way from the traditional shop and culinary classes you may remember from high school. Today, CTE courses connect students with local employers through internships, offer hands-on learning through state-of-the-art facilities, and empower students to earn employer-recognized credentials while graduating high school.

## CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES BY STUDENT GROUP



Source: ISBE Report Card 2019, 2024 | Note: In 2018 and 2019, chronic absenteeism held at 15% nationally. By 2022 chronic absenteeism exceeded 28%, 89% higher than the average rate three years earlier.

# HIGH-QUALITY CTE COURSES DO

## 3 POWERFUL THINGS FOR STUDENTS:



### 1 Connects students to employers for networking and mentoring and to develop soft skills.

A 2023 survey found that only 13% of teens felt that they had the resources they needed to fully prepare them for life after graduation ([ECMC Group 2023](#)). Connecting students with employers not only give them a window into their future careers but also offers mentorship opportunities and career exploration—two critical resources to help students envision a future beyond the experience of their neighborhood or families.



### 2 Provides value immediately upon graduation.

The best CTE programs align with industry standards and postsecondary coursework so young people can fluidly move from the workforce to postsecondary education and back again as they level up their skills or transition industries. Many CTE programs serve as a map for life after graduation by loading students up with pre-requisites for postsecondary coursework, early college credit, and offers career exploration across an industry so students can envision themselves in multiple jobs within an industry instead of pigeonholing them in entry level positions.



### 3 Embeds essential academic competencies in career-centric coursework that aligns with student's interests.

CTE is no longer just for skilled trades. Outstanding CTE programs in computer science, engineering, and healthcare use industry-professional instructors to teach students foundational skills through hands-on learning, team-based challenges, and technical applications. These 21st Century CTE programs prepare students for both the rigors of college while offering career exploration, unlike traditional coursework. A future doctor will find CTE coursework as valuable as the future certified nurse assistant.

But CTE opportunities remain sidelined as students struggle to fit CTE course sequences into schedules revolving around the state's high school graduation requirements. Gone are the days of single semester CTE courses. Today, most CTE courses are one of a sequence that may require two (or more) years to complete and typically involve traveling off campus to work directly with employers or learn at separate facility. And of

course, all of this requires funding. In FY26, the state allocated \$51M in CTE funds, which amounted to an average of \$70 per high school student—not nearly enough to fully support these programs. Of course, a lack of state funding means a lack of equitable access as high-income districts use local resources to expand CTE opportunities for students, low-income communities struggle to re-envision outdated legacy programs or introduce

new industries, like energy, that may not have existed decades before. Finally, our data systems allow for one measure of student success: college enrollment. If we only offer one measure of success it's no wonder that's where schools are putting their efforts. Collecting and reporting on data that showed job placement rate or secondary credential attainment could help schools define new measures of success and build programs to help them achieve.

Illinois has an opportunity to redefine what it means for students to be ready for life after high school. By modernizing graduation requirements, investing in high-quality CTE programs, and measuring success through multiple postsecondary pathways—not just college enrollment—we can create a system that prepares every student for the future they choose, not just the one we've traditionally expected.



Earlier this summer, we began a fellowship for high school students to explore and learn about the impact of having access to career exploration programs in high school. While our fellows learned about the importance of advocacy, the power of storytelling, and how the education system impacts their high school experience, we learned about their goals and who supported them through the process of finding a career pathway after graduation.

Their stories are unique and diverse, but they all showcase a student's need to have a support system to achieve their goals. These students relied on counselors, mentors, college & career

centers, teachers, and family members to support them in the career exploration process. Our students made the most of their high school experience, but they did not all have access to the same resources. What if all Illinois students could have access to the same career exploration resources? In a state where most high school graduating seniors do not attend a 4-year university within 12 months of graduation, we need to ensure all students are receiving adequate support in career exploration whether their next step takes them to university, community college, career training, or the workforce. We are proud that our fellows became a part of our advocacy work in high school success.



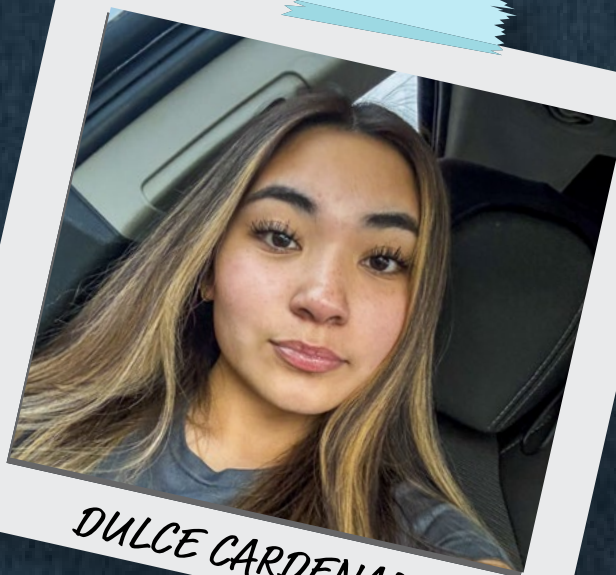


TRAVON ANDERSON



"How I got introduced to CTE was through my school's career days... I want to be an HVAC tech and probably do residential."

During high school, Travon felt unsure of what he wanted to do after graduation. As a senior, he tried some classes that interested him, and his brother-in-law connected him to Developing Our Youth, a community organization helping students in his area explore career options. While getting a haircut, his barber mentioned HVAC as a reliable career option. Travon has decided to pursue a career as an HVAC technician, and is looking forward to working on getting his OSHA certification. He is thankful to have the support of his sister and his mom throughout the career exploration process.



DULCE CARDENAS



"When I moved to Illinois, everybody wanted to help... While at my old school, I felt like I was kind of alone. No one was there to tell me what to do, or what I can do [after graduation]."

Dulce moved from a small town out-of-state to a big school in IL during her freshman year. That is when she noticed nearly all of her peers already had a career plan for after graduation. Her school district begins career exploration for students in middle school. By the time students get to high school, many of them have already chosen a career path.

While she felt behind, she always knew she was interested in the medical field. Through the HOSA program in her school, she was able to take multiple AP/dual credit classes, and programs to explore a career in the medical field. She has decided to pursue a career as a radiology nurse and is thankful to have the support from her teacher at the HOSA program.



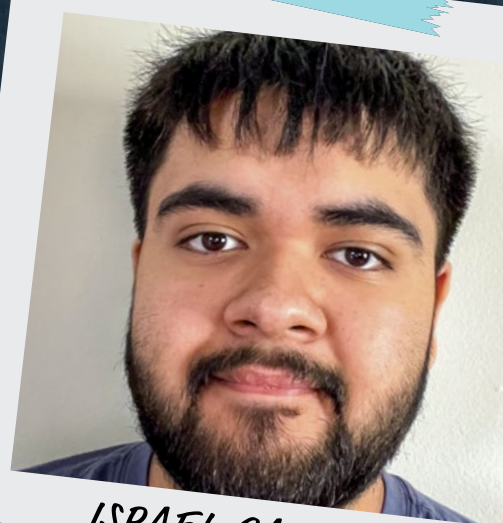
KAILANI FISH

“My teachers who have supported me so much... They helped me and made me feel seen and cared for, and I realized that’s the impact I want to have.”

Kailani began exploring different career options in high school when she was connected to various CTE and Dual Credit classes. She followed her interest in working with children and discovered she wanted to be an elementary school teacher. Through her courses, she learned about early childhood education and gained work-based experience working with teachers in their classrooms.

She will take her class credits and clinical hours with her to a community college in the fall. She is passionate about advocating for CTE and Dual Credit courses being available to students, because she has seen the impact it made for her and her peers. She is thankful to have the support from her high school teachers during this career exploration process.

“My sophomore year I started taking intro to coding and I really enjoyed it, so I continued on that pathway. My senior year, the CCRC program helped me get an internship in IT for a park district in Aurora... that’s when I knew this is something I want to do as a career.”



ISRAEL GARCIA

Israel began taking CTE classes after connecting with his school’s College & Career Readiness Center (CCRC). He had the opportunity to try a variety of career exploration classes and enjoyed computer science the most. CCRC helped him get an internship with his district’s IT department. He is excited to pursue a career in cyber security, and continue his education in computer science. He is thankful to have the support from CCRC, and his internship supervisor and coworkers during his career exploration journey.



"Through this opportunity, I hope to expand my understanding of the Illinois education system. I plan to share my experiences and understanding to better support Illinois students accurately."



GRACE LAUBSCHER

Grace began exploring different career paths as a freshman. She has been able to take advantage of multiple dual credit classes, CTE classes, and hands-on learning experiences. After these diverse experiences, she discovered her love for education and will pursue a career as a middle school math & science teacher. She has become a leader in her school through multiple clubs, and an advocate for education. Grace encourages all high school students to take advantage of any opportunity and try new things because you never know what you will discover.



"I talked to my college and career center... they connected me with an internship... and I think that's what pushed me to go to college for civil engineering"



KHUSHI PATEL

Khushi began exploring engineering classes at her high school and discovered she wanted to pursue it as a career. When she was connected to her school's college and career center, she took advantage of their internship program. She worked with two engineering companies as an intern and gained valuable professional work experience. She is excited to study civil engineering in college and is thankful for having the support of her college and career counselor in this process.



REGINALD (REGGIE) POSTLEWAITE

“When I started playing basketball and making more friends, I started getting comfortable... [My friends and I] had the same goals in the classroom and on the basketball court... It made it easier for us to push each other to complete our goals.”

As a freshman, Reggie felt nervous and a bit lost in a new school. Basketball helped him connect with his teammates and support each other in achieving their goals. They focused on working together as a team and winning games while focusing on school and getting straight 'A's. Reggie enjoyed his computer science class and decided to pursue it as a career. He is excited to continue basketball in college and pursue a career in computer science. He is thankful to have support from his mom throughout his academic and career exploration journey.



BIANCA WOJNOWSKA

“As I saw through my internship at the law firm, alot of people in this community are struggling... and that makes me passionate to go into the field of law and get people the representation they need.”

As a freshman, Bianca began exploring careers through her high school classes and she enjoyed her Law class the most. She joined her school's mock trial team and internship program. She was able to intern at a law firm and legal aid clinic. Her internship experiences allowed her to explore the impact of law and how she could support her community by representing people who need it the most. She is grateful to have participated in the internship program and have an internship coordinator who has connected her with many opportunities. She is looking forward to pursuing a career as a lawyer.

# IMPLEMENTING PHONE-FREE SCHOOLS



From left to right: Aimee Galvin, Jessica Handy, Rep. Michelle Mussman, Rep. Justin Slaughter, Rep. Anna Moeller

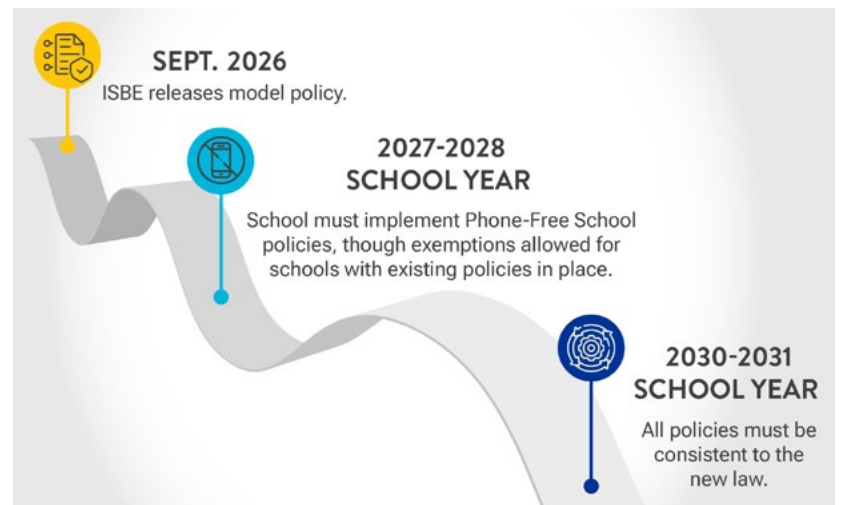


Front row from left to right: Elgin H.S. student, Gov. Pritzker, Sen. Cristina Castro, Rep. Michelle Mussman, Rep. Anna Moeller, Elgin H.S. student, Elgin H.S. student

In a divisive climate, it was especially encouraging to see the overwhelming bipartisan support in the legislature for the Phone-Free Schools bill, which Governor Pritzker signed last month with legislative champions Senator Castro and Representatives Mussman, Slaughter, and Moeller.

But the work is not done yet! The next step? **Implementation.**

The biggest implementation question revolves around high school lunch and passing periods. Elementary and middle schools must have phone-free policies from the first bell of the day to the last bell of the day, called a “bell-to-bell” policy. But high schools will be able to make exceptions to allow students to have their phones in school outside of instructional time.



WE WOULD ENCOURAGE HIGH SCHOOLS TO STICK WITH THE FULL BELL-TO-BELL BAN.

HERE ARE **3** REASONS WHY:



- 1 Students deserve human interaction and social connections.** We recently talked to an employer group about skills gaps in math and literacy and were surprised to hear their response: the even bigger barrier is customer service skills. Simply being able to carry on an in-person conversation has become a challenge in the digital age. Phones have been replaced in lunch rooms with playing cards, board games, conversation, laughter, and camaraderie.



- 2 Teacher satisfaction is higher with centralized storage.** When every class period starts with confiscating phones or relies on students to keep their phones out of sight, we keep teachers in the role of policing cell phones instead of freeing them of the classroom management burden cell phones create.



- 3 We minimize discipline disparities when we take away the temptation.** One of the strongest points of Illinois's cell phone law is its intentional focus on restorative justice and equitable discipline. When phones are away for the day – safely stored and not within arms' reach for students, the strong temptation to peek at the phone goes away. But with policy allowing students to whip out their phones between every class, they are never far from mind, and there are infinite opportunities to break the rule. And with every cell phone infraction, there is another opportunity for a student to get in trouble, and therefore, opportunities for disparities in enforcement of consequences.



We have created an [Illinois Implementation Guide](#) for our new Phone-Free Schools law, available for anyone to read and advocate for best practices in implementation.

Scan this QR code to see our resources!

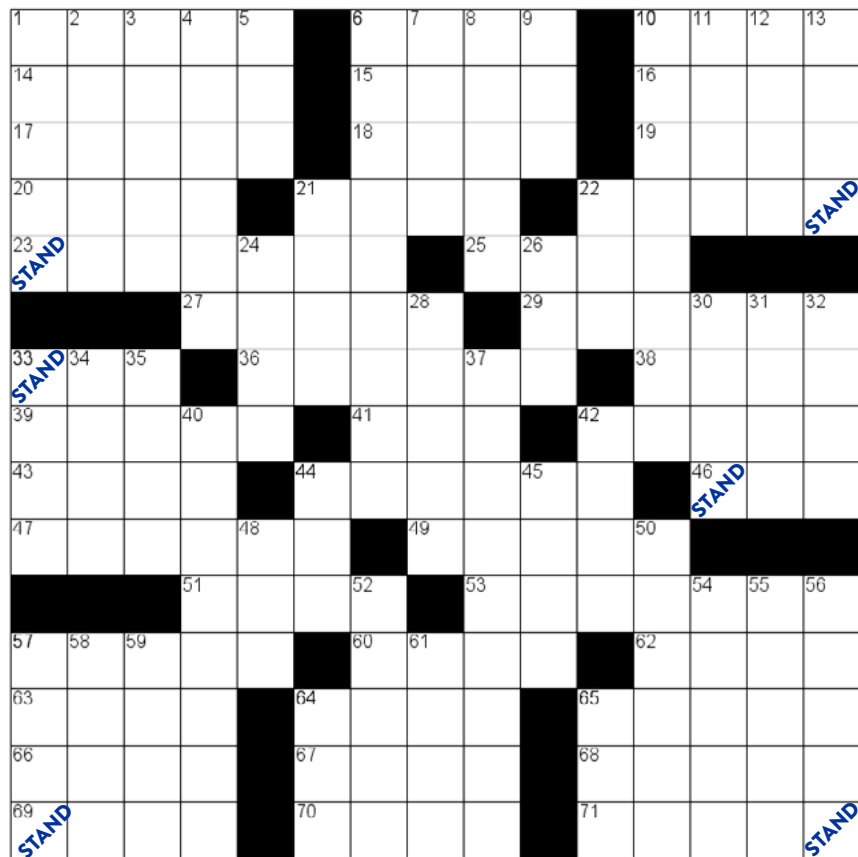
# CROSSWORD: **STANDING** FOR CHILDREN

## ACROSS

1. Wifey's spouse
6. Yellow Teletubby
10. Healing wound
14. Boomer's video game
15. Eye part
16. Great lake
17. Cover a 2Pac hit?
18. Opals and diamonds
19. Solder
20. Feel lethargic
21. Whale pursuer
22. \*This "publication"
23. Wearing bold clothing, maybe
25. Stinkiness
27. Spun farfetched stories
29. Cracker for s'mores
33. \*Volunteer
36. Catholicism and Judaism
38. Fundraiser reception
39. Opera parts
41. Long or Odeoti-Hassan
42. Discourage
43. Coral formation
44. Light
46. \*Be on call
47. Sudan region
49. \_\_\_\_ la la la la la la
51. Genetic info carriers
53. Food for Popeye
57. Delight
60. Successful songs
62. Adhesive
63. Person, place, thing, or idea
64. Not one
65. Small crisp toast type
66. Darn
67. Type of test or hygiene
68. Wooed
69. \*Substitutes
70. Hackman or Wilder
71. \*An inverted vertical position

## DOWN

1. \*A definitive stance



2. Wombs
3. \_\_\_\_ Al-Hashimi (The Pitt)
4. Boastful
5. A sharp bark
6. \_\_\_\_ never strikes twice
7. Region
8. Purgatory
9. Donkey
10. Wastewater infrastructure
11. Team
12. Bothers
13. \*Lamp, book, and charger locale
21. Atmosphere
22. Conjunction with "neither"
24. Buffoons
26. Cheap retail store (abbrev.)
28. Short period
30. \*Coatrack
31. Maybe the winner of blind beer taste test
32. Lamb owner
33. \*Customary, normal
34. Fertilizer and skin care ingredient
35. Dock
37. Bob, bouffant, or braids
40. Displays of disrespect
42. Meat counter
44. Nest egg
45. Faucets
48. College
50. Merkel or Lansbury
52. Use jointly
54. Bet the rest of one's chips, with "go"
55. Taken to the third power
56. \*Like 71-across, with one more point of contact
57. \*Table beside the sofa
58. Seaweed
59. Peron, Gabriel, or Soto
61. If \_\_\_\_ the Zoo
64. Sweet egg beverage
65. Hwy signage

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for children



Stand for Children Illinois



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@IllinoisStand



[stand.org/Illinois](http://stand.org/Illinois)

## ABOUT STAND FOR CHILDREN

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

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