

Chicago Tribune

Advancing education

Editorial

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Illinois has been so caught up in crisis management of the state budget this year that it has largely neglected other essentials, such as the need for radical changes in how our public schools educate children. We can't lose sight of that.

Yes, there have been some important changes in education this year. State legislators voted to double the number of charter schools permitted in Illinois, from 60 to 120. (Why is there any Springfield-mandated limit? Because teachers unions, which want to hamstring charters, are a strong lobby.) And the state is also about to embark on an ambitious longitudinal data collection system to track student progress (or lack of it).

But lawmakers and schools have to be pushed to do much more.

We're glad to see a relatively new group, Advance Illinois, take up this cause. We were glad to see Advance Illinois is led by a couple of heavy-hitters, former Gov. Jim Edgar and former U.S. Commerce Secretary Bill Daley. And it's supported by the Joyce Foundation. That should help the group get some attention and have staying power.

Here's something that also should get some attention: Advance Illinois' reports on just how miserably our public education system is failing to prepare our children.

-- Only one of every four kids in this state who enters high school will graduate ready for college or a meaningful job.

-- Only 55 percent of high school grads even start college. (That's based on the class of 2006.) New York, which leads the U.S. in this crucial measure of school success, sends 73 percent of its kids to college.

-- Only 36 percent of Illinoisans over the age of 25 have an associate degree or higher. In Massachusetts, 45 percent of residents have at least finished community college.

Said Advance Illinois in its initial report: "This generation of young people is on track to be less-educated than their parents -- for the first time in American history."

So what are we going to do about that?

Advance Illinois offers good ideas, many of which this page long has supported.

Some of its proposals:

-- Properly evaluate teachers on their performance in the classroom before granting tenure. Tenure needs to be earned, not granted as a matter of course after three years. (We question why elementary and secondary education should even have a tenure system.)

-- Make sure teacher evaluations are thorough and instructive. In Chicago, 93 percent of public school teachers who were evaluated from 2003 to 2006 received ratings of "excellent" or "superior."

-- Change criteria for pay increases. Illinois districts now spend more than \$400 million per year to bump up the pay of teachers who complete master's degrees or advanced course work. Those credentials don't necessarily produce better-educated kids. That money should instead be spent on those teachers whose students show significant academic improvement.

-- Give principals enough flexibility in programming, scheduling and staffing to build the best possible schools. Flexibility is especially crucial for principals who head schools on the state's academic watch list. That list is made up of schools that have gone four consecutive years without showing adequate yearly progress in meeting performance targets in reading and math. In order to turn those schools around, principals need to be able to hire, fire and transfer teachers as they see fit -- without being bound by seniority rules.

It's good to see Advance Illinois join the fight. This state has a budget crisis to fix. But it has an education crisis too.