The history of public education reform efforts in Illinois reads like a never-ending story. As the decades pass, the already complicated relationships grow more complex, challenges arise, ideas are born, perceptions are changed, alliances are forged, goals are achieved, and challenges arise again. One of the major lessons that we have learned is that there will always be challenges. How could it be otherwise when we are always striving to provide a better education for our students? But by establishing a common goal for the future of education, keeping our focus on this goal, and working together to meet our goal, we can keep making progress. The story of reform will go on forever; so too can our successes.

One significant milestone in Illinois’s education reform efforts is the collaboration now taking place among the state’s education stakeholders. This presentation, for example, explores the process and history of education reform in Illinois from the collective perspective of four authors: a district-level leader of K–12 public education, a state bureaucrat in K–12 education, a campus leader in higher education, and a state bureaucrat in higher education. We believe that just the fact that we work together so often is a sign that real reforms are on their way in Illinois.

An Overview of Current Challenges

What are we up against? There are three main gaps that Illinois needs to fill if we want to provide students with the best possible education, and they are virtually inextricable from one another. First, we need to address the

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disparities in student achievement. In Illinois, student achievement is measured through comprehensive assessments of standards mastery. We want to ensure that all students experience success and have the opportunity to achieve to their potential. We already know that one size does not fit all, that every child learns differently. Now we must translate that knowledge into a commitment to provide flexible, customized learning experiences that meet each individual’s needs. Our goal must be to provide a seamless, high-quality education from prekindergarten through college and beyond. This is of course where high-quality teaching comes in.

It is perhaps impossible to overstate how crucial a role teachers play in the kind of customized, student-centered instruction we need to provide. So the second gap we need to fill is actually two: a gap in educator quantity and a gap in educator quality. The entire nation is facing a teacher shortage, and Illinois is no exception. Our shortages are more severe in some subjects than others, however, and we must focus on preparing teachers in the areas of greatest need. An essential part of that preparation is ensuring that teachers meet state standards of subject-matter and pedagogical knowledge.

Third, we need to look at how educational resources, including the most in-demand teachers, are distributed across the state. The current funding gaps that occur within and between school districts undermine our ability to provide a high-quality education for all students. Equal access must be the cornerstone of any education reform success story.

Those are the issues the education community in Illinois will have to address simultaneously, collaboratively, and deliberatively. It is certainly a tall order; let’s try to put it in perspective.

The Grand Scheme of Things

A university student by the name of Sally once wrote the following note home to her parents:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I’m writing you this letter from the county jail. My friend Bob and I got caught selling our fall marijuana crop. Oh, I haven’t told you about Bob. I’m sorry, I forgot—we’ve been living together now for quite a while and congratulations, Mom and Dad, soon you will be grandparents. Please send $5,000 in bail money.

Sincerely, your loving daughter, Sally.

P.S. None of the above is true but I am flunking French, and I just wanted to put it in perspective.
Illinois may not be “flunking” education reform, but we have experienced setbacks as well as success. Every time we become discouraged, however, it helps to look at the big picture. The following sections of this paper offer two chronologically based perspectives on the grand scheme of education reform in Illinois.

The History of Education Reform from Philosophy to the Classroom

While the roots of reforms related to learning goals and learning objectives reach back into the 1970s, 1985 proved to be a real turning point. That was the year the Illinois legislature passed an omnibus package that turned the K–12 education world on its head by requiring that school districts have school improvement plans. The state also began to get involved in curriculum decisions by establishing content areas that schools had to provide instruction in and learning goals that students were expected to meet. And, for the first time, principals were required by law to evaluate teachers. This aspect of the legislation changed the lives of principals and the relationships between principals and teachers perhaps more than any other; before 1985 such evaluations were not even part of common practice in Illinois schools.

But while the new laws did create a new kind of conversation about the instruction that was happening in the classrooms, and while they did produce district-level school improvement plans, they did not make a big dent in what happened in the classrooms. The school improvement plans that were created sat on the shelf, and students benefited little from the process.

As a result, between 1991 and 1995 many stakeholders began to feel that reform legislation needed to have some teeth. They began looking at what the student performance assessments meant: What were the penalties, what were the rewards? How did scores translate into action? The new reformers pushed through legislation that required school improvement planning not only at the district level, but also at the school level. And, in addition to having its own school improvement plan, each school would be visited by state officials who would make sure that the improvement plan, including an assessment system, was being implemented in that school. This effectively drew attention to the fact that student learning was a school-level responsibility and created a period of building-to-building reform. The visits by the state auditors generated a lot of stress and a lot of paperwork but not genuine instructional change. The reforms had still not reached the classroom.

Beginning in 1995, the nature of the visits to the schools changed. Members of the state education agency began to bring educators from other public schools and, instead of auditing, the group would conduct a peer review of the schools. This new policy had several effects at the school level. For
one thing, it created an opportunity for schools to conduct their own internal study before the external team came. It also fostered a different level of conversation in the school. When the visiting team came, it observed classrooms, talked to teachers, interviewed focus groups, met with the board of education, met with people in the community, and created a community conversation about what was happening in the school. And finally, it created a sense of a network across the state, because peers were going to other educators’ classrooms, speaking a language that they shared, and bringing home ideas to their own schools. Schools began to examine their practices. As a result, some changes actually started to happen in the classrooms.

Recently, and probably for a variety of reasons, the state peer visits were stopped. We are now at a crossroads in Illinois, a period of some uncertainty about what will happen. A new school-designation system is being discussed in which student test scores would be weighted more than peer-review visits or other kinds of school evaluations. It is also possible that future visits will focus primarily on low-performing schools and on creating the kind of peer networks that they need.

We have the opportunity now to use our collective knowledge and experience to devise and implement reforms that are even more effective than any in the past. One of the things that we learned in looking at the history of reform efforts, collecting data, and visiting schools was that the reaction schools have to reforms that come from the state is typically marked by increased levels of stress. The message to schools is that they must align curricula with state standards while maintaining a high level of engagement with their students, and often the schools perceive that they must go it alone to make this happen. At this point, schools essentially respond in one of four ways. First, there are schools that ignore the whole reform for a variety of reasons, although fewer and fewer fall into this category. These schools are essentially adrift; their students are not especially engaged and the curriculum is not especially aligned. Second, there are schools whose curricula are highly aligned but whose students are not particularly engaged in learning. This in effect creates a test factory. Unfortunately, this is often the first reaction many schools have to top-down reform, particularly schools that are low-achieving and already in danger of not providing those enriching, engaging experiences to the students who need them most. Third, there are schools, and this is particularly common in large high schools, where the students are very engaged but the curricula are not very highly aligned. In these situations, students may appear to be achieving and the community may not be at all upset about the level of achievement, because “cool,” exciting things are happening, and the test scores are fine. But the emphasis is not on aligning instruction to the learning goals or the standards developed. And finally, we
have the kind of school that we are all striving for: the classroom as a learning community—high engagement and high alignment.

The question is, in the next generation of reform in Illinois, how can we provide the kind of supports that are needed to move all schools away from low performance, away from the test factory model, and toward the productive, instructive classroom learning environments we’ve been trying to create since 1985?

**Educational Goals Past and Present**

We are truly coming to the realization that administrators, teachers, and the entire community have a stake in public education and that we’re all in this together. But in the public schools themselves, too often the perception is still that they’re being hit with one reform after another, that they have to work harder and do more with less, that they are failing. And that leads to a serious decline in morale. To help foster support for the education reforms that will improve the quality of education our children will receive, we need to define our educational mission and work together to accomplish it. Looking at education from a systems approach helps us analyze how we arrived where we are in the history of public education and how we can effect the changes we know we need.

**Changing Purposes of Public Education**

The original mission of the public school system in this country was closely linked to an agricultural society. Even today, school schedules are based on an agrarian calendar that was developed when the United States economy revolved around the planting and harvesting of crops. School let out in the spring when children’s help was needed to plant crops and started up again in the fall after the harvest. The buildings we serve students in now were built at the turn of the century to segregate students by age and grade and put them through an assembly-line approach to education. The assumption was all first graders would learn exactly at the same rate and we could then move them along just like widgets on an assembly line. Most never made it past the eighth grade, but their occupations did not require higher education.

While the purposes of education changed slightly with the turn of the century, the model of education did not. Although the Industrial Revolution marked a shift from a primarily agricultural society to an increasingly industrial society, higher education was still not considered necessary for all children. The public school system was called upon to teach English to all of the non-English-speaking immigrants who were coming to these shores and educate them in American culture. The mission of the schools was to
provide factories and businesses with very distinct levels of workers, from the non-skilled to entrepreneurs.

In about 1972 we threw out the idea that we could have 30 and 40 percent dropout rates and still succeed. It’s hard to believe now, but in the 1950s and 1960s if 30 percent of the class dropped out at the age of 16, it was not considered to be a big deal. After all, those 30 percent could go to work at Inland Steel, U.S. Steel, or Standard Oil of Indiana and make a very good living, and be able to support their families, without a high school diploma. So nobody said a word about the kids who left. Also during this era, special education was relegated to one classroom and was primarily for the physically handicapped. They didn’t have the kind of inclusive environments we have created across this country today. Nobody minded if kids with special needs were left behind.

Today it’s not acceptable to have 30 to 40 percent of our students not complete high school, and we are committed to making sure all students have the opportunity to succeed academically. This represents a significant change in the perception of the mission of public education, a perception largely driven by the changing needs of the nation’s economy. We know that 60 percent of today’s jobs require not just an eighth-grade education or even a high school education but some college education. The skills and attitudes that students need to have when they leave our institutions have changed and the system must accommodate this change.

**How to Move On with a New Purpose**

Where do we need to go? First, we need to become aware of our current environment, which can be kind of like asking fish to describe water. We’re in a certain kind of educational environment every day; we operate in it, and we never question it. One of the things we know, however, is that the quality of education depends upon the quality of the teacher. And yet we spend very little time, and even less money, on organized learning opportunities for our educators. In Illinois, we have four days in the school year that are “institute” days and can be used for staff development. Four days! We can and must do better.

Along with examining how much time we carve out of the schedule for teacher learning, we must also begin to think seriously about lengthening the school year beyond 185 days. After all, once we subtract five for snow days, we’re down to 180 days, and then when we subtract four institute days, we’re down to only 176 days of instruction. Now, remember, 60 percent of jobs today require some college education, and most students will never need to help out on the family farm in the summer months. Therefore, if we’re truly going to be competitive in a global economy, we need to expand the time
that children are in school and engaged in learning. We know that kids learn what they’re taught. We also know that they don’t learn what they’re not taught. The same thing applies for teachers.

Our students and our staff need environments that are conducive to learning. Although the purpose of the public school system has changed, schools are still for the most part operating under nineteenth-century conditions based on nineteenth-century assumptions. We continue to put kids and teachers in buildings that are not designed to deliver instruction the way we deliver instruction today. Some school buildings in Illinois are now 105 years old. They are wonderful buildings; they will stand for another 105 years, but they were not designed for connectivity. They were not designed to have students in learning centers. They were designed to hold six rows of five chairs, with a blackboard at the front of the room and a teacher giving the lecture every day. The government accounting office has estimated that the monumental amount of money it would take to restructure and rebuild schools in this country is prohibitive. Now, we all realize that there is only one education budget and a lot of competing priorities. But what does it say about what our society feels is important when our schools are allowed to decline in terms of safety and when we literally have to fight to get the money we need to keep our buildings operating safely? Just heat, lighting, and windows are an issue in some school districts. In some buildings, the plaster is literally falling off the walls. That’s a disgrace to a nation as great as this one.

We have to acknowledge the facts about our teacher shortage. Why do we continue to produce an overabundance of elementary classroom teachers, social studies teachers, and physical education teachers? There is nothing wrong with physical education or elementary teachers, but we already have the number we need. Why don’t we more aggressively recruit science teachers, math teachers, ESL teachers, and special education teachers? We know what we need; let’s do something about it.

Moreover, there are 957 school districts in the state of Illinois alone. We have schools that can provide tens of thousands of dollars for the educational needs of each child. Conversely, we have school districts that are barely hand to mouth in terms of the resources available. It’s time that we had equitable funding across the state of Illinois; it’s time that no matter where children live, or what their parents can afford, they each receive a world-class education.

Let’s step back and assess what our motives are in twenty-first-century public education. We need our actions to match our mission. We cannot accept high dropout rates, deteriorating facilities, and teacherless classrooms. If our goals are to provide equal opportunities for all children to succeed, to
ensure that educators have the professional knowledge and skills to provide high-quality learning experiences, and to create an educational environment that supports teachers and students, then we know what we need to do. We need to become passionate about education. The reforms of tomorrow begin with the realities of today.

**Current Reform Realities**

The results of the best-intentioned reforms are not always predictable. Real reform produces surprises. In Illinois, for example, the K–12 community, led by the Illinois State Board of Education, has adopted some very high learning standards. The standards creation process, which involved a cast of thousands and multiple stages of revision, produced learning standards that are among the highest in the country. As a second step, an exceedingly rigorous examination was created to measure how well students have mastered the learning standards. The Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE) was given to every high school junior for the first time in the spring of 2001. It is a two-day examination, more than seven hours of testing, and includes both the ACT Assessment® college entrance examination and two of ACT’s eight WorkKeys® exams, which are designed to measure students’ math and reading skills when applied to workplace situations. Over 115,000 students were administered the PSAE, and the results are beginning to come in. This is a wonderful example of positive education reform, but the standards and the exam have produced three nice surprises, or rather three questions for us to examine.

First, what do you do for those who pass? The test is taken at the end of the junior year, but it is designed to be a test of the first twelve years of schooling. Half of the students passed the exam, which means that, by definition, they don’t need a senior year; they’re done. But we did not create the PSAE as a graduation exam, so we can’t just hand these students their degree, pat them on the back, and wish them good luck. Almost all of them, even though they have met the K–12 learning standards, will stay for their senior year of high school. Now, what is the obligation of this great wealthy state to the kids we’ve said have mastered the exam but are stuck in high school for one more year? Our response may be to increase Advanced Placement (AP®) study opportunities or to offer dual-credit programs between high schools and local community colleges. There are still all kinds of things we can do to help students who have passed the test prepare for the next step in life once we have certified that they know everything that they need to know in high school; but it is an issue we did not fully anticipate.

The second surprise can be summarized by the question, what do we do for those who failed? If you look carefully at the scores of the students who did
not pass the PSAE, you’ll quickly learn two or three things. Most importantly, most of them failed because they were not taught the content they needed to know to pass the test. For example, the test has trigonometry questions, geometry questions, and pre-calculus or calculus questions. Trigonometry, geometry, and calculus are not taught in all of our high schools. So many students can rightly say that we are asking them to know things we did not teach them. Reform in the classroom and teaching to the standards are currently behind the rest of the reform effort. Colleges and universities, elementary and high schools, and the state board must make sure that if every student is going to take this exam, as the law requires, every student has a chance to learn the content tested on the exam.

The third nice surprise is that we learned that there are between 5,000 and 10,000 students in the state who scored an 18 or better on the ACT part of the test and who said they had no plans to attend college. What a wonderful recruitment opportunity! We ought to be able to induce nearly every one of them to come to one of our 160 Illinois colleges and universities, because apparently they don’t know that they have the skills to succeed at that level.

Inciting a Passion for Learning

The creation of the Illinois Learning Standards and the PSAE are definitely steps in the right direction for Illinois. But the standards and the tests are not compelling in and of themselves. Even today, we can’t appeal to every parent, and certainly not every student, by saying we have to have our kids reach high standards because we want them to be smart. That message doesn’t really hit home with a lot of people because not everyone places the same value on higher education. We can go to some groups and make a compelling argument that the standards are there to help create a better economy—a better work force. Some people in education even try to justify all of their educational policies around the idea of preparing people for the work force, but again, that only appeals to one slice of our society.

There is a higher purpose for students reaching high standards—one that, sadly, has come awfully close to our home in 2001. The future of our society depends on strong minds. A participatory democracy requires the input of people who can lead, think, solve problems, and pull together when they need to—people who can bring to bear the skills they have even if it’s years after their formal education. So many people now are drawing from their educational past and using their skills in ways that will help our country and, by extension, each individual, each child. Illinois—the entire country—is at a crossroads. Perhaps now we can pull together and agree on the purpose of public education and rededicate ourselves to fulfilling its promise to our children.