Educational Opportunity: The Illinois Dilemma

Authors
Deborah A. Verstegen, Professor, Department of Educational Leadership, University of Nevada, Reno; Lisa G. Driscoll, Associate Professor, Department of Educational Leadership, University of North Carolina, Charlotte.

Purpose
This article provides an examination of key dimensions of finance reform, including equity, adequacy, and equal opportunity, using research from the state of Illinois. It concludes by discussing key routes to change and improvement and the dilemmas they represent for the state.

The Article
Linking top-down standards-based reform and bottom-up school finance reform has the potential to affect American education well into the future. However, to align resources with curriculum and performance standards, funding systems need to be reinvented for an information age and global economy. Current school finance systems are obsolete and antiquated; they have failed to achieve equity or to incorporate adequacy. They finance minimums and basic skills, not excellence in education and proficiency outcomes for all children and schools, and they present a formidable obstacle to reform. Lack of financial support is also a problem—the number one problem facing public schools today, according to a Gallup poll of the public's attitude toward the public schools.

What This Means for the Field
The key dilemma for Illinois is how to reform the education finance system to provide all children and youth with equal opportunities for an equitable and adequate education. Although there are numerous approaches, one possible route to reform is the General Assembly. Edgar recounts the constitutional convention's discussions on educational funding, which was a highly charged topic, and the debates over unequal opportunities and resources that ultimately led to incorporation of the last line in article X, section 1 of the 1970 Illinois Constitution. It holds, "The State has the primary responsibility for financing the system of public education." The purpose was "to put the convention on record" that "the State should bear greater responsibility for school funding both to reduce the burden of property taxes and to cure inequality in education." However, although this language is "something that can be pointed to every time the question of appropriations from the state to the school districts is at issue," it was "not legally binding."

Citation

Contact
Deborah A. Verstegen: dav3e@unr.edu; 775-682-9095; or visit www.unr.edu/education