Does New Group Have What It Takes To "Advance Illinois" Education?

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A prominent line up of public officials—including former Commerce Secretary William Daley, former Gov. Jim Edgar, and former House Speaker Dennis Hastert—along with some deep-pocketed foundations rolled out the state’s latest education initiative yesterday.

For some time now, the school reform community has had its eye on the emerging group, dubbed Advance Illinois. And they’ve expressed skepticism, to say the least. Judging by today’s lackluster response to the initiative, it appears that the people of Illinois have also grown weary of blue ribbon commissions intended to study what everyone already knows: stark inequities pervade Illinois schools.

Nonetheless, the leaders of Advance Illinois have set out to draft a set of policy recommendations for repairing the state’s “mediocre” education system. In a report released yesterday, the group makes a solid case for why failing to act quickly sets the state up for failure:

Though Illinois boasts the fifth-largest economy in the United States, it is one of the slowest growing in the country. Between 1997 and 2004, only six states had slower-growing economies and, while we are still above the national average, our per capita income has been in a downward slide since 1960.

Within the next six years, 89 percent of jobs in Illinois’ fastest-growing sectors will require some education or training beyond high school. Yet, of Illinois adults over the age of 25, only 36 percent have an associate or bachelor’s degree, and just 20 percent more have pursued some other education beyond high school. As a result, thousands of well-paying jobs go unfilled each year in Illinois.
Setting higher academic standards, improving accountability, and advancing teacher training will likely be the thrust of Advance Illinois’ forthcoming recommendations, which will go before the General Assembly in a year or so.

How the group will recommend funding those initiatives remains unclear. But their initial report makes the case for why investment in education will ultimately bolster the state economy:

- More than $13 billion would be added to Illinois’ economy by 2020 if students of color graduated at the same rate as white students.

- A five percent increase in male high school graduation rates would save Illinois $379 million in incarceration costs and crime related expenses.

- If Illinois’ high schools raised standards, the state would save $81 million annually in remediation for recent high school graduates.

The thing that most Illinois school reform advocates agree on is that money matters. They argue that, without some form of tax reform, kids from low- and middle-income communities won’t have the same technology, books, and other resources needed to keep pace with their peers in wealthier districts.

For years, the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability (CTBA) has stuck with some pretty simple talking points for how to go about reversing the decline in education, which they point out is now eroding academic achievement in middle-class communities. CTBA advocates raising the income tax on high-earners and using the additional revenue to reduce property taxes and invest in education and infrastructure.

We caught up with CTBA assistant executive director Chrissy Mancini to see what she thinks about Advance Illinois. Her response: “How many times do you have to reinvent the wheel?”

“Everyone knows what the problems are,” Mancini added. “There are disparities between rich, poor, black, white. Everyone knows how to solve it.”