



Illinois State Board of Education

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Gery J. Chico
Chairman

Christopher A. Koch, Ed.D.
State Superintendent of Education

August 2013

Dear Parents,

I hope that you enjoyed summer with your families and that you are excited to begin a new school year. I am writing to update you on several initiatives that we believe will better prepare our more than 2 million Illinois public school students to succeed today and ultimately become contributing citizens in the 21st century global economy.

A few years ago, a group of governors and state school chiefs, including myself, began a grassroots effort to develop a common set of more rigorous learning standards for students in grades K-12, whether they lived in Illinois or Idaho. These new Common Core Learning Standards have been adopted by more than 40 states and set clear expectations for what we want our students to know and be able to do in math and English language arts.

Since the State Board of Education adopted these standards in June 2010, our nearly 4,000 schools in Illinois have been developing and revising curriculum and preparing lessons and instructional materials to meet these higher, internationally benchmarked standards. Instruction will go deeper into the core foundational concepts, and students must show not only acquired knowledge but the application of that knowledge in real-world situations.

With these higher standards also comes the need to ensure students are performing at a higher level. Just as we raised the bar in 2010 by adopting more rigorous learning standards, we also raised the bar on the state's annual standardized achievement tests (also known as ISATs) for students in grades 3-8 by increasing the performance expectations on the 2013 test.

By raising performance expectations on the ISATs, we are seeing a drop in the 2013 test scores for elementary students and schools. This does not mean that students know less or that teachers don't provide good instruction, but it does give us an earlier indication of where students perform in terms of college and career readiness.

Before this adjustment, the ISAT was not a good measure of college and career readiness; that important information wasn't generated until students took a test in 11th grade called the Prairie State Achievement Exam (also known as the PSAE), which includes the ACT. This is far too late to know that a student will not be prepared for success after high school. We have observed this disconnect when comparing ISAT scores, which showed 82 percent of elementary students met or exceeded standards in 2012, with our PSAE scores, which showed only 51 percent of 11th graders met or exceeded standards that same year. Students did not fall behind when they left grade school, but they faced a higher bar. This year, all students, in grades 3-12, are being measured against the same bar.

We know that it's not easy to suddenly see a drop in your student's or school's scores but we also know our state has great teachers and leaders who are working hard every day to prepare your children for these new, higher expectations for learning. Several other states are taking similar measures, given the implementation of new learning standards.

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In the spring of 2014, elementary students will once again take the ISATs, with questions written to the Common Core. Then, in 2014-15, Illinois is preparing to distribute new online assessments that are being specifically developed to align with the Common Core. The new tests will demand students show more critical thinking, problem-solving and excellent writing skills. Students will be assessed at least twice within a year's time span in order to better gauge progress and help their teachers identify specific areas of need and provide appropriate interventions to support student success.

As we change the way we assess students, we are also improving the way we report those results to you. This year, Illinois will debut a simplified, more consumer-friendly 2013 school and district report card that offers facts such as extracurricular activities and school honors to showcase the unique qualities of our schools. We hope that the redesigned report card for schools, districts and the state will better inform and support community-wide discussions about educational opportunities in your local schools.

Finally, as part of our efforts to offer more comprehensive school information, we will release the results this fall from our first statewide survey of school climate and learning conditions, called the Illinois 5Essentials. Sixth- through twelfth-grade students and all teachers in the state were invited to take this survey last spring. I am pleased that 93 percent of Illinois districts participated, with 87 percent receiving enough responses to generate a report based on students, teachers or both. A summary of the survey findings will also be included on the 2013 school report card.

If you have any questions about any of these initiatives, we encourage you to talk with your local teachers and school leaders. Thank you for all you do to support your child(ren) and their educational journey. Have a great school year!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christopher A. Koch". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Christopher A. Koch, Ed.D.
State Superintendent of Education