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Editorial

A 'Burnham Plan' for schools

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The Illinois House's rejection of a gross receipts tax allows the legislature's discussion on state spending priorities to start anew. We hope that discussion focuses on this state's most pressing need: a mix of new education initiatives and aggressive reforms, not just to spend more but to improve student performance.

We need better educated students and a higher-skilled workforce. No, we don't dedicate enough today to achieve that. So how do we best spend existing and new money to significantly boost student outcomes? How do we guarantee taxpayers their dollars will be invested to produce results? What reforms to school pension systems and other elements of the current system need to occur in exchange for more money?

These are questions few lawmakers have had much opportunity to discuss. Legislative priorities often get decided in a Springfield back room by a handful of staffers given 90 minutes to muscle out a bill -- only after a handful of legislative leaders cut a deal on the price tag.

So it was wonderfully refreshing when, earlier this month, nearly 50 legislators attended a forum in Springfield built around the Tribune's "From Here to Excellence" editorial series on how to reform Illinois public schools.

Not only did nearly a third of the General Assembly attend -- Republican and Democratic, Downstate, suburban and Chicago -- they stayed late. Legislators lined up to ask thoughtful questions. One typical comment came from Rep. Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago): "People should understand that down here we often get bogged down with myopic, one-dimensional, 8 x 10 fact sheets that don't usually illustrate the whole picture. Unbiased opinions that are clean from 'agendas' are truly what we hunger for."

Feigenholtz and her colleagues can expect another fresh perspective on Monday. That's when a bipartisan group of business, education and political leaders plan to release "The Burnham Plan" for better education in Illinois. The document -- its name borrowed from architect Daniel Burnham's visionary plan for Chicago of a century ago -- synthesizes best practices from around the U.S. to improve student outcomes and enhance school accountability.

There's much to like in this comprehensive plan, which will be available at aplusillinois.org. Think of it as the education component that easily can be dropped into any school funding proposal. The Burnham Plan defines smart ways to spend additional education money, however legislators choose to provide it.

The plan calls for a better data system to measure student gains and determine teacher and principal effectiveness. It outlines a streamlined process for dismissing inadequate teachers. It proposes a statewide group to drive an Illinois education agenda going forward. It establishes financial rewards for excellent teachers and schools.

Also included: intensive mentoring and induction programs for teachers and principals; financial training for school board members; easier routes to alternative teaching certification for career-switchers; an expansion of the number of charter schools permitted in Illinois; and better reimbursement to districts for costly special education programs.

The plan calls for a pool of money schools could tap if they spend it on research-proven, high-impact strategies: reduced class sizes; smaller schools; longer school days and school years; and parent involvement programs.

Parts of the \$3 billion Burnham Plan echo school improvement strategies highlighted in "From Here to Excellence," which can be read at chicagotribune.com/edfund.

The Burnham Plan results from more than a year of occasional Saturday meetings by participants who agreed to "leave our associations and histories at the door," according to one leader of that group, former Republican state Rep. William O'Connor. Other contributors include Elgin Mayor Ed Schock, Illinois Education Association Executive Director Jo Anderson, Cook County Assessor James Houlihan, Center for Tax and Budget Accountability Executive Director Ralph Martire, members of the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, and former state schools Supt. Glenn "Max" McGee.

This plan is worth reading -- and enacting. It's thoughtful, bipartisan, results-oriented and, most compelling, it's within reach.

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