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OPINIONREVIEW & OUTLOOK

Illinois's Shocking Report Card

The Land of Lincoln is failing its children and covering it up.

Editorial Board

10/5/22, 3:53 pm ET



No one thought Illinois schools were a shining beacon in the education landscape, but we didn't know how truly awful so many of them are. A new report by Wirepoints using the state's data shows that an epidemic of indifferent instruction and social promotion has left children unable to perform at even the most basic educational level.

Statewide, in 2019, 36% of all third grade students could read at grade level. That's an F, and that's the good news. That number drops to 27% for Hispanic students and 22% for black students statewide. In certain public school systems, the numbers plummet to single digits. In Decatur, 2% of black third-graders are reading at grade level and only 1% are doing math at grade level.

We aren't often speechless, but the extent to which that performance is betraying a generation of schoolchildren is hard to put into words. Third grade children are eight years old, full of potential with minds like sponges to absorb what they are taught. Third grade is the year that children need to achieve a level of reading fluency that will prepare them to tackle more complex tasks in upper elementary grades that require comprehension.

A child who can't read in third grade can't do word problems in fourth or science experiments in fifth. Promoting Decatur children to the fourth grade when 99% are below grade level in math condemns them to future failure. By 11th grade, 5% of Decatur's students are reading at grade level and 4% are on par in math. Why shouldn't every single adult presiding over the Decatur schools be fired?

Wirepoints shows that in 2019 7% of black third-graders in Rockford were reading at grade level, 11% of Hispanic third-graders in Elgin and 8% of black third-graders in Peoria. Chicago's 30% of black third-graders reading at grade level almost seems a triumph by comparison. Statewide, the system records a 30 percentage-point achievement gap between black students and white students. If you want to discuss "systemic racism," start here, yet black Illinois politicians protect this indefensible system.

The 2019 numbers are pre-Covid, so pocket any objections that the failure to educate students was a function of pandemic closures. Covid no doubt made things worse, but the rot is endemic.

Parents may not grasp how bad things are when students are promoted from grade to grade even as their education is left behind. In Decatur, 97.3% of teachers were rated "excellent" or "proficient" in 2017, according to the Illinois State Board of Education. In 2018 that number was 99.7%. This year 100% of Chicago teachers were evaluated as excellent or proficient. The students are failing but the teachers are great? That contradiction shows the system is corrupt as well as incompetent.

Family and social dysfunction play some role in this scandal. But the overriding problem is school governance and the monopoly power of the teachers unions. The Chicago Teachers Union has walked out four times in the last seven years (2016, 2019, 2021, 2022), reaping higher salaries or benefits each time. Wirepoints says Illinois spends \$16,660 per student annually, the eighth-highest state spending per student in the country.

Teachers get raises, schools get more money, and children are shuffled through until its time for the adults to collect a pension. Families that can get their children out are leaving in droves. Over the past two decades, 120,000 students have left the Chicago Public Schools. Wouldn't you?

Appeared in the October 5, 2022, print edition as 'Illinois's Shocking Report Card'.