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Your turn: Investing in public education means more than minimum spending

Dan Montgomery and Al Lorens Special to The State Journal-Register

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In our ever-evolving society, education stands as the cornerstone of progress and prosperity. Yet, despite recognizing its paramount importance, we find ourselves in a perpetual cycle of underfunding, which preserves the systemic challenges that hinder our students' potential – and hits our Black, Brown, and low-income students the hardest.

Studies indicate increasing funding for education, particularly for our Black, Brown and low-income students, correlates with enhanced academic performance and higher graduation rates. It is also associated with elevated earnings and favorable life trajectories.

Established in 2017, Illinois' Evidence-Based Model (EBM) for K-12 education was designed to equitably and effectively distribute resources. However, it falls short of its promise; it is not expected to meet adequacy standards until 2040—13 years behind schedule.

Since adopting the EBM, Illinois has only provided the statutory minimum of about \$350 million annually, leaving a funding gap of \$2.3 billion. Amid record inflation and shrinking government grants, this funding is increasingly insufficient.

This shortfall was highlighted in the latest legislative session when minimal funding increases proved inadequate for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and other districts across the state, underscoring a deepening crisis in educational investment as student needs grow.

This is especially troubling as Illinois ranks 37th among the 50 states in funding public education, further illustrating the systemic neglect and urgent need for reform.

Under Illinois' school funding formula, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is owed over \$1 billion per year from the state to meet adequacy standards. Elgin schools would need \$219 million to reach adequacy, Peoria School District 150 would need \$55 million, Cahokia CUSD 187 would need \$10.5 million, Mahomet-Seymour CUSD 3 would need \$14.5 million, and Carterville CUSD 5 would need \$10.1 million to reach adequacy.

These districts, among many others across the state, are short-changed by inadequate state funding. Additionally, Chicago faces unique financial burdens that either disproportionately or exclusively affect CPS.

This is a pivotal moment for our lawmakers, who have the opportunity to be real heroes for our students by rectifying these disparities. Our plea to the governor and legislators is clear: we cannot afford to wait decades for adequate funding. The urgency of the situation demands immediate action to break free from this cycle of underinvestment.

We must close the gap between our well-resourced districts and those whose needs aren't yet being met. An increase beyond the mandated minimum is imperative to ensure that our schools in every district, regardless of zip code, have the resources that students need to thrive.

While this conversation often centers on PreK-12, we must not overlook the critical importance of higher education.

Western Illinois University recently announced that the university intends to layoff an undetermined number of contingent and tenure/tenure track faculty and academic support professionals.

The need for funding in our colleges and universities is desperate; last year, three state universities were forced to go on strike due to underfunding that resulted in skyrocketing tuition, program cuts and understaffing.

Decades of severe underfunding have left our state universities struggling to meet the needs of their students. To address these pressing challenges, Illinois must adopt a higher education funding formula akin to the Evidence-Based Model. Such a model would ensure that resources are allocated based on identified needs through evidence-based practices, fostering a more equitable and sustainable higher education system.

In times of fiscal constraint, investing in education is not an expense, but an investment in our future. Failure to adequately fund higher education perpetuates a cycle of inequality, hindering social mobility and economic progress.

As stewards of our state's future, we cannot afford to let another generation of students bear the brunt of underfunded public schools and unaffordable higher education.

The time for action is now. Let us rise above partisan divides and prioritize the well-being and future success of our students in every district. By investing in education today, we sow the seeds for a brighter tomorrow for all.

Dan Montgomery is the president of the Illinois Federation of Teachers and Al Lorens is the president of the Illinois Education Association; both are former teachers.