Dear Friends,

When a small crew of advocates banded together to fight for quality education options more than five years ago, some supporters in our circle would wish us luck, but quietly mutter, "The Cubs have a better chance of winning the World Series than you do of passing education policy in Illinois!" At the time, they did not think we could unify to cultivate meaningful public policy ensuring quality education for low-income kids. Working together with educators, policy makers, parents, donors, and students, I am happy to say, we proved them wrong. Not unlike a certain doubted baseball team. Advocating five policies into law, we confirmed what we knew all along, that Illinois has a big appetite for standing up for the little guy through large-scale, long-term strategies, statewide.

From the bipartisan fight to fund traditional public education fully and equally, to ensuring gifted public school students advance at their level of competency through the Accelerated Placement Act, we are proud of the work accomplished to ensure Illinois kids have equal access to great public schools.

When public schools are not the right fit, Empower Illinois fights to ensure kids have private school options to meet their unique needs. That is why we advocated for and implemented the Invest in Kids Act. The program saw an eventful and successful first year with the development of new infrastructure, such as our updated scholarship application, the launch of our EmpowerXChange school and family portals, and the granting of millions of dollars in scholarships to thousands of children at hundreds of schools, in every nook of Illinois.

Together with our advocacy partner, One Chance Illinois-Action, we empowered hundreds of coalition allies to become local defenders of the Tax Credit Scholarship.

Empower Illinois, and our coalition of partners, are proud of the milestones we have reached this year:

- $45,190,374 million raised.
- 5,459 scholarships granted.
- 91 percent of private schools in Illinois served.

Our coalition’s drive to protect the program grew stronger when we saw its impact firsthand:

- At $61.4 million, Illinois’ Tax Credit Scholarship program has raised the most money of any first-year Tax Credit Scholarship program in U.S. history.
- There is significant demand for tax credit scholarships. It would require more than $216 million to award scholarships to every student that applied.
- Our average scholarship recipient comes from a family of four with an average income of $35,371, or 148 percent of the federal poverty level.
- Program donors are not all millionaires — they are regular Illinoisans; the average donation to EI is $22,732, the median donation is $4,000, and the most common donation is $1,000.

In the following pages, you will find data on Empower Illinois’ work, as well as the stories of those whose lives have been changed by quality education options. All of this is a credit to our coalition partners, Board of Directors, donors, fearless staff, and the political leaders who are our champions. To the thousands of you who have educated students, donated funds, organized communities, signed petitions, or showed up at rallies statewide — you are making your voices heard.

Thank you.

Myles X. Mendoza
President
THE EMPOWER ILLINOIS MISSION IS TO EXPAND QUALITY EDUCATION OPTIONS FOR LOW-INCOME AND WORKING-CLASS FAMILIES OF ILLINOIS.
Empower Illinois has a big, bold mission rooted in the simple belief that income level should not predetermine a child’s educational options. Over the years, our team members have devoted themselves to quality education through classroom work, policy research, and scholarship granting. Each of these efforts, over many years and under numerous iterations, has become the core of Empower Illinois. Knowing Illinois and its students are capable of wondrous things, Empower Illinois looked for ways to support students further. Empower Illinois identified several areas upon which we could have a positive impact: the under-identification of low-income students and students of color as gifted, support for students with unique abilities, the lack of course offerings to students across diverse learning environments, and the inability for low-income families to have access to the same educational opportunities as their wealthier peers.

Our team saw success with policy work through partnership. In 2016, working with the Illinois Association for Gifted Children, we advocated for and passed the Untapped Potential Act, Illinois’ Tax Credit Scholarship program generates private dollars for K-12 scholarships to low-income and working-class students, whose educational options were previously limited by household income. With the successful passing of the Untapped Potential Act, Empower Illinois identified several areas upon which we could have a positive impact: the under-identification of low-income students and students of color as gifted, support for students with unique abilities, the lack of course offerings to students across diverse learning environments, and the inability for low-income families to have access to the same educational opportunities as their wealthier peers.

Our largest accomplishment once again came through cooperation, as education leaders across the state united to improve the public school funding formula and expand options for all Illinoisans. Through the bipartisan passage of Illinois’ Invest in Kids Act, Illinois’ Tax Credit Scholarship program generates private dollars for K-12 scholarships to low-income and working-class students, whose educational options were previously limited by household income. With the successful passing of the Invest in Kids Act, Empower Illinois quickly established itself as a statewide Scholarship Granting Organization (SGO) to serve Illinois’ children. We support schools in their tax credit fundraising efforts, while assisting students and their families through the scholarship process that can help make their dreams a reality. In under a year, Empower Illinois went from a three-person policy shop to Illinois’ largest SGO with a full-time staff helping thousands of children reach their full educational potential. Today, we are poised to grow our focus on educational opportunity and ingenuity, always in the service of Illinois’ children and their families.
EMPOWER STUDENTS
OUR IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS
The Invest in Kids Act aims to help low-income and working-class kids have educational options. Empower Illinois’ Year One data confirms that our scholarships are helping these students find the school that best fits their needs. Three of every four of our scholarship students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and our average recipient has a family income equal to 148% of the Federal Poverty Level. No longer are these students’ educational opportunities dictated by ZIP Code or their family’s income.

Additionally, Empower Illinois scholarships provide opportunities to a diversity of students. Our scholarship recipient demographics closely mirror Illinois’ student diversity, and one in seven recipients have unique learning needs.

We are honored to empower parents to choose the best school and education options for their child.
The demographic data for scholarship recipients in Region 1 most closely mirrors that of the state.

**Region 1**

*Cook County*

The demographic data for scholarship recipients in Region 1 most closely mirrors that of the state.

**18,177**

APPLICANTS

**3,899**

AWARDEES

**219**

SCHOOLS WITH Awardees

**$35,350,684**

DONATED

**Socio-Economic Status of Scholarship Recipients**

- Less than 185% of FPL: 75%
- Between 185%-250% of FPL: 9%
- Between 250%-300% of FPL: 16%

**Ethnic/Racial Demographics**

- Hispanic: 40.3% (1573 students)
- White: 30.2% (1138 students)
- Black/African American: 10.4% (432 students)
- Multiracial: 5.4% (224 students)
- Other: 1.9% (76 students)
- Asian: 1.5% (59 students)
- Not Answered: 0.5% (209 students)
- American Indian/Native Alaskan: 0.2% (9 students)
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.1% (5 students)

* The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) in 2018 was $25,100 for a family of 4.

Region 2 saw the greatest percentage of scholarships granted to families with an income below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level.

**Region 2**

*Northern Counties*

**6,865**

APPLICANTS

**84**

SCHOOLS WITH Awardees

**$6,260,330**

DONATED

**Socio-Economic Status of Scholarship Recipients**

- Less than 185% of FPL: 79%
- Between 185%-250% of FPL: 9%
- Between 250%-300% of FPL: 13%

**Ethnic/Racial Demographics**

- Hispanic: 39.7% (1520 students)
- White: 40.3% (1234 students)
- Black/African American: 9.3% (324 students)
- Multiracial: 9.6% (324 students)
- Other: 0.5% (4 students)
- Asian: 0.5% (4 students)
- Not Answered: 0.5% (4 students)
- American Indian/Native Alaskan: 0.2% (12 students)
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.2% (12 students)

* The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) in 2018 was $25,100 for a family of 4.
**Region 3**

**North Central Counties**

Region 3's award recipients come from over 27 different cities.

- **3,294 Applicants**
- **256 Awardees**
- **37 Schools with Awardees**

**Empower Students**

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS**

- Less than 185% of FPL: 64%
- Between 185%-250% of FPL: 22%
- Between 250%-300% of FPL: 14%

*The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) in 2018 was $25,100 for a family of 4.*

**ETHNIC/RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS**

- **Hispanic**: 16.0% (46 students)
- **White**: 66.8% (13 students)
- **Black/African American**: 13.1% (2 students)
- **Multiracial**: 7.8% (2 students)
- **Other**: 0.8% (2 students)
- **Asian**: 1.2% (2 students)
- **American Indian/Native Alaskan**: 0.4% (1 student)
- **Not Answered**: 2.7% (8 students)
- **Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander**: 0.0% (0 students)

**Donated**: $1,350,279


**Region 4**

**Central Counties**

Region 4 hosts the county with the largest percentage of students receiving scholarships; 56 percent of applicants from Livingston County received a scholarship.

- **2,261 Applicants**
- **269 Awardees**
- **32 Schools with Awardees**

**Empower Students**

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS**

- Less than 185% of FPL: 61%
- Between 185%-250% of FPL: 28%
- Between 250%-300% of FPL: 11%

*The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) in 2018 was $25,100 for a family of 4.*

**ETHNIC/RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS**

- **Hispanic**: 10.4% (38 students)
- **White**: 69.9% (238 students)
- **Black/African American**: 3.2% (15 students)
- **Multiracial**: 13.0% (50 students)
- **Other**: 0.7% (3 students)
- **Asian**: 1.9% (1 student)
- **American Indian/Native Alaskan**: 1.9% (3 students)
- **Not Answered**: 0.0% (0 students)
- **Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander**: 0.0% (0 students)

**Donated**: $1,188,879
Our Impact by the Numbers

Region 5 has the greatest percentage of students in elementary schools; 66 percent of scholarship recipients in the region are in grades K-5.

1,821 APPLICANTS
232 AWARDEES
29 SCHOOLS WITH AWARDEES
$1,040,202 DONATED

Region 5
Southern Counties

Socio-Economic Status of Scholarship Recipients

- Less than 185% of FPL: 14%
- Between 185%-250% of FPL: 14%
- Between 250%-300% of FPL: 72%

*The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) in 2018 was $25,100 for a family of 4.

Ethnic/Racial Demographics

- Hispanic: 10.3% (24 students)
- White: 71.6% (166 students)
- Black/African American: 8.6% (20 students)
- Multiracial: 3.4% (8 students)
- Other: 0.0% (0 students)
- Asian: 3.0% (7 students)
- Not Answered: 0.9% (2 students)
- American Indian/Native Alaskan: 2.2% (5 students)
- Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.0% (0 students)

Empower Students
"The words 'Thank you' do not begin to cover our immense gratitude for your generosity. The tax credit scholarships that gave so many of us the opportunity to enroll our children in the schools we could only dream of because of the high tuition costs. Our family will forever be grateful for this opportunity you gave us to fulfill our goal to see our son go to the high school that best fits his needs and to keep our daughter in the school she loves so much." – Maria C.

"My family and I applied with fingers crossed praying that I would be awarded this scholarship. When it came time to apply for the Empower scholarship I did not get my hopes up. My mother and father both work so hard to make ends meet and sometimes those ends don't meet but they are making every sacrifice they can for what they think is best for me and my brother and sister. When we found out I had received the scholarship, we couldn't believe it. It was a dream come true... I was placed in honors classes as well as an AP class. It's very challenging but I managed to work really hard and do very well in my first quarter. I hope I am again blessed with this amazing opportunity. I am forever grateful to Empower for this amazing opportunity, I love [my school] and I know it was 100% the right place for me." – Tatum F.

"When I found out about Empower Illinois, I was hopeful. I kept my fingers crossed, we prayed and hoped for the best. I cannot express enough the gratefulness and appreciation that I have for all of the donors. I wish there was a way that I could thank every one of them individually. The only way I am able to thank them is by continuing my children’s education and continue to watch them grow and learn and continue to work hard for everything. I want them to look back and be just as grateful as I am that there are great people out there who want the best for them just as much as I do." – Maria K.

"I am a single father who takes education very seriously and when I saw this opportunity through Empower I quickly made a plan and goal to do everything I could to be a part of it... I received a 100% scholarship for my daughter to attend private school and it has changed our lives, she loves it and hasn't missed a day... My daughter says the teachers here push you to be the best and help you in everything... I'm grateful for Empower and our lawmakers for this scholarship and donors because an enormous weight is off my shoulders." – Javier A.

"The tax credit scholarship is important to me for many reasons. I believe the most important reason is to give my children a quality education and a fantastic learning environment... This scholarship means the world to us as a family. It's amazing how our daughter even knows the importance of it as a seven-year-old! It means we had an option to send our children to the school of our choice. It means our daughter can attend a school in which she feels comfortable from a learning perspective and meet some of her best friends. It means we could be happy as a family! Thank you so very much once again, thank you to all who helped contribute to the success of the scholarship program. From donors, to volunteers, to those who worked behind the scenes: You have changed a number of people’s lives!" – Tony D.

"I wish there was another phrase I could use instead of the common one but truly, thank you! My gratitude for what Empower, and this scholarship has brought and provided to our lives is beyond what the meaning of the simple phrase 'thank you' could ever behold. The scholarship that has been so generously gifted to us has had the greatest impact on all of our lives... My daughter and family have never been happier. The school alone has also opened so many new doors with their education opportunities and technology. Education can help us further obtain things, [like] careers so that our kids can have a fulfilling job and life with little worry. This scholarship has done so much already for me as a mother, as well as my daughter and I am forever grateful for it." – Kareem N.

"The words 'Thank you' do not begin to cover our immense gratitude for your generosity. The tax credit scholarships that gave so many of us the opportunity to enroll our children in the schools we could only dream of because of the high tuition costs. Our family will forever be grateful for this opportunity you gave us to fulfill our goal to see our son go to the high school that best fits his needs and to keep our daughter in the school she loves so much." – Maria C.
Empower Illinois is fortunate to partner with 91 percent of recognized private schools in Illinois to offer applicants a diversity of quality education options.
EMPOWER DONORS
Empower Illinois is proud to have a broad base of donor support. Donations are not just from major donors, but rather are from regular Illinoisans who want to support their local students, schools, or community.

**1,988 DONORS**

**$1,000 MODE DONATION**
* The most common donation
* 14% of donors gave $1,000

**$4,000 MEDIAN DONATION**
* 51% of donors gave $4,000 or less

**$22,732 AVERAGE DONATION**
* The average donation

**DONATION DISTRIBUTION**

- **53%** of donors gave to a school in the same city that they reside in
- **64%** of donors gave to more than one school or a school system
- **14%** of individuals who live in Chicago donated to a school outside of Chicago.

**AVERAGE DONATION**

- **$22,732**
- **Median**
- **$4,000**

**MODE DONATION**

- **$1,000**
- **$1,000**
- **$1,000**

**Donation Distribution**

- **Under $1K**
- **$1K – $10K**
- **$10K – $50K**
- **$50K – $100K**
- **$100K – $500K**
- **$500K – $1M**
- **$1M – $2.5M**
- **$2.5M – $5M**
- **$5M – $10M**
- **$10M – $25M**
- **$25M – $50M**
- **$50M – $100M**
- **$100M – $500M**
- **$500M – $1B**
- **Over $1B**
EMPOWER PUBLIC
EDUCATION OPTIONS
Empower Public Education Options

SUPPORTING UNIQUE LEARNERS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

One of the most impactful policies is the Accelerated Placement Act, which went into effect in 2018, and empowers parents to advance their kids into coursework, and sometimes higher grades, to meet their level of competency. The Accelerated Placement Act brings uniformity to previously fragmented or nonexistent acceleration policies, which left too many bright students behind or unnoticed. All school districts must now have a policy based on best practices that allows students to enter school early, enroll in above-grade level classes, or skip grades altogether.

We believe students deserve to be in educational environments that meet their needs, and the Accelerated Placement Act unites parents, teachers, and school administrators to ensure all students have the chance to reach their full potential.

Through advocacy by Empower Illinois, and our partner One Chance Illinois-Action, the Illinois General Assembly passed more than five laws to allow low-income kids to thrive in schools, both public and private. From reimbursing teachers for their out-of-pocket classroom expenses to universally screening low-income children to enter state-funded gifted education programs, Empower Illinois supports innovative ideas to foster quality education.

FULL AND EQUITABLE FUNDING

We recognize many Illinois families rely on great public schools that fit their child’s needs. That is why Empower Illinois supports the full funding of public education. For far too long, the chronic underfunding of public schools left low-income students behind their higher-income peers.

In 2017, Empower Illinois advocated for landmark public school funding reforms that ultimately became law. The new evidence-based public school funding formula received bipartisan support and more equitably funded school districts across Illinois. Most importantly, a base funding level is ensured, while each public school district’s needs are taken into consideration when determining its funding. These advancements support the core of Empower Illinois’ mission: to expand quality education options for low-income and working-class families of Illinois. We will continue to support full funding for public schools, because we know quality education comes in many forms.
EMPOWER POLICY WORK
Empower Illinois advocates for expanding course offerings to students across diverse learning environments. Many students throughout Illinois lack access to adequate or diversified coursework to prepare them for college or future careers. The courses students take in school open doors for their future, and every student should be offered that opportunity regardless of local district resources.

**COURSE EQUITY**

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**TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM**

Illinois’ Invest in Kids Act created the Tax Credit Scholarship program, which serves K-12 students who come from a household with income below 300 percent of the federal poverty level to qualify for a scholarship. In 2018, over 30,000 students applied for these private K-12 scholarships. The Tax Credit Scholarship can cover up to 100 percent of private school tuition up to a maximum of the average Illinois cost to educate. Both individuals and corporations can receive a 75 percent tax credit for donations made to support low-income children. In the past year, with our partners at One Chance Illinois-Action, we successfully defended the Tax Credit Scholarship program from opposition legislation and continue to be a vocal advocate for the program.

**COMPETENCY BASED LEARNING**

Students deserve to be in educational environments that meet their needs. In Illinois, 33 percent of students already meet or exceed the proficiency level on the state exam. 36 percent are already proficient or higher in English and Language Arts, and 31 percent are already proficient or higher in math. Acceleration options such as grade-skipping, early entrance into kindergarten, and content-based acceleration have positive outcomes on high ability students.

Empower Illinois, working with One Chance Illinois-Action, collected data from across the state to see how many districts had a policy around acceleration and what it included. We discovered that only 43.35 percent of districts had a policy in regards to early entrance into Kindergarten, 44.39 percent of districts had a policy in regards to early entrance to first grade, 53.72 percent of districts had a policy on content-based acceleration, and 9.19 percent of districts had a policy regarding grade-based acceleration.

That is why Empower Illinois, in conjunction with One Chance Illinois-Action, advocated for the Accelerated Placement Act, which was signed into law last year and went into effect July 1, 2018. The bill requires all school districts to have a policy based on best practices that allows students to enter school early, enroll in above-grade level classes, or skip grades altogether.

**SUPPORTING GIFTED AND UNIQUE LEARNERS**

In Illinois, both low-income students and students of color are greatly underrepresented in gifted programs. As a result, the talents of many of our smartest children go unnoticed. In response to national studies demonstrating the under-enrollment of low-income students in gifted programs, Empower Illinois and its partner One Chance Illinois-Action researched the state’s largest school districts to determine if the same issue is occurring in Illinois. It found that Black, Hispanic, and low-income students were all vastly underrepresented in gifted programs.

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EMPOWER VISION
2019 GOALS
PROTECT AND EXPAND TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIPS

After a successful first year of Tax Credit Scholarships, we have seen the immense impact these scholarships have on students, their families, and their communities. These life-changing results further solidified our commitment to ensuring all of Illinois’ families have the option for quality education, regardless of their income. Just as the original bill required bipartisan support, we know Tax Credit Scholarships can count on diverse support, and Empower Illinois will work throughout the year to unite these supporters and amplify student and parent voices who have personally found success.

GROW RISE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Empower Illinois was blessed with many generous donors during our first year of Tax Credit Scholarships. Some people asked how they could be more involved or continue contributing to Empower Illinois’ work. Their generosity allowed us to launch the a new scholarship program.

The RISE Scholarship Program provides students attending schools with designated dollars to receive up to $5,000 for tuition, if they qualify for the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program. During the Fall 2018 – Spring 2019 school year, $405,353 in RISE Scholarships are being granted to 150 students across 30 schools.

The RISE Scholarship program allows local and national foundations without tax liability, individuals who want to contribute beyond their tax liability, and individuals who wanted to be involved beyond the Tax Credit Scholarship an opportunity to further their commitment to Illinois’ students.

Empower Illinois will grow charitable donations to the RISE Scholars program during 2019 and support schools that are impactful in their communities.

MAINTAIN AND GROW OUR RESEARCH

We take pride in our policy roots and are committed to discovering how Illinois’ educational landscape can improve for all students. In the coming year, we will monitor the Invest in Kids Acts’ impact. Additionally, we will study the Accelerated Placement Acts implementation. Both of these Acts contribute toward positive outcomes both directly and indirectly measured through traditional means. To understand fully their impact, and that of other potential, innovative programs, Empower Illinois is excited to begin Whole Child research. This research will offer insights into how an educational environment develops a child mentally, physically, socially, emotionally, and through other non-traditional factors that impact a student’s growth.

SUPPORT TECHNICAL EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

Empower Illinois will continue to research policy options that can provide opportunity to low-income youth by gaining access to Career and Technical Education, such as trade certifications that lead to gainful employment in areas of workforce shortages. Following the Age of Agility Summit this year, Empower and other national policy organizations will prioritize the need to research Illinois’ workforce shortages in the career and technical education sector. Additionally, we will align around the need for the State to perform an assessment to determine in what areas there are workforce shortages, and which certifications could qualify for financial incentives, support for education programs, payments, reimbursements, or other support.
THANK YOU DONORS

Tax Credit Scholarship Donors
Thank you to our Tax Credit Scholarship donors for being champions of educational opportunities. Your generosity has made quality education options a reality for thousands of Illinois’ children.

Empower Illinois Charitable Donors

Honor Roll of Donors (January 1-December 31, 2018)

Thank you to our charitable donors. Your generosity has funded the policy creation and community organizing that makes sweeping educational change achievable. Empower Illinois’ advocacy and outreach work is central to our mission, and would not be possible without your support.

American Federation for Children Growth Fund
Anonymous
Peter and Beth Bensen
John Croghan
Dan and Sherry Daly
Mary and Paul Finnegan
Ken Griffin
Ward R. Hamm
Bob and Patty Huffman
John F. Kirtley

Michael and Lucinda McClain
Bill McIntosh
Michael and Lindy Keiser Fund, A Donor Advised Fund of the Bradley Impact Fund
Al and Mary Ann Moschner
Charles and Ellen Mulaney
Jim and Molly Perry
John and Kathy Schreiber
Peter and Joan Vilim
Walton Family Foundation