FUTURE OF ILLINOIS

INVEST IN KIDS. BUILD THE FUTURE.

Empower Illinois          Illinois Economic Policy Institute          Untapped Potential Project
Governor J.B. Pritzker “describes the skills gap as arguably Illinois’ most serious barrier to economic prosperity,” according to a 400-plus page state policy document. ² “Building a pool of job seekers and workers with the right skills at the right time is essential if Illinois businesses and workers are to compete in the global economy today and in the future.”


2. Unified State plan, p. 65
The problem is especially acute among the skilled trades. A 2019 survey of Illinois construction employers conducted by the Associated General Contractors of America found that the overwhelming majority of respondents had trouble hiring skilled workers. Over half anticipated the problem becoming worse over the next year, and virtually none thought hiring would become easier. ³

The gaps between the workforce demands of industry and the pool of qualified workers are even wider in low-income communities of color. Opportunity gaps both in schools and in skilled trades apprenticeship programs exacerbate these challenges. Trade union apprenticeships, particularly those run jointly by labor organizations and participating employers, offer a significant return on investment. Much work, however, remains to be done to ensure equitable access to those opportunities across income and race.

Public high school and community college Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs have struggled to keep pace with the rising demand for qualified workers. Increasingly, high school graduates as well as people holding industry certificates, associate’s degrees, and bachelor’s degrees have lacked both the technical skills and requisite soft skills to qualify for many occupations that offer career opportunities and solid, middle-class wages.

Public systems, while endeavoring to address these existential challenges, are often slow to respond to rapidly shifting economic and social conditions. This can frustrate industry leaders, who have long advocated for a more effective, flexible, and innovative governmental response. ⁴

These realities have led the Future of Illinois coalition to conclude that the time is now to strengthen the 2017 bipartisan legislation known as the Invest in Kids Act, which provides up to $100 million in scholarships for children from low-income and working-class families to receive a private education. Enhancing the scholarship program would open new opportunities for low-income students of color to thrive in careers with family-supporting incomes and actively contribute to the state’s economy.

One new strategy these changes would enable is the creation of a network of private, tuition-free career and technical education high schools, operated jointly by industry and a coalition of trade unions. The Untapped Potential Project, a nonprofit education organization, is leading the design of the schools, the first of which is already slated to open in Chicago in 2021. The schools expect to actively and aggressively recruit students from underserved populations and plan to provide a rigorous academic education coupled with state-of-the-art technical training and pre-apprenticeship opportunities.

In turn, the schools create direct pathways into a variety of post-secondary options, including joint labor-management apprenticeship programs that funnel completers into well-paying unionized jobs in the trades. Labor-management apprenticeship programs are demonstrably the most effective training opportunities available to non-college graduates aspiring to stable middle-class careers. They offer more hours of classroom and on-the-job training than both university-level education and other types of registered apprenticeships.

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⁴ Unified State Plan, p. 38
Graduates of these apprenticeships on average earn higher wages as journeymen than do workers with bachelor’s degrees. And instead of leaving post-secondary education burdened by debt—which is currently about $29,000 for the average Illinois college graduate—apprentices get paid while receiving their training.

If these new technical schools are to realize their full scale and potential, changes to the Invest in Kids Act will be required. This report dives into policy changes that could support technical education and pre-apprenticeship opportunities while improving access for low-income students of color. These potential changes include:

- Boosting the tax credit that funds the scholarships to 100 percent, is essential for corporate and individual donors to be able to finance operations;
- Removing the law’s sunset to provide continuity to students enrolled to complete programs, and assurance to school operators, and donors, that the schools are here for the long-term; and
- Increasing the maximum scholarship amount for students attending CTE schools to 1.5 times the current maximum, or about $20,000. CTE schools require state-of-the-art equipment, making them more expensive to operate than other kinds of schools.

It is important that these schools replicate the success of Illinois’ registered apprenticeship programs, which are operated privately by employers and labor organizations. The schools should enjoy the freedom and agility of private, independent schools to keep pace with the ever-shifting needs of learners and industry alike. Private operation would also allow them to partner directly with trade unions and private industries without significant logistical and bureaucratic hurdles that so often impede the adoption of these programs and practices in Illinois’ public schools.

Both the $45 billion Rebuild Illinois capital program and the state’s recovery from the COVID-19 recession will require developing and retaining the next generation of skilled construction workers. Accordingly, 2020 offers favorable conditions to seize this exciting opportunity. In the words of Karin Norington-Reaves, CEO of the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership and chair of the Untapped Potential Project board:

“We don’t have a centralized homogenous way of providing CTE across the country. So why not try private CTE schools as a way of exploring and piloting opportunities for kids to learn in a different way? These schools will create alignment between education and career that doesn’t exist today in the public school setting.”

This report will lay out the workforce challenges facing Illinois, and will offer a compelling case for why private CTE high schools with close ties to industry and trade unions provide one viable, highly creative solution to those challenges. Illinois has an opportunity to become a national leader in building pathways into middle-class trades that are in high demand for low-income and disadvantaged communities. By amending and strengthening the Invest in Kids Act, Illinois can seize the opportunity.

SKILLS & QUALIFICATIONS GAP

Before COVID-19 threw ice water on strong economic and employment growth, most states, including Illinois, struggled to find enough qualified workers to fill available jobs. In 39 states, Illinois included, there were more job openings than people looking for work.  

While massive layoffs and furloughs caused by the pandemic has significantly altered the economy, there are still several job-seekers for every open position, many of whom lack the skills required to get hired and succeed on the job. It often does not matter whether the open job requires an advanced degree or can be performed by someone who lacks a high school diploma: there are not enough qualified workers to fill available jobs. The skills gap is likely to become more acute in the recovery from the COVID-19 recession, as essential workers in construction and manufacturing are needed to rebuild infrastructure, modernize health care facilities, and bring products back to businesses, consumers, and households in Illinois.

In 2019, CareerBuilder, a global leader in HR technology, reported that 50 percent of hiring managers nationally said they had “open positions for which they could not find qualified candidates.” In Illinois, a workforce survey last year showed that half or more of surveyed firms reported difficulty hiring plumbers, pipelayers, millwrights, concrete workers, carpenters, electricians, and bricklayers. There was also a mismatch between credentials and qualifications required for jobs and workers possessing those attributes. In Illinois, 52 percent of jobs require skills training beyond high school, but short of a four-year degree. Only 41 percent of the state’s workers, however, fit into that level of educational attainment. Given that these mid-skill jobs are where the bulk of job growth will take place as the state recovers from the COVID-19 recession and invests in infrastructure through the Rebuild Illinois capital program, this skills gap is likely to be exacerbated in the years to come.

Numbers look more troubling when broken down by race. Almost one-third of African American men in Illinois between the ages of 20 and 24 are out of school and out of work — double the number of Latino men and triple the number of white men in that same age group. The majority of out of school youth who are in the workforce have jobs in sectors including retail trade and accommodation and food, areas particularly hard hit by COVID-19 job losses, and where “beginning wages for entry-level positions in those sectors are typically insufficient to move those workers into economic self-sufficiency. It will be critical that these youth benefit from career pathway support and continuing education to enable them to move into living wage jobs in those or other industries.”

If students graduated high school lacking only hard skills for specific jobs, then in at least some cases employers could provide the necessary training. But employers report that many entry-level job applicants also lack what have become known as “soft skills.” Soft skills include the ability to work effectively with others, particularly people from different backgrounds; basic habits of punctuality, reliability, and professionalism; and the work ethic required to perform a full day’s work for a full day’s pay.

A survey of northern Illinois employers conducted in 2019 by the Regional Planning Council found that 58 percent of employers reported that people failing to show up for work or showing up late was a major problem among middle-skill employees. Other frequently mentioned challenges were lack of desire to work and work ethic (26 percent), and communications skills (26 percent).

Statistics demonstrating qualified worker shortages all point to two basic, interrelated facts. First, Illinois’ pre-K through 12 education system—which for years has been geared toward preparing students for four-year college trajectories—is failing to place sufficient emphasis on viable, alternative pathways to success. Second, a large-scale disconnect exists between education and workforce development programs that train people and the employers looking to hire and retain qualified workers.

BARRIERS TO JOBS IN THE SKILLED TRADES

The skilled construction trades—a range of careers including plumbers, electricians, carpenters, pipefitters, operating engineers, and painters—offer promising employment pathways for young people eager to earn a living wage but who are not necessarily interested in obtaining four-year degrees. Landing a trade union apprenticeship provides the best entry point into the trades. Historically, however, apprenticeships have gone disproportionately to white candidates. There are multiple reasons contributing to this including familial and ethnic ties to trade unions in Chicago and other systemic barriers that are not unique to the construction industry but hinder the ability of people of color to enter the middle class. While trade unions have undertaken efforts to directly diversify, much remains to be done.

According to an article on Chicago apprenticeship programs from New America, a national think-tank:

“Union apprenticeship spots are fiercely competitive each year,” says Marc Poulos, Executive Director of the Indiana, Illinois, Iowa Foundation for Fair Contracting, a regional labor-management organization that advocates for contractors and workers on public projects. One union representing operating engineers in northern Illinois and Indiana receives about 5,000 applications for 400 to 500 apprenticeship slots. For women and people of color, especially those who grew up in the inner city, the odds are even longer. Without a family history in the building trades, he says, these learners are less likely to hear about construction apprenticeships, and may lack foundational skills possessed by those who grew up in the suburbs or exurbs, with fence posts to dig and small engines in the garage to fix. Female apprentices face an industry still rife with sexist attitudes that can make construction workplaces uncomfortable at best and unsafe at worst.13

As a result, African Americans are underrepresented in the construction trades, according to the Illinois Economic Policy Institute’s analysis of the 2018 American Community Survey (five-year estimates) from the U.S. Census Bureau.14 African Americans comprise 14 percent of the state’s population, but occupy just 4.6 percent of all construction and extraction jobs. Latinos are actually overrepresented—meaning they comprise a higher percentage of the construction workforce (26 percent) than the overall population (17 percent). In general, however, the construction jobs filled by Latinos tend to be lower-skilled, lower-wage occupations, such as painters, paperhangers, and roofers. Higher-skilled, better-paying jobs, such as construction supervisors and electricians, are overwhelmingly comprised of white workers.
Union apprenticeship spots are fiercely competitive each year. For women and people of color, especially those who grew up in the inner city, the odds are even longer. Without a family history in the building trades these learners are less likely to hear about construction apprenticeships, and may lack foundational skills.

-- Marc Poulos, Executive Director of the Indiana, Illinois, Iowa Foundation for Fair Contracting

Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS USA): https://usa.ipums.org/usa/cite.shtml
It is worth noting that construction trades are by no means alone in mirroring long standing societal inequities and prejudices. The underrepresentation of people of color in middle class jobs spans the economy.

To their credit, trade unions in Illinois have acknowledged these inequities and have taken steps to correct them. According to a study on apprenticeships in the construction trades from the Illinois Economic Policy Institute (ILEPI):

Both joint labor-management programs and employer-only programs have made efforts to diversify their trainees over time. Over the five-year period between 2002 and 2006, white men comprised 69 percent of the apprenticeship class in joint construction programs. A decade later, the five-year apprenticeship class was 64 percent white men—a 5 percentage point drop—and 36 percent women and people of color.15

ILEPI offers suggestions for how the building trades might boost diversity:

One way for the trades—both union and nonunion alike—to improve racial diversity would be to develop initiatives to increase the completion rate for people of color who are already in their programs. This includes creating mentoring programs, retaining counselors to address challenges unique to people of color, and hiring more minority journeymen to teach courses and serve as positive role models.16

16. ILEPI, p. 12
17. Unified State Plan, p. 76
EDUCATION SYSTEM
DISCONNECTS & DEFICIENCIES

In Illinois, 70 percent of jobs require some level of postsecondary education—which includes college, university, community college or technical training—and that number is expected to climb in the coming years. That is five percentage points above the national figure. Yet among the state’s 12.8 million adults, 1.1 million have less than 12 grades of formal education, and more than a third of those people did not even make it through ninth grade.

Disaggregating those numbers by race and geography presents a dire this challenge truly is. Statewide, just over three-quarters of African American students graduate high school in five years. The five-year graduation rate for Latinos is 82 percent. In Chicago, however, about one-third of African American males drop out of high school without receiving a diploma.

Education achievement and opportunity gaps among different racial groups continue to plague public schools exacerbating economic inequities and making it more difficult for underserved populations to have an equal opportunity at entering stable jobs with decent wages.

In Illinois, the gaps begin early, with just 22 percent of African American and 15 percent of Latino preschoolers academically prepared to enter kindergarten, compared to 32 percent of white preschoolers. Kindergarten-ready students have been found to have an 82 percent chance of being academically on track and mastering key skills by age 11. Less than half of children who enter kindergarten unprepared ever reach proficiency. Those gaps widen as students move through their education, as seen in the box.

Chronic absenteeism is also a vexing problem, with one-third of African American students and 20 percent of Latinos missing 10 percent or more of school days each year.

Widespread student disaffection with and disconnection from learning poses a serious problem, because going forward, workers will need to adopt lifelong learning modes of upskilling and reskilling to keep pace with technological and logistical changes to the workplace. As the Illinois Unified State Plan describes the situation:

“Continuous upskilling and digital dexterity will outweigh tenure and experience. The most highly valued work will still be cognitive in nature. Employees will have to apply creativity, critical thinking and constant digital upskilling to solve complex problems. Going forward, workers will need to change their skills at an accelerating pace.”

22. Advance Illinois report, p. 29
24. Unified State Plan, p. 52
According to the ILEPI study mentioned earlier, the average mid-career wage for a journeyworker who completes a joint labor-management construction apprenticeship ($40.40 per hour) is higher than the average wage from age 31-60 of a college graduate with a bachelor’s degree ($35.28 per hour), and approached the average wage of people ages 31-60 with advanced degrees ($44.42 per hour). Lifetime earnings of a worker who has gone through a joint apprenticeship program is virtually the same as the holder of a bachelor’s degree ($2.4 million vs. $2.5 million), and significantly more than the holder of an associate’s degree ($1.9 million).

WAGE COMPARISONS ACROSS EDUCATION TYPES

Students in Illinois public, private non-profit and private for-profit universities accumulate significant debt—nearly $30,000 on average—working toward their degrees. Yet significant numbers leave school without graduating. Degree attainment rates vary from a 66 percent graduation rate at private, nonprofit schools to just 43 percent at for-profit four-year schools.

By contrast, young people who enter joint labor-management apprenticeship programs complete those apprenticeships at a rate of 54 percent. While in those programs, they earn a living, and accumulate little or no debt. Once they graduate from the programs, they are ahead of the game in terms of spending power, because they start their careers with little or no debt. Without debt, workers who complete registered apprenticeship programs have more spending power and greater financial security.

If the lifetime earnings trajectories of college graduates were astronomically higher than skilled tradespeople, then taking on debt to earn a degree might be a no-brainer for almost everyone. And indeed, research has shown that, in general, every year of additional education boosts an individual’s earnings by 7 to 10 percent. Attending college and earning a bachelor’s, master’s, or advanced degree increases earnings.

But college is not for everyone, and finding viable pathways to middle-class careers is vital for the future of our economy and society. In particular, joint labor-management apprenticeship programs deliver graduation rates, training hours, and competitive lifetime earnings that rival the performance of Illinois’ four-year universities.

27. ILEPI, p. 16
Expected Earnings by Age 60 for Apprenticeships and Degrees

LACK OF EQUITABLE ACCESS TO VIVABLE CTE OPTIONS

Dual credit programs provide an opportunity for high school students to get a jump-start on an associate’s degree or post-secondary credential at little or no cost. In Illinois, there were more than 117,000 high school students enrolled in community college dual credit programs across all 48 community colleges during the 2017-18 academic year.28 Low-income students and students of color were underrepresented among those taking dual credit courses. Of Illinois high school students taking dual credit courses, just 8.9 percent were African American and 15.5 percent Latino.29 Statewide, 16.7 percent of students are African American and 26.4 percent are Latino.30 And although almost 50 percent of Illinois students are low-income, just one-third of students participating in dual credit courses were low-income.

Pre-apprenticeship CTE programs, which often tie directly to apprenticeships in the trades, are another way Illinois high school students or recent graduates can gain access to education that sets them on a viable, non-college career path. But those opportunities are limited, and pre-apprenticeships tend to be run by outside organizations rather than schools or districts. As a result, there is no centralized data collection on pre-apprenticeship programs and their effectiveness on various metrics, including their impact on worker earnings and on workforce diversity. There are, however, several long-standing programs with strong reputations in Illinois.

One of the best-known in the Chicago area is the career-readiness program run by the St. Paul Church of God in Christ Community Development Ministries, Inc. (SPCDM) on the city’s South Side. “Since its inception SPCDM has successfully placed 173 applicants into United States Department of Labor approved apprenticeships and other related industries. Its training program is designed to prepare students to pass apprenticeship examinations and conduct effective interviews. Experienced instructors with building trade experience and subject area experts, like math instructors, are hired to teach in an intensive 12-week program. The program is independently managed and funded with private donations. The SPCDM is an attractive model for pre-apprentice training because its requirements for entry and success mirror what the USDOL demands of apprenticeship programs. In other words, a graduate from the pre-apprentice program should be an eligible apprenticeship school applicant.”

More than 80 percent of applicants who completed the program are African American.

Chicago Women in Trades is a large, well-funded, and successful nonprofit pre-apprenticeship program for women. The organization helps the building trades and the contractors across Illinois develop pre-apprenticeship programs that will increase female employment in the construction industry. Its 12-week Technical Opportunities Program supports women with high school diplomas or GEDs who are interested in the construction industry, in getting hands on experience, and appropriate academic training that qualify them for apprenticeships. The 13-week Women in Welding program prepares trainees for jobs in metalworking and manufacturing, and does not require a high school diploma or GED.
Illinois in general and Chicago in particular, have a long history of providing vocational education opportunities, dating back to the early decades of the 20th century.\textsuperscript{32} Even then, the concept of vocational education generated controversy, with some arguing that preparing young people for the workforce was critical, and others saying that tracking some kids into vocational schools would perpetuate class divisions and limit social mobility. With the quality of vocational education varying across Chicago and better-equipped schools located in whiter neighborhoods, these concerns are still prevalent today.

More recently, an increased focus on preparing all students for college has further weakened vocational/CTE education. A narrow definition of equity presumed that the best and perhaps only pathway to upward mobility was working toward a college degree, especially a four-year degree. As this idea took hold, a stigma developed around CTE was seen in some circles as a form of academic tracking that relegated disproportionate numbers of low-income students of color to an inferior education that would consign them to dead-end, low-wage jobs.

While that prevailing attitude has shifted in recent years, CTE is still struggling to catch up to societal and economic needs for well-trained graduates prepared to enter the workforce and avail themselves of career paths that offer solid, middle-class wages. All in all, both public high school CTE models, which in many cases offer limited opportunities for students to engage in quality workforce programming, and community college models, which rely on students first progressing through high school, have not caught up to the demand for skilled workers in Illinois. These models lack the capability and the flexibility to meet current and future demand. For Illinois to reassert itself as the manufacturing hub of the Midwest, and arguably the United States, requires direct partnerships between business, industry, and skilled trades and K-12 education, where employers are not only invited to the table, but they lead the work.

\textsuperscript{32} http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1123.html
LAYERS OF OVERSIGHT & REGULATIONS

In recent years, state government has made enhancing career and technical education opportunities a key educational priority. While this has resulted in some programmatic enhancements and higher standards, it has also created additional layers of bureaucracy that can limit systems’ abilities to pivot and adapt to rapidly-changing economic conditions and technological advancements. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, school systems have struggled to pivot effectively to online learning. In the CTE space, the Illinois State Board of Education, Community College Board, and Illinois Workforce Innovation Board all play major roles in the development and oversight of CTE programs—each with committees, commissions, and working groups that are often duplicative.

As acknowledged in the Unified State Plan for workforce development: “Many businesses are frustrated with the myriad workforce and education organizations and institutions working in silos. Lack of coordination on business engagement is a very common business complaint.”

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33. Unified State Plan, p. 38
THE FUTURE OF ILLINOIS SOLUTION

PART 02
Beginning with a flagship school projected to open in the fall of 2021 on Chicago’s South or West Side, the Future of Illinois coalition and the Untapped Potential Project (UP²) are leading the planning for a network of independent career and technical education high schools throughout Illinois. At these schools, students will be supported through scholarships from the Invest in Kids Act. The schools will be centrally located in communities where industry-led education and training opportunities are often not available. The schools will be joint partnerships between labor, industry, and the communities they intend to serve. Successful matriculation through these schools will lead directly into apprenticeship opportunities, and ultimately into mid-to-high-wage jobs that are upwardly mobile.

The effort to establish these schools by leveraging the tax credit scholarship program has produced bipartisan support, in large part because of the unprecedented charge to directly bring together labor, industry, communities of color, and educators to diversity and increase the skills of the workforce. The need to move nimbly and collaboratively has been made exponentially more urgent by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis it spawned.

These schools will be uniquely suited to the realities of the modern economy and workplace. They also will be adaptable to sudden swings in workforce needs, as currently illustrated by the COVID-19 economic disruption. While diverging from traditional models of CTE education today, they will draw on the best practices of schools and programs from across the country that have proven track records of educating underserved populations and helping them develop the skills necessary for access into upwardly mobile jobs. A list and brief description of several such programs can be found in the appendix to this report.

This is the school for the tinkerers; the kids building with Lego sets and Tinker Toys and Minecraft. The kids who may not find their space in a traditional classroom. It does not mean they are less than.

-- Karin Norington-Reaves, CEO of the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership
Students will be exposed to a wide range of technical fields and jobs, with academic coursework and technical training integrated by using relevant tools, equipment, and technologies, both inside classrooms and in real-world work environments. The flagship school, which will support up to 600 students and enroll an inaugural ninth grade class of 150 students, will offer the following technical training and employment pathways:

- Operating Engineer: operate and maintain heavy construction equipment, including the bulldozers, motor graders, backhoes, and cranes that form and shape large-scale infrastructure.
- Electrician: Design, install, and maintain electrical systems and equipment.
- Carpentry: Design, build and repair wooden objects and structures.
- Information & Technology: Training in coding, data, design, marketing, and other digital and technical tools.
- Plumbing: Build and repair systems of pipes, tanks, fittings, and other apparatus required for the water supply, heating, and sanitation in a building.
- Automotive: Training in commercial driving, engine mechanics, body repair, fleet management, and transportation logistics.
- Advanced manufacturing: Training in innovative technology to improve products and processes.

The schools will also place heavy emphasis on the development of the soft skills required to succeed in the modern workplace, including punctuality, reliability, and the ability to work productively and collaboratively in diverse teams.

The first school will support up to 600 students, with a goal of enrolling an inaugural ninth grade class of 150 students. The size, location, and focus areas of additional schools will vary based on community and industry needs.

In addition to industry-led technical training, the schools will offer an academically rigorous core curriculum and dual pathways model. At minimum, academic course offerings will allow students to meet Illinois high school graduation requirements. The schools will support a dual pathways model that both prepares students for post-secondary college or university education, and ensure career readiness for direct entry into the workforce.

Career-focused schools will ensure graduates are prepared for post-secondary success, and proficient in at least one employable technical skill that provides an upwardly mobile pathway into the middle class—whether through an apprenticeship program, a two- or four-year college, entering the workforce directly, enlisting in the Armed Forces, or some combination of these.
As the coalition has launched into planning UP² schools, its members have concluded that they should be private and independently managed. The schools will draw on the decades of success in Illinois’ registered apprenticeship programs, which are operated privately by employers and labor organizations. Ensuring that the schools are agile and adaptable can make them especially effective at serving local populations and businesses in the current economic, political, and regulatory environment.

The value of replicating and building upon the proven model in Illinois’ apprenticeship programs is twofold. First, it avoids the layers of regulation and bureaucracy that make it difficult for public schools to pivot quickly as industries, technologies, and workforce conditions change. Second, it enables students to gain technical expertise in a variety of fields from professionals within those fields who serve as primary instructors. While the public education system has erected barriers that make it difficult for industry professionals to teach in CTE schools—such as requiring instructors to have 60 semester hours of classroom learning before they can teach a CTE subject full-time. Private schools are exempt from such teacher licensure requirements.34

This means that seasoned professionals with experience teaching in apprenticeship programs or other formal classroom settings can enter CTE classrooms and impart their knowledge to students without needing to jump through regulatory licensing or certification hoops.
It is worth noting, however, that the best track record for promoting upwardly-mobile careers within Illinois’ apprenticeship system is among joint labor-management programs. The ILEPI report on apprenticeship programs provides rich data on the efficacy of joint labor-management programs in preparing apprentices for stable, well-paying careers in the trades. These joint programs yield much stronger outcomes for a more diverse pool of apprentices than apprenticeships run by industry alone.35

Karin Norington-Reaves, CEO of the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership and chair of the Untapped Potential Project board, has spoken eloquently about the potential impact of these CTE schools.

“We don’t have a centralized homogenous way of providing CTE across the country. So private CTE schools provide a way of exploring and piloting opportunities for kids to learn in a different way,” said Norington-Reaves. “These schools will create alignment between education and career that doesn’t exist today in the public school setting.”

Norington-Reaves also stresses that top-flight, independent CTE schools should in no way be viewed as a lower-track option best suited to students who struggled in more traditional schools.

“These schools will not skirt academic rigor,” she said. “This is not the throwaway school where you send the kids who were failing and couldn’t make it. This is where you send the kids who got overlooked because they might be tactile or kinesthetic learners, and weren’t in an environment that fostered and promoted and supported them. This is the school for the tinkerers, the kids building with Lego sets and Tinker Toys and Minecraft. The kids who may not find their space in a traditional classroom. It does not mean they are ‘less than.’”

35. ILEPI report, pp. 7-10
REQUIRED CHANGES TO THE INVEST IN KIDS ACT

The landmark, bipartisan Invest in Kids Act, signed into law in 2017, allows for privately funded, K-12, tax credit scholarships to support student scholarships. By leveraging tax credit incentives, local corporations and industry can direct financial capital to support scholarships for low-income, working-class students, where cost is often a barrier to entry and completion. Industry will provide donations to scholarship granting organizations in return for a state tax credit on their donation.

Working in concert with the trade schools, students from these targeted communities will be recruited to apply for scholarships that support their tuition and fees all the way through placement into upwardly-mobile work.

For the Act to be utilized to its fullest to benefit private CTE schools, however, will require some modifications to the current law. While negotiations during legislative session will set the specific parameters, the Future of Illinois coalition believes the following areas must be addressed.
Remove the law’s sunset to provide assurance to schools, donors, and students that the scholarships will be available for a student’s entire schooling career.

Allow corporations to designate the destination of their donations to support high-quality programs that align with their mission. Corporations are currently not allowed to designate to which school(s) they want to donate.

Allow accredited schools to participate. Under the Act as currently written, schools must undergo an additional state recognition process before becoming eligible to accept scholarship students. Removing this barrier would provide students and families with more quality options to find their best fit school at a quicker pace.

Lift the tax credit that funds the scholarships to 100 percent, to grow corporate donor participation (who currently do no participate at a 75 percent credit) to meet the student demand that is approximately eight times greater than available funds.

Prioritize scholarships to current recipients. This change would codify in statute that students who receive scholarships are first in line to receive a scholarship in subsequent years. This would ensure education continuity and uninterrupted whole child support from a school community for scholarship students.

Increase the maximum scholarship amount for students attending CTE schools to 1.5 times the current maximum, or about $20,000. CTE students require state-of-the-art equipment and tradework supplies in addition to traditional school supplies. Therefore, scholarships must match these costs to remove barriers to entry for low-income students.

Implement an automatic escalator when the state cap on donations (currently $75 million) is reached in two out of three years. This provision allows the program increasingly to meet student demand as private support for the program grows.

INVEST IN KIDS ACT PROGRAM RESULTS

Since the Invest in Kids Act’s passage in 2017, Illinois’ Tax Credit Scholarship Program has raised more than $126 million through private donations from thousands of Illinoisans. These donations have funded more than 16,000 scholarships.

All awarded students qualify based on financial need. Each year, waitlists for the program’s scholarships exceed the available scholarships, highlighting families’ and students’ demand for the program.
IN CONCLUSION

In the span of a few weeks, the COVID-19 pandemic made Illinois’ economic and workforce challenges exponentially worse. As the state considers how to rebuild from the COVID-19 recession and importantly, add capacity, workforce investment will be prioritized. Additionally, while the $45 billion Rebuild Illinois capital plan will be key to putting Illinois residents back to work, it will require addressing existing workforce shortages in both the skilled construction trades and other industries. Illinois also has a unique opportunity to recapture and rebuild local supply chains that are currently broken and expatriated. Both the infrastructure and supply chain challenges necessitate a rethinking of the traditional way Illinois has educated and prepared its youth for the workforce.

Illinois has an opportunity to provide solutions to vulnerable communities. To deliver skills training and direct pathways into upwardly mobile jobs for those on the margins of the economy, put Illinoisans back to work, and build local supply chain capacity to restore Illinois as a national manufacturing hub that can produce high-priority supplies, Illinois can support a new network of private CTE schools. Ultimately, the Future of Illinois coalition’s plan is a win-win for the state, providing an exciting new educational option for underserved youth and boosting the state’s economy.
APPENDIX: RESEARCHED SCHOOLS & MODELS WORTH EMULATING

The Untapped Potential Project schools that supported by the Future of Illinois coalition would offer a unique and innovative blend of hard- and soft-skills training and rigorous academics. They would be schools for the future and as such, are not directly comparable to other schools across in the country. Comprehensive research on the most effective high schools, community colleges, and private training programs, however, yields elements that can be emulated.

The Brooklyn Steam Center.36 This break-the-mold program provides 11th and 12th graders from eight area public schools with immersive career preparation at the 300-acre Brooklyn Navy Yard, a 400+ company industrial park. The STEAM Center recently moved into a brand-new, custom built facility and finished its first full year at scale, with 221 juniors and seniors attending the program from eight Brooklyn district schools. “This is the way students learn, and this is the way industry is going,” said New York Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza after touring the facility. This program relies on public funding significantly above what most NYC schools get, and for this and other reasons is almost impossible to replicate in the public sphere.

Ranken Technical College.37 This century-old St. Louis-based private technical college, located in the Ferguson neighborhood, has kept pace with the times and remains on the cutting edge of technical education. For each hour of classroom instruction, students spend at least three hours in a lab or shop setting, becoming proficient in the skills they need to excel in their careers. This means that each student spends an average of 15 hours a week doing hands-on work with the guidance of expert instructors. Ranken focuses on the development of both technical and soft skills required to succeed in the 21st century workplace. Ranken offers bachelor’s and associate degree tracks, as well as certificate programs. Areas of study include automotive, architecture, construction, electrical, information technology, and manufacturing.

Northland Workforce Training Center.38 Based in Buffalo, N.Y., is an industry-driven, public-private partnership between employers, educational institutions, community and faith-based organizations and state and local government focused on closing the skills gap of the local labor pool and creating economic on-ramps to training, co-ops, internships, apprenticeships, and permanent employment for Western New Yorkers seeking high-paying advanced manufacturing and energy careers. Northland is intentional about reducing or eliminating barriers for its students, including transportation, childcare, academic readiness, and affordability. Programs offered include welding technology, electrical construction and maintenance, machine tool technology, and mechatronics. In addition, Northland offers an academic advancement support program for students who lack 10th-grade literacy and numeracy.

St. Benedict’s Preparatory School.39 Located in Newark, N.J., St.Benedict’s is a 150-year-old Catholic school that instills its students—virtually all low-income people of color—with an academically rigorous, character-based love of learning. Featured on 60 Minutes,40 St. Benedict’s is relevant to the Future of Illinois coalition for its incredible success in preparing students who might otherwise fall through the cracks for success in a complex and often unjust world. Its character program is second to none.