

***The New Education Advocacy in the U.S. States: A Perspective From The Field***  
***Commentary by Robin M. Steans, Advance Illinois Executive Director, May 2014***

**A Burgeoning Movement Afoot**

Amid the steady march to improve public schools, a new breed of education advocates is emerging to shape education policy at the state level. The nascence of the new education advocates – conceived during the past five years – makes the degree of influence all the more notable.

Advance Illinois is part of this ecosystem. Created five years ago, Advance Illinois is dedicated to providing an independent, objective voice in support of a public education system that prepares all students for college, career and citizenship. We are bipartisan and nonprofit, and I have had the privilege of shepherding the organization since its inception.

Given the focus of our work and the nature of how we do it, The Wallace Foundation last year proposed a case study of Advance Illinois as part of a comprehensive analysis of new education advocates, *New Education Advocacy Organizations in the U.S. States: National Snapshot and a Case Study of Advance Illinois*.

The Advance Illinois Board and staff recognized a deep dive into our work might be uncomfortable, but that reflection would offer insight into what we (and the field) have done well, how we might improve and where we might focus moving forward. As proponents of evaluation, we saw this as an opportunity to practice what we preach and continue to grow as an organization and contribute to the field, so we agreed to participate.

The resulting report tells the story of how advocates like Advance Illinois can improve education by focusing on what best serves students, engaging everyone from policymakers to parents in the effort, and bringing together diverse leaders to support improvement. As the authors describe and as we can attest, the work is challenging, yet critical. Better still, the study affirms that it can be done in a way that achieves real impact.

What follows is our state-level perspective on the work at hand and on several dilemmas raised within the report.

**Who Are New Education Advocates? We're Not All Alike. Review Finds**

The report's authors identified defining traits of education advocacy organizations – namely, we are not all alike. Some are partisan. Some work with decision-makers, some engage at the local level, others support policy implementation, and many engage in some combination of the above.

The findings about new education advocates can be distilled to three observations, observations we would second (loudly) given our perspective during the past five years within the Illinois landscape:

- ***States serve as an often overlooked linchpin in education policy.*** States interpret federal policy. States also oversee school districts as they put policy initiatives into practice. The intersection of the two fuels the state's prominence in how education policy takes shape at the district and school level.
- ***New education advocates are "rabble rousers" of a different sort.*** This new breed of advocates differs from education stakeholders. We have boards, not members. We rely on foundation funds and contributions rather than dues. And we tend to focus agendas on students more than adults.
- ***Framing the education discourse within a state is challenging, yet critical, and can be done.*** The strategy may vary depending upon the issue at hand, but all of us engaged in new education advocacy would be wise to be nimble, strategic and willing to partner as well as prod when the issue calls for it.

## **Looking In The Mirror: An Evaluation Of Our Work at Advance Illinois**

The report's authors analyzed Advance Illinois against our organization's goals. Through more than two dozen interviews, media analysis and research of our organization's structure and scope of work, the report suggests Advance Illinois "delivered on its promises." Here's how:

- ***We support and bring additional capacity to enhance the work of state institutions.*** It's not our organizational nature to simply play the gadfly. As a practical point, our existence coincided with a nearly \$1 billion decline in Illinois' investment in K-12 education since 2009. In an era of limited resources, we all have a role to play in supporting public education.
- ***We build bridges between an array of partners to support educational policy.*** Such bridges often extend to new or otherwise reluctant partners. This "connective" work opens the conversation to a range of perspectives and broadens discussion and decision-making.

### ***A Driving Dilemma: Engaging the Grasstops and Grassroots***

*The report's authors pinpoint a key challenge faced by Advance Illinois and others: that of balancing grasstops versus grassroots work.*

*While Advance Illinois has worked at all levels, the authors note our early work tilted toward grasstops outreach. While arguably a practical response to Illinois' dynamic as a leadership-driven state, it also reflects the evolving nature of the work and our evolving capacity for more labor-intensive grassroots outreach.*

*In a state as large, diverse and segmented as Illinois – with more than 860 school districts that range from one-district schoolhouses to the nation's third largest school system – grassroots advocacy and outreach is a critical, if challenging, vein of work. Our team and Board have been aware of and attentive to this challenge, but it has taken time to grow our ability to develop partnerships in the state. As the critical need for local engagement in school progress and change is increasingly clear, however, and as we mature, we have been able to hire another outreach associate to expand this work, and recently convened a statewide summit on the collective impact approach to educational improvement and community development.*

*The question for the field is whether and how other groups might strike a grassroots/grasstops balance as they consider the policy-making landscape at hand and/or their staffing capacity in the early stages. One way or another, and as the authors observe, there is little doubt that outreach at all levels is essential to both fomenting and sustaining meaningful change.*

- ***We use research and evidence-based best practices to drive our advocacy, and we do our homework before staking a position.*** That's according to a majority of individuals interviewed or surveyed for the report. Indeed, the diversity of opinions and interests among our own Board and staff drive us to the reasonable, data-based middle ground. Some respondents, though, urged us to better connect the research with on-the-ground conditions (e.g., funding) and others suggested we bring a more critical eye to the research base for our work.

### ***A Driving Dilemma: When Should an Advocate Prod, When Should It Partner?***

*As all independent organizations know well, there is a time to prod and a time to partner in an effort to get work done. Recognizing the distinction between the two – and the competing need for both – is critical.*

*At Advance Illinois, we confront this tension with our biennial report, titled *The State We're In*. The report compares Illinois performance with other states across a range of measures that span early childhood through postsecondary, and assigns grades based upon the results. This is a significant undertaking that relies on state-by-state data, which can be challenging to collect and analyze. With help from an brainy group of advisors, we navigate the process with a great deal of care, but there is little doubt that using grades to summarize Illinois' performance has been off-putting to many in the field, even as it generates attention and awareness among the broader public.*

*This tension reflects the broader challenge facing state-level policy and advocacy organizations: When is it necessary to make the field uncomfortable, and when/how should that be balanced against the value of working effectively with stakeholders? Organizations around the country answer that question differently. At Advance Illinois, we have endeavored to be constructive and collaborative participants in the core issues facing the state, while recognizing that we have a unique role to play in laying out sometimes hard realities for public discussion. Knowing that we cannot avoid ruffling feathers, we aim to balance that with as much constructive support and engagement as we can, in an effort to build relationships and credibility that can withstand even difficult moments and issues.*

*To date, our efforts to bring tough issues to light has not compromised our ability to collaborate with these and other partners. That said, maintaining that balance has been and will continue to be an ongoing tension.*

- ***We effectively play a role in creating policy change to support educational improvement.*** Advance Illinois is an organization with a track record for getting things done, a recognition offered by the group's champions and critics alike. This reflects the organization's efforts to mobilize resources, find a reasonable middle ground with often unlikely partners, and frame issues well and in a way that supports state-level advocacy and outreach.

### ***A Driving Dilemma: What Happens Next? Policy Change Is A First Step***

*During the past five years, Illinois leaders have raised student expectations, championed educator evaluations to provide feedback and improve instruction, redesigned school report cards to put meaningful information in the hands of families and stepped up efforts to support struggling schools and the students they serve.*

*These and other interlocking initiatives represent the state's comprehensive approach to a comprehensive challenge. Yet they have come at the same time Illinois cut K-12 education funding by nearly \$1 billion, compromising the ability of the state education agency and individual districts to implement and support these changes.*

*The report's authors rightly ask: What role should advocates play in the implementation of these and other reforms?*

*We wrestle with this question ourselves, and the answer depends, in part, upon the nature of the policy. Some changes, such as the shift to new learning standards or new educator evaluations, require significant support if they are to be implemented well. Other policy changes, such as shifts in school funding (see *Funding for Illinois' Future* below) represent less of an implementation challenge. Our work straddles both, and our role varies accordingly. Whereas we championed changes to educator evaluations in 2010, we now work to build guidelines and to advocate*

*for the support and professional development new evaluation systems require. We use our skills as a “connector” and “resource mobilizer,” to use the language of the report, to accomplish this. Yet we continue to be mindful of striking the right balance, particularly given the different expertise required for policy development versus that required for more direct technical assistance. Given the make-or-break role of strong implementation, the authors rightly challenge organizations to consider that piece of the work – either by developing internal capacity, or ensuring it exists.*

- ***We provide information and context for the work at hand to policy elites and the media.*** The credibility of the Advance Illinois Board of Directors helps in this regard. The 17-member board includes Democrats and Republicans, Chicagoans and downstate residents, CEOs and educators. An analysis by the report’s authors found that news stories containing Advance Illinois board members more likely resulted in the organization being described as independent, objective or nonpartisan.

### **The Road Ahead for Advance Illinois**

We appreciate the independent evaluation of our work and the willingness of The Wallace Foundation to study the landscape of state education advocacy.

To be sure, challenges lie ahead. Most notably perhaps is the need to see policy translate to practice during a time of limited resources. This will define us and other education advocates who ultimately will be measured by how the improvements they champion serve students.

*“New education advocates will ultimately prove their value not simply by being something new or different,” the report notes, “but by showing that the policies they promote are more successful in practice than the alternatives.”*

We agree, and we set for ourselves the same challenge we have issued for our state: We must do better.

### ***Funding for Illinois’ Future***

For two years now, Advance Illinois has shone a light on the shortcomings of how Illinois funds public schools and the students they serve, a strand of work noted by the report’s authors.

Illinois’ education funding system consistently ranks among the most regressive nationwide. And the state consistently falls short of funding the amount recommended by Illinois’ independent funding commission as the adequate level needed for an average student. It was not until Advance Illinois called attention to the little-understood practice of proration – a backdoor budget cut that disproportionately hurts school districts with little local wealth and large concentrations of low-income students – that the policy-making wheels began to turn.

In 2013, the Illinois Senate charged a bipartisan task force of senators with examining how Illinois might better support public schools. In February, after months of testimony and research, the Education Funding Advisory Committee released a blueprint to more effectively distribute state education funds.

In April 2014, the Illinois School Funding Reform Act of 2014 was filed with a comprehensive framework to fund public education that will bear on future generations of Illinoisans. As proposed, the measure aims to bring more consistency to the state’s funding system that now consists of a hodge-podge of formulas, and more efficiently direct state education dollars to students and districts in need.

The odds of the legislation passing both chambers and getting signed into law by the governor during an election year are unclear; skeptics might say they are long at best.

Yet for the first time in years, there is a comprehensive and credible plan on the table to improve how our state funds public education that is sparking long overdue discussion and forging consensus. In my book, for now, that’s a win.

