

20 | ILLINOIS
23 | LEGISLATOR
RETREAT

SUPPORTING THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

With decades of research informing our understanding of [brain science](#) and documenting the long-term benefits of targeted investment in young children, one conclusion is increasingly clear: the years of early childhood matter – both for children themselves and for society at large.

Babies are “wired” to understand the world from the ways they are cared for from birth. Every word spoken to them, every facial expression they see, and [every interaction with caregivers](#) – both in and out of the home – helps shape the foundation of their healthy development. Babies learn best when actively engaged by trusted caregivers.

Further, [research](#) has documented increases in later school and life success when young children have opportunities to access high-quality early childhood experiences. For children in child care, these experiences are provided by early childhood educators who play critical roles in children’s development.

The work of an early educator requires knowledge, skill, and strong levels of competency to effectively provide high-quality care and education. Early care and education professionals are sometimes referred to as “the workforce behind the workforce” because reliable child care enables parents to work, attend school and/or participate in other job training opportunities. The

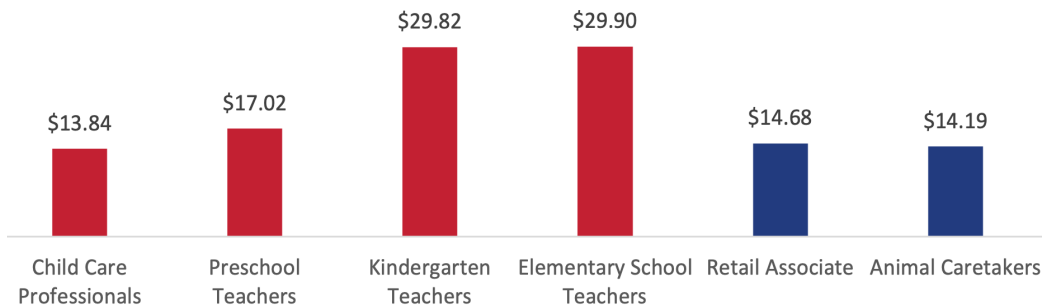
critical role early educators play makes it essential that the field has a strong and competent educator pipeline.

Despite the role child care plays in the state’s economic and social success, the estimated [45,060 professionals](#) that make up Illinois’ early childhood workforce are leaving the field in large numbers, with an annual turnover rate of 39.5% (a 7% increase within the span of 2 years). Many in the early childhood workforce leave because their [median wage](#) in Illinois is just \$13.84 per hour. Most also lack access to critical benefits such as health insurance and paid sick leave.

This poor compensation and lack of benefits causes many child care providers to report difficulty with food security, housing, or paying for utilities, causing many to hold one or more additional jobs to meet their basic needs. In fact, the early education workforce experiences a poverty rate [7.7 times](#) higher than teachers in the K-8 system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the landscape of the nation’s workforce, resulting in an unprecedented closure of child care programs. Already operating on razor thin margins, child care programs experienced financial turmoil, fluctuating and unpredictable demand, as well as costly new health and safety regulations, both during and post-pandemic. Retainment issues have not only caused skilled, knowledgeable, and devoted educators to leave the field but also have negatively impacted children’s social and academic progress. In 2023, the workforce

Workforce Hourly Wages Comparison in Illinois (2022)



Source

continues to recover from the fallout of the pandemic, with 39,400 fewer jobs in child care (nationally) compared to February 2020.

As a consequence of these challenges, the [turnover](#) in the child care workforce is an even greater issue, making it difficult to find and retain quality workers. This negatively impacts children's well-being when consistency of care is lacking, and teacher-child relationships are broken. It also reduces access to quality early childhood programs for working families which has an economic impact on the state. In Illinois, the economic drag due to lack of Infant-Toddler care alone is estimated to be [\\$4.9 Billion annually](#).

Illinois has begun to make progress in strengthening the early childhood workforce with higher wages and increased access to quality child care programs. Smart Start Compensation and Quality Supports is a new multi-year plan. In FY24 new workforce compensation contracts using a based funding model that will increase wages to at least \$17-\$19/hr.

Additionally:

- The state is supporting navigators that offer personal assistance to help college students enroll in college/university coursework that will advance careers in early childhood education and better articulate how courses already completed can count towards degree requirements
- The Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity Scholarship Program offers financial awards to earn a credential and/or degree in the field of early childhood education. Recipients of this scholarship commit to working in the early childhood workforce in Illinois upon completion of their studies.
- The Illinois ExceleRate Pilot includes targeted funding to support quality improvement and teacher compensation. The state is currently sustaining the ExceleRate Pilot with possible consideration to expand in FY26 using Smart Start Quality Investments.

Policy Considerations

- How can the legislature stem attrition within the early childhood workforce and make child care wages more competitive in Illinois?
- How might Illinois align the exit ramps of public benefit programs (e.g., SNAP, Medicare) to avoid unintended "benefits cliffs" associated with the state's expanded investments in the Smart Start Compensation and Quality Support plan?
- In what ways can policymakers build on the work that has begun in Illinois to strengthen the early educator pipeline? How might access to affordable insurance help?



K-12 LITERACY: READING AS A RIGHT AND SCIENCE

The [science of reading](#) represents the collection of evidence-based practices supported by decades of interdisciplinary research in the education, psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience fields. The notion of the science of reading is relatively new, growing out of the 1997 [National Reading Panel](#). As a result, ineffective, non-research based practices for teaching literacy are still widely used.

It is difficult to determine how many teachers use the science of reading in classrooms, but we can surmise that the probability is higher if teachers learned evidence-based practices in their teacher preparation programs. As of 2023, [32 states](#) required educator preparation programs (EPPs) to address the science of reading for at least some teacher candidates.

State Approaches to Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction

The practice of aligning literacy instruction to the science of reading has gained traction nationally. States like [Mississippi](#), [Arkansas](#), [Colorado](#), and [North](#)

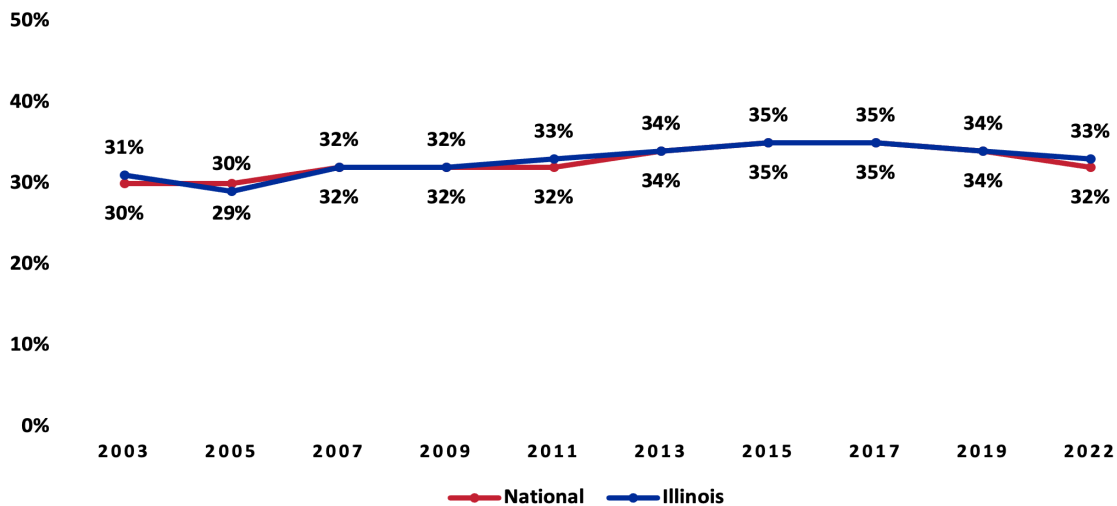
[Carolina](#) include the following as part of their science of reading frameworks:

- Aligning state literacy standards to the science of reading
- Funding professional development for teachers in the science of reading
- Requiring that reading interventions for students be aligned with the science of reading
- Working to align teacher licensure exams with the science of reading
- Requiring educator preparation programs to include coursework in the science of reading

Literacy Proficiency and the Illinois Literacy Plan

Over the past 20 years, Illinois has consistently followed the national average performance on fourth grade reading proficiency as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Although the state’s performance aligns with the national average, education stakeholders are investing in improving student performance as evidenced by passage of the Illinois Literacy Plan.

Illinois 4th Grade National assessment of educational progress (NAEP) Reading: Percent Proficient or Above



Source

In July 2023, Illinois passed [SB 2243](#), requiring the State Board of Education to adopt a statewide comprehensive literacy plan by October 1, 2023. To support the writing of the plan, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) completed a six-session literacy tour across the state in August for the Illinois Literacy Plan and are [still](#) collecting public feedback. ISBE plans to finalize the state’s literacy framework by [January, 2024](#).

The plan currently provides a framework for statewide literacy instruction [including](#):

- Framework for Evidence-Based Instruction
- Educator Professional Learning and Development
- Framework for Leadership, Support Systems, and Implementation
- Resources for Implementation

Policy Considerations

- How can the legislature best support statewide implementation of the Illinois Literacy Plan?

- As the Illinois Literacy Plan is finalized, how can legislators support stakeholder buy-in across the state to facilitate implementation?

K-12 STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Youth suicide has been on the rise for the past decade and is the [second leading cause of death](#) among children ages 10-14 and the [third leading cause of death](#) among individuals ages 15-24. In the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the [proportion](#) of children between the ages of five and 11 visiting an emergency department because of a mental health crisis was 24 percent higher than the same time period in 2019; among 12- to 17-year-olds, that number increased by 31 percent. Ultimately, [37 percent](#) of high school students reported experiencing poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Schools must consider the unique needs of each student, starting with their need to feel safe, in order to effectively address the impact of mental health on student learning. The [figure below](#) highlights the key student needs that must be met to ensure students are ready to learn.



Caring for the mental health needs of students requires the development of a robust infrastructure that goes beyond learning, as students must have their behavioral and mental health needs met to feel safe, succeed academically, and be the best version of themselves. Many methods designed to focus on those needs fall under what are known as [wraparound services](#).

Wraparound services feed into the philosophy of caring for the [“whole child,”](#) meaning that states and districts must go beyond meeting just academic needs to address emotional, behavioral, and health needs as well. States and districts throughout the country are working to find ways to generate and target investments for student wraparound services. These approaches vary from calls for targeted investments in after-school programs to establishing [community schools](#).

Illinois has taken several legislative steps to support student mental health:

- **Mental Illness In-Service Training:** Illinois passed [PA 101-0350](#), requiring licensed school personnel and administrators in K-12 to be trained to identify warning signs of mental illness and suicidal ideation in youth as well as intervention and referral strategies.
- **Student Mental Health Days:** [Senate Bill 1577](#) alters attendance regulations to allow students five mental or behavioral health days per year without requiring a medical note. The bill includes that a student may be referred to appropriate school personnel after the second absence.
- **Annie Marie’s Law:** This legislation [requires](#) all schools to have a current suicide awareness and prevention policy publicly posted on their school district’s website.

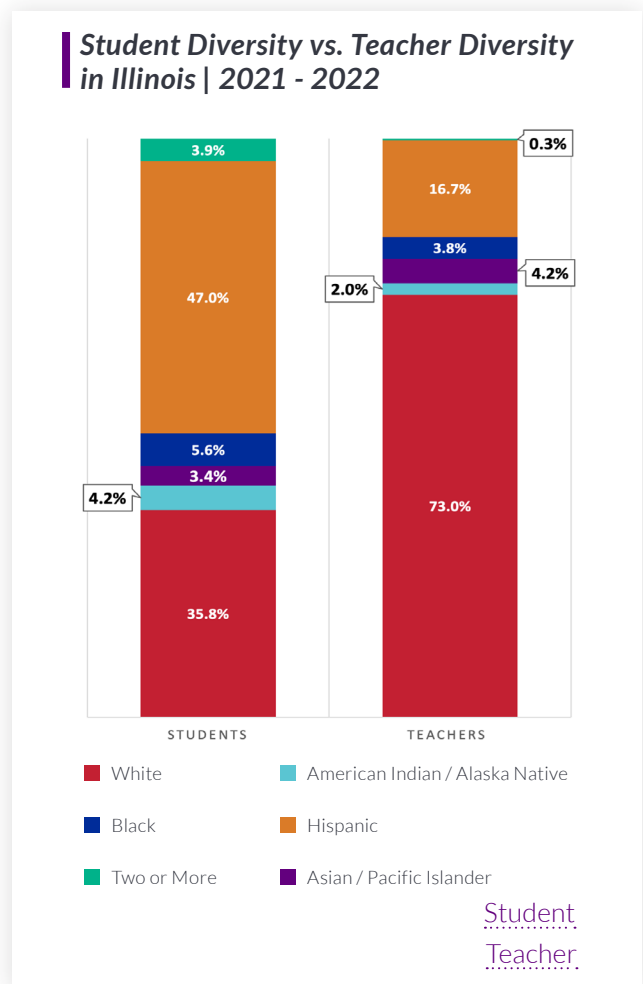
Policy Considerations

- In what ways can policymakers support communities across Illinois to leverage their strengths in supporting parents, schools, and students?

- What additional information is needed to best support the mental and behavioral health of Illinois’s student population?
- How can Illinois better enlist local and regional agencies to provide behavioral health assistance and support to students?

RECRUITING AND RETAINING A HIGH-QUALITY AND DIVERSE K-12 EDUCATOR WORKFORCE

Research [indicates](#) that teachers are the most important school-based factor for student growth and achievement. Students taught by highly effective, excellent educators are [more likely](#) to graduate from high school, attend college, be employed, and earn higher wages.



Extensive research has [also found](#) that a diverse educator workforce is beneficial to all students, but especially students of color. When students are taught by an educator who reflects their racial identity, their [test scores improve](#) in both math and reading in early grades, and they are less likely to face exclusionary discipline practices and more likely to attain a postsecondary credential or degree.

However, nationally and in Illinois, the teaching profession is largely white and female, a trend that has been persistent; over the last [30 years](#), the percentage of the national teacher workforce who are women has increased and, while the profession has become slightly more racially and ethnically diverse overall, the

One Million Teachers of Color

Launched by The Hunt Institute and TNTP, the [One Million Teachers of Color](#) campaign has a goal of adding one million teachers of color and 30,000 leaders of color to the education workforce over the next decade. Our campaign is made up of leaders from the education sector and beyond, united in the belief that when education systems are designed to honor the humanity of teachers and school leaders of color, students and our entire society benefit. As a growing body of research indicates, when education systems recruit and retain teachers and leaders of color, all students, particularly students of color, benefit. Together we seek to amplify the unique strengths, skills, and lived experience that teachers and leaders of color bring in support of all students.

Additional partners in the campaign include the Center for Black Educator Development, EdTrust, Latinos for Education, Men of Color in Educational Leadership, New Leaders, and Teach Plus.

percentage of Black teachers has declined. Educators of color experience significant barriers both before and throughout their professional careers, making it more difficult for these individuals to enter or stay in the teaching profession.

Postsecondary Completion

Due to barriers faced by people of color that begin long before college or other educator preparation programs, students of color experience [lower enrollment and graduation rates](#) from postsecondary institutions, making diverse educator recruitment difficult. Growing up, students of color are [more likely](#) to attend schools where the majority of students are also low-income or of color. These schools tend to be underfunded, have fewer qualified educators, and sparse educational offerings, [reducing the likelihood](#) these students will matriculate to college. Low-income and students of color who do attend college are [more likely to be enrolled in remedial courses](#), delaying their graduation and thus increasing the cost of their education.

Educators of color, particularly Black educators, are [more likely](#) to have financed their college education through student loans, causing them to carry more debt. Therefore, students of color and low-income students, who often lack generational wealth or may be supporting additional family members, take on [additional risks](#) when attending college, likely leading them to pursue more financially lucrative careers.

Discrimination

Studies have shown that educators of color report higher levels of discrimination, microaggressions, and other forms of racism while on the job compared to their white coworkers. In one study, educators of color in predominately white school settings [were more likely to receive lower evaluation scores](#), which may lead educators of color to leave their schools for other opportunities.

Educators of color working in majority-white schools are also prone to heightened feelings of isolation. In fact, an [assessment](#) conducted by Minneapolis Public Schools in 2018 found that educators of color reported feeling vulnerable, excluded, and unwelcome

in their schools. The same assessment also highlighted that educators of color felt they would be risking their jobs by expressing their frustrations or attempting to address inequities within their schools.

The Invisible Tax

The [invisible tax](#) is levied on educators of color when they are expected to take on additional duties related to their race or ethnicity, such as serving as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion experts within their schools. Teachers who speak more than one language may be required to translate documents or liaise with families that do not speak English, often for no additional compensation. Black male educators, who are already [underrepresented](#) in the education profession, report spending [more time mentoring and counseling](#) students than teachers of any other demographic, and often have to serve as disciplinarians to students of color in their schools as well.

Diverse and Learner-Ready Teachers

In 2018, Illinois joined the Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) [Diverse and Learner-Ready Teachers \(DLRT\) Initiative](#) to revise, enact, or remove state policies that address specific challenges for both diversifying the educator workforce and ensuring all educators are culturally responsive in practice. [This work](#) of diverse stakeholders across higher education, district and school-level leadership, the Illinois State Board of Education, and the Illinois General Assembly who have committed to the following [goals](#):

- Increasing the number of teachers of color in Illinois public schools by 2025 and increasing the pool of diverse teacher candidates by 2023.
- Ensuring that all teachers practice culturally responsive teaching via development of a definition for "Learner Ready" for teacher candidates and a required training/PD activity for all in-service teachers.
- Providing more valuable support to teachers of color who are currently in the teaching profession.

- Guiding Illinois institutions of higher education on inclusion of the Illinois [Culturally Responsive Teacher and Leader Standards](#) into their preparation programs, and helping them develop recruitment and retention plans for teacher candidates of color.

An additional component of the DLRT Initiative is the Diverse and Learner-Ready Teacher Network, which provides practitioner insight and expertise to advise on policy and action in order to support this work and operationalize the initiatives developed by the DLRT Steering Team. A notable outcome from the DLRT Network is the development of Illinois' [Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning Standards](#), which will be incorporated in all Illinois educator preparation programs by October 2025.

Policy Considerations

- How can Illinois continue to strengthen pipelines that recruit educators of color?
- How can Illinois encourage and invest in innovative approaches to diversify the teacher workforce?
- How do Illinois educator preparation programs align with other efforts to recruit and retain high-quality and diverse educators?



FOSTERING DIVERSE POSTSECONDARY EXPERIENCES

For the last four decades, affirmative action in higher education allowed colleges and universities to broadly consider applicants' race in admissions processes. After repeatedly reaffirming the legality of race-based admissions, the U.S. Supreme Court (SCOTUS) voted in a six-three decision to end affirmative action in higher education in June 2023. This leaves institutions of higher education considering alternative opportunities to ensure campuses remain accessible to all students.

Impacts of a Ban on Affirmative Action

Evidence suggests the existence of affirmative action policies has contributed to the [increase of students of color](#) attending colleges and universities. Progress made in racial equity in higher education is likely to be reversed as institutions comply with the SCOTUS decision, especially at elite institutions.

Evidence suggests the banning of affirmative action policies will have serious implications for the diversity of college campuses. In 2021, several states, including California, Arizona, Florida, Idaho, Michigan, Nebraska,

New Hampshire, Oklahoma, and Washington, [banned affirmative action policies](#) at colleges and universities. When compared to states that did not ban affirmative action, states that prohibited this policy [saw declines](#) in the admission and enrollment of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students.

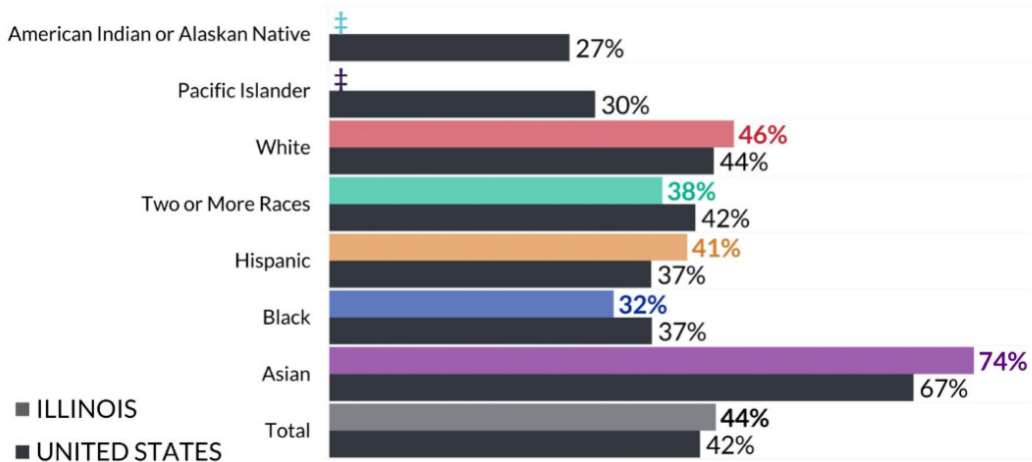
In light of this ruling, higher education institutions are considering all race-conscious practices, including initiatives and resources like race-based scholarships, Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI) offices, or multi-cultural student centers.

Implications for Illinois Higher Education Students

A study from the Illinois Board of Higher Education found that enrollment of Black students has already [dropped 34 percent](#) from 2013 to 2019, even before changes were made to affirmative action policies. This study also illustrated that Illinois universities retained 85 percent of their white students, but only 66 percent of their Black students.

Universities are expected to shift admissions policies away from considering race, and it is expected that enrollment numbers for students of color will continue to decrease.

Illinois Educator Preparation Program Enrollment and Completion 2012 - 2021



[Source](#)

After the SCOTUS decision was announced, several universities, including Northwestern University, University of Illinois, and Illinois State University, reaffirmed their commitment to making diversity a priority in admissions, but did not reveal specific plans in response to the decision.

In the decision's aftermath, Western Illinois University withdrew a scholarship only offered for incoming students of color for fear of legal repercussions from the SCOTUS decision. They soon reinstated the scholarship.

Best Practices for Encouraging Campus Diversity

Based on the possible implications that the decision on affirmative action can create, it is critical for institutions to re-commit to increasing accessibility and diversity at their institutions. In the absence of affirmative action admissions policies, there are still several avenues to increase diversity.

- Provide resources and support to students of color currently enrolled in higher education institutions to increase their retention. This support can often be found in university DEI Offices and multi-cultural student centers.
 - Ensuring that universities are [hiring diverse faculty](#) and staff also can aid in the persistence of students of color.
- Support colleges and universities in their efforts to become more accessible to underrepresented students by providing them the resources to expand financial aid opportunities.
 - [The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) announced it will provide free tuition for more low- and middle-income families that make less than \$80,000 per year.
 - [Duke University](#) announced it would offer full tuition grants starting this fall to students from North and South Carolina whose family income is less than \$150,000 per year.

Policy Considerations

- How can institutions of higher education find ways to prioritize diversity on their campuses without affirmative action in admissions policies?
- In what ways can policymakers best support Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) that uplift students of color in the wake of the affirmative action decision?





Established in 2001, The Hunt Institute honors the legacy of James B. Hunt, Jr., the former governor of North Carolina who distinguished himself as an ardent champion of education.

The Hunt Institute brings together people and resources to inspire and inform elected officials and policymakers about key issues in education, resulting in visionary leaders who are prepared to take strategic action for greater educational outcomes and student success.

In 2016, The Hunt Institute became an independent, nonprofit entity and joined forces with Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy to pursue research, educational partnerships, and events related to improving education policy.

Learn more at www.hunt-institute.org.



4000 Centregreen Way | Suite 301 |
Cary, NC 27513 | 984-377-5200