

Illinois' Emerging Leaders

Aspiration: An Illinois that empowers youth to actively contribute to the policy making process

All youth in Illinois deserve the opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of gender, the color of their skin, socioeconomic status, or zip code, and youth voices are critical to the creation of policy that meets the needs of Illinois' younger generations. However, the insights and lived experiences of youth are often missing from the tables where policy decisions are made.

This transition committee brought youth to the table to begin a conversation on statewide youth issues and discuss how the new administration can empower youth in their communities. This committee prioritized diversity and was comprised of high school students from across the state, including northern, central, and southern Illinois, reflecting rural, suburban, and urban experiences. This committee also embodied diverse genders, races, sexual orientations, and religions. We developed a set of shared values, identified the issues most pressing for younger generations, and generated recommendations that the new administration should consider in a value-aligned way moving forward.

The transition committee found alignment around three key values: security, responsibility, and social justice. We believe the new administration should address a range of youth issues, and can begin by improving the education system, expanding access to mental health services, and reforming the criminal justice system.

Illinois today: A state with large opportunities but statewide challenges facing youth

The youth of Illinois are the future of Illinois and one of the state's most important assets. Illinois' youth are students, workers, interns, voters, volunteers, and change agents who contribute to their communities in meaningful ways. Many work jobs in addition to attending school, go to college, and begin careers in this state. Youth contribute to the economy, organize their communities, and serve as productive citizens of Illinois.

However, inequities in communities across the state prevent youth from reaching their full potential. Students in suburban Chicago have different education opportunities compared to those in central and southern Illinois. Many individuals witness the effects of neighborhood disinvestment, poor relationships between police and the communities they serve, and lack of economic opportunities. Further, many students struggle with mental health issues, experience a lack of guidance around educational and career options, and are not incentivized to attend college or work in state after high school.

In order to build a state that serves future generations, the state must reimagine the role of students in the policy making process, take an active role in listening to the voices of youth, and incorporate the thoughts and concerns of youth while developing new policy initiatives.

Principles for policies affecting youth

The new administration should evaluate new policy initiatives through the lenses of the following shared values:

- **Security:** Students deserve to feel physically and psychologically safe and secure in their homes, schools, and communities. No one should feel fear while walking from home to school, experience trauma from a school shooter drill, or undergo bullying related to a disability.
- **Responsibility:** Students are community members, family members, citizens, and voters. The new administration should promote policies that preserve and protect the state in the long-term, such as strong environmental protections, affordable college, and adequately funded mental health services.
- **Social justice:** The new administration should begin to address the most pressing civil rights issues affecting youth, including educational, economic, and racial equity.

Priority Issue + Recommendations: Education

The new administration should explore ways to expand economic opportunity for students who complete secondary or post-secondary education. Not every student in Illinois wants to attend college, but many lack guidance and direction around the availability of non-college options. Policy makers could observe the discrepancy in workforce development offerings by visiting schools in different parts of the state and then should explore ways to create pathways for post-secondary opportunities that don't require college, such as the trades. Partnerships between high schools, community colleges, and labor unions would offer students opportunities to learn about these options and explore careers that could be a good fit for their skills and talents.

The new administration should also expand the availability of advanced classes to students statewide. Many students choose to pursue college, and the new administration should assist these students by exploring ways to incentivize students to attend college in state, such as increasing college affordability, streamlining and assisting with college financial aid applications, and investing in institutions of higher education.

Priority Issue + Recommendations: Mental Health

Students in communities across the state face significant pressures and mental health issues, and many high schools do not have adequate mental health resources that give students the tools they need to thrive at school and at home. Many school counselors have unworkable caseloads, and in several areas, a culture of stigma and shame around mental health prevent students from seeking help. Only 58% of this transition committee believes that our schools have sufficient support systems. The new administration should prioritize and invest in mental health resources in schools, regardless of geography. For example, the new administration could make efforts to change campus cultures surrounding mental health, provide increased training for counselors, and expand the number of counselors serving high schools and regions.

Priority Issue + Recommendations: Criminal Justice Reform

The new administration should make efforts to reform the state's criminal justice system, which disproportionately impacts people of color and criminalizes adolescent behavior. This transition committee supports the legalization of recreational marijuana and the expungement of marijuana convictions from the criminal records of offenders. We also recommend that the new administration prioritize rehabilitation services in prisons, re-entry programs, and community investments that keep people out of the criminal justice system in the first place.

Priority Issue + Recommendations: Raise Youth Voices

This transition committee recommends that the new administration make efforts to elevate youth voices across Illinois. It can begin that process by creating and sustaining a standing committee of youth advisors, consisting of a diverse group of students representing each area of the state, who can provide feedback and ideas to the administration on an ongoing basis.

Conclusion: Empower youth across Illinois, beginning with a statewide youth summit

This transition committee believes that youth voices are too often ignored throughout the policymaking process. Leaders and lawmakers should seek to understand the challenges that youth are facing and build a state where youth feel empowered to live up to their full potential and make changes in their communities.

The new administration should take the feedback of this committee and incorporate it into its work by lifting up youth voices and being cognizant of the challenges and opportunities identified by this youth committee. A statewide youth summit spearheaded by the new administration would be an effective next step to continue to gather youth input on policy priorities.