

Commentary

Illinois PTA calls for statewide learning recovery plan

Submitted by the Illinois Parent Teacher Association

As the current school year ends in districts across our state, school staff, from teachers and principals to bus drivers and school nurses, have shown to be true heroes for our students and families in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. These truly essential employees have delivered our communities meals, provided health alerts and information, supported our children with a quick transition to remote learning, and served as vital lifelines for countless students and families. We are extremely grateful to them and applaud their strength and commitment.

Now, as we begin to prepare for a return to school, it is clear our students and teachers will need support as schools re-engage. This crisis has taken an emotional and academic toll on every student in the state. Whether young people have lost a

loved one, struggled through economic loss and hardship, worried about how to keep up with college tuition, or simply wrestled with isolation and anxiety, no young person in the state has been unscathed by the upheaval and dislocation of this pandemic.

As parents, we have seen firsthand that remote learning is not a substitute for in-person instruction and schooling. We see that many of our children are not covering all their lessons and material, are less engaged and have far less opportunity for peer to peer growth and development. We know that our schools had limited time and resources to plan for remote learning, and that we as parents had little time to prepare for what would be needed at home too. But we cannot let our children suffer – either next year or in the long term as a result.

Just as Gov. JB Pritzker identified the need for a statewide and regional

approach for opening up the state, we need a statewide approach for reopening schools that recognizes local conditions but ensures equity, rigor, and recovery for all of our children and schools. While every student has been affected, we know that the impact of this crisis has been felt unevenly across race, income, citizenship status, and need. It is our job as adults to ensure that our educational recovery focuses resources on communities and student who will need them most.

We need our state leadership to ensure that Illinois has a comprehensive learning recovery plan. This plan should include elements that ensure our school communities have the social-emotional and mental health supports for students and educators; educator planning time, support, and training to navigate unprecedented emotional and academic impact; infrastructure, training, and

other supports to close the digital divide; targeted supports for students most impacted by COVID-19; and additional school time to address learning and social-emotional needs.

Every student’s future is at stake right now. History and research show that if we do not support students emotionally and if we do not help them make up missed academics, their educational and employment outcomes will be forever changed. These losses will follow them into adulthood where a vast majority of them will live and work in Illinois. Providing our children a quality education is as critical for us as it is for them. Leaders from across our state must work urgently to craft and implement a plan that will ensure our students’ futures are not shortchanged. Working together, we can make every child’s full potential their reality.

Economically distressed areas need improved quality of life

By **RODNEY CRIM**

I, like many of you, am grieving over the injustices that still exist and the impact of inequality. In addition to the ongoing senseless killings, we are also dealing with the unknown future of the impact of COVID-19 and its impact on our communities of color.

From my experiences living in Chicago, Minneapolis and now St. Louis, I have learned that we must listen to the voices of all our people, young and old, of all ethnic groups, take sustainable actions, urgently work together to end systemic racism, and build an equitable and inclusive world for everyone.



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To that end, I contemplated on what we are doing at the St. Louis Economic Development Partnership. The Partnership is comprised of creative, committed, and passionate people of all ages with the energy to impact sustainable changes. I wanted to hear and include their voices. Their comments have included outrage, recognition of systemic racism, hurt, anger, empathy, appreciation of the global Black Lives Matter movement, need for urgency, hope, resilience and a commitment to do more.

After COVID-19 struck, the organization rallied around finding ways to help our small businesses, many in our economically distressed areas. Together with our partners, we established the Small Business Resource Program and provided \$2.5 million in funding, access to resources and hope to hundreds of small businesses impacted by COVID-19.

And when peaceful protesters took to

the streets to fight systemic racism and injustices, my team also denounced racism and committed to work toward a more equitable St. Louis.

Our STL Partnership team is saying we can do so much more. We can lead, convene and take more actions using our tools and access to other resources to facilitate equity, inclusion and investment in our region.

The STL Partnership team is already going into action. Our St. Louis Promise Zone team is working on issues and strategies going forward that will bring more resources and actionable projects to our most economically distressed areas resulting in more investment, jobs, education and improved quality of life.

Our Mosaic Project is ramping up more initiatives to address the needs and opportunities of our foreign-born residents to make St. Louis a more welcoming and successful region for everyone.

Across our organization, all are saying we will do much more. Our teams in business development, lending, our entrepreneurship initiatives (39 North and our four incubators) and the World Trade Center are challenging ourselves to facilitate the creation of more African American and foreign owned businesses, to attract more resources to increase investment in our most distressed communities, to facilitate more tools and access to jobs.

Together with our partners, we will work to increase access to opportunities and a more just and equitable community for all. That is the goal for the STL Partnership. My team is fired up and ready to go.

Rodney Crim is CEO and president of St. Louis Economic Development Partnership, an organization that works to attract, retain and facilitate growth of businesses and works collaboratively with public and private sector partners across the region.

Pandemic will mean a worse retirement for millions of workers

The following is an excerpt from an analysis written by Alan Greenblatt by Governing.com and reprinted with permission.

If you were born in 1960, it turns out you had bad timing.

A portion of the Social Security benefit formula is based on national average wages for each cohort of 60-year-old workers. It’s not yet certain how long double-digit unemployment rates will last, but it’s a safe bet that record job losses will bring down average wages this year. That means a middle-income worker who was born in 1960 could see her Social Security benefits reduced in retirement by 14 percent, or \$3,900 a year, according to a study from the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School.

Older workers, regardless of their birth year, are suddenly having a harder time. In most recessions, they have been largely shielded from job losses. That isn’t the case in 2020. “This time, the data show older workers are getting hit harder than those who are 25 to 54,” says Alicia Munnell, director of the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College.

Workers nearing retirement age have been buffeted by numerous factors. Millions who haven’t lost their jobs have still seen hours or wages cut. Their retirement accounts have been dragged down by the market, or have drained to pay for more immediate expenses. Dozens of companies have suspended their 401(k) match programs, affecting more than 400,000 workers. The

Social Security trust fund, already projected to run dry by 2035, could be depleted earlier due to the spike in unemployment, which means fewer workers and employers are paying payroll taxes.

As is common during recessions, older individuals struggling now are applying for Social Security early, before reaching the full retirement age.

“The bad thing that’s coming out of this is that people are going to claim their Social Security benefits early,” Munnell says. “They’re going to be living on reduced monthly income for the rest of their lives.”

In April, 13.6 percent of Americans 55 and older were unemployed, compared with 2.6 percent in January. To be counted as unemployed, they had to be actively seeking work. That’s not the case for many older Americans, who have decided to retire early or are choosing not to work due to potential health risks. The share of people not looking for work who have declared themselves retired increased from 53 percent in January to 60 percent in April, according to one large survey.

As part of the CARES Act, a stimulus package passed in March, Congress made it easier for individuals to tap into their tax-shielded retirement accounts. Those younger than 59 and a half can withdraw up to \$100,000 without paying the usual 10 percent penalty.

“We’re looking at retirement savings as a rainy-day fund, and that’s not its purpose,” says Angela Antonelli, executive director of the Center for Retirement Initiatives at

Georgetown University.

The result of all this is that workers who were on the verge of retirement are more likely to live in poverty in old age. More than 24 million people over the age of 62 will be living in poverty, compared to a pre-pandemic estimate of 21 million, according to a projection from the New School for Social Research.

Such an increase may not be surprising, given the scope of the economic downturn. Still, it represents a descent into downward mobility, following roughly half a century during which older Americans had been better protected from poverty by Medicare and other programs.

Even before the recession, the share of the population in homeless shelters who were 62 or older, while still relatively small, had roughly doubled over the past decade. Meanwhile, the share of private-sector workers covered by traditional, defined-benefit pension plans fell from 56 percent in 1994 to 14 percent in 2018.

Tax preferences and automatic enrollments have made it easier for people to save for retirement than expenses. But they don’t always have short-term accounts they can draw from in a pinch.

“The retirement savings account, for way too many Americans, is their only form of savings,” says Karen Biddle Andres, director of the Aspen Institute Retirement Savings Initiative.

One of the most commonly cited statistics about savings is the Federal Reserve’s annual survey looking at how many

Americans can cover an unexpected \$400 expense with cash or savings. In 2018, 39 percent of those surveyed didn’t even have that modest sum handy — a decline from 50 percent in 2013. Hence, individuals drawing down their 401(k)s.

Regardless of their balances at the start of the year, many people have lost money, at least on paper, in the stock market. Despite recent gains, most of the major stock indices remain down for the year.

They will recover, whether sooner or later. But those who have withdrawn funds from 401(k)s will not realize those gains.

“If a young person, a couple of decades from retirement, takes out \$3,000, that’s actually closer to \$50,000 in lost retirement income,” says Antonelli, the Georgetown professor.

For policymakers, state-facilitated plans offer a clear benefit: They don’t cost much money. There may be some administrative costs involved, but it’s a lot cheaper than offering any kind of direct assistance. “This is people saving their own money,” noted Andres.

She says that investing has become more automatic thanks to other retirement plans that require workers to opt out, rather than having to opt in. One innovation that may be protecting some workers nearing retirement age is target date funds. Portfolios of funds keyed to a particular retirement date — say, 2024 — become less aggressive over time, buffering investors from some of the downside risk when the stock market is volatile.