

Whitney for Governor 2006

Jennifer Rose, Campaign Manager

(618) 528-VOTE - campaignmanager@whitneyforgov.org



Blagojevich is Gambling on Your Child's Education Rich Whitney is the Safer Bet!

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Three recent stories have highlighted the huge problems with the education system in Illinois: Our state's schools, overall, are badly funded, with record levels of inequality, and, not surprisingly, are performing poorly. But instead of responding with a sound plan to address the problem, Governor Rod Blagojevich predictably has come up with another band-aid – relying on more gambling to finance school construction. Specifically, breaking his promise not to expand gambling in the State, he is now looking to permit the State lottery program to begin running electronic Keno games in taverns and restaurants statewide.

“Rod Blagojevich is trying to fix our increasingly bankrupt schools and state budget by bankrupting more low-income workers who are susceptible to the temptations of gambling,” says Green Party gubernatorial candidate Rich Whitney. Whitney has long opposed legalized gambling, on the ground that it preys especially on the poor and the desperate, and that it brings ruin and misery to far more working class families than the few who luck out.

The news that Blagojevich is looking to Keno as his latest “quick fix” scheme to shore up the State's increasingly shaky budget follows two recently released studies that have once again called attention to the dismal state of Illinois schools.

One study, conducted by Quality Counts 2006, published in the current issue of Education Week magazine, gives Illinois an overall grade of C+ but graded Illinois a D+ in school funding.

This follows the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report, released in October 2005 by the U.S. Department of Education. The NAEP, sometimes called the "nation's report card," is a national, standardized assessment based on regular testing of a sample of fourth and eighth grade students in math and reading. While the latest results show gains at the national level, Illinois was one of the many states that did

not see such progress. The overall average score for Illinois fourth and eighth graders in reading and math did not show significant gains from the 2003 NAEP results.

Further, the 2005 NAEP results show that Illinois continues to have some of the worst achievement gaps in the country and has not succeeded in narrowing them. The achievement gap between poor students and non-poor students in fourth grade math is the largest in the nation. In reading, the gap is the third biggest in the country. The story is no better for eighth graders, where there is the second largest gap in math and eighth largest in reading. The sizes of these gaps are not significantly different from those found in the last nation's report card in 2003.

These gaps are not a result of high achievement by non-poor students. They primarily reflect the extremely low achievement of poor students in Illinois. For instance, the scores of poor fourth graders in Illinois make the list of the ten worst scores for poor students in the nation.

The achievement gap in Illinois is not surprising, considering the spending gap among school districts in Illinois. Depending upon how it is measured, Illinois has either the highest or second-highest school inequality in the United States. The average low-poverty school district spent almost \$2,500 more pupil than the average high-poverty district, reflecting the second largest funding gap in the nation. In 2003-04, the highest spending school district in Illinois spent \$19,361 more per pupil than the lowest spending school district, increasing the gap by \$4,000 compared to the year before.

Both the poor performance of Illinois schools and their rampant inequality are due to our State government's failure to provide adequate education funding for basic school expenses and our State's overreliance on property taxes for school funding. The Education Funding Advisory Board (EFAB) determines a recommended per-pupil minimum funding level (or foundation level) by examining the resources used at fiscally efficient, high-performing schools where at least two-thirds of the students meet the state's learning standards. In April 2005, EFAB increased the recommended foundation level for the 2005-06 school year to \$6,405 per pupil. Yet, the state's foundation level for the 2005-06 school year is over \$1,200 per pupil short of this recommended level. This lack of State support for education places an overwhelming burden on local communities to finance education, with local property taxpayers providing 62 percent of funding for school districts. Typically, communities with the greatest needs have the fewest resources upon which to draw. Schools on the state's academic watch list have considerably higher rates of poverty and lower property wealth, as determined by equalized assessed value (EAV) per pupil, than the state average. Due to their relatively smaller property tax bases, these communities have higher tax rates than the state average. Despite these high tax rates, they struggle to generate adequate revenues, and spend less per pupil than the state average. Thus, the school districts with the greatest academic needs and highest poverty lack the resources to invest in programs that can help close the achievement gap.

Meanwhile this system imposes a property-tax burden in Illinois that is about twenty

percent above the national average, imposing an unjust burden on working and middle-class homeowners and on our farmers.

Both the problems and their causes are nothing new – although they are growing worse. Yet Rod Blagojevich hasn't lifted a finger to remedy this problem, even though a few members of his own party have come up with a reasonable plan – House Bill 750 – for shifting the tax burden from local property taxes to the state income tax. Leading House Republicans are also opposing the bill and the Republican Party was equally culpable for failing to address the education crisis in Illinois when it was in power.

This longstanding bi-partisan failure demonstrates the need to bring new leadership to the State of Illinois – through a new party of the people, the Green Party. The two parties that are bought and controlled by corporate money don't want to adequately fund our schools (or provide numerous other services needed to serve the public good) because they are more concerned with protecting the wealth of their benefactors by keeping their tax burden low than they are with serving the needs of the vast majority, the working people of this state, from the poorest to the middle class. Only the Green Party and candidates like Rich Whitney can be counted on to serve the people's interest – because they are organized around the party's principles and values, and they refuse all corporate donations as a matter of principle. For a commitment to quality schools for all, support Rich Whitney for Governor!