

A background photograph showing a group of diverse students in a school hallway. A young woman in the foreground is smiling broadly and hugging another student from behind. Other students are visible in the background, some holding papers.

## ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION



**Invest Forward** is an initiative that encourages districts and states to prioritize investing a significant portion of their American Rescue Plan resources in helping students successfully access postsecondary education and succeed in future career pathways. As part of the effort to equip district and state leaders with high-impact strategies to guide their investments, Invest Forward will continue to highlight the work of **innovative local and state leaders** who are using the once-in-a-lifetime stimulus funding to give students a better tomorrow by investing in postsecondary pathways today.

**ACCESS TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IS ONE OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAYS TO ADDRESS INEQUALITY AND CREATE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY.**

Investments in strong postsecondary pathways—the meaningful connections between K-12 education and college and career—are vital to ensuring a better future for our young people.

**In 2020**, postsecondary enrollment across Illinois [dropped](#) by 5.4 percent from 2019 levels, with larger decreases in community college enrollment (13.7 percent decrease) and undergraduate enrollment (7.2 percent decrease). Only 57.6 percent of lower-income students were enrolling in college directly after high school, compared to nearly 80 percent enrollment for more affluent students. Illinois' P-20 Council recognized that the state needed to prioritize a “**targeted (re)engagement strategy and communication program** to boost enrollment in postsecondary.”

**The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)** used data to identify districts and schools where existing initiatives were not helping students successfully navigate postsecondary pathways—whether to workforce, community college, or four-year programs—particularly those with pronounced equity gaps. The approach appears to be working. [Illinois beat national trends](#) in fall 2021 college enrollment, increasing by 1.2 percent from the previous fall. Freshman enrollment at Illinois public universities increased by 7.8 percent year over year, compared to a 2.7 percent decline in freshmen at all public universities nationally.

## STARTING WITH LEADERS



ISBE partnered with **OneGoal**, a postsecondary success support organization, to implement leadership development programs in 32 districts

across the state. This program will **build capacity at the system level** to ensure more equitable outcomes for students, district leaders, and school leadership teams.

By **engaging the leaders first**, Illinois is focusing on shifting mindsets around the value of prioritizing postsecondary outcomes—encouraging educators and administrators to think about how their actions either cultivate or restrict opportunities for students—to ensure that these systems become deeply integrated in schools and persist even if specific programs sunset or shift.

## DIRECT SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS



After the initial phase of leadership training, Illinois districts will have access to **support and training for individual classroom educators** to provide direct

postsecondary coaching to students. The three-year program is designed to support students as they explore postsecondary pathways, apply to programs, and transition from high school to the future, all within a nurturing environment surrounded by peers and guided by a coach invested in the future success of each student.



## SETTING THE TONE FOR DISTRICTS

The fact that **Illinois made a specific investment as a state** helps highlight how important leadership can be for setting a culture of postsecondary attainment in schools. In working with each individual district across the state—large, small, urban, rural, etc.—some school leaders recognized that their own strategic plans did not always prioritize transitions to postsecondary education and training, and that they were not being given access to the resources and funds to make significant investment in that work.



“Equity is the central tenet of our agency’s strategic plan and has guided all of our investments of federal pandemic relief funds. Equity means paying special attention to addressing historic inequities and prioritizing policies and programs that help ensure every child graduates equipped to pursue a successful future. We are proud to partner with OneGoal in this effort to dismantle and rebuild systems and structures that serve as barriers to students’ postsecondary success.”

—Dr. Carmen I. Ayala, Illinois State Superintendent of Education