Thank you Senator Manar, and members of the committee for your work, and for the opportunity to speak with you today.

We are here because of the importance of public education. It is important to us as individuals and important to us as a state. It is important to our democracy, and our society that allows all to rise to the level of their talent and drive. We all have experience with successes in Illinois public schools. I have two daughters who received an excellent education from Carbondale public schools. And there are successes like that all over the state. But there is also a failure. It is a failure on the part of the state to provide equitable and adequate funding for education.

As the state prepares for the FY2015 budget, it is time to remind ourselves that there is no better state investment than public education. Our elementary and secondary schools prepare students for college, careers, and citizenship. Our entire state economy depends on schools having the resources to do those jobs well. While year-to-year budget decisions are important, the larger structural problems of our inadequate and inequitable school funding system overwhelm any short-term financial issues. As state leaders, we have the moral obligation to ensure that all of our students can learn and thrive.

We need to think big now. Only deep structural changes will correct the current situation. As we have heard time and again, Illinois has one of the nation’s largest funding disparities between high- and low-poverty schools, and is last in terms of the state’s share of spending on public education. Much of the testimony you’ve received illustrates the system is unfair to both schools and taxpayers. The disparity has contributed to the financial instability in districts such as North Chicago and East St. Louis, and more districts are destined to join them if we continue to shortchange our children. A severe reduction in income tax revenue in FY15 will only hasten this slide.

For many years, the state’s Education Funding Advisory Board (EFAB) has recommended amounts to adequately fund student learning. In recent years, the shortfall between those recommendations and actual funding levels has steadily grown, placing our schools in serious jeopardy. At the same time that we are expecting more from students, teachers, and administrators, we are depriving them of the resources they need to meet those expectations. A long-term solution will require both reducing inequities and building up to adequacy.

Tackle equity first. We need to revise the funding formulas and funding streams. The funding components that are meant to compensate for student needs (such as the Supplemental General State Aid grant) must be re-examined to determine which districts need those dollars most, and mechanisms should be put in place to determine the effects of those investments. We need to cap existing adjustments (such as for PTELL) that have the potential for wide fluctuations, subsidize some districts at the expense of others, and shortchange the basic GSA formula. And we should seriously consider including transportation in the primary formula, to avoid targeted budget cuts that disproportionately affect large and rural districts.
Any changes to the formulas will most certainly create “winners and losers.” But this is where courage of leadership is most needed. In our current system, the perennial losers are low-income and rural communities: those with the least local resources and the least political clout. Yet our state needs all students to succeed if we are to grow our economy and improve our quality of life. It will take guts to make this shift, but it could be done gradually, and it is a moral and economic imperative.

*Build up to adequacy.* We must make a commitment to reach EFAB’s recommended funding levels over the next five years. We should use every possible means to identify revenue sources to make this happen. As a state leader, I have heard from many people who say they are willing to pay more if they can be sure that the money will go directly to public education. In the long run we need to consider at least a partial shift away from property tax reliance, and build a dedicated and sustainable education funding stream.

Finally, should all else fail, the State Board should have immediate legislative authority, or receive legislative direction, to modify the state aid formulas if and when funding falls short. The current method of flat proration makes the formulas’ structural inequities even worse. As we well know, those most dependent on state funding take the biggest hit when flat proration is applied. At the very least, while all districts are deprived in a funding shortfall, we should not deliver the biggest hits to the most vulnerable.

I stand ready to support and promote bold recommendations from this committee that will fairly and adequately support student learning statewide.