

ISBE's Weekly Message

February 18, 2026

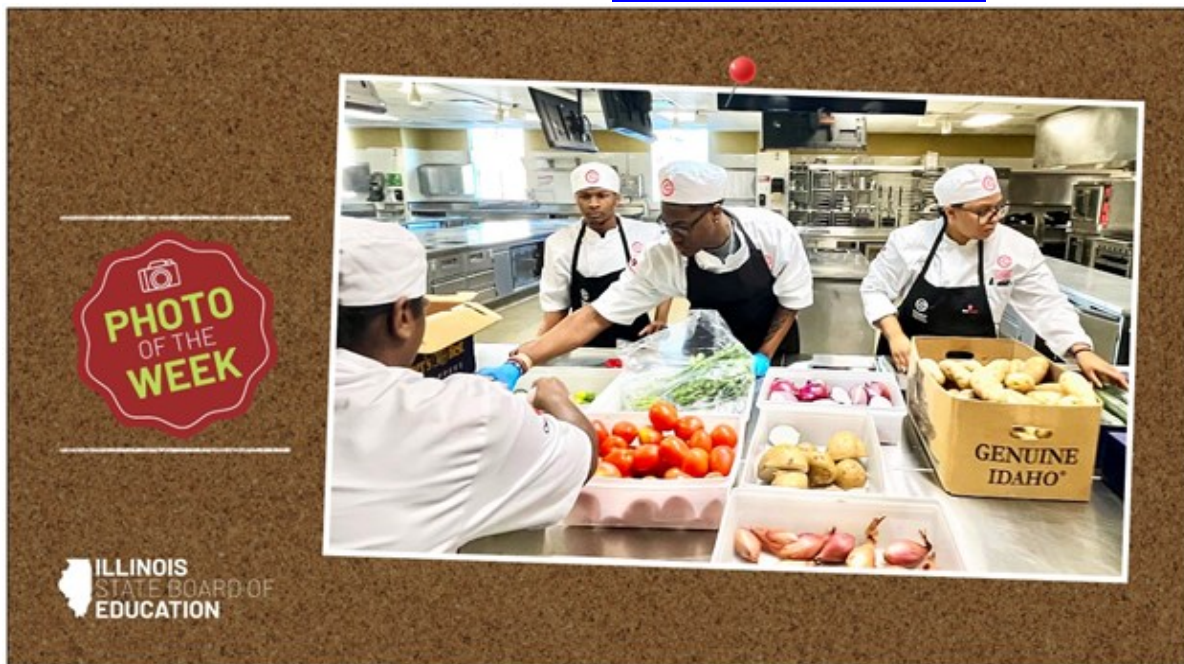
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Rich Township High School District 227 students showcased their talents at the Culinary Careers Program Preliminary Competition. After eight weeks of practice, students put their skills to the test at Washburne Culinary Institute preparing delectable dishes such as omelets and cucumber salad, with five seniors advancing to the final competition in March.

CELEBRATING THOSE WHO EXCEL & TEACHER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS

Dear Colleagues:

Illinois has great teachers. We were reminded of that fact yet again this year when we received a record number of nominations and applications for the 2026 Those Who Excel & Teacher of the Year Awards. Each submission was carefully reviewed and scored by a diverse committee of educators, administrators, educational service personnel, student support professionals, and past Illinois Teachers of the Year. Last week, we announced our [2026 Teacher of the Year Cohort](#). This year's cohort includes 10 Regional Teachers of the Year — representing every region of the state — along with Teachers of the Year in the specialties of Bilingual, Early Childhood, and Special Education, as well as Outstanding Early Career Educator (a category for teachers with one to four years of experience who are not yet eligible to be Teacher of the Year).

We also announced nearly 450 Those Who Excel award recipients. These include educators, administrators, student support staff, educational service personnel, and community volunteers whose dedication, innovation,

and leadership are making a meaningful difference for students and school communities across Illinois. [View the Those Who Excel & Teacher of the Year Awardee List.](#)

Again this year, I got to notify each one of this year's cohort members through surprise video calls. Making the calls is always one of the highlights of my year. We will share snippets of those videos at our Those Who Excel & Teacher of the Year Awards Banquet on April 18. If you attended the banquet in the last few years, you know those moments made a very poignant highlight reel.

The Teacher of the Year receives a yearlong state-funded sabbatical from their classroom to explore their chosen platform. Our [current Teacher of the Year, Víctor Gómez](#), began his ambassadorship in July, championing bilingual STEM education across Illinois. He has led professional development, engaged with university partners and aspiring teachers, and presented at statewide conferences and parent events to advocate for multilingual learners, uplift bilingual educators, and celebrate linguistic diversity. We are incredibly proud to have Víctor representing Illinois.

Now comes the hard part: It's my duty to decide which one of the 13 finalists should be named the next Illinois Teacher of the Year. I am excited to review their applications and interviews, get to know them better, and learn more about their priorities, plans, and potential platforms as Teacher of the Year. Reviewing the files of each of these finalists always reminds me of the quality of teachers we have in our state, as well as the heart each of you bring to your work every day. Thank you for all you do!

All my best,

Tony

Dr. Tony Sanders
State Superintendent of Education

WANT TO SEE YOUR SCHOOL FEATURED AS ISBE'S PHOTO OF THE WEEK?

Just follow these three, easy steps!

1. Capture the moment. (Make sure your camera is horizontal!)
2. Ensure all students featured have a signed photo consent form on file.
3. Email the photo (in .jpg format) to photos@isbe.net. Don't forget to include a description of the photo.

HERE'S THE LATEST...

MULTILINGUAL/LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

HELP SHAPE ILLINOIS' DUAL LANGUAGE EDUCATION GUIDANCE

ISBE is developing a comprehensive [dual language guidance document](#) to be completed by Dec. 15. This statewide resource will support districts in establishing and expanding high-quality dual language programs. To ensure the document reflects community needs, ISBE is hosting virtual and in-person listening sessions across the state. These sessions serve as dedicated time for participants to share feedback. Please review [Draft](#)

[1 of the Illinois Dual Language Guidance](#) in advance and come prepared with input. ISBE staff will be present to listen to and gather comments.

All sessions will begin at 4 p.m. The virtual session can be joined live via GoToMeeting. Eventbrite registration is required for in-person sessions.

- **Feb. 19:** [Dual Language Guidance Listening Tour - Virtual](#)
- **Feb. 24:** [Dual Language Guidance Listening Tour - Elgin](#)
- **Feb. 26:** [Dual Language Guidance Listening Tour - Moline](#)
- **March 2:** [Dual Language Guidance Listening Tour - Urbana](#)
- **March 3:** [Dual Language Guidance Listening Tour - Vandalia](#)
- **March 4:** [Dual Language Guidance Listening Tour - Carmi](#)
- **March 12:** [Dual Language Guidance Listening Tour - Peoria](#)
- **March 13:** [Dual Language Guidance Listening Tour - Chicago](#)

SAFE & HEALTHY CLIMATE

ILLINOIS SCHOOL PHONE POLICIES SURVEY

We have received 5,000 responses to the Illinois School Phone Policies Survey so far! Our goal is to collect five or more responses in at least 70% of public and charter schools across Illinois. The survey will close on **July 1**.

ISBE invites teachers, principals, counselors, social workers, and all certified school staff from Illinois public and charter schools to participate in a [national survey examining school cellphone policies](#) and their impact on student learning and well-being in Illinois. Cellphone use in schools is a major topic of conversation nationwide, and we strongly encourage educators to share their perspectives. This optional survey takes approximately five minutes to complete and is completely confidential.

ISBE is collaborating with the [Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University](#) as part of the [States Leading States Initiative](#) to evaluate the impact of school cellphone policies on student achievement and student engagement. The Center is partnering with Dr. Angela Duckworth of the University of Pennsylvania on this work.

Thank you for supporting the students of Illinois and for contributing to this important national project.

If you have questions about the survey, please contact Interim Director for Proving Ground at the Center for Education Policy Research [Amber Humm Patnode](#) or ISBE Director of Wellness and Student Care [Jeffrey Judge](#).

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

CAREER & TECHNICAL EDUCATION

PARENTEACH INSTITUTE: EVIDENCE-BASED PARENTING EDUCATION FOR HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

Looking for a meaningful way to bring evidence-based, healing-centered parenting and caregiving education into your classroom? Through a brief online training, [ParenTeach Institute](#) prepares high school educators to

facilitate [ParentABLE's](#) 6.5-hour Positive Parenting and Caregiving curriculum, helping students build essential relational life skills and a strong foundation in positive parenting and caregiving. This unit aligns with the Illinois Social-Emotional Learning and Health Education Standards, making it an ideal addition to any high school health or CTE class. Teachers who [sign up with ParenTeach Institute](#) and implement the curriculum will earn six Continuing Education Units (CEUs). Empower your students, expand your professional development, and make a lasting impact on youth and families in your community!

SPECIAL EDUCATION

USING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN DEVELOPMENT OF INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAMS (IEP)

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) has been on the rise for the last several years. While AI can be a tool to assist both educators and administrators, ISBE's Special Education Department would like to remind Local Education Agencies (LEAs) of the responsibilities they hold with respect to developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) under [34 CFR 300.324](#), [23 IAC 226.220](#), and [23 IAC 226.230](#). LEAs should review and/or revise internal policies and procedures related to AI to prevent violating the rights of students with IEPs. Illinois' definition of AI is located at [775 ILCS 5/2-101\(N-O\)](#).

To support LEAs, ISBE offers the following resources to help districts ensure that if AI is utilized, it is used in an appropriate manner.

- [Avoiding the Discriminatory Use of Artificial Intelligence](#)
- [Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Teaching and Learning, May 2023](#)
- [Designing for Education with Artificial Intelligence, July 2024](#)

STANDARDS & INSTRUCTION

ACCELERATED PLACEMENT ACT GUIDANCE & FAQ UPDATES

The Accelerated Placement Act (APA) Guidance and FAQ have been updated to reflect policy changes and the new assessment benchmarks. View the updated webinar and resources on the [ISBE Advanced Learners page](#). If you are interested in receiving future information, please [sign up for Advanced Placement Act updates](#).

IN BRIEF

EDUCATOR OPPORTUNITIES

BLACK HISTORY MONTH FILM SCREENINGS: 'AGAINST THE CURRENT'

ISBE and the Social Studies Network invite you to join a special Black History Month film screening of "Against the Current." Drawing on interviews and archival research, the film highlights Black resistance in Illinois and throughout the world, inspiring viewers to reflect on the past and reimagine their role in shaping the future.

Screening options:

- **Feb. 18 | Malcolm X College (Chicago) | 5:30-7:30 p.m.**
[Register for “Against the Current” Film Screening – Chicago](#)
- **Feb. 23 | Virtual | 6-7:30 p.m.**
[Register for “Against the Current” Film Screening – Virtual](#)

RURAL IL CTE PROJECT WEBINAR SERIES: COMPUTER SCIENCE SKILLS FOR ALL CTE PATHWAYS

In this interactive webinar, the Learning Technology Center (LTC) will show you how to introduce students to sensory computing using the micro:bit. This session is designed for everyone — no prior coding experience is required — and these activities integrate seamlessly into any subject area. Whether you’re a tech expert or a total beginner, join LTC at **3 p.m. March 5** to see how physical computing prepares your students for a future driven by innovation. [Register for the Rural IL CTE Project Webinar Series: Computer Science Skills for all CTE Pathways.](#)

INAUGURAL ILLINOIS RURAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE: EXPLORING STUDENT CAREER SUCCESS

The Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools will host the first education conference in the state catered to the rural and small school perspective on **April 17** in Decatur. Join in person to network with and learn from other rural Career and Technical Education directors and educators, meet exhibitors and partners, and participate in a collaborative workshop with keynote presenter Christian Jackson.

A virtual live stream is available for those who cannot attend in person. Attendees may earn professional development hours. [Register for the Rural Education Conference.](#)

STUDENT RECOGNITION

CONGRATULATIONS TO UNITED STATES SENATE YOUTH PROGRAM DELEGATES AND ALTERNATES

The [United States Senate Youth Program](#) (USSYP) Illinois delegates have been announced. Congratulations to the Illinois delegates and alternates!

2026 USSYP Delegates:

- Makaylah Adams – Mt. Zion High School, Mt. Zion CUSD 3
- Elani Trejo – Romeoville High School, Valley View CUSD 365U

2026 USSYP Alternates:

- Drew Jansen – Highland High School, Highland CUSD 5
- Gage Cobbley – El Paso-Gridley High School, El Paso-Gridley CUSD 11

Thank you to all the applicants for your hard work and time throughout the application process.

The United States Senate Youth Program is a scholarship and leadership program where two student delegates from each state, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense Education Activity are

immersed in a premier leadership experience and receive a \$10,000 undergraduate college scholarship in the name of the U.S. Senate.

Applications for next school year will open in late summer/early fall. To learn more about the program, please visit the [ISBE United States Senate Youth Program webpage](#). If you have any questions, please contact ussyp@isbe.net or 217-782-5270.

FEATURED ISBE CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

- [Principal Consultant \(#1533\)](#)
- [Regional Financial Consultant - Northern Region \(Principal Consultant #652\)](#)
- [Web Developer \(Principal Consultant #1081, 1937, 1920\)](#)