
Broken Promises: How Pritzker is Failing Black Students

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About National Black Empowerment Action Fund

National Black Empowerment Action Fund (NBEAF) is a Black-led advocacy organization devoted to the economic, educational, and social uplift of Black communities across the country.

Through grassroots engagement, policy research and advocacy, leadership training, and earned and paid media campaigns, we drive public conversation around the policy decisions that affect the daily lives of Black communities and fight to lift up Black leaders and Black communities.

Black Americans for too long have been locked out of opportunities to accumulate wealth and establish economic security. We are committed to policies that empower Black businesses and families alike to thrive by creating good-paying jobs and generating economic activity in Black communities. We believe all Black people should have the resources they need to live fulfilling lives.

DARIUS JONES
FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT

Introduction

Knowledge is power. With that, education has been the cornerstone of rising African American achievement since emancipation. Being prepared for the challenges, complexities, and opportunities of modern life is as much a necessity as it must be a fundamental right in this country. African American children cannot be slowed or restricted on the path to social mobility and economic independence. A good education gives them a fair chance at the life outcomes we want for all our children.

In Illinois, Governor J.B. Pritzker is failing Black students and denying them an opportunity for a better life. Education is the essential cornerstone of a foundation for success. By choosing to underfund schools year after year, Pritzker is sending a clear message - supporting educational opportunity for the Black community is not his priority.

Pritzker came into office promising to make Illinois a national model for education.¹ Instead, he's made the state into a national disgrace, continually neglecting one of his most critical duties and leaving Black children behind. Year after year, advocates and experts have warned that Pritzker's policies are denying schools adequate funding. And each year Pritzker fails to change course and prioritize investing in the state's Black children, causing untold harm and robbing them of a better future.

The Promise of the Evidence-Based Funding Law

The Illinois State Constitution guarantees “an efficient system of high quality public educational institutions and services.”² Despite this commitment, the state has routinely underfunded schools, leading to one of the most regressive and unequal public school funding systems in the country. After multiple legal challenges and public outcry, the state legislature adopted a new system designed to remove the risks of political instability and guarantee equitable school funding. The Evidence-Based Funding (EBF) for Student Success Act, passed in 2017, commits Illinois to increase state education aid by more than \$7 billion and reach fully adequate funding by 2027 so that the public schools system has “the capacity to ensure the educational development of all persons to the limits of their capacities,” as per the state Constitution.³ Under the law, the state must increase education funding by at least \$350 million per year⁴ and direct funds toward the most under-resourced schools,⁵ but if Illinois does only the bare minimum annually, it will not come close to meeting the law’s deadline for full funding.

To determine funding levels, school districts are classified into four tiers, based on the gap to adequate funding, with Tier 1 representing schools with the fewest existing resources.⁶ As seen below, virtually all funding is allocated to Tier 1 and 2 schools.

Tier	Percent of evidence-based funding
Tier 1	50%
Tier 2	49%
Tier 3	.9%
Tier 4	.1%

The Reality of Pritzker's Underfunded Schools

Once Pritzker took office in January 2019, it quickly became clear that his pre-inauguration plans for a new, equitable educational system were all talk. Aside from a modest \$25 million bump in his first year as Governor, Pritzker has never proposed nor delivered a budget with more than the mandatory minimum in evidence-based funding increase.⁷ This lackadaisical approach to funding yielded unsurprising results. In 2022, the Partnership for Equity and Education Rights Illinois (PEER IL) and the Education Law Center did a comprehensive review of the law's implementation, finding that 1.7 million students from 83% of Illinois school districts still attended underfunded schools.⁸ Pritzker's mismanagement of education funding was so dire that PEER IL was formed as a new statewide education justice coalition "to ensure the state is fulfilling its promise to provide Illinois public school students fully funded and fully resourced public schools..."⁹ PEER IL estimated that the state would need to increase funding by nearly \$1.5 billion per year to fully fund schools, a far cry from the \$350 million typically allocated under Pritzker.¹⁰

Annual EBF Allocations

FY 2020: \$375M

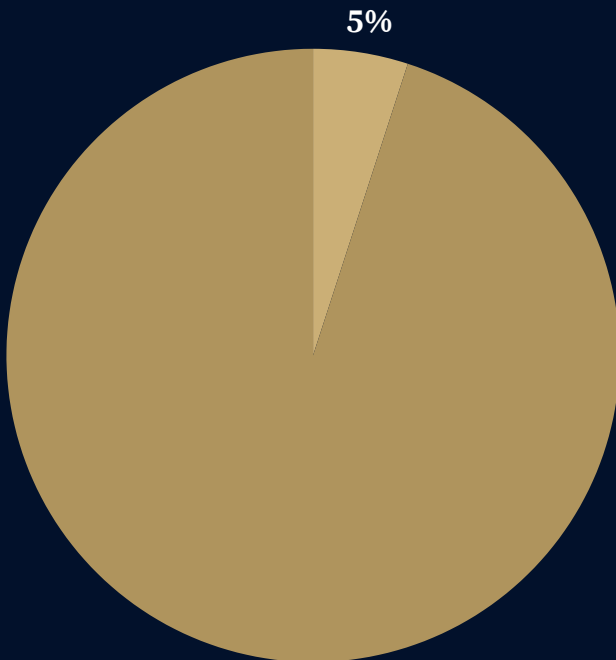
FY 2021: \$0

FY 2022: \$350M

FY 2023: \$350M

FY 2024: \$350M

FY 2025: \$350M

Black children in properly funded schools

5%

Illinois is not simply lagging behind in properly funding public education, Pritzker has doomed multiple generations of Black students to attend inadequately funded schools. According to one 2023 calculation, at the current rate, Illinois will miss the 2027 target by 27 years.¹¹ Another analysis from 2024 predicted a delay of at least 15 years.¹²

Black children in underfunded schools

95%

Meanwhile, Pritzker continues to bury his head, gloating in a February 2024 press release that the “evidence-based funding model is working, so my budget proposal follows the EBF law’s recommendation, increasing it again by \$350 million.”¹³ Of course, at the time, it had been clear for years that this amount was woefully insufficient to meet the law’s targets and the state’s legal obligation. Pritzker’s blatant dismissal of the legitimate concerns of parents and advocates is even more cruel due to the on-going effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students and schools.

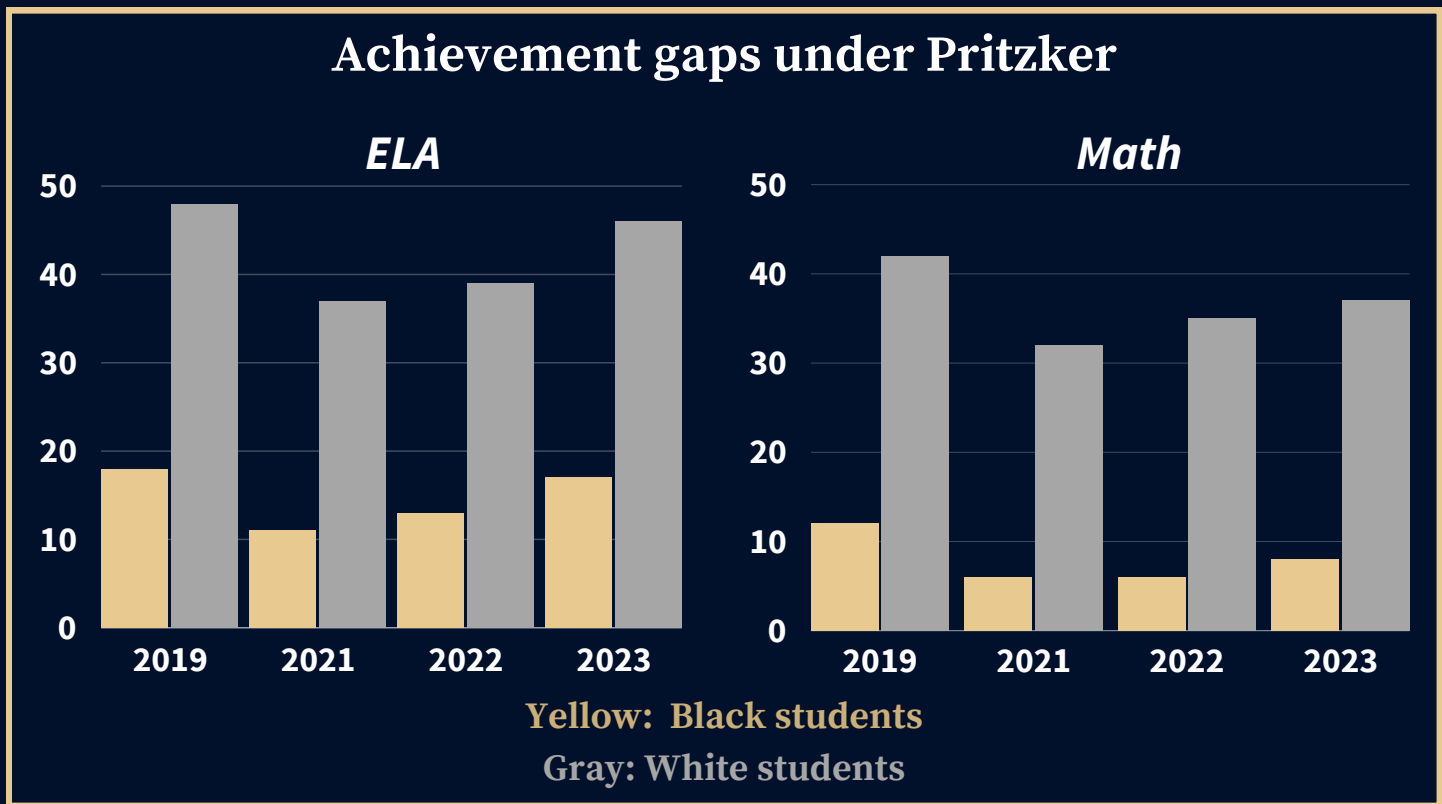
For example, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), which educates the greatest portion of Black students of any district in the state, is facing a \$391 million budget hole next year.¹⁴ Despite the evidence-based funding law, state education officials estimate that CPS is still underfunded by over \$1 billion.¹⁵

The Consequences for Black Students in Illinois

Research is clear that funding and resources are key to student success.¹⁶ This is not merely a debate over numbers - budgets are moral documents. By electing to underfund schools attended by Black students, Pritzker is making an affirmative choice to undervalue the lives and potential of Black children. The disparities he's perpetuating are stark. We conducted our own analysis of the disparities resulting from Pritzker's policy choices using the state's own data (a detailed explanation of our methodology is included in the appendix).¹⁷ The results are disturbing.

- 95% of Black students are in underfunded school districts.
 - White students are more than four times more likely to be in a well-funded district than Black students.
 - Districts with a significant Black student population (25% or more) are half as likely to be well-funded as other districts.
 - Districts that receive the most in local property taxes (top 10%) are more than twice as likely to be well-funded than those in the bottom 10%.
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Pritzker’s failure to properly fund schools attended by Black students is evident in the stagnant achievement gaps seen during his term. In 2023, only 16.1% of Black students achieved proficiency in English Language Arts (ELA), compared to 44.9% of white students and 34.6% overall.¹⁸ The gap is even more pronounced for math, with just 8% of Black students achieving proficiency, compared to 36.7% of white students and 26.9% overall. In science, 25.5% of Black students achieved proficiency, compared to 65% of white students and 51.8% of students overall. In addition, since Pritzker took office in 2019, Illinois has not made notable progress in closing the achievement gap between Black and white students in math or English.¹⁹ The data shows similar gaps, largely unchanged during Pritzker’s tenure, for SAT scores.²⁰



Meanwhile, Pritzker has been urged by Democratic lawmakers and the Illinois State Board of Education to provide dedicated funding to ensure public schools do not have to divert resources to provide necessary new services for the growing number of migrant children they serve, such as the need for bilingual staff and educators.²¹

Without dedicated funding for these emerging needs, already underfunded schools that predominantly serve Black children and other students of color will be the most negatively impacted. Yet Pritzker has ignored their concerns and left public schools unfunded to address the challenge, choosing instead to exclude any targeted resources to help impacted schools in his 2024 budget.

Pritzker's disregard for funding Illinois' public schools is not the only way he is failing Black students. In 2023, he allowed an essential scholarship program to expire, giving Illinois the dubious distinction of becoming the first state in the country to end a major school choice program.²² Launched in 2018, the Invest in Kids Tax Credit Scholarship Program gave individuals and businesses donating to qualified scholarship granting organizations a 75% income tax credit.²³ Those scholarships gave low-income children in underfunded public schools a lifeline, providing them with an opportunity to attend private schools.

One of the main beneficiaries of the program were Black students. Empower Illinois, the largest scholarship granting organization, reported that at least 53% of scholarship recipients were Black or Hispanic.²⁴ Another, the Big Shoulders Fund, reported over 50% of recipients were Black or Latino.²⁵ In its final year, the program raised more than \$90 million.²⁶ Despite the incredible success of Invest in Kids, Pritzker has made no meaningful attempts to resurrect the program, once again leaving Black children to suffer because of his choices.

Pritzker's shameful record on supporting Black students becomes even more reprehensible when compared to the rest of the country. The Education Law Center gives the state the lowest possible ranking based on funding equity, finding that districts serving the most students of color receive 11% less than districts serving the least students of color.²⁷ It is one of only five states with a gap over 10%.²⁸

Conclusion

J.B. Pritzker has had five and a half years to demonstrate his commitment to supporting the Black community. And his record is clear - he has repeatedly failed to improve opportunity and quality of life for Black Illinoisans. His consistent underfunding of schools and the failure to preserve an essential scholarship program are clear signs that he does not stand with Black families and children. Pritzker promised us that he would be a champion for equity. Instead, he's proven time and time again that he will not take meaningful action on the most critical issues for Black Americans. The Black community deserves accountability and is taking note.



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Appendix

95% of Black students are in underfunded school districts.

We can estimate the number of Black or African American students in each district by multiplying the total student enrollment for that district (located in the column “# Student Enrollment”) by the percentage of Black or African American students in that population (located in the column “% Student Enrollment - Black or African American”).

According to the Glossary, districts classified in EBF Tier 1, 2, or 3 are underfunded — meaning that they receive less than the minimum funding necessary to educate the students in that district. We can therefore use the dataset to identify underfunded districts based on their identified tier level (located in the column “EBF Tier”). We can also use the dataset to identify well-funded districts (those classified in EBF Tier 4).

If we then divide the number of Black or African American students enrolled in underfunded districts (282,569) by the number of such students in all districts (298,763), we find that about 95% of Black or African American students are enrolled in underfunded districts.

White students are more than four times more likely to be in a well-funded district than Black students are.

We can estimate the number of white students in each district by multiplying the total student enrollment for that district (located in the column “# Student Enrollment”) by the percentage of white students in that population (located in the “% Student Enrollment - White”).

Appendix

If we then divide the number of white students enrolled in well-funded districts (173,648) by the number of white students in all districts (841,627), we find that approximately 20.6% of white students are enrolled in well-funded districts.

By comparison, if we divide the number of Black or African American students in well-funded districts (13,741) by the number of Black or African American students in all districts (298,763), we find that only 4.6% of Black or African students are enrolled in well-funded districts. Thus, white students are more than four times as likely as Black or African American students to be enrolled in well-funded districts ($20.6\% / 4.6\% = \text{about } 4.5x$).

Districts with a significant Black student population (25% or more) are half as likely to be well-funded as other districts.

Here, we classify a district having a Black or African American student enrollment percentage of 25% or greater to have a “significant Black student population.” By dividing the number of well-funded districts having a significant Black student population (10) by the number of all districts having a significant Black student population (92), we find that approximately 10.9% of districts with a significant Black student population are well-funded.

By dividing the number of well-funded districts that do not have a significant Black student population (176) by the total number of districts that do not have a significant Black student population (757), we find that approximately 23.2% of students without a significant Black student population are well-funded.

Appendix

Thus, districts with a significant Black student population are less than half as likely to be well-funded as districts that do not have such a population ($10.9\% / 23.2\% =$ about 0.47x).

The districts that receive the most in local property taxes (top 10%) are more than twice as likely to be well-funded than those that receive the least in local property taxes (bottom 10%).

Using the column “\$ Local Property Taxes,” we can identify the districts earning the most in local property taxes (top 10% of all districts) and the districts earning the least (bottom 10% of all districts).

By dividing the number of well-funded districts in the top 10% of local property taxes (32) by the total number of districts in the top 10% of local property taxes (85), we find that about 37.6% of districts in the top 10% are well-funded.

By dividing the number of well-funded districts in the bottom 10% of local property taxes (15) by the total number of districts in the bottom 10% of local property taxes (85), we find that about 17.6% of districts in the bottom 10% are well-funded.

Thus, districts in the top 10% of local property taxes are more than twice as likely to be well-funded as those that are in the bottom 10% of local property taxes ($37.6\% / 17.6\% =$ about 2.1x).
