



December 20, 2017

Let's Make the Invest in Kids Program Fair!

Public Act 100-0465 was passed by the General Assembly and signed into law by the governor in August 2017 and created the Invest in Kids Act (35 ILCS 40/1). This Act allows income tax credits for taxpayers who make authorized contributions to a Scholarship Granting Organization (SGO). SGOs, in turn, provide scholarships for eligible Illinois students to attend qualified, non-public schools in Illinois.

Put more simply, through the Invest in Kids Act, Illinois children from low-income households who want to attend certain private schools that charge tuition will have access to new scholarships. The scholarships offered through this program could cover up to 100 percent of tuition and eligible fees. These scholarships are funded by donors who receive a credit on their Illinois state income tax as a result of their donation to a Scholarship Granting Organization (SGO), a separate organization that is responsible for receiving and processing scholarship applications, and distributing the scholarships to eligible students.

I was very skeptical about the program when it was being proposed. I wasn't sure if children and schools who could benefit most from this program would be helped. I did not vote for the bill because of these reservations, and instead I proposed that hearings be held and more work be done so the legislation could be made clearer and fairer.

Now we find out that the program really is not fair. The new tax credit scholarship program will only help selected schools, leaving out a lot of schools that serve underprivileged children, because they were not on the inside of the deal.

I sent a letter to the Illinois Board of Education shortly after the bill was passed, saying, "It is of grave concern to learn that the overwhelming majority of independent African American non-public schools operating in the State of Illinois will be excluded from participating in the Invest in Kids Scholarship Tax Program because this new initiative is being rolled out without giving them sufficient time to become both registered and recognized by the State of Illinois. I, and many of my colleagues, did not initially support this bill out of concern that the communities we represent would be excluded and unfortunately it appears that we were correct. Since this legislation is now law, we must ensure equal access and opportunity to participate."

However, it is highly unlikely that schools that are not in the program in this round will not participate in the future either, because the \$75 million tax credit and \$100 million of scholarship money will run out this year and the same students in the same schools will receive support in future years.

I have recently received a letter listing many, many independent African American schools operating in the state of Illinois that are not included in the program. There are also many Catholic and Jewish schools that have been left out. It appears that the only schools in the program are those that have some sort of connection. And that is not fair.

This bill was rushed through and made into law – now we hope the department will delay it so it will be made fairer. I continue working with State Board of Education Board Chair James Meeks and the governor's office to try to rectify the problem. Please call the governor's office at 312-814-2121 to let them know that we need to make the Invest in Kids program fairer and include the schools and kids who really need help with tuition.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Ford', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District