



*For use in forums and
other election-year activities:*

Suggested questions to share with candidates seeking state office in 2010

Whether seeking to become governor, senator or representative, candidates for state office face a significant responsibility to voters in mapping a course they will follow if elected. Voters face a responsibility no less important: carefully investigating and weighing each candidate's positions, to make an informed decision about who would best represent the interests of children and families and communities.

To help voters reach their own conclusions on election choices, Voices for Illinois Children presents the following questions for candidates. These questions can be used in a variety of ways – including election forums, editorial board interviews, neighborhood coffees and personal meetings with candidates. Most questions begin with statements to provide helpful context.

As a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, Voices endorses no candidates for office, but urges Illinoisans to vote – and to make their own, well-informed determination about election choices.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

- *What would be your top priority in office? How would you pursue it?*
- *What is the greatest challenge facing children and families in Illinois? How would you help them meet that challenge?*
- *Name a state policy or program you believe to be particularly effective in helping kids and families, and describe why you believe it works.*

REVENUE / FISCAL QUESTIONS

- The state's revenue shortfall now stands at more than \$11 billion for this fiscal year and will likely grow to about \$17 billion in FY2012.

How would you go about addressing the budget deficit?

- Education, health and human services and public-safety programs comprise more than 90 percent of discretionary spending in Illinois, and these budgets have been cut in recent years.

If you believe further cuts are needed, in which areas would you reduce spending? Exactly which programs, and by how much?

Do you agree with the cuts that already have been implemented? If so, why? If not, what steps would you take to restore funding to programs, and which programs?

- Delays in payments to schools and providers of vital services have stretched to about six months. The bill backlog is projected to reach \$6 billion, and continues to grow. As a result, many providers are being forced to curtail programs or shut-down altogether.

How would you handle the problem of growing payment delays, and the harm they cause in public services?

- State policymakers have avoided significant new, recurring-revenue sources in recent years. Instead, they've largely turned to one-time sources – such as borrowing and tax-amnesty programs – to plug budget holes. This has provided short-term budget relief while adding to the state's long-term debt, leaving more holes to fill when these sources go away.

What is your position on the need for recurring revenues, and which recurring sources might you support? How – and how often – should one-time revenues be used?

- Illinois' sales tax structure has a very narrow base that depends heavily on manufacturing and goods and includes very few consumer services. However, services have grown to play a major role in our economy in recent decades.

Should the state sales tax base be broadened to include more services? Why or why not?

EDUCATION QUESTIONS

- A wealth of research demonstrates that children's earliest years of life – particularly from birth to age 8 – form an important foundation for success or struggles throughout their lives. The vast majority of their brain development takes place before they even get to kindergarten.

What policies do you support to help develop the full learning and growth potential of our youngest learners?

- Overall, about 25 percent of students fall short of state learning standards, as measured by standardized exams. And many children – such as minority and low-income students – face wide achievement gaps, even as state education funding has been reduced in recent years.

How would you help to ensure that all children have – and can take advantage of – the educational opportunities they need to succeed in school and life?

HEALTH QUESTIONS

- Health care reforms have passed at the federal level, and Illinois has a state policy of extending affordable health insurance coverage to all Illinois children. Nonetheless, many families – particularly adults – still lack insurance. And in recent years, the state has cut back on investments in a wide range of human services.

What policies and programs would you support to protect the physical well-being of kids and families? And what state policies do you favor to implement and supplement the provisions of the federal health care legislation?

- The social and emotional development of children and youth is critical to their overall well-being. Early intervention, prevention and treatment are important. Yet only one in five kids who need mental health services actually receives them, and Illinois has cut mental health funding in recent years.

What policies and programs would you support to protect and enhance the social and emotional well-being of children and youth?

FAMILY ECONOMIC SECURITY QUESTIONS

- Child poverty was on the rise in Illinois, even before the national recession hit. And even many families above the poverty level are struggling to weather this economic downturn and get back on their feet.

How would you bolster families' economic security? How would you help parents to ensure they can provide their children with the basics in life?

- Illinois overall tax structure puts a heavy responsibility on low- and middle-income earners. Their combined state and local tax bills take a greater percentage of family income than do taxes paid by the wealthiest households. Illinois has a constitutionally mandated flat income tax rate – but also has tax credits and exemptions that can be changed legislatively to provide greater progressivity.

Should Illinois' tax structure be revised to better reflect families' ability to pay? If so, how? And how would you pursue these reforms?

OTHER QUESTIONS: JOBS, REFORMS & PARENTAL SUPPORTS

- Job creation and retention are a significant component of Illinois' economic recovery efforts. Yet many public- and private-sector jobs are being lost to cuts and payment delays in programs either directly run by, or contracted with, the state.

How would you protect existing jobs and help to create new ones?

- In the past 18 months, state leaders have approved a wide variety of reforms in state government and politics. Changes have been made in state pensions, Medicaid practices, campaign finance and government ethics, among other things.

Please describe your position on recent reforms. What further reforms might you support?

- Parents are critical to their children's learning and healthy development. But too many moms and dads – and other caregivers, such as foster parents and grandparents raising grandchildren – lack the information, services and other support they need to fully support kids' optimum growth.

How would you help parents and other caregivers to become fully knowledgeable about, and adequately engaged in, supporting children's development?