

EMPOWER ILLINOIS YEAR ONE REPORT



EMPOWER
ILLINOIS



Dear Friends,

When a small crew of advocates banded together to fight for quality education options more than five years ago, some supporters in our circle would wish us luck, but quietly mutter, “The Cubs have a better chance of winning the World Series than you do of passing education policy in Illinois!”

At the time, they did not think we could unify to cultivate meaningful public policy ensuring quality education for low-income kids. Working together with educators, policy makers, parents, donors, and students, I am happy to say, we proved them wrong. Not unlike a certain doubted baseball team. Advocating five policies into law, we confirmed what we knew all along, that Illinois has a big appetite for standing up for the little guy through large-scale, long-term strategies, statewide.

From the bipartisan fight to fund traditional public education fully and equally, to ensuring gifted public school students advance at their level of competency through the *Accelerated Placement Act*, we are proud of the work accomplished to ensure Illinois kids have equal access to great public schools.

When public schools are not the right fit, Empower Illinois fights to ensure kids have private school options to meet their unique needs. That is why we advocated for and implemented the *Invest in Kids Act*. The program saw an eventful and successful first year with the development of new infrastructure, such as our updated scholarship application, the launch of our EmpowerXChange school and family portals, and the granting of millions of dollars in scholarships to thousands of children at hundreds of schools, in every nook of Illinois.

Together with our advocacy partner, One Chance Illinois-Action, we empowered hundreds of coalition allies to become local defenders of the Tax Credit Scholarship.

Empower Illinois, and our coalition of partners, are proud of the milestones we have reached this year:

- **\$45,190,374** million raised.
- **5,459** scholarships granted.
- **91 percent** of private schools in Illinois served.

Our coalition’s drive to protect the program grew stronger when we saw its impact firsthand.

- At \$61.4 million, Illinois’ Tax Credit Scholarship program has raised the **most money** of any first-year Tax Credit Scholarship program in U.S. history.
- There is **significant demand** for tax credit scholarships. It would require more than \$216 million to award scholarships to every student that applied.
- Our average scholarship recipient comes from a family of four with **an average income of \$35,371**, or 148 percent of the federal poverty level.
- Program donors are not all millionaires — they are regular Illinoisans; the average donation to EI is \$22,732, the median donation is \$4,000, and **the most common donation is \$1,000**.

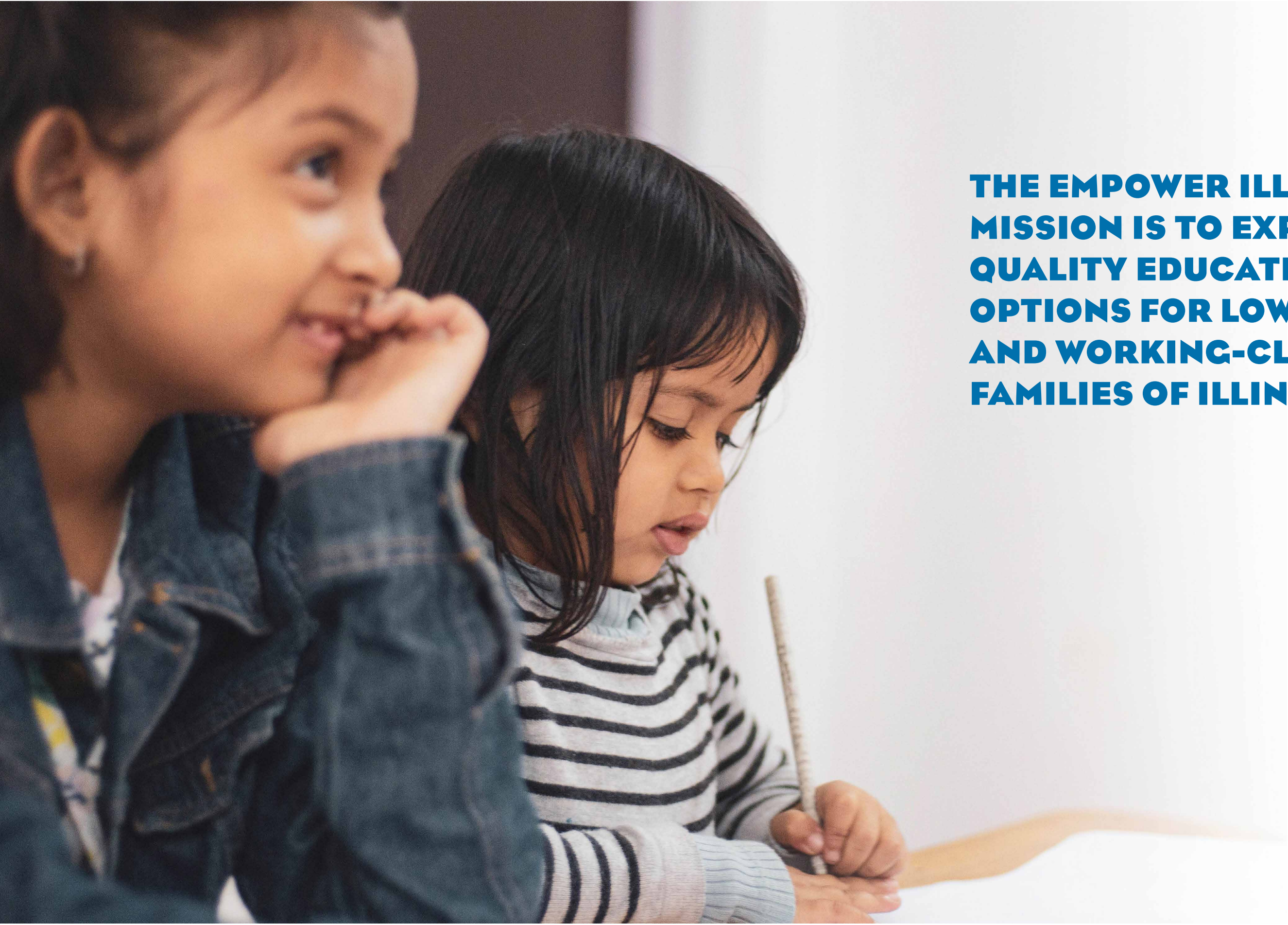
In the following pages, you will find data on Empower Illinois’ work, as well as the stories of those whose lives have been changed by quality education options. All of this is a credit to our coalition partners, Board of Directors, donors, fearless staff, and the political leaders who are our champions. To the thousands of you who have educated students, donated funds, organized communities, signed petitions, or showed up at rallies statewide — you are making your voices heard.

Thank you.

Myles X. Mendoza
President

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A photograph of two young girls. The girl on the left is wearing a denim jacket and has her hand near her mouth. The girl on the right is wearing a striped shirt and is holding a pencil, looking down at it. They are both looking towards the right side of the frame.

**THE EMPOWER ILLINOIS
MISSION IS TO EXPAND
QUALITY EDUCATION
OPTIONS FOR LOW-INCOME
AND WORKING-CLASS
FAMILIES OF ILLINOIS.**

EMPOWER HISTORY

Empower Illinois has a big, bold mission rooted in the simple belief that income level should not predetermine a child’s educational options. Over the years, our team members have devoted themselves to quality education through classroom work, policy research, and scholarship granting. Each of these efforts, over many years and under numerous iterations, has become the core of Empower Illinois.

Knowing Illinois and its students are capable of wondrous things, Empower Illinois looked for ways to support students further. Empower Illinois identified several areas upon which we could have a positive impact: the under-identification of low-income students and students of color as gifted, support for students with unique abilities, the lack of course offerings to students across diverse learning environments, and the inability for low-income families to have access to the same educational opportunities as their wealthier peers.

Our team saw success with policy work through partnership. In 2016, working with the Illinois Association for Gifted Children, we advocated for and passed the *Untapped Potential Act*, and in 2017, working again with the same organization, we advocated for and passed the *Accelerated Placement Act*. These accomplishments were hard-fought and won with just a three-person team.

Our largest accomplishment once again came through cooperation, as education leaders across the state united to improve the public school funding formula and expand options for all Illinoisans. Through the bipartisan passage of Illinois’ *Invest in Kids Act*, Illinois’ Tax Credit Scholarship program generates private dollars for K-12 scholarships to low-income and working-class students, whose educational options were previously limited by household income.

With the successful passing of the *Invest in Kids Act*, Empower Illinois quickly established itself as a statewide Scholarship Granting Organization (SGO) to serve Illinois’ children. We support schools in their tax credit fundraising efforts, while assisting students and their families through the scholarship process that can help make their dreams a reality. In under a year, Empower Illinois went from a three-person policy shop to Illinois’ largest SGO with a full-time staff helping thousands of children reach their full educational potential.

Today, we are poised to grow our focus on educational opportunity and ingenuity, always in the service of Illinois’ children and their families.

EMPOWER LEADERSHIP

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

- Sara Albrecht
- Pete Bensen
- Jack Buck
- John Buck
- Daniel P. Daly
- Daniel Gard
- Ward Hamm
- Robert Huffman
- Michael McClain
- Jim Perry
- John Schoenig
- John Schreiber
- Avrum Weinfeld

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- Trey Cobb, *Regional Director*
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- Myles Mendoza, *President*
- Meggan Muller, *Data Manager*
- Sinthu Ramalingam, *Senior Policy Associate*
- Juan Rangel, *Strategy Director*
- Bobby Sylvester, *Regional Director*
- Susan Walker, *Finance Associate*



EMPOWER STUDENTS

OUR IMPACT BY
THE NUMBERS

The *Invest in Kids Act* aims to help low-income and working-class kids have educational options. Empower Illinois' Year One data confirms that our scholarships are helping these students find the school that best fits their needs. Three of every four of our scholarship students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and our average recipient has a family income equal to 148% of the Federal Poverty Level. No longer are these students' educational opportunities dictated by ZIP Code or their family's income.

Additionally, Empower Illinois scholarships provide opportunities to a diversity of students. Our scholarship recipient demographics closely mirror Illinois' student diversity, and one in seven recipients have unique learning needs. We are honored to empower parents to choose the best school and education options for their child.



5,459
SCHOLARSHIPS
GRANTED



\$6,669
AVERAGE
SCHOLARSHIP



32,456
STUDENT
APPLICATIONS

\$45,190,374 MILLION RAISED

➔

95% GIVEN DIRECTLY TO SCHOLARSHIPS



401
SCHOOLS RECEIVING
AWARDS



91%
OF ELIGIBLE PRIVATE SCHOOLS
PARTNER WITH EI

AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD INCOME OF SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

➔

\$35,371 OR 148% OF THE POVERTY LEVEL

* for family of four



1,988
DONORS



\$4,000
MEDIAN DONATION



\$1,000
MOST COMMON
DONATION

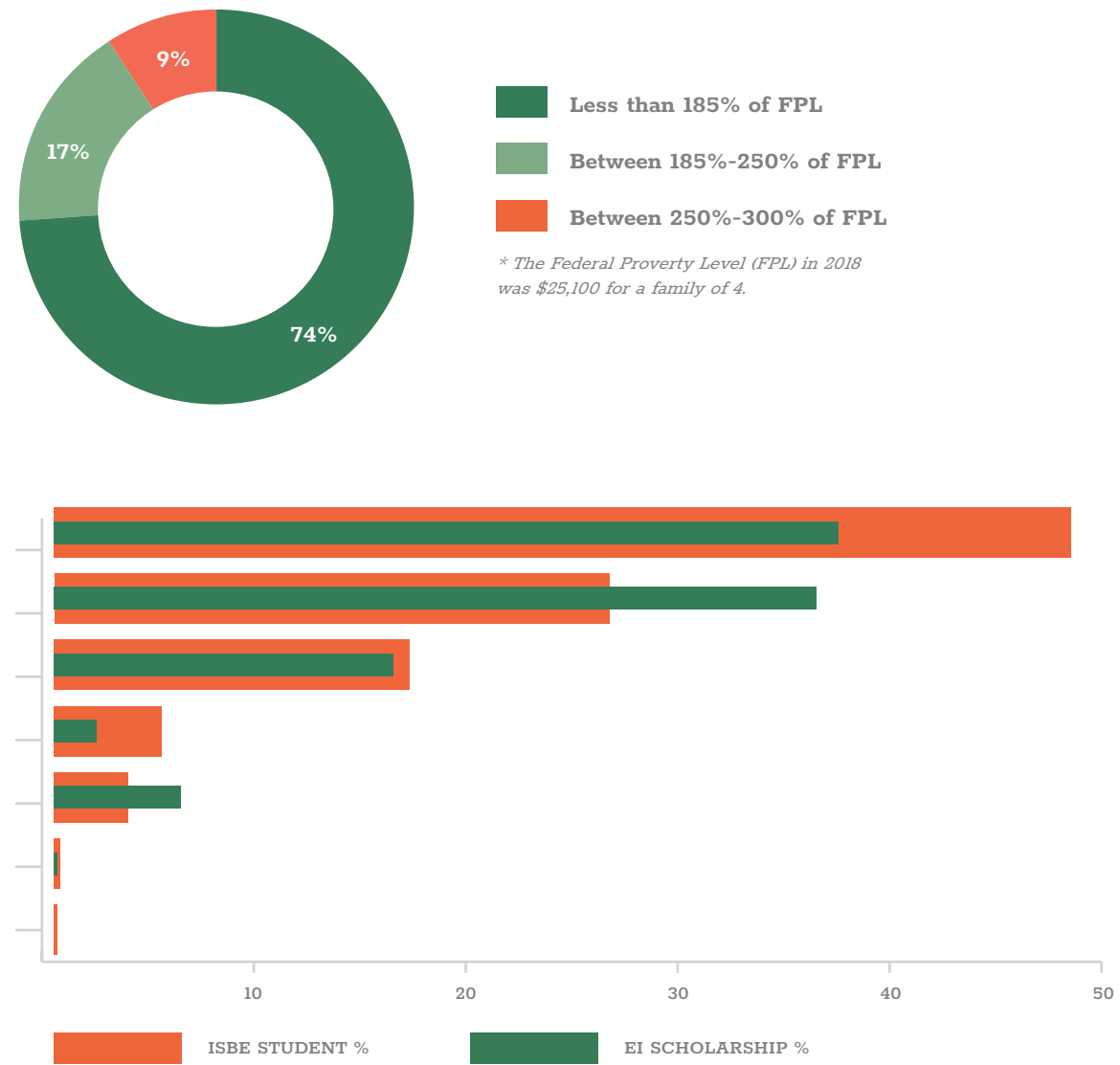


1 IN 7 SUDENTS HAVE
UNIQUE LEARNING NEEDS



\$216 M
TO AWARD SCHOLARSHIPS
TO ALL APPLICANTS

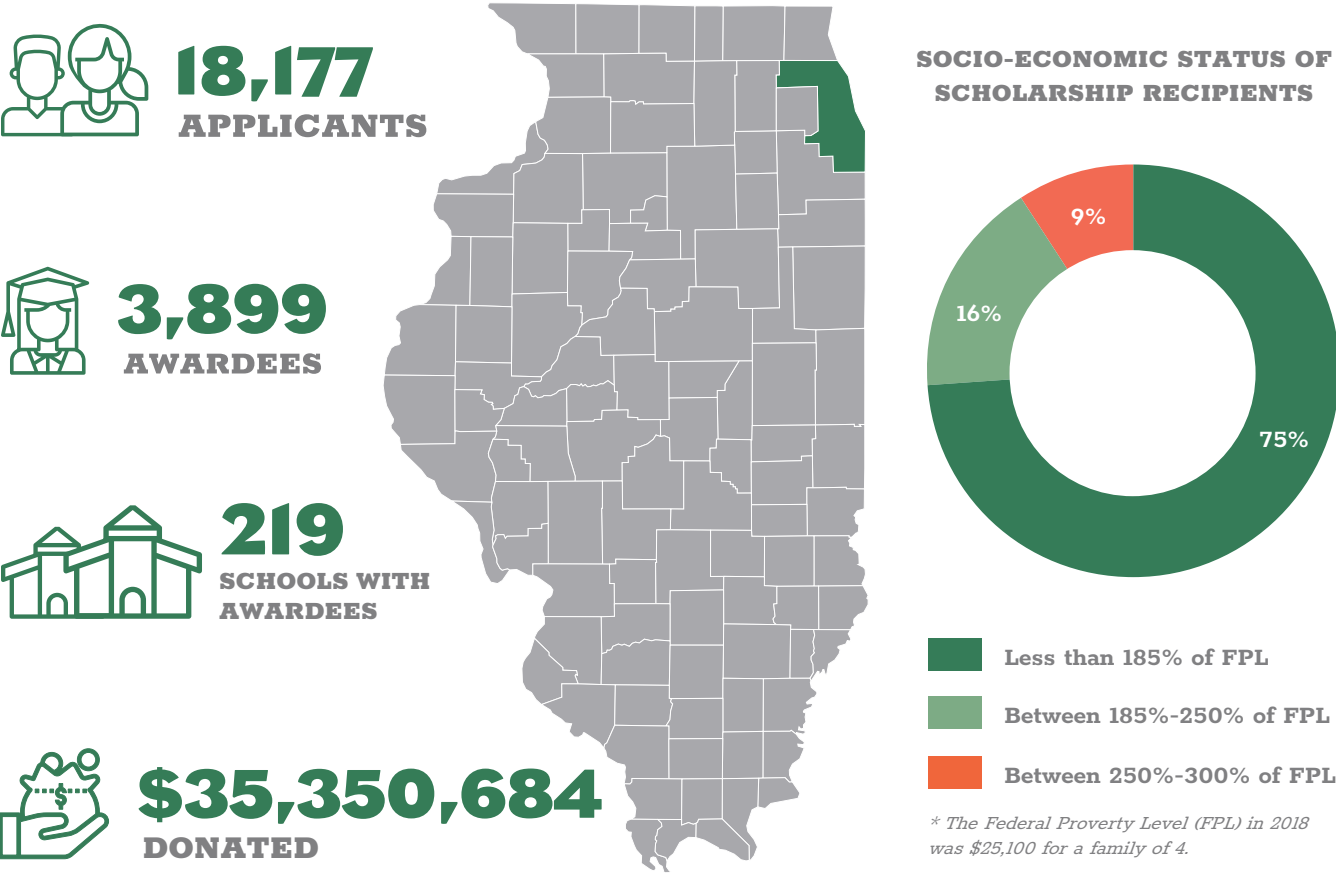
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS



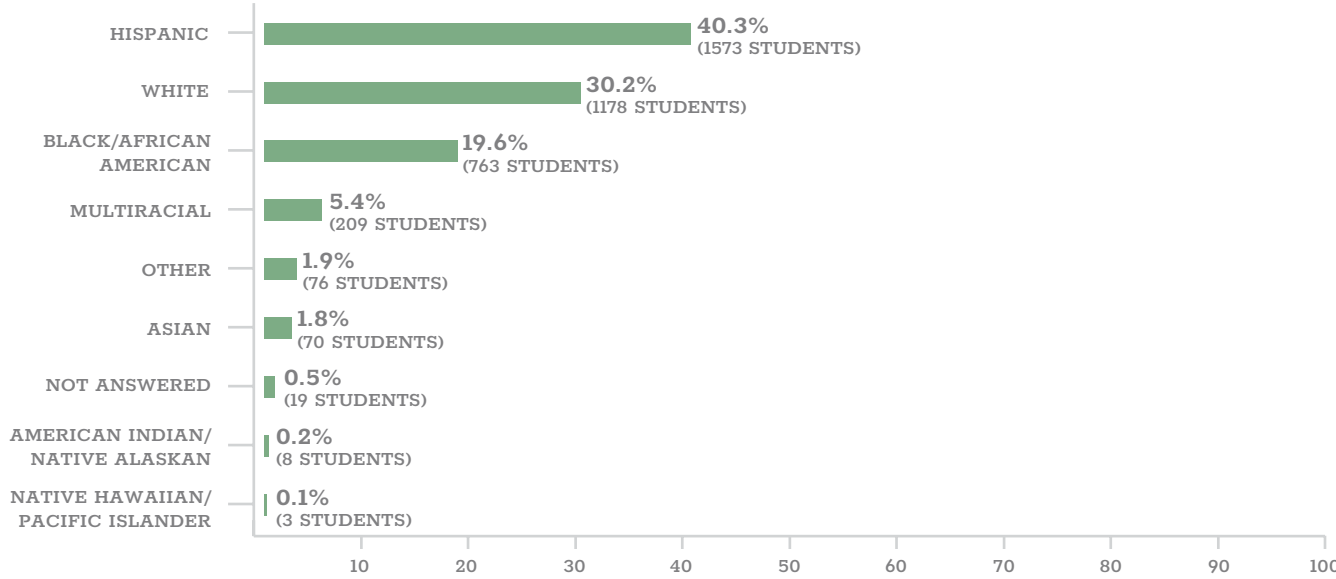
REGION 1

Cook County

The demographic data for scholarship recipients in Region 1 most closely mirrors that of the state.



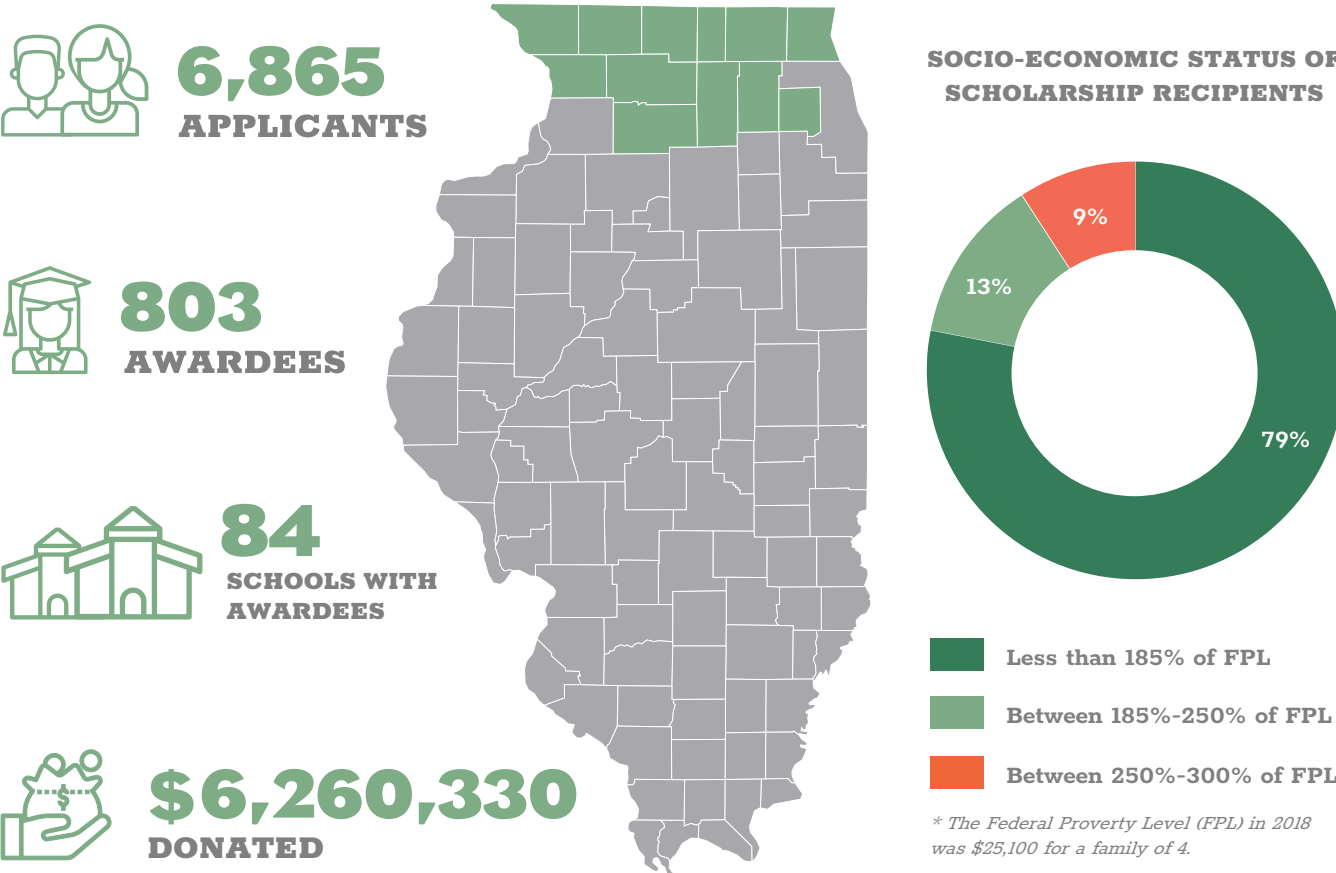
ETHNIC/RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS



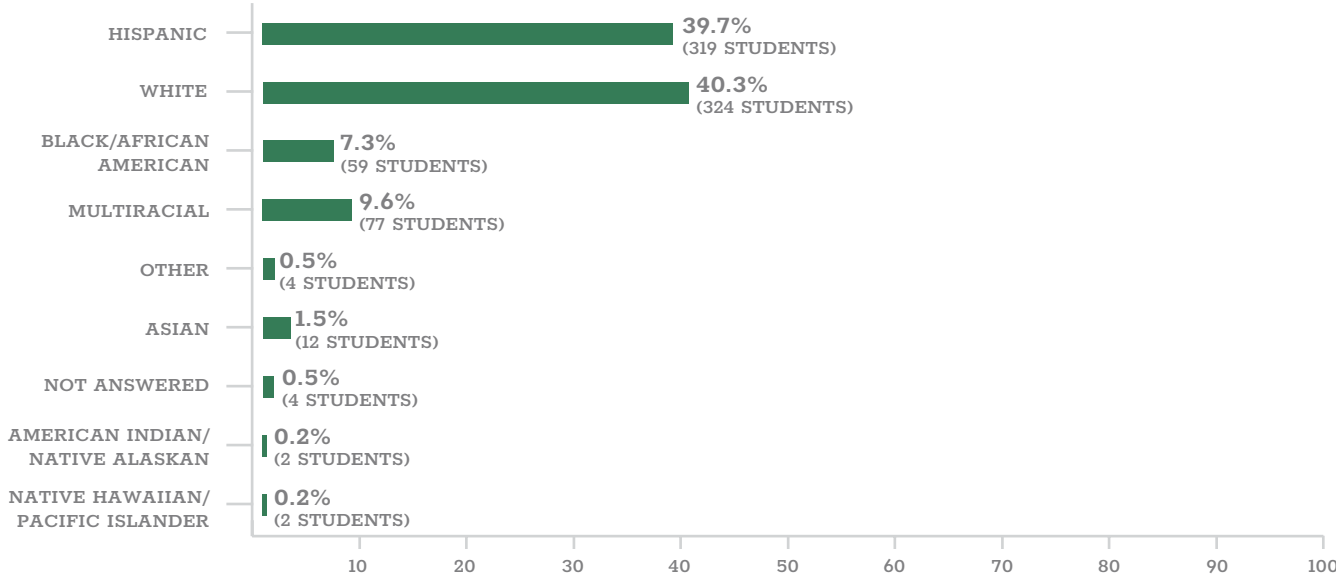
REGION 2

Northern Counties

Region 2 saw the greatest percentage of scholarships granted to families with an income below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level.



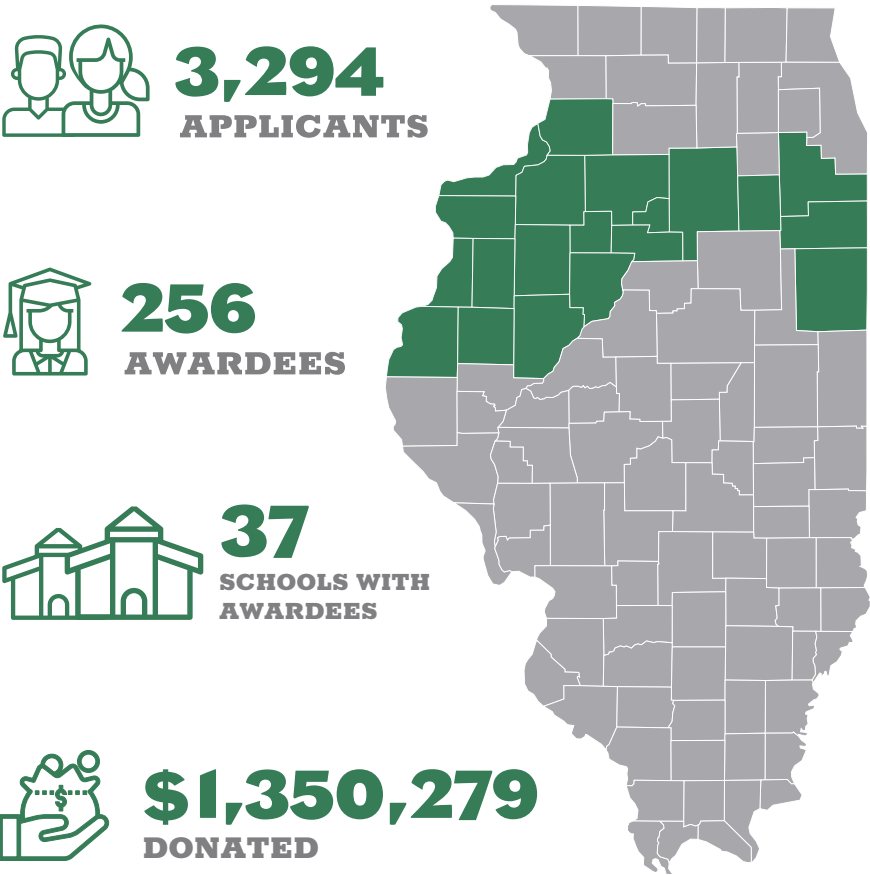
ETHNIC/RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS



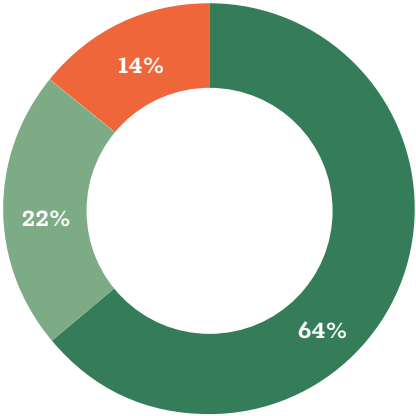
REGION 3

North Central Counties

Region 3's award recipients come from over 27 different cities.



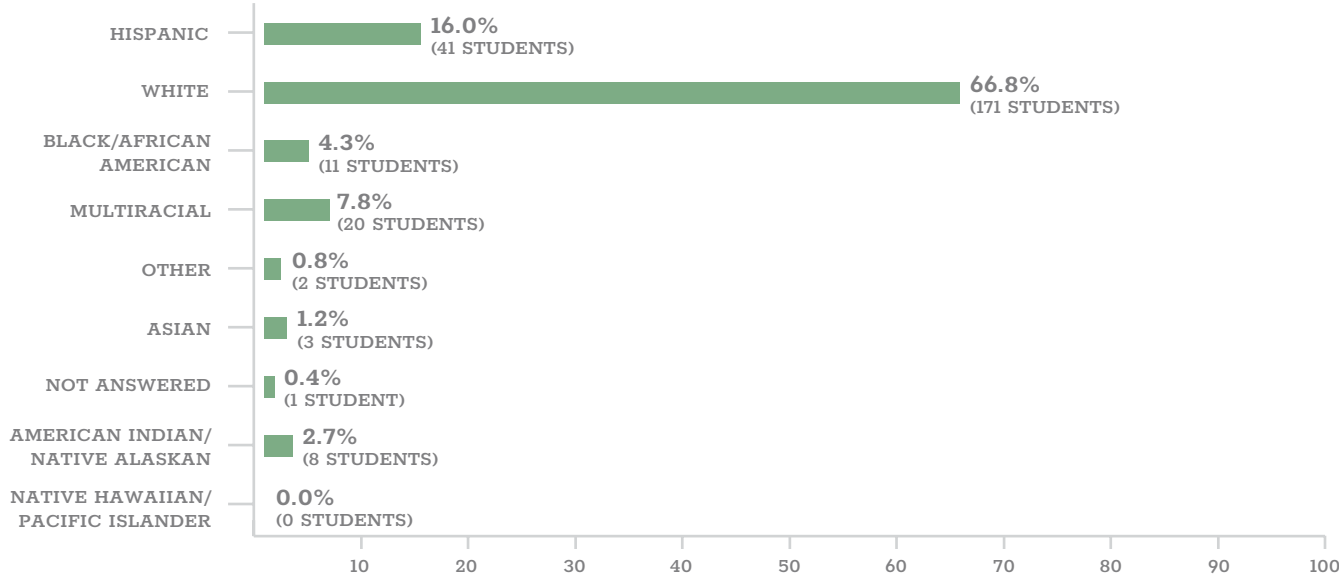
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS



- Less than 185% of FPL
- Between 185%-250% of FPL
- Between 250%-300% of FPL

* The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) in 2018 was \$25,100 for a family of 4.

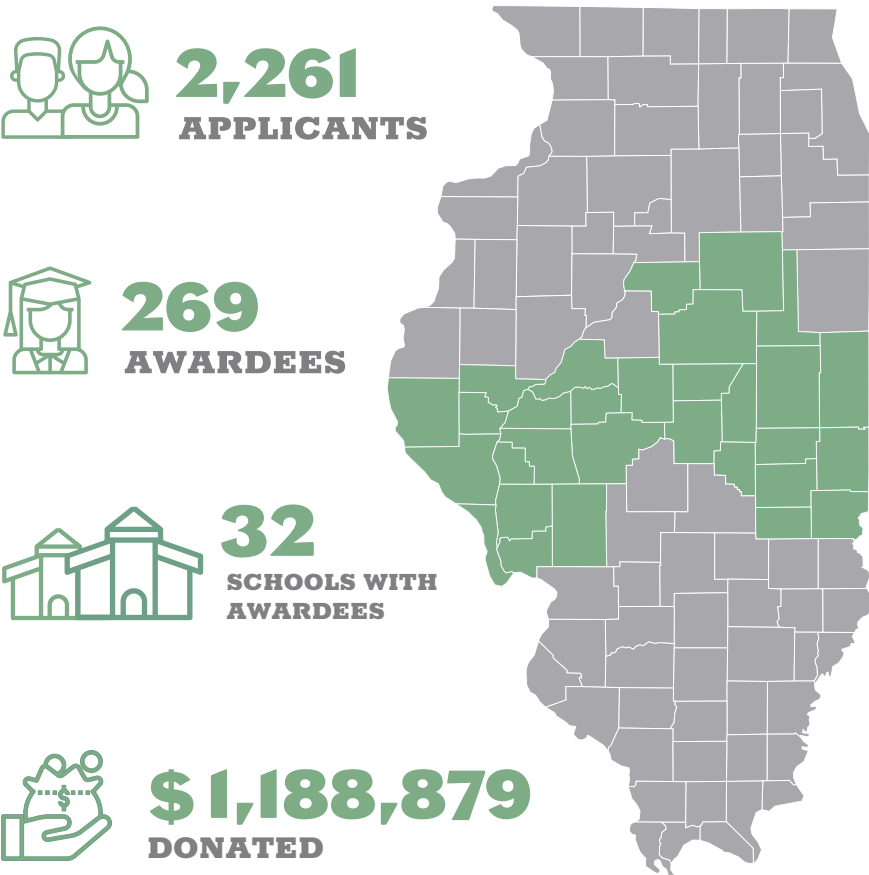
ETHNIC/RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS



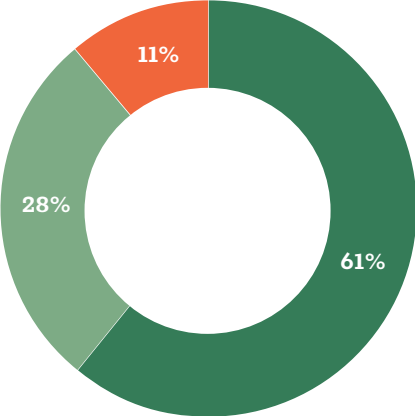
REGION 4

Central Counties

Region 4 hosts the county with the largest percentage of students receiving scholarships; 56 percent of applicants from Livingston County received a scholarship.



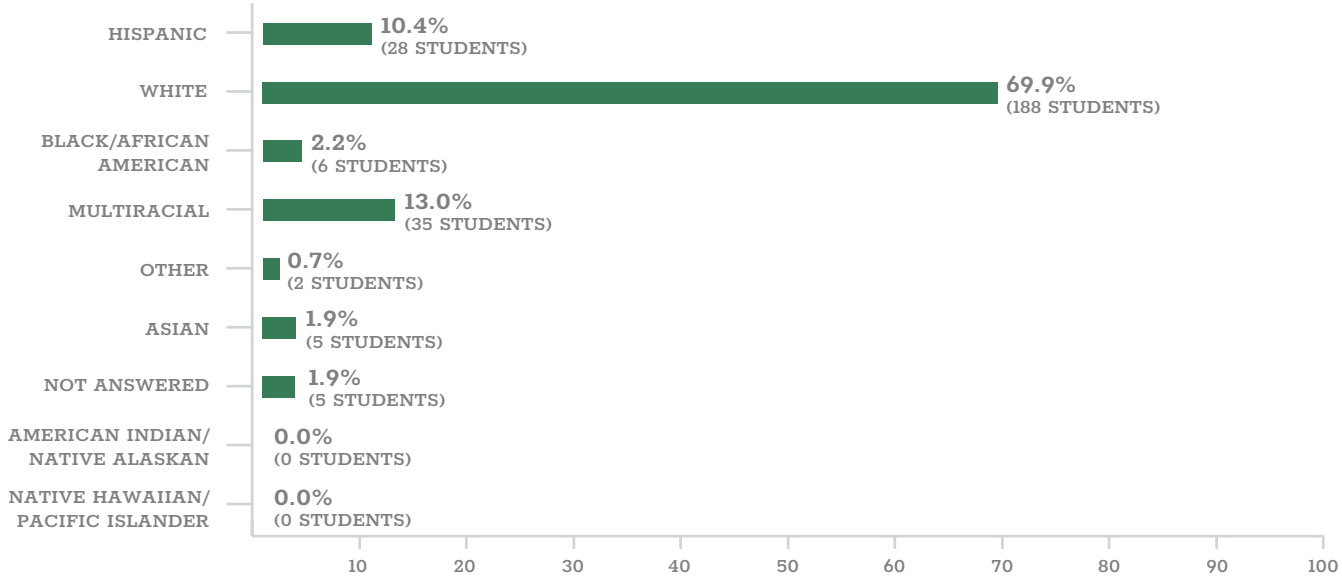
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS



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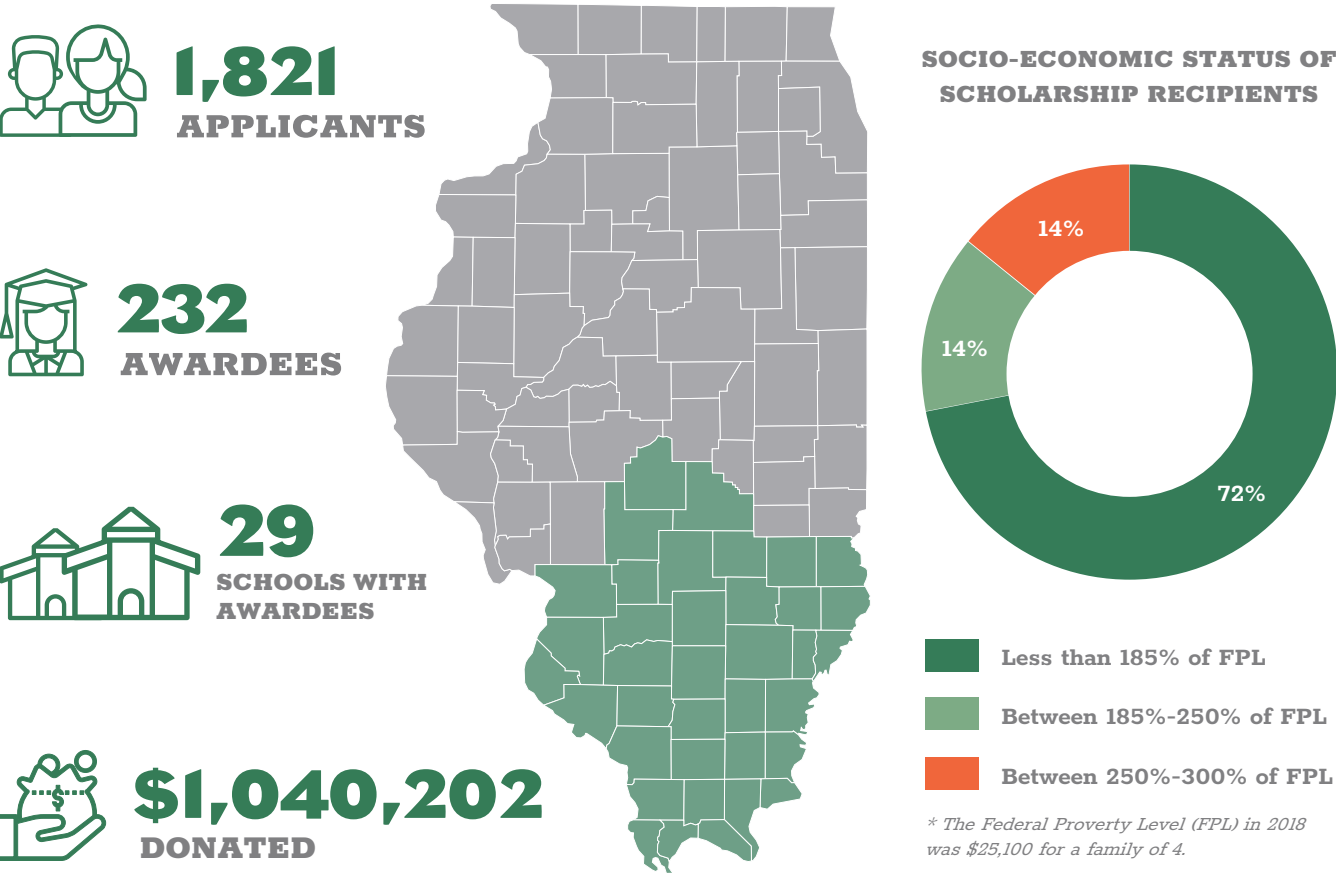
ETHNIC/RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS



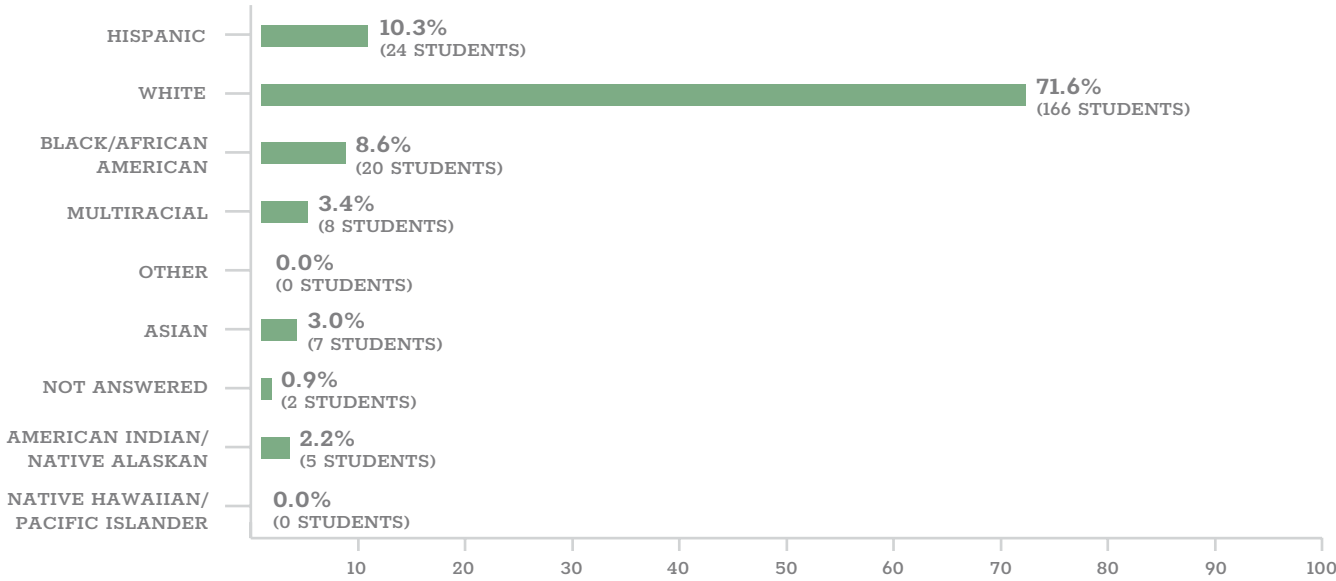
REGION 5

Southern Counties

Region 5 has the greatest percentage of students in elementary schools; 66 percent of scholarship recipients in the region are in grades K-5.



ETHNIC/RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS





EMPOWER FAMILIES

OUR IMPACT BY
THE STORIES



“The tax credit scholarship is important to me for many reasons. I believe the most important reason is to give my children a quality education and a fantastic learning environment... This scholarship means the world to us as a family. It’s amazing how our daughter even knows the importance of it as a seven-year-old! It means we had an option to send our children to the school of our choice. It means our daughter can attend a school in which she feels comfortable from a learning perspective and meet some of her best friends. It means we could be happy as a family! Thank you so very much once again, thank you to all who helped contribute to the success of the scholarship program. From donors, to volunteers, to those who worked behind the scenes. You have changed a number of people’s lives!” — Tony D.

“When I found out about Empower Illinois, I was hopeful. I kept my fingers crossed, we prayed and hoped for the best. I cannot express enough the gratefulness and appreciation that I have for all of the donors. I wish there was a way that I could thank every one of them individually. The only way I am able to thank them is by continuing my children’s education and continue to watch them grow and learn and continue to work hard for everything. I want them to look back and be just as grateful as I am that there are great people out there who want the best for them just as much as I do.” — Maria K.



“I wish there was another phrase I could use instead of the common one but truly, thank you! My gratitude for what Empower, and this scholarship has brought and provided to our lives is beyond what the meaning of the simple phrase “thank you” could ever behold. The scholarship that has been so generously gifted to us has had the greatest impact on all of our lives... My daughter and family have never been happier. The school alone has also opened so many new doors with their education opportunities and technology. Education can help us further obtain things, [like] careers so that our kids can have a fulfilling job and life with little worry. This scholarship has done so much already for me as a mother, as well as my daughter and I am forever grateful for it.” — Karem N.



“My family and I applied with fingers crossed praying that I would be awarded this scholarship...When it came time to apply for the Empower scholarship I did not get my hopes up. My mother and father both work so hard to make ends meet and sometimes those ends don’t meet but they are making every sacrifice they can for what they think is best for me and my brother and sister. When we found out I had received the scholarship, we couldn’t believe it. It was a dream come true... I was placed in honors classes as well as an AP class. It’s very challenging but I managed to work really hard and do very well in my first quarter. I hope I am again blessed with this amazing opportunity. I am forever grateful to Empower for this amazing opportunity, I love [my school] and I know it was 100% the right place for me.” — Tatum F.



“I am a single father who takes education very seriously and when I saw this opportunity through Empower I quickly made a plan and goal to do everything I could to be a part of it... I received a 100% scholarship for my daughter to attend private school and it has changed our lives, she loves it and hasn’t missed a day... My daughter says the teachers here push you to be the best and help you in everything... I’m grateful for Empower and our lawmakers for this scholarship and donors because an enormous weight is off my shoulders.” — Javier A.

“The words ‘Thank you’ do not begin to cover our immense gratitude for your generosity. The tax credit scholarships that gave so many of us the opportunity to enroll our children in the schools we could only dream of because of the high tuition costs. Our family will forever be grateful for this opportunity you gave us to fulfill our goal to see our son go to the high school that best fits his needs and to keep our daughter in the school she loves so much.” — Maria C.





EMPOWER SCHOOLS

Empower Illinois is fortunate to partner with 91 percent of recognized private schools in Illinois to offer applicants a diversity of quality education options.



659

SCHOOLS RECEIVED APPLICANTS



401

SCHOOLS RECEIVED SCHOLARSHIPS



52

AVERAGE APPLICANTS PER SCHOOL



14

AVERAGE AWARDEES PER SCHOOL



\$25,094,666

AWARDED TO K-8 STUDENTS



\$11,314,893

AWARDED TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

\$6,772

AVERAGE TUITION

vs

\$6,669

AVERAGE SCHOLARSHIP



EMPOWER DONORS





Empower Illinois is proud to have a broadbase of donor support. Donations are not just from major donors, but rather are from regular Illinoisans who want to support their local students, schools, or community.



1,988
DONORS



\$1,000
MODE DONATION

** The most common donation
14% of donors gave \$1,000*

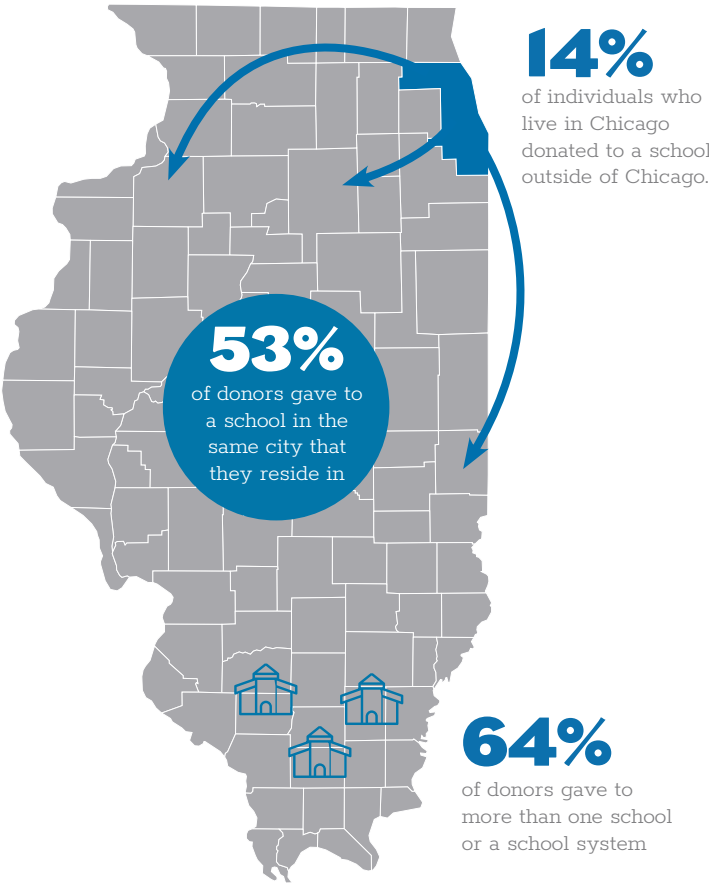


\$4,000
MEDIAN DONATION

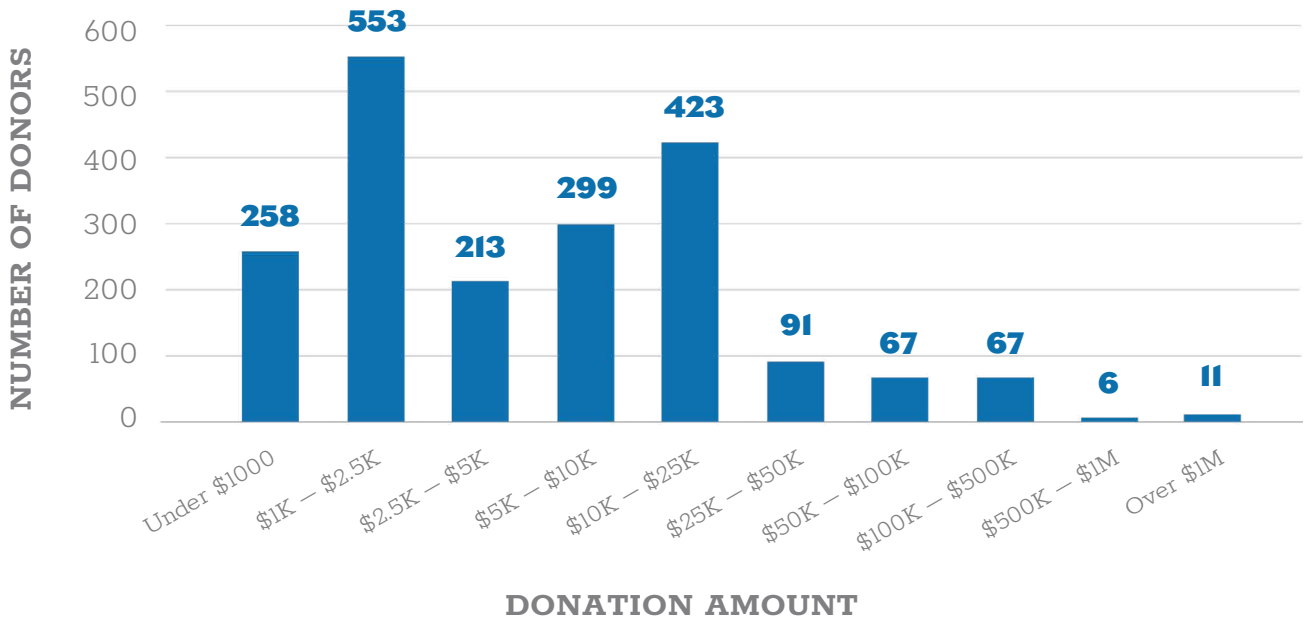
** 51% of donors gave \$4,000 or less*



\$22,732
AVERAGE DONATION



DONATION DISTRIBUTION





**EMPOWER PUBLIC
EDUCATION OPTIONS**

Through advocacy by Empower Illinois, and our partner One Chance Illinois-Action, the Illinois General Assembly passed more than five laws to allow low-income kids to thrive in schools, both public and private. From reimbursing teachers for their out-of-pocket classroom expenses to universally screening low-income children to enter state-funded gifted education programs, Empower Illinois supports innovative ideas to foster quality education.



IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

One of the most impactful policies is the *Accelerated Placement Act*, which went into effect in 2018, and empowers parents to advance their kids into coursework, and sometimes higher grades, to meet their level of competency. The *Accelerated Placement Act* brings uniformity to previously fragmented or nonexistent acceleration policies, which left too many bright students behind or unnoticed. All school districts must now have a policy based on best practices that allows students to enter school early, enroll in above-grade level classes, or skip grades altogether.

We believe students deserve to be in educational environments that meet their needs, and the *Accelerated Placement Act* unites parents, teachers, and school administrators to ensure all students have the chance to reach their full potential.



FULL AND EQUITABLE FUNDING

We recognize many Illinois families rely on great public schools that fit their child’s needs. That is why Empower Illinois supports the full funding of public education. For far too long, the chronic underfunding of public schools left low-income students behind their higher-income peers.

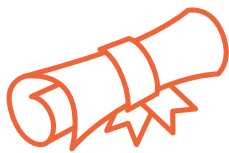
In 2017, Empower Illinois advocated for landmark public school funding reforms that ultimately became law. The new evidence-based public school funding formula received bipartisan support and more equitably funded school districts across Illinois. Most importantly, a base funding level is ensured, while each public school district’s needs are taken into consideration when determining its funding.

These advancements support the core of Empower Illinois’ mission: to expand quality education options for low-income and working-class families of Illinois. We will continue to support full funding for public schools, because we know quality education comes in many forms.



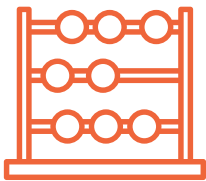


**EMPOWER
POLICY WORK**



TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Illinois' *Invest in Kids Act* created the Tax Credit Scholarship program, which serves K-12 students who come from a household with income below 300 percent of the federal poverty level to qualify for a scholarship. In 2018, over 30,000 students applied for these private K-12 scholarships. The Tax Credit Scholarship can cover up to 100 percent of private school tuition up to a maximum of the average Illinois cost to educate. Both individuals and corporations can receive a 75 percent tax credit for donations made to support low-income children. In the past year, with our partners at One Chance Illinois-Action, we successfully defended the Tax Credit Scholarship program from opposition legislation and continue to be a vocal advocate for the program.



COURSE EQUITY

Empower Illinois advocates for expanding course offerings to students across diverse learning environments. Many students throughout Illinois lack access to adequate or diversified coursework to prepare them for college or future careers. The courses students take in school open doors for their future, and every student should be offered that opportunity regardless of local district resources.



COMPETENCY BASED LEARNING

Students deserve to be in educational environments that meet their needs. In Illinois, 33 percent of students already meet or exceed the proficiency level on the state exam, 36 percent are already proficient or higher in English and Language Arts, and 31 percent are already proficient or higher in math. Acceleration options such as grade-skipping, early entrance into kindergarten, and content-based acceleration have positive outcomes on high ability students.

Empower Illinois, working with One Chance Illinois-Action, collected data from across the state to see how many districts had a policy around acceleration and what it included. We discovered that only 43.35 percent of districts had a policy in regards to early entrance into Kindergarten, 44.39 percent of districts had a policy in regards to early entrance to first grade, 53.72 percent of districts had a policy on content-based acceleration, and 9.19 percent of districts had a policy regarding grade-based acceleration. That is why Empower Illinois, in conjunction with One Chance Illinois-Action, advocated for the *Accelerated Placement Act*, which was signed into law last year and went into effect July 1, 2018. The bill requires all school districts to have a policy based on best practices that allows students to enter school early, enroll in above-grade level classes, or skip grades altogether.

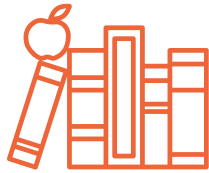


SUPPORTING GIFTED AND UNIQUE LEARNERS

In Illinois, both low-income students and students of color are greatly underrepresented in gifted programs. As a result, the talents of many of our smartest children go unnoticed. In response to national studies demonstrating the under-enrollment of low-income students in gifted programs, Empower Illinois and its partner One Chance Illinois-Action researched the state's largest school districts to determine if the same issue is occurring in Illinois. It found that Black, Hispanic, and low-income students were all vastly underrepresented in gifted programs. Misguided identification policies that many schools use to identify gifted students caused the discrepancies, and our research showed that impoverished students and students of color were paying the price.

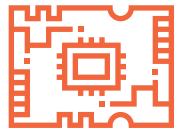
In response to this research, One Chance Illinois-Action consulted with national, state, and local experts to develop a legislative agenda to reform Illinois' gifted education program.

Empower Illinois and One Chance Illinois-Action championed the Untapped Potential Act, which required districts to change their identification and assessment requirements to use certain best practices in order to qualify the districts for state gifted funding. The *Untapped Potential Act* passed both chambers of the Illinois General Assembly and was signed into law July 2016.



TEACHER TAX CREDIT

Empower Illinois strongly supports teachers and providing them the resources they deserve. Too often, teachers make personal investments to enhance their classrooms with supplies and other learning tools. That is why together with our partner, One Chance Illinois-Action, we championed a \$250 tax credit for teacher expenses spent out-of-pocket on supplies. Teachers are the backbone of a successful education, and we support policies that acknowledge their dedication to educating our children.



TECHNICAL EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

The University of Oxford's landmark study "The Future of Employment" predicts that technology will shift 50 percent or more of all employment within 20 years. Artificial intelligence, robotics, 3-D printing, and more are growing at exponential rates. As developing technologies advance, it creates a new moment for educators and policy makers to unite to meet new education challenges. That is why this past August, Empower Illinois — together with America Succeeds and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce — convened some of America's largest corporations, including Aon, McDonald's, Walmart, and ExxonMobil, with local education leaders and policy advocates at the Age of Agility Summit. The attendees learned how Illinois' K-12 education system can keep pace with the training and skill development required for the workforce of tomorrow. As 2018 ended, the Empower Illinois team continued researching a future workforce policy agenda to ensure children in our K-12 education system have access to the education they need and deserve.



EMPOWER VISION

2019 GOALS

1

PROTECT AND EXPAND TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIPS

After a successful first year of Tax Credit Scholarships, we have seen the immense impact these scholarships have on students, their families, and their communities. These life-changing results further solidified our commitment to ensuring all of Illinois’ families have the option for quality education, regardless of their income. Just as the original bill required bipartisan support, we know Tax Credit Scholarships can count on diverse support, and Empower Illinois will work throughout the year to unite these supporters and amplify student and parent voices who have personally found success.

3

GROW RISE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Empower Illinois was blessed with many generous donors during our first year of Tax Credit Scholarships. Some people asked how they could be more involved or continue contributing to Empower Illinois’ work. Their generosity allowed us to launch the a new scholarship program.

The RISE Scholarship Program provides students attending schools with designated dollars to receive up to \$5,000 for tuition, if they qualify for the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program. During the Fall 2018 – Spring 2019 school year, \$415,353 in RISE Scholarships are being granted to 150 students across 30 schools.

The RISE Scholarship program allows local and national foundations without tax liability, individuals who want to contribute beyond their tax liability, and individuals who wanted to be involved beyond the Tax Credit Scholarship an opportunity to further their commitment to Illinois’ students.

Empower Illinois will grow charitable donations to the RISE Scholars program during 2019 and support schools that are impactful in their communities.

2

MAINTAIN AND GROW OUR RESEARCH

We take pride in our policy roots and are committed to discovering how Illinois’ educational landscape can improve for all students. In the coming year, we will monitor the *Invest in Kids Act’s* impact. Additionally, we will study the *Accelerated Placement Act’s* implementation. Both of these *Acts* contribute toward positive outcomes both directly and indirectly measured through traditional means. To understand fully their impact, and that of other potential, innovative programs, Empower Illinois is excited to begin Whole Child research. This research will offer insights into how an educational environment develops a child mentally, physically, socially, emotionally, and through other non-traditional factors that impact a student’s growth.

4

SUPPORT TECHNICAL EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

Empower Illinois will continue to research policy options that can provide opportunity to low-income youth by gaining access to Career and Technical Education, such as trade certifications that lead to gainful employment in areas of workforce shortages. Following the Age of Agility Summit this year, Empower and other national policy organizations will prioritize the need to research Illinois’ workforce shortages in the career and technical education sector. Additionally, we will align around the need for the State to perform an assessment to determine in what areas there are workforce shortages, and which certifications could qualify for financial incentives, support for education programs, payments, reimbursements, or other support.



THANK YOU DONORS

Tax Credit Scholarship Donors

Thank you to our Tax Credit Scholarship donors for being champions of educational opportunities. Your generosity has made quality education options a reality for thousands of Illinois’ children.

Empower Illinois Charitable Donors

Honor Roll of Donors (January 1-December 31, 2018)

Thank you to our charitable donors. Your generosity has funded the policy creation and community organizing that makes sweeping educational change achievable. Empower Illinois' advocacy and outreach work is central to our mission, and would not be possible without your support.

American Federation for Children Growth Fund

Anonymous

Peter and Beth Bensen

John Croghan

Dan and Sherry Daly

Mary and Paul Finnegan

Ken Griffin

Ward R. Hamm

Bob and Patty Huffman

John F. Kirtley

Michael and Lucinda McClain

Bill McIntosh

Michael and Lindy Keiser Fund, A Donor Advised Fund of the Bradley Impact Fund

Al and Mary Ann Moschner

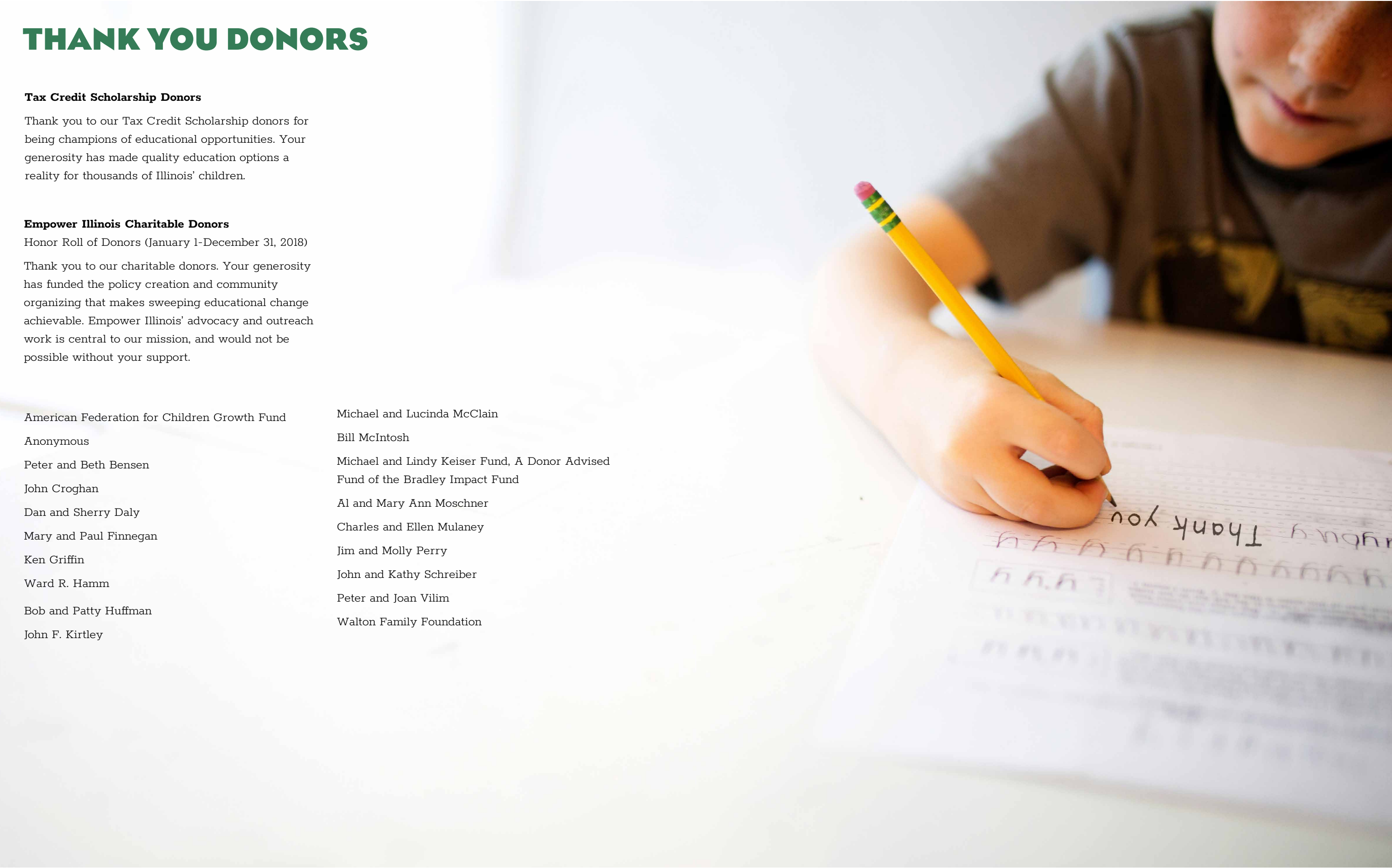
Charles and Ellen Mulaney

Jim and Molly Perry

John and Kathy Schreiber

Peter and Joan Vilim

Walton Family Foundation



The logo consists of three overlapping green circles of varying shades, creating a layered effect. The text "EMPOWER ILLINOIS" is centered within these circles in a white, bold, sans-serif font.

**EMPOWER
ILLINOIS**

www.empowerillinois.org

