

By [Dan Naumovich](#)

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IEA president an advocate for education, teachers

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PHOTO/ JUSTIN L. FOWLER/THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

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Cinda Klickna has come a long way since she started her career in education in 1973. In one fundamental way, though, things have remained the same for the current president of the Illinois Education Association.

“I think that one of the exciting things about being a teacher — and even though I’m not in the classroom right now, I still think of myself as a teacher — is constantly running into former students and have them say hello. They wouldn’t do that if they didn’t feel some connection to me,” Klickna says. “I’ve always felt that I made a difference in the classroom. And what I want to do as president is to make a difference so that people look at public education as something important that we need to continue in this country.”

Although her first job in education came after earning a bachelor’s degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1973, the Springfield native and Rochester resident can trace the path of her career back to a much earlier starting point. Klickna always had possessed the innate abilities of an English teacher — she loved to read and she was great at diagramming sentences, an ability that has become a lost art. She also points to a seventh-grade English teacher who was influential in leading her into education.

She believes that teachers aren't alone in looking back to their school years for the source of inspiration that led them down their eventual career path.

"It really doesn't matter what the profession is," Klickna says. "When you ask someone why they got into the field they chose, almost everyone talks about a teacher who encouraged them in some way along the way."

Stepping into advocacy

Klickna got her first experience as a public education advocate as a legislative intern with the IEA in 1981.

She went on to serve on the IEA board of directors from 1988 to 2000, and on the National Education Association board of directors from 1994 to 2000. After serving six years as the secretary and treasurer of IEA, Klickna was elected president in March of 2011 to a three-year term.

As president, Klickna has been on the front lines of the current pension battle facing the state. She says that her group, which represents 130,000 education professionals, is advocating for a fair and constitutional solution, and she's proud that the union was able to bring a proposal to the table, when many doubted that they would.

A much longer running battle in education is being fought on the funding front.

"The entire issue of how we fund schools has been an issue as long as I've been in education, and the state has still not addressed that," she says.

To provide an adequate education, the Illinois State Board of Education's Education Funding Advisory Board has recommended that expenditures be set at \$8,360 per pupil. The current funding stands at only \$6,100 per student. The difference often is made up by cutting staff, classes and programs.

"We're not getting ahead. Our students in Illinois are competing for spots in colleges with those students in more affluent areas who are getting to take a lot of different electives in foreign languages and fine arts and other things," she says.

Changing perceptions

While the IEA is focused on improving education for students in Illinois, they also must fight the perception that their overriding concern is the well being of teachers. One of Klickna's goals as president is to change how the general public perceives her organization.

"If you say 'association,' everyone thinks you're great. If you say 'union,' all of the sudden you're bad," she says. "And to me the union is simply a group of people who have a voice about their profession."

To counter the belief that unions are only interested in protecting their members, Klickna points to

the “Performance Evaluation Reform Act” that was signed into law in 2010, a bill the IEA supported. It enacted major changes to how teachers are evaluated so that student performance is taken into account, not simply tenure.

“It also brings more accountability to administrators. One of the pieces in the law is that all administrators who are required to evaluate must prove that they know how to evaluate. They must go through training and that has never been the case before,” she says. “We also have in law now that every school board member must have several hours of training so they understand the process. So there’s accountability at all levels.”

In addition to improving the public perception of the IEA, Klickna would like to further carry out the accomplishments that have been made in improving professional development for teachers. Nationwide, the teaching profession experiences high turnover rates in the first few years of employment; providing more resources to young teachers is an effective way to maintain quality individuals.

Speaking out

In terms of accomplishments, one of the proudest developments during her tenure has been the rising voice of teachers.

“I’ve watched our members become more vocal about the issues that are facing them,” she says. “I think that for a while there was a fear of speaking out too much, but as members have seen our students suffering by not having their needs fulfilled, they’ve been more vocal in communities and in political action.”

Klickna says that she misses being in the classroom, but not necessarily the piles of term papers that had to be read and graded each semester. Being a teacher can be a very demanding job. But when asked what she would say if asked to address a graduating class of education majors, she is quick to note that the challenges are outweighed by the benefits.

“I would tell them that they’re entering one of the greatest professions. That every day is different. That you’ll make a difference, although you may not know that you’ve made a difference until years later,” she says. “This is a very difficult job that has many, many rewards.”

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Meet Cinda Klickna

Age: 61

Home: Rochester

Education: Bachelor’s in education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; master’s in literature, University of Illinois Springfield

Work: President of the Illinois Education Association; former teacher

Family: Husband, Kim Klickna; sons, Keith Klickna and Kevin Klickna

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