



*Jim Broadway's*  
**Illinois School Policy Updates**

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## What if all first-graders had a promise?

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, State School News Service

May 27, 2010 – Here's a story public officials who claim to be trying so hard to close the achievement gap and to "leave no child behind" should hear about. Why don't you send it to them?

An elementary school in a poverty-stricken urban area had two classrooms of first-grade pupils in 1987. Twelve years later, only four of the kids from one of the classrooms graduated from high school. In the other classroom, *all but four graduated and went on to college.*

What was the difference? The kids in one classroom were given a promise. If they graduated and went to college and maintained a 2.5 grade point average or higher, all their college expenses would be paid. That was it. They got nothing extra that was denied the other class.

All they had – all they needed – was a promise they believed in.

The promise came from an individual of modest means. Oral Lee Brown's story is told in a book entitled [\*The Promise\*](#), and has also been featured on a [national news program](#). The media portray the story as one of philanthropy achieved by extraordinary sacrifice.

But I see it as a case study for educators to analyze. I keep thinking about the other classroom, the other kids who did not get the promise, the kids who failed – as they were expected to fail. Oral Lee Brown could just as easily have happened into their classroom in 1987.

In valid research, a key is often "control" groups, groups that are deprived of the ingredient given to the primary study group. Different results between the two groups then can be ascribed to the ingredient's effects. Here the ingredient was hope. One group got it, the other didn't.

While you're thinking about that, here's another story that seems related.

The Illinois Student Assistance Commission [announced this week](#) that its list of students rejected for Monetary Award Program grants has reached 27,000. ISAC is receiving about 5,000 student applications every week – but must deny them all.

Of the rejected students, more than 65% just wanted help attending a community college. But the state policymakers have so badly mismanaged the FY 2010 and FY 2011 budgets, the MAP program has been strangled just as the need for this assistance is greatest.

In Illinois, MAP was established as a promise that all students who meet eligibility requirements will be able to develop to their capacities ([as promised also in the Constitution](#)) regardless of economic status. For the first time ever, more applicants will be rejected than assisted.

The Governor and the Illinois General Assembly are supposed to be the keepers of the MAP promise. As with so many other responsibilities, they are dropping the ball.

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