The Illinois Storytellers Initiative
Every school has a positive story to tell. Illinois is working to capture those stories and highlight best practices across the state as a powerful tool for professional development and peer-to-peer learning.

Through the Illinois Storytellers Initiative, the State Board of Education (ISBE) is engaging three full-time communicators with education experience to travel the state, working with school and district leaders to highlight how schools are using evidence-based practices to meet the needs of all students.

While the Illinois initiative is in its early stages, the below overview provides several considerations for a similar approach in your state.

What are the goals of the Storyteller Initiative?
Illinois State Superintendent of Education Tony Smith, Ph.D., strongly believes that every school has positive stories to share, and every school has room to grow. School improvement in Illinois begins with schools identifying their strengths and opportunities.

Change moves at the speed of trust. Storytellers reinforce the state’s strengths-based approach to school improvement by highlighting the effective improvement strategies and leadership approaches occurring in Illinois’ lowest-performing schools. These stories provide other educators facing similar challenges the opportunity to learn from the successes of their colleagues.

A compelling story helps adult learners retain information. The Storyteller Initiative combines data and evidence with the authentic voices of those closest to the work—traveling the state to showcase the great learning happening in each of Illinois’ 852 school districts. Early drafts of stories showcase districts piloting competency-based education, integrating career pathways into the curriculum, and incorporating trauma-informed practices. The storytellers interview and observe administrators, teachers and students who can provide their perspectives, experiences and accomplishments on a successful program or policy in their district.

Storytellers are an integral component of IL-EMPOWER, the statewide system of support, and function as a peer-peer learning tool. The stories may also provide a secondary benefit of helping stakeholders and lawmakers understand the unique contexts and assets of all of Illinois’ school districts and inspire prospective teachers to join in accomplishing amazing things in every school.

How will Illinois share these stories?
Illinois’ stories use compelling, multimedia formats—such as video, audio, podcasts and blog posts—to showcase how districts and schools are implementing evidence-based practices to support student achievement. These stories will live on a central, public platform. ISBE will share the stories on social media and in the agency’s direct communications to superintendents and principals. ISBE also is exploring how they can partner with professional associations in the distribution of the content, as well as ways to integrate these stories into professional development trainings.
**Who is the audience for these stories?**
These stories are primarily intended for school, district and other local education leaders as a learning tool.

**How will Illinois fund the Storyteller Initiative?**
The Storyteller Initiative is funded federally through Title I since it focuses on sharing best practices to support improvement in Illinois’ lowest-performing schools.

**Who will oversee the Initiative?**
The Storyteller Initiative will operate from within IL-EMPOWER—the statewide system of support that builds schools’ capacity to meet all students’ needs. IL-EMPOWER provides schools access to pre-approved professional learning partners and promotes strengths-based inquiry, collaboration and peer-to-peer learning as vehicles for educator-led and state-supported school improvement. Illinois has hired a new director of IL-EMPOWER to oversee the storytellers and guide the expansion of the Initiative. The new director will work closely with the communications team to edit and ensure the multimedia stories capture the essence of Illinois’ commitment to educational equity. The Storytellers living within IL-EMPOWER ensures the stories provide practical lessons within the engaging story format and connect with the state’s broader efforts to improve schools for all students.

**How will Illinois vet the best practices highlighted in the stories?**
Illinois created a scoping form to guide Storytellers in collecting the evidence base before going out into the field. The scoping form recommends researching with internal program experts and gathering data points from internal systems and the district and includes key questions that stories should answer for administrators.

**How will the state track and approve stories?**
ISBE’s IT team built an internal dashboard that enables storytellers to track and suggest potential districts and topics. The dashboard notifies the next layer of review once a Storyteller completes and submits a piece for approval. While the new director of IL-EMPOWER will determine the process for story approvals, the communications team and a copy editor will review all stories.

**How will ISBE measure success?**
ISBE is still determining the exact metrics it will use to measure success. However, success will come when practitioners share researched-based practices proven to have positive impact on student learning, and these practices are replicated across the state.

**Who is the ideal candidate for the storyteller position?**
The ideal candidate is a strong writer with a background in multimedia storytelling and experience in the classroom. These candidates must have the background knowledge to tell not only a compelling story, but a story that also details how other districts can implement the practices highlighted.

Illinois advertised for these positions through the State Board of Education website, LinkedIn and partners, such as the Illinois Association of School Administrators.

**Where can I learn more?**
If you have additional questions about the Illinois Storytellers Initiative, you can contact IL-EMPOWER Executive Director Allison Sherman at asherman@isbe.net.