

Education



Funding South Carolina's Future

Sporadic Improvements

We in Horry County and specifically in the Myrtle Beach area look at our growth and see these shiny new education buildings and think education must be improving. And it may be, albeit very slowly. But only in areas of wealth and only for some segments of the population.

According to the “South Carolina State Reading Plan and Annual Proficiency Update”¹ (SCSRP) published in June 2019, no grade level from 3rd grade to 8th grade has more than 45 percent of our children meeting or exceeding standards on the SC English Ready ELA (English Language Arts) assessment. Now it is commendable that after 2015 the South Carolina Education Department is not continuing to lower standards as they did previously,² but it does tell us how long and how far our children need to go in improving their basic reading skills.

It is also worth noting how far behind our 11th and 12th grade children are. In the 2017-2018 school year ACT test results for juniors and seniors, only 29 percent of those students scored at or above the ACT College Ready Benchmark for reading.¹ In the 2020 “U.S. News and World Report for Education” national rankings it has South Carolina ranked 43rd out of the 50 states, Pre-K through 12th grade ranks 41st and Higher Education ranks 46th.

How did we get here?

As in our national constitution where it says, “all men are created equal . . .” our state constitution says, “The General Assembly shall provide for the maintenance and support of a system of free public schools open to all children in the State and shall establish, organize and support such other public institutions of learning,

as may be desirable.” S.C. Const. art. XI, § 3.

Our state constitution also says, “No money shall be paid from public funds nor shall the credit of the State or any of its political subdivisions be used for the direct benefit of any religious or other private educational institution.” S.C. Const. art. XI, § 4.

We know all too well that these statements are half-truths. We do not treat all men, women, and children equally, and this is alarmingly true in educating our children of South Carolina.

How else can we explain these numbers? In the same SCSRP update, 59 percent of 3rd grade students classified as “White” meet or exceed standards, yet only 26.9 percent of those 3rd grade children classified as “African American” meet or exceed standards. Yes, poverty has a great deal to do with these indicators, and it does need serious attention. But if that were the only reason why do more “Economically Disadvantaged” 3rd grade readers meet or exceed standards than students classified as “African American”?

Why else would the administrators and legislators of our state claim in a lawsuit against them that districts and schools whose students are predominantly minority students need only be guaranteed a “minimally adequate” education.³ And yet, give away (illegally) millions of dollars to private and charter schools whose student makeup is predominantly white? It is interesting to note in this context that fewer than 1 in 4 legislators have a child in public education.²

We know from history that this phenomenon does not happen only in education, but in education it has the most drastic impact on the future viability of our state. In 2017, it was estimated that two-thirds of students who were unable to read by the end of 4th grade will end up on welfare or in jail. Imagine if our legislators concentrated our energy and funds on raising our children’s educational expectations as opposed to raising jails and lowering taxes.

How do we make education better?

First, we must make immediate and substantial investments in some of our longest neglected schools and districts. These children deserve much better from us, and it is long past time we lived up to our responsibil-

ities. It is a travesty that we continue to have conversations about tax cuts and reduced tax rates when we know nearly a third of our children in the state suffer with a marginalized education.

Second, we should reward our teachers like our children's lives depend on them-because they do. They are the lifeblood of our education system and the lifeblood of our state. And we fail to provide them with even an average paycheck for a college graduate. Their first-year 2020 base salary of \$28,190 is only \$1,990 above the poverty level income for a family of 4. Current first-year teachers do receive an Education Improvement Act supplemental of \$6,810, but this money is not guaranteed every year.

In fact, the \$3,000 raise the state so boldly promised teachers (plus their merit raises) beginning in September of 2020 has already been put on hold. As we risk their health, and the health of their families in this pandemic, as we force them to teach in-class, hybrid, and remote classes all at the same time, we cut their pay.

So, for a college graduate that has interned for a total of up to one year, that we entrust with our children's lives and futures while they risk their lives, we are only willing to pay these professionals \$35,000 per year. Would you sign up for that?

Third, we must develop a long-term plan to streamline our education funding system. Because of our past neglect of segments of the population we have a piecemeal system of funding that has wreaked havoc on our schools. Several lawsuits have shown that segregation and unfair funding of minority school districts after segregation-especially as it concerns capital improvement projects-has put the whole of South Carolina's school children at a disadvantage to most of the nation.

We need a comprehensive, transparent, and consistent funding system that can plan for the future, a state system that puts money where it is most needed when it is most needed, and a system that puts maximum effort into funding a world class state-wide public school system for all children.

What can you do?

- For starters, read to, or with your kids and/or grandkids of all ages. Read over the phone, via Skype or Zoom, or in person. Dodi Hodges, PhD., founder and Executive Director of the non-profit Palmetto Literacy Council (PLC) in Horry County suggests, "Reading to the kids just 20 minutes a day, switching off to have the kids read also, can be a real game changer".⁴

- Volunteer to help students in reading, writing, or math at a literacy Council such as PLC <https://www.palmettoliteracy.org> or other non-profit educational organizations.
- Help students in reading, writing, math, or other subjects at your local school.
- Get active at your local school board and with your local legislator. Insist on improving the quality of education for all students.
- And when it comes time to talk about taxes, look at your school districts assessment results (you can look it up online, or call the district or school). Then take a drive out by the school with the lowest scores. Ask to get a short tour if you have time. If you cannot say I would let my child or grandchild go there, do not let someone else's child suffer that fate. Tell your family, friends, neighbors, and legislators what you saw. And tell them what you think needs changing.

It is time we insist that meaningful and measurable structural change is made to our state school system. Let us finally get to a place where we are all proud of every South Carolina public school as they give each and every child of South Carolina a world class education.

Sources:

1. <https://ed.sc.gov/scdoe/assets/File/instruction/read-to-succeed/2019%20Reading%20Plan%20and%20Proficiency%20Report.pdf>
2. <https://data.postandcourier.com/saga/minimally-adequate>
3. <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/sc-supreme-court/1336011.html>
4. "Literacy council says quarantine doesn't have to close book on learning", myhorrynews.com, Ettie Newlands, May 29, 2020

-Note: Author readily admits to being (happily) married to the Executive Director of the Palmetto Literacy Council

HORRY COUNTY DEMOCRATIC PARTY