

Essays

Equity and Access in South Carolina Education

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The Southern states, though different, bear a strong family resemblance:

- All are home to large numbers of low income people, including disproportionately high numbers of African Americans;
- All have historically underinvested for a variety of economic, social and political reasons in public education;
- All have large numbers of low income students who are especially ill served by the educational status quo;
- All face the need to recast educational structures and practices to adapt to changed circumstances and to remove barriers to equal and adequate opportunity;
- All must make difficult policy and practice decisions in order to improve access and equity at a time when economic resources are limited and needs are many; and
- All are experimenting with varying degrees of efficacy with diverse approaches to improve educational quality and access.

Miles to Go South Carolina is one in a series of reports developed by the Southern Education Foundation about the status of education in the South. It provides data and analysis to call public attention to the large numbers of poor people, including a disproportionately large number of African Americans who, as a group, are still being inadequately served by the educational system at all levels. The report is written with a sense of urgency. Our interest is not academic. Over 16 percent of South Carolina's residents are low income; over 40 percent of the school age population is low income; among low income students, over 60 percent are African American. This is too many people to be ignored. Finding ways to advance the quality of education that they receive, break the cycle

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of exclusion and underachievement, and tap into the tremendous talent pool that these students and low income people, more generally, represent is the great challenge that lies before us.

Our submission is simple: South Carolina can't take its appropriate leadership role in the region or nation, or be a destination of preference for investment and business development as long as so many of its students are underachievers, unable to compete in the information-driven global economy and lacking in the skills needed to function in the technology-dominated workplace. South Carolina needs to focus more attention on the bottom half of its students and do what is necessary to help them give them a better chance for bright, productive and

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prosperous futures. Increasing the investment in education for these students, making equity the center of education reform efforts is in everyone's and the state's self-interest. It is also a matter of simple fairness.

We urge in our report that all South Carolina education reform measures be assessed in light of their impact on or relevance to the improvement of educational quality and access for low-income and African American students. If equity is not at the center of the debate about school reform, we believe that it should be. South Carolina should not any longer, to paraphrase the old song, allow "them that's got" to win and "them that's not" to lose. When almost half of the students in the state are poor and large numbers are underachievers or drop outs, everybody and the State are the losers.

Our first recommendation is to create an effective, seamless, comprehensive k-16 system. Put simply, there is a need to reinvent educational structures. Each level of education in the state is linked to the others, and we ought to find ways to promote better planning, assessment, communication, funding and cooperation between and among pre K-12 schools, school districts, and higher educational institutions of all types. Too many children are falling

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through the cracks. Too much money is being wasted, and too much effort is being duplicated. We urge the state to find effective ways of harmonizing the aims and goals of all elements of the state's educational infrastructure using a student-centered approach.

Our second recommendation is to devise and implement strategies to ensure that all students are able to meet high standards. This means, simply, that the state must take seriously its duty and obligation to ensure the essential adequacy of the educational opportunity being afforded to all students. There is no point in prescribing high standards and then penalizing children who do not attain them when they have been taught by out of field and inexperienced teachers or denied access to rigorous academic instruction. There is a need to invest in better and more fulsome teacher education and preparation, reduce the use of out of field and unlicensed teachers in the classroom, and use high stakes tests as a means to direct compensatory resources to low performing schools and students. It is unfair to hold students accountable for what they have not been afforded the opportunity to learn and then fail to help them when the tests reveal the deficiencies in the education that they have received.

Our third recommendation is to enhance access of low income and minority students to higher education by fully funding needs-based scholarships. We are mindful of the fact that South Carolina has made a significant commitment to provide tuition assistance for students, especially those who wish to attend 2- year institutions. But we are troubled by the lack of full funding for needs-based scholarships. It is fine to recognize those who are high achievers and award them scholarships based on "merit." But we think that students who come from low-income families and African Americans who are still struggling to overcome the legacy of the dual system of education in the state also merit more scholarship aid. This is a matter of fundamental fairness. Put another way, we think, "merit should be measured by the distance traveled as well as the point reached. "

The fourth recommendation is to improve and promote diversity in staffing and governance at all levels of the educational system. South Carolina is a diverse state. Over 30 percent of its residents are African American. The

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Latino population is growing. The absence of significant numbers of African Americans in teaching, administration and governance at all levels of the South Carolina educational system indicates that there is much to be done to promote equity in educational leadership. We believe that the State must do a better job of promoting integration at all levels. What is striking about the pattern of participation that the task force has reviewed is its unevenness. Some institutions do far better than others in embracing diversity. We ought to know why this is so and hold those that are failing to integrate accountable for their failures.

In conclusion, let me say this: We believe that South Carolina has begun to move in the right direction to improve equity and excellence in education. We believe that there is an emergent consensus that everyone in the state—individuals, institutions, government, the business community—benefits from having a broader base of people who are well educated, earning good wages, consuming goods, contributing to the common good, participating in civic life, and looking forward to prosperous futures in this beautiful state. We believe that our debate today is not about whether we need to invest in better education and access for low income and African American students and the institutions that serve them, but about the priority to attach to meeting that need.

Miles to Go South Carolina paints a picture of uneven progress, remaining barriers to equity in education, half-starts, and fragmentation of effort. We hope that our report will contribute to fresh strategic thinking about what must be done to create a world-class, fair system of education of which all can be proud.