Ensuring Equity

Recommendations to
Federal, State and Local Policymakers

From a Continuing Conference
sponsored by the
Southern Education Foundation

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ENSURING EQUITY

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EACH YEAR, the Continuing Conference of the Southern Education Foundation brings together individuals from across the South and the nation who are committed to achieving a fair and just society through quality education for disadvantaged children and young people.

The annual gathering often takes on the feel of a "town meeting" as a cross-section of the region's state and community leaders grapple with the social, political and economic issues encompassed by the broad theme: "Education in a Changing South."

Over the past decade, the conferees have engaged in lively, often passionate dialogues with a diverse group of regional and national leaders: Bill Clinton describing education reform in Arkansas; Julius Chambers and Derrick Bell examining the ongoing struggle for racial justice in the nation's courts; Harold Hodgkinson and David Hornbeck discussing the challenges facing school reformers in the South; BellSouth CEO John Clendendin underscoring the business community's responsibilities in the fight for educational equity; Children's Defense Fund President Marian Wright Edelman metaphorically nailing a "Children's Agenda" to the doors of the White House and the Congress.

Why, after more than a century of effort to achieve educational equity, do we still face overwhelming problems as we try to assure a quality education for every child?

In a single decade, the Southern Education Foundation's annual conference has become a "must-attend" event for many members of the South's progressive coalition — an opportunity to reexamine issues, "recharge batteries" and renew the commitment to educational equity.

At SEF's 10th Annual Continuing Conference, Nov. 10-12, 1992, in Atlanta, more than 150 educators, business leaders, state and federal policymakers, foundation executives and grassroots community activists gathered to celebrate the 125th anniversary of SEF's first predecessor fund — the Peabody Fund — and to explore this critical question:

Why, after more than a century of effort to achieve educational equity, do we still face overwhelming problems as we try to assure a quality education for every child?

The conferees concluded that the problems of schools are deeply rooted in a massive educational system that is very slow to change. They spent much of their time at this year's sessions searching for key "pressure points" where sufficient political energy might be applied to accelerate school reform and generate an equitable system of public education. Some of their recommendations (and comments) are briefly described here.

These recommendations are not the product of a research group or commission but the voice of grassroots educators — people working day to day seeking key pressure points for ensuring a quality education

for all children. Their commitment to educational equity is an enduring commitment of the Southern Education Foundation. Our challenge is to apply the pressure necessary to accelerate the pace of change in education to guarantee that all the South's children have the opportunity to achieve future success.

The report represents a diverse group of individuals — diverse in where they come from and diverse in what they do — but when discussing the future of education in the South, they speak with one voice. Ensuring equity in education is their answer.

In keeping with the new administration's efforts to stay in touch with the "grassroots people," these recommendations have been sent to President Bill Clinton and Education Secretary Richard Riley to help them shape federal policy on education. In addition, the report is being presented to other policymakers at the federal, state and local level to provide direction for ensuring educational equity in the future.

Recommendations

1. America's future success depends entirely on whether we can provide a quality education to all students in our public schools, including children in poverty and children of color.

"Education is an essential ingredient for the well-being and empowerment of a people. Yet consider today how quickly our children are labeled 'uneducable' and left to fend for themselves."
— Johnnetta Cole, president of Spelman College

The United States cannot maintain its economic and political position in the world if we continue to allow the exponential growth of an underclass that cannot sustain itself.

Nor can we afford to underutilize the talent pool represented by the fastest growing segment of our population — people of color — who will provide more than one-third of our new work force in the next decade.

In many states, virtually all new revenue growth is being absorbed by the burgeoning costs of prisons and Medicaid — two social institutions whose growth is fueled by society's failure to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy.

Education is the answer, and time is running out.

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2. Schools are only part of our problem — and only part of our solution. The challenges facing poor and disadvantaged children begin before birth and grow throughout the preschool years. We must shake educational, social and health bureaucracies out of their complacency, end their 'turf wars,' and integrate services to meet the needs of every child from birth to adulthood.

"The notion of systemic education reform is a very powerful one ... but do we really have a system that addresses the needs of children in early childhood?"
— Wilmer S. Cody, executive director of the National Education Goals Panel

The national goal to have all children ready for school by the year 2000 has a special importance for the South, where rural and inner city poverty combine to produce our country's largest population of children who start first grade "behind."

In its 1992 policy statement, *The Early Childhood Challenge*, the Southern Regional Education Board reported that, compared to the nation, children in the South are more likely to be born to mothers who did not receive adequate prenatal care; more likely to be born prematurely or at low birthweight; more likely to be born to teenage mothers; more likely to die in infancy; more likely to die between the ages of one and four; more likely to die in poverty; more likely to have no health insurance coverage; and more likely to be in a child care center that falls below minimum standards.

At present, there is no national or regional agreement about how best to reach the readiness goal. We have no national plan of action nor do we have a comprehensive set of benchmarks to help us measure our progress along the way. Unless this situation changes dramatically, our nation will not come close to our commitment to prepare all children for school by the year 2000.

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3. We must have adults in our schools and in our other social institutions who understand that each child is a product of his upbringing and experience — and that adults have the responsibility to do whatever it takes to assure each child prospers and fulfills her individual potential.

Readiness applies to more than just children. It applies to schools. Schools — and the larger social support system — must be ready to serve every child.

Clearly, when a child walks into a classroom, he or she brings far more than that moment. Children bring the 16-18 hours a day they are not at school — and all the years since birth. Whether these experiences are in a wealthy suburb or an inner city neighborhood, In every school in the South, we must recapture something that existed long before desegregation. We must recapture the profound belief that every child can learn and that education will assure every child more wealth, more power, more dignity and more joy.

The problem is not only about race, but about class. The problem exists wherever — and by whomever — children are labeled as "unteachable" or of "limited potential." The teachers, social workers and other care providers may be white or people of color. Daily, the poison of low expectations is being administered by disengaged adults of every description.

We can no longer tolerate teachers, principals, administrators, policymaker, or community leaders who are willing to give up on children.

"We have to build a full and open commitment to the success of all children."
— Gerry House, superintendent of the Memphis City Schools

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4. All children deserve a challenging, engaging, hands-on curriculum taught by teachers who are challenged, engaged and committed to hands-on instruction — in schools that are linked to the environment where they exist, responsive to diversity, goal-focused and accountable.

No longer should schools be places where we hold children for a certain time and then release them into the streets. Schools must become places where children want to be.

Schools can demand high levels of performance and engage children in learning. Two things have to happen. First, the community must support higher standards. Second, principals and teachers must see for themselves what educators in some restructuring schools are learning — that a fresh approach can accelerate the achievement of average and below-average students.

Schools that work for all children recognize that the language and culture of the student is something to be valued, not ignored. They build on what students know and do not constantly tell them what they do not know. They employ any and every teaching strategy in the effort to reach every child.

Our school reform policies must be shaped with these observations in mind:

"We must have curriculum that is not rigid and compartmentalized, but curriculum that helps children find powerful questions they consider worth answering."
— Sharon Robinson, director of the NEA National Center for Innovation

• You cannot mandate what matters. Neither centralization nor decentralization is the answer; the system must be top-down and bottom up at once.

• Schools will begin to change when the people who work in them begin to think deeply about the work they do. Empowering educators to do this kind of thinking — giving them the time, the resources and the incentives — is the first thing that must happen.

• Schools are not citadels apart from the community. Substantive parent and community involvement must become a standard for the evaluation of district and school performance.

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5. We must increase the capacity of teachers to make the learning experience more effective — and use the preparation of teachers as an engine of school reform.

"We were all taught that teacher education could not be a powerful lever for change, but now we are beginning to see that if we do not address the preparation of teachers, we will not achieve our school reform goals."
— Barbara Hatton, president of South Carolina State University

In fighting the disease of low expectations, an important remedy lies in the preparation and in-service training of teachers and other professionals in the education and social support systems. It begins with a clear vision of the kind of education we want to provide all children. This vision must then guide us as we select and prepare young teachers and work to upgrade and expand the skills of women and men already in our classrooms.

Several points are critical:

First, the best way to be certain that teachers understand the whole life of every child is to prepare them in programs that are student- and family-centered. Teacher candidates must learn to teach by working in a variety of realistic settings, teaching a variety of children, and coming into contact with a variety of families.

New and existing teachers must see themselves as problem solvers, finding the right learning combination for each child — and coalition builders, reaching out to involve parents, guardians and communities in the education process. Experienced teachers with a "grounded knowledge" of the school must be involved in this training, which cannot evolve without stronger alliances between public schools and teacher colleges.

Second, we must assure by all means necessary that we reach a critical mass of minority teachers who will be leaders in the commitment to improve the performance of low-achieving students and to assure equity in education.

Also, teacher licensing systems need to be re-designed to assure high-quality clinical experiences; eliminate "emergency certification" loopholes; involve experienced, thoughtful teachers in the preparation of new teachers; and prepare new professionals for the realities of today's classrooms.

We must create sufficient pressure and incentives to bring together our best teachers and our students most in need of skillful teaching. We

must begin to eliminate from the teaching force individuals who are not fully committed to the educational success of all children. And we must restructure our teacher preparation programs to insure that tomorrow's teachers have the skills and understanding they will need to succeed in any school setting.

It does no good to single out teachers for change if counselors are still telling students what their limits are. We must address the training of teachers, counselors and administrators simultaneously.

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6. The definition of education reform must be broadened to include adults.

"We must have a new social contract in the South that broadens education reform to include education for the adult workforce."
— George B. Autry, president, MDC, Inc.

The school reform movement did not arrive in time to avert the workforce crisis we face today. It is therefore imperative that we broaden our definition of education reform to address the more effective educational preparation of America's existing workforce.

An increasing share of our labor force is poor, immigrant, undereducated, minority, female — yet we have not set high "workforce level" standards for many individuals who belong to these groups. They have finished — or dropped out of — high school without sufficient skills to compete in the industrial job market of the South today.

By redefining education reform to include adult-centered educational programs — and in particular, our community college system — we can "retool" our work force in much the same sense that the private sector is retooling its factories and businesses to remain competitive. In an economy that now depends on high skills rather than a mass of undereducated workers, adult education reform has become a survival issue.

Unlike the days of the Job Corps, when corporations got involved in adult training for philanthropic reasons, the corporate motive is "bottom line" today. The high quality of foreign competition has forced U.S. companies to put more responsibility on the front line and give more emphasis to training. But our education system is still geared to let 70 percent of our high school graduates fend for themselves. The challenge is to have quality education for everybody.

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7. We can no longer afford to abandon nearly 50 percent of our students who do not pursue a college education immediately after high school. We must raise our academic expectations for these students and develop apprenticeship programs that can lead to promising careers.

"We need an education system that works, and work that educates."
— Robert Glover, research scientist at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs

Many students graduate from high school ill-prepared for either college or work. Frequently these students have been consigned to poorly conceived vocational programs or watered-down "general track" courses that lead nowhere. Students outside of the college track can

master a challenging academic curriculum, when it is taught in an engaging, hands-on fashion and when they see the connection between school and jobs. Well-designed "Tech Prep" programs that link academic work and vocational training can help close the academic achievement gap between college- and career-bound students.

Career-bound students also need meaningful apprenticeship programs that link schools and jobs, providing both career direction and incentives to master challenging academic material.

Unfortunately, most American corporations today do not recruit graduates as they leave high school and have not involved themselves in high school-based apprenticeship programs. As a result, students often experience a five-to-10 year delay in gaining access to significant occupational training.

The first step in establishing a truly American apprenticeship system is to convince community business leaders that they have a long-term interest in building linkages between schools and work and in convincing students that hard work in school is going to pay off.

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8. The federal Chapter 1 program has been important in closing the basic skills gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, but its usefulness is limited so long as it remains an add-on program.

The Chapter 1 program, first implemented in 1965 as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, has had its greatest effect in the South. Poor and minority children who took part in the small-group instruction paid for by the program gained significant academic ground during the 1970s and 1980s. The program, with its parent involvement component, also made it possible for parents and teachers to stand up for children often otherwise ignored.

"Chapter 1 has very definitely made a difference in achievement for many children — but often the difference has not been enough. Giving extra help through Chapter 1 doesn't get kids very far if their regular school program is not of good quality."
— Kati Haycock, American Association of Higher Education

Despite the program's successes, the achievement gap between poor and middle-class students has remained large, especially in higher order skills. Why does this gap persist, despite all of the resources funneled into the Chapter 1 program?

Studies by an independent commission on Chapter 1 indicate that the program's traditional dependence on pull-out teaching strategies have had the effect of creating a subclass of students — mostly minority — who are educated separately from other students. Often these students get the least well-trained teachers, the least resources and the least exposure to challenging material. Frequently they are consigned to computer classrooms for rote drill in the basic skills. Even after these students leave Chapter 1 programs, they tend to be tracked into low-level, dead end programs in middle and high school.

At its next reauthorization, Chapter 1 must be redesigned in such a way that it will serve as a catalyst for whole school change on behalf of poor and minority children. The redesign should help ensure that schools have the same high standards for all children. Federal funds

invested in the Chapter 1 program should be concentrated on high-need schools, and states should be required to hold schools accountable for the success of poor and minority students.

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9. Educational assessment must move away from low-level, fill-in-the-bubble testing toward a system that both tells us how well schools and teachers are performing and fully explores what children can do.

"What you test is what you get."
— A Continuing Conference participant during an audience discussion

The quality of a school's curriculum is closely tied to the quality of its testing and assessment program. Broad assessments of the full range of skills we want students to master will help assure a rich curriculum. The assessment system must be rooted in high standards and expectations developed by the school and community. As an integral part of the assessment program, parents must be kept fully informed about each child's progress and the actions the school will take to help the child achieve at the highest levels possible.

Standardized tests can be used effectively to hold schools accountable for the educational success of all children, provided they are well-designed and test the full range of skills and knowledge desired.

The development of individual performance assessments can help assure equity and quality, but advocates need to bear in mind that performance assessments reintroduce subjective judgment to the evaluation process — judgment that needs to be informed by professional knowledge, a moral sense and significant community involvement.

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10. Educational choice, yes. Private school vouchers, no.

"Private school vouchers would seriously erode the public school tradition in America. It could return us to the days of 'pauper schools.' "
— A Continuing Conference participant during an audience discussion

The opportunity for students and families to choose among several public schools to find the best educational "match" is not a cure-all for our educational problems, but it can stimulate schools to rethink their missions and increase their interest and emphasis on quality. In some situations, public school choice can also work to help ensure educational equity.

But it would be a serious mistake indeed for America to embrace the philosophy of private school "choice" or vouchers. Siphoning away scarce public education resources to supplement the private elementary and secondary school system makes no sense in the face of continuing "savage inequalities" in public school funding described by Jonathan Kozol and others.

Encourage public schools to develop their own unique character and offerings, but discourage states from succumbing to the simplistic notion that marketplace competition is the quick cure for what ails the public school system.

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11. Black colleges will continue to play a vital role in stabilizing American society by serving as centers for the development of national and community leaders of color; by challenging American society to educate about the totality of the human condition; and by supporting black higher education leaders who provide, among many contributions, a positive role model for young men and women with professional aspirations.

"The value of black colleges to America has got to be something we talk about, and talk about, and talk about."
— Ingrid Saunders Jones, vice president, The Coca-Cola Company

Despite often meager resources, the nation's historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have provided many men and women of color virtually their only chance for higher education.

Although 30 years have passed since James Meredith integrated the University of Mississippi, HBCUs still educate 18 percent of all African-American college students. More strikingly, HBCUs graduate 35 percent of all African Americans who complete college.

Categorized throughout history as "black schools," HBCUs have never excluded students of other races. They have provided a supportive environment for many students who experience their first leadership opportunities through HBCU campus organizations and activities.

HBCU faculty have high expectations for students and are seriously committed to their success. The presidents, provosts, department chairs and leading scholars at historically black colleges and universities are primarily people of color who provide students positive role models and encourage high self-esteem.

It is no coincidence that many of the nation's most prominent black leaders are graduates of historically black institutions. HBCUs must be protected and nourished as they continue to produce leaders in the fight for social justice and educational equity.

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12. Informed local leadership is essential for change to be effective.

"You can't leave the school board out there alone as an island to itself. You can start by getting the school board to talk about children, about their beliefs about families, about their vision for schools."
— Gerry House, superintendent of the Memphis City Schools

Many of the school changes efforts of the last decade have been flung in the face of local school boards, who were often seen as obstructionist and incapable of leading reform. As a result, many education reforms that ultimately depended on the financial and policy support of school boards have withered on the vine.

So long as our nation's school systems rely on school boards for their governance, measures that strengthen support for reform among school board members will be essential. Steps worthy of consideration include educational qualifications for school board service, additional investments in leadership training and a greater emphasis on total community involvement in school reform.

School boards need the support of involved and knowledgeable citizens. Expanding the base of individuals who take part in and are responsible for education will ensure that true education reform is a commitment of the entire community.

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About the Southern Education Foundation

The Southern Education Foundation is a public charity that works to promote educational equity for black and poor citizens in the South. The Foundation operates its own programs and makes a limited number of grants. In recent years, the Foundation has focused on recruiting and retaining minority teachers, aspects of education reform, linkages between education and economic development in the South, and other issues related to education and public policy.

Through research, grants, consultations and conferences, the work relating to education and public policy serves an important agenda-setting function, informing decision-makers about policy issues in education and ways to promote positive change.

Since 1983, SEF has sponsored an annual Continuing Conference to promote discussion of important education policy issues.

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