

November 17, 2015

FINDINGS

Introduction

The students in South Carolina, particularly those living in high poverty and/or rural settings lack the resources, opportunities, and experiences to achieve the goals set for them by the State of South Carolina.

Therefore, the State of South Carolina finds that it is necessary to provide better and more educational opportunities for students in the Plaintiff districts as well as for all students who live in poverty or rural settings. These opportunities, to include both access and quality, should extend from pre-kindergarten through high school graduation and should enable each student to achieve the Profile of the SC Graduate. Such opportunities must, at a minimum, include a pipeline of highly talented teachers and principals who are committed to working in high poverty and/or rural settings over time; a comprehensive well-articulated curriculum that includes more and better courses taught to middle and high school students in engaging way;; increased access to workforce experiences, including technical and college pathway, high quality afterschool and summer learning opportunities; facilities that support the delivery of the curriculum and learning extensions (including modern classrooms, technology and science, language and mathematics labs); better and more organized early childhood education; extension of learning provided by other institutions and entities; and a coherent and operational transportation system that provides shorter student ride time and accesses to courses and critical learning experiences during the day, afterschool and in summers.

As Speaker Lucas charged the Task Force, we know that initiating the reforms to achieve our goals is “complicated process .” He further stated that “our teachers need to have the flexibility to help our students acquire a 21st century skillset, which outpaces the requirements mandated in the antiquated Carnegie unit system. We must give every individual school district the opportunity to maximize its potential. We must supply our teachers with updated, comprehensive curriculum standards at every level. And we must work to strengthen the relationship with our job creators so that our children learn the technological, mathematical and scientific skills to succeed in the workforce.”

The Task Force respectfully submits the below summary of its findings for your consideration. Since they are summaries, the subcommittee reports and recommendations are by reference incorporated in this report for additional detail.

Finding 1

To further the goal of effective leadership, the General Assembly should enact legislation that leads to collaboration with the State Department of Education (SDE), institutions of higher education, and organizations such as the South Carolina Association of School Administrators and the South Carolina School Boards Association. The General Assembly should work to create the teacher/principal/superintendent pipeline before the shortage becomes critical.

There are an insufficient number of teachers and leaders in the Plaintiff districts (as well as in other rural or high poverty districts) who have the knowledge and expertise to promote successful learning for children of poverty of those living in rural communities. Some of the Plaintiff districts are unable to attract, develop and/or retain strong leaders and excellent teachers because of location, salary differential and a myriad of other factors.

If the role of leadership is fully embraced, it will take a coordinated effort to identify, grow, and nurture leaders from the school board level to the classroom. Difficulties in attracting educators are already appearing, and districts that already struggle in this area will likely face growing challenges. Because the

November 17, 2015

promotion and practice of strong leadership is essential, assistance to school boards in regard to their practices and operations should also be provided.

Finding 2:

Although better leadership is, in itself, a noble endeavor, it is necessary for the state to create a vision for its leaders and provide measurable objectives for districts to meet. Currently, there is a lack of vision for educational leaders in the State as well as measurable objectives that must be met and action plans that will enable the objectives to be met as the State strives to achieve the ultimate expectations included in the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate. With the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate as the ultimate goal, the General Assembly should specify metrics that indicate progress. For instance: all students should be reading on grade level by the end of third grade; all students should have an individualized graduation plan by the ninth grade that focuses on a career cluster; all students should be college and career ready by the end of the twelfth grade.

Finding 3:

Many indicators are already in state law. The General Assembly should review existing legislation and update, modify, expand, or consolidate goals for student achievement in order to better focus and guide districts. Once goals are in place, there must be a rigorous and transparent accountability system. The General Assembly should establish the educational goals for South Carolina students. The Education Oversight Committee should assess and report on whether the goals are being achieved. The State Department of Education should assist districts that struggle to be successful and provide access to best practices across the state in the form of professional development and technical assistance.

Finding 4:

When local districts are unable to attract or develop leadership as evidenced by the accountability system, it is imperative that the state insert itself more directly into local issues than it otherwise would. Should a district continually find itself "at risk" or "below average," the state, through the SDE, should be available to provide intensive and immediate assistance. The type of assistance is dependent on the unique local situation.

For example, assume several districts or schools in an identifiable geographic area not able to hire enough district personnel. The General Assembly (or SDE through clear parameters established by the legislature) could establish benchmarks and develop recommendations to encourage greater efficiencies. For example, districts could be encouraged to merge so called back-office functions (accounting, human resources, facilities maintenance, safety, IT, etc.). In some instances, districts could be encouraged or required to consolidate. The SDE should be provided the resources and authority to assess districts' needs.

The examination of back office functions necessarily raises the issue of funding--is more needed or can obstacles be overcome with existing resources. Simply providing more money without the wherewithal to effectively and efficiently allocate it will not lead to transformative change.

Of course, when examining both school and district functions, the constant focus must remain on how to best meet the needs of the students.

According to reports from the State of South Carolina Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office, the thirteen school districts with the lowest per pupil revenue from local sources are rural school districts (a majority of these are Plaintiff districts). Not only do these districts suffer in comparison to other districts statewide; their limited resources perpetuate longstanding and formidable barriers to their students succeeding. When examining per pupil spending, the five most underperforming all spend more than

November 17, 2015

the state average, with two districts spending over \$15,000 per student. By contrast, Aiken spends approximately \$9,100 per student and Dorchester 2 spends approximately \$8,500 per student. Of course, districts with smaller student populations have fewer overall dollars to spend.

There is a paradox in regard to school funding: how much additional funding is necessary to provide an adequate education to all students versus how well the district utilizes existing resources. To help solve the paradox, outside assistance can prove exceedingly useful.

Under the auspices of a state budget proviso, four school districts agreed to undergo an efficiency study during the 2014-15 school year. This study examined areas such as facilities, transportation, and finance. Each district that was reviewed was presented with a comprehensive report outlining numerous suggestions for improvement.

Finding 5:

All plaintiff districts, particularly those scoring “below average” or “at risk,” should be required to have an efficiency and effectiveness study conducted. The results of these independent studies can be used to request additional resources from the General Assembly or, alternatively, direct the district toward greater efficiencies. To assist in the delivery of assistance, the SDE should establish regional centers with primary focus in the plaintiff districts.

Unfortunately, for some small and underfunded districts, just because a problem is identified does not necessarily mean that the problem can be corrected. Districts may not have the expertise to implement recommendations. In order to assist districts in building capacity, the State Department of Education should become a key provider of technical assistance.

Finding 6:

Because some of the Plaintiff districts lack the capacity (primarily human and material resources and expertise) to provide a quality education for all of their students, The State Department of Education should establish a stronger emphasis on providing expertise and assistance to districts, with the Office of First Steps adopting the same role in regard to early childhood providers. This could manifest itself in the form of targeted and intensive professional development at the district, school, and day care levels, assistance with back-office functions, and information technology consultation.

This focus may require restructuring within the SDE; however, the department should provide technical support to districts while also making the case to the General Assembly for resources or legislation that meet the needs of the districts.

Finding 7

To ensure that the state remains focused on improving educational opportunities for children, the General Assembly should direct the creation of an Office of Transformation. The Office of Transformation should identify low-performing schools in the Plaintiff districts and provide intensive and innovative interventions that produce immediate improvements in the academic growth and achievement of students. Additionally, the Office will evaluate the impact of the interventions.

Finding 8

The General Assembly should consider increasing the poverty rating for school districts with extreme poverty from 0.20 to 0.50 and not requiring a local Education Finance Act (EFA) match on these funds. Districts should be held accountable for how the funds are expended and the impact on student academic growth and achievement. Currently, the State provides insufficient funds to enable Plaintiff districts to meet the academic, social and emotional needs of their students.

In Fiscal Year 2014-15 the General Assembly included a special weight in the Education Finance Act (EFA) for students in poverty. While funding is not the solution to many of the problems facing education, the

November 17, 2015

General Assembly must recognize that school districts with high concentrations of students who live in poverty face daunting challenges. For example, poverty negatively affects school readiness in kindergarten. Students in poverty incur summer loss in reading and mathematics because they do not have ongoing opportunities to learn and practice essential skills. Students in poverty also experience medical and physical needs that often detract from learning.

Research shows that approximately \$1,200 in additional expenditures is needed to provide the support that children who live in poverty need to achieve. These additional expenditures are for quality after-school programs, summer programs, extended school years, and overall increases in the amount of time spent learning.

Finding 9

Create a School Infrastructure Bank that has the authority to provide funding to districts that comply with the Bank's directives. Even before the filing of the Abbeville lawsuit, a recurring and constant concern revolved around the issue of facilities. The bond bill adopted by the General Assembly during the 1999-2000 session alleviated many facilities problems, but the problem of inadequate school buildings remains. Unfortunately, the SDE does not have an adequate listing of district needs in regard to either deferred maintenance or capacity. Even if the SDE did have such information, questions remain regarding the capacity of many districts to keep buildings in good working order.

Because building needs are constant, a School Infrastructure Bank should be established to provide ongoing assistance to the plaintiff districts. Before and during the lifetime of a loan, the bank must issue, and the district must comply, directives necessary for the efficient operations of school facilities to include.

For example, the Bank should require districts to undergo a thorough efficiency and effective audit that highlights the operation of school buildings. The Bank should stipulate that districts undertake a study of future enrollment trends so that both the construction and closing of buildings is considered. Additionally, it should ensure that districts have a building maintenance plan, and the wherewithal to implement it.

Finding 10:

The General Assembly recognizes that as long as the state is responsible for the transportation of students to and from school, the General Assembly needs to monitor the amount of time that students spend on buses and use that time to promote student learning. Particularly in rural areas, students spend a great deal of time being transported from home to school and back again, With breakfast programs and after-school programs, some elementary school students are away from their homes 10 to 12 hours per day. The mantra "any-time learning" has to be instilled in all policy decisions. Consequently, looking to other states that have instituted computerized bus transportation systems that maximize efficiencies, and again, thinking innovatively for the 21st century, the state must consider other remedies to large buses in rural South Carolina. Could the state entertain the idea of leasing buses, especially smaller buses equipped with Wi-Fi access in rural South Carolina to limit the morning ride time for students to one hour?

The sharing of resources--particularly buses--must be explored. The use of state and district owned buses for transportation to early childhood centers, dual enrollment classrooms, and CTE centers demands strong consideration.

Even with improved leadership and targeted resources, the goal of improving educational opportunities for all South Carolina children would be enhanced if students began their academic careers ready to learn. The General Assembly has already taken an important first step by providing full-day four-year-old kindergarten programs to at-risk four-year-olds residing in over

November 17, 2015

60 school districts. As with other programs enacted by the Legislature, the question now becomes how effective is the program. What is the quality of the interaction between the child and teacher in four-year-old kindergarten?

The General Assembly has also mandated that children entering public five-year-old kindergarten in school year 2016-17 will be measured for readiness along several domains – early literacy and language development; mathematical thinking; physical well-being; and social and emotional development. These readiness results will be able to answer the question of how effective are the programs and initiatives that support children and their families from birth to age five.

Finding 11:

The State Department of Education (SDE) recently selected three four-year-old kindergarten assessments. Individual districts may choose the one they wish to administer. The General Assembly should use the results of the assessments to determine whether individual programs are providing high quality learning to their students. Early childhood development (birth through grade 8) has been found to have a significant impact on children's school success over their entire school career. If not, assistance in the form of professional development should be provided from the SDE and the Office of First Steps. Professional Development should be available on both the instructor and administrator level. Additionally, a technical assistance network should be established between First Steps and the SDE. Because both entities work with four-year-old kindergarten programs, it would be useful if the schools and centers were provided with similar information and guidance.

Finding 12:

The General Assembly should also examine whether all early childhood programs should be combined into one agency. Programs are currently provided through several state agencies (DSS, DDSN, DHEC, etc.). By involving so many different entities, knowing where to turn for assistance can be daunting. Moreover, the current system increases duplication and while decreasing efficiency. In order to centralize services, one agency should have control over state efforts that involve children four-years-old and younger.

TIMELINE

By July 1, 2016, the State of South Carolina shall have in place proposed, pending or enacting legislation addressing actions taken or to be taken within specific time frames to address transportation and facilities needs, teacher and principal quality, high teacher turnover, the offering of a wide array of courses in middle and high school, expanding learning opportunities after school and in summers, local legislation, school district size, and poverty and strategies to overcome their adverse impact on student performance in the Plaintiff districts. If staffing and other critical needs require additional time for full implementation, the legislation should provide expected time lines for full implementation. The Task Force is cognizant of the fact that the enactment of legislation is not guaranteed, and the timing proposed is subject to change.

November 17, 2015

(NOTE: An expanded time line should be developed to represent the recommendations in the Task Force Report.)

~~June 2016 — Enactment of legislation creating the Office of Transformation.
SDE begins implementation of Regional Service Centers to increase capacity of plaintiff districts.
Local districts begin implementation of recommendations that do not require approval of the General Assembly.~~

~~July 2016 — Increased funding for school bus purchases or leases and for school bus drivers' salaries.~~

~~Evaluation of school infrastructure needs, including technology, begins.~~

~~September 2016 — The Office of Transformation is open and functioning~~

~~March 2017 — School Infrastructure Report submitted to General Assembly and Governor.~~

~~June 2017 — Enactment of legislation creating School Infrastructure Bank.~~

STATEMENT ON FUNDING

The General Assembly should provide the resources and authority, beginning in the 2016-17 fiscal year and continuing over time, to implement the recommendations of this Task Force and to achieve the goals of the South Carolina educational system.