

*The SCEA Abbeville Lawsuit White Paper – May 2015*

## **Poverty Matters, and We're All Part of the Solution**

Schoolchildren from poor and rural communities have far heavier burdens to bear than back pain from overstuffed backpacks that so many of them must lug around. They are far more likely to worry about hiding embarrassing holes in their shoes or how they can make the fullness of their free school lunch last until the next day, because there won't be any dinner on the table that night. They might not have a parent in the home in the evening because their parents are working multiple jobs just to keep the lights on. There's no one to help them with homework, spend "quality time" with, or tuck them in. And forget about a computer and Internet connectivity. Those are luxuries beyond reach.

Not surprisingly, these students tend to fall behind in school. Self-described education reformers believe there are no excuses for poor academic performance. They broadly and dismissively label teachers whose students don't perform well on standardized tests "ineffective," or "bad." Inherent in their philosophy is that schools ought to be treated as businesses that compete in a free-market system.

There's just one sticky *problem*, a powerful contradiction to that philosophy. Poverty matters.

From the reformers' perspective, firing bad teachers and privatizing schools will improve education for everyone. That's certainly easier and cheaper than actually resolving poverty as it relates to education and learning. The challenge of poverty is just too big.

In her 2013 book *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*, education expert Diane Ravitch writes: "Our society has grown to accept poverty as an inevitable fact of life, and there seems to be little or no political will to do anything about it. ... It is easy for people who enjoy lives of economic ease to say that poverty doesn't matter. It doesn't matter to *them*. It is an abstraction. For them, it is a hurdle to be overcome, like having a bad day or a headache or an ill-fitting jacket."<sup>1</sup>

Ravitch ably points out that poverty indeed matters, even before birth. Lower-income women are less likely to receive prenatal care throughout their pregnancies, which leads to higher risks for low birth-weight babies, preterm births, and the disabling conditions associated with both. Prematurely born children are much more likely to suffer from learning disabilities. These babies are less likely to receive regular medical, dental, or eye care. They are less likely to receive nutritious meals every day or to live in healthy homes that are free of peeling lead paint, asbestos, asthma-igniting allergens, and insect infestations. Some live in unsafe, gang-occupied neighborhoods. Imagine the peril of simply making it safely from bus stop to front door in such a place.

Other obstacles poor children face is parents who are unemployed, under-employed, incarcerated, or drug-addicted. They are far more likely to be homeless and to change schools

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<sup>1</sup> Ravitch, Diane, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), p. 93.

frequently as they are evicted from various dwellings. They are more likely to be chronically absent, to drop out, or to be removed from school through the juvenile justice system due to over-reaching, zero-tolerance discipline policies. Remember, it is impossible to teach a student who is not in school. Therefore, it is important to examine and deal with the daunting challenges that exist outside of the classroom.

A child's zip code never should dictate the quality of his/her education. The South Carolina Supreme Court's long-awaited final ruling<sup>2</sup> in the Abbeville school funding lawsuit acknowledged that our Legislature for decades has failed to adequately and equitably fund public education and provide equal educational opportunity for all children in our state. Now legislators not only are honor-bound but legally required to address these inequities, and that is a good thing.

Forty percent (40%) of students in South Carolina attend school in a rural district.<sup>3</sup> The Rural School and Community Trust estimated that an increase in per pupil spending of 20 percent (sustained throughout the child's K-12 schooling) would increase high school graduation rates by 22.9 percentage points, increase adult earnings by 24.6 percent, and reduce adult poverty by 19.7 percentage points. Not only would this investment change individual lives, but it would boost state and rural economies, because educated and skilled workers are more likely to remain in their communities and contribute to a strong workforce that will attract business and industrial development. Properly educated citizens will buy homes, pay taxes, and contribute to an improved overall quality of life in their communities.

Investing an additional \$200 million annually in South Carolina's public schools would generate more than \$400 million in revenue and create approximately 10,000 jobs.<sup>4</sup> At 100 percent, this is an indisputably lucrative return on investment.

As the high court pointed out, teacher effectiveness is neither adequate nor consistent in hard-to-staff rural school districts. In order to recruit and retain highly effective teachers, rural school districts must be able to compete in terms of compensation, benefits, and facilities. Their ability to compete on these terms depends on funding policies passed and enforced by the General Assembly. Therefore, the state of South Carolina bears "the burden articulated by our State's Constitution" to ensure the "requisite educational opportunity."<sup>5</sup>

As decision-makers explore solutions to mitigate inequities in educational opportunity, The South Carolina Education Association offers the following recommendations:

- 1) Of highest priority, invest in South Carolina as a whole by taking a systemic approach to addressing education inequities. One of the most commonsense steps to do this requires little or no new funding.**

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<sup>2</sup> <http://sccourts.org/opinions/HTMLFiles/SC/27466.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ruraledu.org/user\\_uploads/file/2013-14-Why-Rural-Matters.pdf](http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/2013-14-Why-Rural-Matters.pdf), p. 81

<sup>4</sup> Research conducted for The SCEA by the National Education Association, March 2015.

<sup>5</sup> SC Supreme Court Chief Justice Jean Toal, writing for the majority, *Abbeville County School District, et al, v. The State of South Carolina, et al.* Appellate Case No. 2007-065159, Appeal from Lee County, Opinion No. 27466, filed November 12, 2014.

Significantly broaden our public education focus by involving certain state agencies, including the Departments of Health and Environmental Control, Health and Human Services, Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services, Disabilities and Special Needs, Mental Health, Social Services, as well as Clemson Extension Service and First Steps.

All of these agencies have regular contact with at-risk families, many of which have children who are struggling in school. These agencies could partner with private non-profits and the faith and business communities to send consistently constructive and positive messages to at-risk families.

These agencies can cooperatively develop strategies to address non-classroom impacts, such as access to quality nutrition, early childhood education (Pre-K), health care (from prenatal months and birth), awareness of Medicaid eligibility and Earned Income Tax Credits (EITC), as well as affordable, high-speed Internet connectivity.

This not only extends our reach to target populations, but it better utilizes already existing resources.

Another promising strategy that will bolster local economies is for school districts to adopt policies to "buy local" as often as possible, including developing a "farm to school" contract by which fresh local foods are served in schools. In 2012, St. Helena Elementary School in Beaufort launched its Farm to School program<sup>6</sup>, an initiative to bring healthy food from South Carolina farms to school children. St. Helena Elementary's program is one of 52 similar projects in schools statewide.

A joint effort of the SC Department of Health and Environmental Control, the SC Department of Agriculture, the SC Department of Education, and Clemson University Cooperative Extension, the SC Farm to School program not only helps educate students about nutrition and healthy eating, it also helps the local economy by providing a new direct market opportunity for local farmers and reduces the costly and environmentally wasteful practice of transporting foods over long distances.

Similarly, a 2012 farm-to-school grant from Boeing Corporation to the College of Charleston has resulted in the 2015 construction of a "Crop Stop" on Johns Island, a produce processing and packaging facility designed for use by small and mid-size rural farmers who can't ordinarily afford to use a commercial kitchen. By participating in the program, the local farmers agree to sell a portion of their products to local schools and help them achieve their healthy food goals. Other pending goals of that program include involving farmers in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) education initiatives, establishing school gardens, and publication of a farm-to-school cookbook.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.clemson.edu/extension/waccamawfoodguide/support-programs/scfarmtoschool.html>

<sup>7</sup> Hardaway, Connelly, "Johns Island Gets First-of-its-Kind Commercial Kitchen," *Charleston City Paper*, April 29, 2015.

On a larger scale, the long-established Harlem Children's Zone in New York City is a model of public-private community collaboration to improve the health, education, and well-being of lower-income children (see inset box).

### **Harlem Children's Zone**

An excellent example of the type of private-public agency, community-wide collaboration described above is the Harlem Children's Zone in New York (<http://hcz.org/>). Founded on the tenet that "the success of our children and the strength of the community go hand in hand," HCZ began as a one-block pilot project in the 1990s. Today HCZ has grown to a 97-block operation that serves more than 25,000 low-income children and adults. It has become a national model that President Barack Obama adopted on the federal level with "Promise Neighborhoods" grant program.

HCZ operates on five key principles: serve the entire neighborhood comprehensively; create a pipeline of coordinated, best practice programs to provide seamless support from birth through college; build community among residents, institutions, and stakeholders in order to create a healthy, positive environment; evaluate program outcomes and create a feedback loop with real-time data to strengthen services; and cultivate an organizational culture of success rooted in passion, accountability, leadership, and teamwork.

Components of HCZ's successful programs include:

- The Baby College, a series of workshops for parents of young children
- Full-day pre-kindergarten
- Extended-day charter schools (Promise Academy)
- Health clinics and community centers for children and adults offering after-school, weekend, and summer hours
- Youth violence prevention initiatives
- Social services such as a foster-care prevention program
- College preparation, admissions, and retention support

HCZ's work has begun to curb Harlem's cycle of generational poverty. Thanks to grants and private donations, HCZ is fiscally sound and on track toward continued success. In addition, 60 neighborhoods across the country have received federal funding to build their own Promise Neighborhoods. Continuing the work and infrastructure already begun is critical. U.S. Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut this year introduced the Promise Neighborhoods Authorization Act of 2015 to reauthorize the Promise Neighborhoods program administered by the U.S. Department of Education. According to Senator Murphy's February 18, 2015, press release, the bill will "create five-year grants to support the planning and implementation of evidence-based programs that surround children in education, health, and social support activities from the cradle, to college, and to their career."

President Obama, in an April 28, 2015, announcement,<sup>8</sup> expanded on the federal Promise Neighborhoods grant program (referenced above) by establishing eight new “Promise Zones,” including six rural counties in the South Carolina Lowcountry: Allendale, Bamberg, Barnwell, Colleton, Hampton, and Jasper. The poverty rate in this six-county zone averages 28.12 percent, and the unemployment rate is about 15 percent. This Promise Zone designation, which provides priority access to federal resources, is expected to impact more than 90,000 people.

Promise Zones work in high-poverty communities to “support locally developed plans that leverage private-sector investment to create jobs, increase economic activity, improve educational opportunity, and reduce violent crime.” In short, communities in qualified Promise Zones that apply for federal grants will receive preference. “This is going to change people’s lives,” said Center for a Better South President Andy Brack. “It’s a big deal.”<sup>9</sup> Brack also is editor of the popular publication on the SC Legislature, *Statehouse Report*.

Where children grow up has a significant influence on their earning capacity as adults. Based on long-term research, titled “Moving to Opportunity” and begun in the 1990s, scientists believe that Promise Zones have the capacity to accelerate economic mobility. Harvard economist and researcher Raj Chetty, in presenting his findings (publication pending) at a Federal Reserve Conference in spring 2015, reported that low-income children who moved to wealthier communities early in life had a much greater chance of moving from the bottom to the top of the income ladder. “We think there are really large causal effects of local communities on children’s long-term success,” he said.<sup>10</sup>

Revelations from this research and pilot projects, including the Harlem Children’s Zone, corroborate theories explored some 20 years ago in South Carolina by a collaborative project to test the Schools as Centers of Communities Process (SCCP).<sup>11</sup> Piloted in Richland School District One from July 1993 through June 1996, the project had nine contracted participants, including Columbia College, the state Department of Social Services, the state Department of Mental Health, and the state Department of Health and Environmental Control, as well as a local community task force.

Winner of a 1996 Magna Award presented by the *American School Board Journal* to recognize creative approaches to improving education, SCCP provided access to health, community, and social services assistance using the school as a hub linking at-risk children with community resources. Each school in the project had a social worker, a nurse, and a mental health counselor on site. Designed to build relationships among teachers, school administrators, and public agency personnel, the project aimed to identify and promptly respond to family crises using the collaborative support network.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/04/28/accelerating-economic-mobility-through-promise-zone-partnerships>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.bettersouth.org/2015/04/better-south-part-of-winning-zone-team/>

<sup>10</sup> Jeanna Smialek, “Where You Grow Up Makes a Huge Difference in Your Salary as an Adult,” *Bloomberg Business*, April 8, 2015; <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-04-08/where-you-grow-up-makes-a-huge-difference-in-your-salary-as-an-adult>

<sup>11</sup> Richland School District One and Columbia College, et al., *The School as the Center of the Community Process: A Crisis-Oriented and Preventive School-Based Strategy for Interprofessional Collaboration and Service Integration*, monograph published June 1996.

"Participants were uniformly positive about having health and human services on-site, about the special educational services for students, and about broadening participation to include parents and community," the monograph authors concluded. "Many communicated their desire for the project to continue and dismay about what might happen if it dies. ... The project has demonstrated the need and, to some extent, the potential for a collaboration such as this."<sup>12</sup> In their recommendations, the authors expressed that the community component needed more definition and greater neighborhood involvement. They also recommended the development of an organizational structure with clearer lines of authority and responsibility. The project, however, did not receive further funding.

**2) Instruct our Legislature to conduct an exhaustive analysis of school funding to include comprehensive tax reform.**

One place to identify new sources of education funding is unnecessary special interest tax exemptions. Lawmakers can eliminate many of the \$3.1 billion in special interest tax exemptions that may no longer be prudent or valid and apply previously lost revenue toward public education.

**3) Ensure adequate, equitable, and sustainable long-term funding for education.**

Continue to weight funding formulas to provide a higher level of funding for under-served children. Look at public education funding not as a cost but as an investment in our future.

**4) Establish a beginning teacher salary of \$40,000, with the means and a plan to fund and reach the goal within a five-year period. (Note — this salary increase must not be paid for by eliminating the National Board Supplement.)**

**5) Expand programs for pre-K children, such as full-day kindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds.** A 2014 article posted by the journal *Psychology Today* estimated that poor children typically begin school with a 30-million-word deficit compared with the vocabularies of middle class children at the beginning of school.

**6) Include practicing classroom educators and education support personnel who reflect the education workforce of their communities in decision-making processes at the school, district, and state level.**

Solutions must include student- and community-centered involvement. If we truly believe that education is a major route out of poverty, then all public schools serving the most impoverished communities, by design, should be well-resourced, well-staffed, and well-funded.

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*