

How to deliver complete education in SC poor counties —

I submit here three big moves we should work toward to bring our education system into the modern world, allow poor communities to better compete, and our country to excel in the world of public schooling. These are drastic additions to our existing school programs, and I know that a quick fix that will raise test scores next year is not within the realm of the possible. Real change will take decades, but we need to start as soon as possible.

This is 2016 and the legislature of the state of South Carolina has failed the families of seven of our counties in this state. The schools in those counties continue to have low or even failing evaluations after decades of advances across the state in the public schools. The children in these counties have few options as far as their choice of education programs, and they are suing the state as is their right. They want a better future for their children and education is the key to this goal.

The state education department has asked for suggestions, and as an educator myself I have given this some thought. I suggest that ideas and changes be made county by county, with the cooperation of the educators in each area. I would focus on Jasper County, our neighbor; a small and very poor county. Used as a crucible for change, I feel that this county could be a big success, and example to the rest of the state and even the nation, but the change must be really big and different. Earlier efforts have not helped; funds have not been allocated enough and the improvements have failed to move the needle toward better test results, higher graduation rates, and success in life.

I am convinced that in order to make a difference in these low income areas (and I live in just such an area) the state must literally help to raise the children of this generation in order to have success in the next one. It will not be cheap, because of more personnel needed, classroom space for very young children and for after-school programs, supplies, etc. But because Jasper County is a small county, it will be a more affordable starting place.

Most crucial for success is a countywide program of public day care for infants and toddlers. Several examples point to this necessity; one being that European nations, China, Japan, and others who consistently outpace the US in educational test scores, do provide this service for young working families. The cost for public day care should be partially ameliorated by an increase in salaries (and taxes) for the young parents who can then get jobs. A small stipend charged to the families (I'm thinking \$25 - 50 per week) could also help to pay these expenses.

In a world in which both parents must work to provide for their families, what do young parents do for the first four years of their babies lives while they work? They must pay for inexpensive day care which is mainly baby sitting, rarely focused on education, and if they cannot afford this, they must find a neighbor or relative to care for their children during the most important, formative years of their young lives. The tv set becomes their teacher.

In another example, we should observe what more affluent families are doing to prepare their toddlers (ages 1 - 4 years old) for school. They enroll them in programs in Montessori, Piedad, Reggio Emilia and other carefully planned programs for very young children. These programs are child-centered rather than

teacher driven; they include behavioral skills such as kindness and respect. The children who have this exposure, talk earlier, learn letters and numerals at age 2 and arrive at first grade, reading (often), using numbers in the thousands, writing words with confidence, knowing basic science, geography, Spanish, music, and other subjects. The children from poorer backgrounds rarely catch up.

A second sweeping (and expensive) change deals with the fact that our educators are doing the right things; they are just not doing them enough. Children in other nations go to school 2 - 4 hours per day longer than American school children and their school year extends 2 - 4 weeks longer than ours. Over a period of 12 years of schooling, this adds another two years of education to these children's young lives.

Actually, extending the school day and the school year makes sense in answering the needs of our young working families because the parents do not get off from work at 3 PM when the children get out of public school in the US; they do not have the summers off from work. Working families are in a quandary when Christmas break approaches and summer vacation presents a world of challenges.

The result has been a hodgepodge of before- and after-school programs in churches, day care centers, and people's homes. Summer programs scattered throughout the county and state; all costing working families money. And again, relatives and neighbors are often engaged to watch the children ... or they are left alone for hours each day; often the family just cannot afford for the mother to work.

An extended school day, and school year will require more salaried, qualified teachers and supervisors; planned programs and consistent stimulating activities and exercises as well as nourishing meals and snacks. Yes it will be expensive and it must continue for at least a decade experimentally to find whether the results in higher test scores, better graduation rates, less crime, more successful employment, less drug addiction, fewer teen pregnancies, and a raising of the level of academic achievement can be evident in these communities.

I stress here that the commitment of county boards of educations, the administration, and the teachers in the trenches are essential to the success of these or any measures taken. Imposing changes on the workers in the field is a recipe for failure from the start. I would also insist that day care, before and after traditional school hour programs, and innovative plans such as Montessori must be selected by the parents and not mandated.

Some of these measures are being tried in small doses even here on St. Helena Is. where there is an early learning center, head start program, computers in the classrooms, reading tutors, etc. Student progress is slow to respond. It is time for a bigger and more ambitious effort. I hope our state will step up and try a sweeping program, perhaps in one small county of South Carolina.

Success would be life changing in poor communities everywhere.

One other improvement in our public education system is important to make this plan work. These measures focus on the teachers and efforts to be made to ensure their success in the classroom and adoption of teaching as a career.

First we must institute a system of teacher internships that are required of all new teachers coming fresh from college. These interns would be paid a

minimum wage during their practice terms with experienced, talented teachers who would agree to and appreciate having a second adult in their classroom. The internship period would be ½ - 2 years in duration, the readiness of a new teacher to take over her/his own classroom to be left to the teacher, his/her supervisor, and the school principal. The payoff would be less teacher turnover and more experienced teachers in every classroom.

In addition, two adults in each classroom makes a great deal of sense as far as giving more individual attention to students, consistently and carefully checking written assignments, supervising when the head teacher must be out of the classroom, and providing greater safety at all times. It would remove the necessity for substitute teachers, and hall monitors in high schools. It would allow for teacher and assistant teacher breaks twice a day as well. But above all of that, having a new teacher learn and practice and then decide (with collaboration from the head teacher and the school principal) when they are ready for their own classroom would pave the way for more careers in teaching being successful.

Other perks that could help to financially boost the rewards for public educators would be "teacherage" housing for single teachers at a low rental rate, bonus pay at Christmas and year's end for teachers who have not been absent, chances to attend refresher courses and conferences, and above all, chances to sit in and observe in other classrooms and schools in order to improve their own skills and gather new ideas.

The teacher turnover rate would plummet.

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