

# Recommendations for the Education Policy Review and Reform Task Force

## Transportation and Facilities Infrastructure

- Districts, with the assistance of SDE, must be required to evaluate whether intra-district consolidation of facilities is possible, and, if so, what transportation resources are needed.
- General Assembly should fund an independent evaluation of school facilities in each of the Plaintiff Districts to:
  - Determine which districts have a five-year master plan;
  - Determine current and projected enrolment capacity and utilization rates by school and gravel-levels;
  - Analyze the needs, costs, and funding options to construct, renovate, or upgrade schools with special attention given to health, safety, energy management, technology, and instructional-needs of students;
  - Determine if facilities can be shared or consolidated, especially for districts having fewer than 1,000 students; and
  - Determine each district's ability to fund needed renovations or constructions;

The Department of Administration should oversee the study since a similar study was done this past year of state agencies.

- Districts should investigate whether facilities could be shared with other districts or entities such as Technical Colleges.
- In the event the state provided new facilities to districts, the ability of the districts to adequately maintain the facilities must be examined.
- SDE should study the feasibility of using more, but smaller, buses in rural areas where there is lower population density.
- General Assembly will fund additional buses of varying sizes depending upon the needs in each plaintiff district to ensure that the average student ride time in each district is 45 minutes or less. The buses will also be equipped with Wi-Fi access to increase learning time.
- General Assembly will also establish a special line item appropriation for plaintiff districts that will increase the average hourly rate paid to school bus drivers and to fund additional school bus drivers. The fund will initially focus on the plaintiff districts but then expand to all other districts.

- The State Department of Education should conduct a feasibility study to determine if Teaching Assistants could be crossed-trained to drive buses in order to increase their salaries.
- The State Department of Education should explore a computerized bus transportation system similar to the one employed in North Carolina.

### Accountability, Continuous Improvement, and Leadership

- Five of the plaintiff districts have been rated either "Below Average" or "At Risk" for at least four of the past five years. Are the local school boards capable of governing the schools in their charge? If not, state assistance of some type should be provided. This assistance could include intensive leadership and management training or, if necessary, require a temporary shift of governance to a different board.
- In addition to poor academic performance, many districts may have an unacceptable financial standing. In order to prevent a district from becoming bankrupt, a fiscal review is necessary and, if there is a danger of insolvency, measures for state intervention must be enacted. House bill 5074, filed April 9, 2014 (White, Owens, and Bingham), tasked the State Department of Education with developing and adopting a statewide program for identifying inappropriate financial practices and budgetary conditions. The program was required to assist districts in correcting their fiscal deficiencies. The bill proscribed three levels of fiscal concern, and provided for certain remedial measures. This bill may provide a starting place for addressing districts that are, or may soon be, in financial distress.
- The Transformation Authority Board suggested by the Plaintiff districts could be the entity that recommends district consolidation, the use of a transformational (or achievement) district, or other measures designed to assist students in districts that consistently underperform.
- The plaintiff districts point out the need for a longitudinal database. Early childhood, SDE, and the Commission on Higher Education will develop common student identifiers across early childhood, elementary-secondary, and postsecondary education to provide understanding and guidance of student performance and outcomes across all educational levels.
- The 2014-15 Appropriations Act appropriated \$300,000 in one-time funds to the EOC to conduct a pilot program that reviewed the central operations of at least three school districts. The goal of the review was to identify opportunities to improve operational efficiencies and reduce non-instructional costs for districts. Four districts were chosen, and the reports seem to be very well received. The pilot project should be expanded so that every Plaintiff district has a better understanding of ways to improve services to students and operate more efficiently.

## Educator Recruitment, Retention, Effectiveness, and Professional Development

- The 2015-16 Appropriations act appropriated \$1.5 million to the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention and Advancement (CERRA) for a Rural Teacher Recruiting Incentive Program. The focus of the program is to recruit and retain classroom teachers in rural and underserved districts with high teacher turnover. The General Assembly also required CERRA, in concert with CHE, SCDE and EOC, to initiate and conduct a study to identify the teacher supply needs of the state between 2017 and 2027.
- The Education Accountability Act provided significant stipends for educators who agreed to work as specialists in underperforming districts. Unfortunately, the stipends did not prove to be a sufficient incentive. Other than salary increases, CERRA should conduct a survey of both educators and students majoring in education to determine what incentives could draw educators to rural and underperforming districts.
- CERRA or the State Department of Education should study efforts in districts such as Saluda to determine strategies communities can employ to retract and retain educators.
- Three regional consortia are working with multiple school districts to provide efficient and effective support: the Olde English Consortium; the Pee Dee Consortium, and the Western Piedmont Consortium. A fourth consortium should be considered. Anticipated cost, based on Western Piedmont Consortium's budget, is \$5 per student (\$4 for operating budget and \$1 for professional development).
- The professional development activities of Francis Marion's Center of Excellence to Prepare Teachers of Children of Poverty should be expanded.

## College and Career Pathways of High Quality Learning Opportunities

- In order to provide greater access to college-level courses, SDE, CHE, and the State Board for Technical and Comprehensive Education (SBTCE) should be required to establish cut scores on admission tests that would allow students to avoid having to take remedial classes.
- SBE and SBTCE should be required to increase the availability of dual enrollment courses throughout the state.
- In areas where there is a shortage of highly-qualified educators, SDE, through its virtual education program, should initiate an online series of courses that are taught remotely by expert teachers. In-class assistance should be provided by existing classroom teachers until those teachers also become highly-qualified.

- Education Finance Act weight of 0.2 for students in poverty could be increased from 0.2 to 0.5 for districts in which eighty percent or more of the children attending are in poverty as defined by the Department of Education. The additional funds would be used to provide after-school, arts, extended day or extended year learning opportunities, etc., which are mentioned by the plaintiff districts. Rather than the General Assembly prescribing interventions, districts must take ownership and be held accountable for the results.

### High Quality Early Childhood Education and Family Engagement

**Facts:** *Full-day 4K programs have been funded in the plaintiff districts since 2006-07. Only one Plaintiff District, Barnwell 45, has elected not to participate in the program. Based on the initial 2014-15 enrollment numbers, in the thirty-four Plaintiff Districts, approximately 76% of all at-risk children are being served in either Head Start or a full-day 4K program in the public schools. For the 2015-16 school year, at-risk four-year-olds residing in 64 school districts in SC are eligible to participate in the program.*

- According to a June, 2015 SREB report entitled *Confronting the Fade-Out Debate: Children Flourish and Gains Do Last in High-Quality Pre-K Programs*, children who are provided with *high-quality* pre-K programs are more likely to avoid remediation and special education than their peers who did not have access to such programs. In order to ensure that programs are high-quality, South Carolina needs to adopt a statewide quality rating and improvement system (QRIS).
- SDE and the Office of First Steps should adopt the ten national standards of program quality issued by NIEER and apply them to all programs receiving state funding.
- Working with the colleges of education, SDE should ensure that teacher credentialing programs are offered that are tailored to early childhood education teachers. The State will establish regional early childhood development training centers in two or more of the Plaintiff Districts staffed by professors of early childhood education and their students. The practicum students will be provided full scholarships, to include tuition and travel allowances, for their training during that semester. The training centers will train childcare providers and early childhood teachers, with specific focus on high-quality teacher-child interactions.
- SDE and the Office of First Steps should ensure that pre-K curricula is appropriate and aligned to early learning standards.
- South Carolina's early childhood services and programs are scattered throughout numerous agencies, e.g. First Steps, SDE, DSS, DDSN, etc. The General Assembly should ensure that there is better coordination among the agencies to prevent overlapping and to promote greater efficiency.
- In order to serve more at-risk children, SDE, First Steps, and Head Start should be required to collaborate in order to avoid overlap and create greater access to high-quality child care.

- In school year 2015-16, the state is administering an early literacy assessment to all students entering public schools in kindergarten. Pursuant to Act 287 of 2014, the General Assembly has already charged the State Board of Education with implementing a comprehensive readiness assessment in school year 2016-17. The General Assembly will fund the cost of the assessment(s) and the professional training for kindergarten teachers who will administer the readiness assessment(s) and complete the observation checklists. Using this information, the General Assembly will then require that EOC (or whomever is designated) annually report on the early readiness indicators by state and county. The report will require that a statewide longitudinal data system be implemented and all responsible agencies and programs will be required to contribute data. The states of Maryland and Kentucky produce such reports that guide policy decisions and resources.
- This past session the General Assembly funded additional FTEs for a community engagement and outreach office at the Department of Education. This office should be charged with the following: SDE, in collaboration with DSS, DHEC, EOC, and First Steps, will provide guidance and support for district and/or regional meetings of early childhood collaborative work groups, including educators, parent liaisons, health care providers, and family services providers, to promote communication, continuous learning and the evaluation of children's progress and development.