

Achieving true equity for early childhood education

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Manning's Judge Thomas W. Cooper, Jr.'s ruling in Abbeville County School District, et al. vs. The State of South Carolina, et al. late last year concluded that the "students in the Plaintiff Districts are denied the opportunity to receive a minimally adequate education because of the lack of effective and adequately funded early childhood intervention programs designed to address the impact of poverty on their educational abilities and achievements."

Since then, efforts to comply with the ruling have focused on 4-k education. However, it is important to note that the ruling does not specifically single out 4k; it focuses broadly on early education, which the Judge referred to as pre-kindergarten through third grade.

Early in the session, the General Assembly directed the Education Oversight Committee ("EOC") to inventory and study all four-year-old kindergarten programs in this State funded in whole or in part with Federal, State, or local public funds.

The EOC reported back to the General Assembly on March 15. The inventory revealed that there are an estimated 56,114 four-year-olds in South Carolina. Of those, there are 12,871 four-year-olds served in public school 4K half and full day programs. Approximately an additional 9,000 children are served through Head Start, First Steps, and DSS childcare vouchers. Most critical, however, is that an estimated 8,186 at-risk four-year-olds are not being served at all.

Judge Cooper's ruling was heavily impacted by the effect of poverty on achievement. In his opinion, he cites testimony, "that effective early childhood intervention, especially to children who are born into poverty, can make a difference in educational abilities and achievements. ... The child born to poverty whose cognitive abilities have been largely formed by the age of six in a setting largely devoid of the printed word, ... and other stabilizing influences necessary for normal development, is already behind before he or she receives the first word of instruction in a formal educational setting. It is for that reason that early educational intervention at the pre-kindergarten level and continuing through at least grade three is necessary to minimize, to the extent possible, the impact and the effect of poverty on the educational abilities and achievements of those children."

Judge Cooper's ruling also emphasizes that the testimony showed that dollars spent on early childhood intervention are "the most effective expenditures in the educational process." As many studies confirm, the best time to reach and prepare a child for life-long learning and inspiration is in the early, formative years. There, the child is most receptive to positive instruction and stimulation.

The House budget allowed for only 6 million dollars to begin a pilot program, a fraction of the amount that most parties agree is necessary to support such a program. (The Senate budget provided for significantly more money. The difference will be worked out in conference committee.) The structure of the program was provided for in a budget

proviso, attached to the budget and effective only for the year. The proviso provided that the funds would be allocated to the Department of Education for First Steps to School Readiness, which would then establish throughout the state early education/pre-kindergarten programs for children birth to four that incorporate family literacy education and focus on the developmental and learning support children must have in order to be ready for school.

For the fiscal year 2006-2007, the First Steps programs will be available only to at-risk birth to four-year old children from the eight trial districts in the school equity case. For the purposes of the proviso, an at-risk child is defined as a child whose family income makes him or her eligible for free or reduced lunches or Medicaid.

Because First Steps is administering the program, both public and private schools would be utilized to meet the facility and staff demands of the program. The proviso requires the same teacher educational requirements and teaching and testing standards for both the public and private facilities.

Unfortunately, the House also passed a stand-alone bill earlier this month to establish a similar program, but with significant differences. The stand-alone bill establishes an unequal, two-tiered system between the public and private facilities. While the standards are the same for the public facilities as in the proviso, private facilities are allowed to hire teachers with lower educational requirements, to teach to lower standards, and assess at lower standards. In addition, any unexpended funds from the prior year for the Program would be carried forward and used by First Steps alone; none would flow to the public school program.

There were several amendments that were offered on the floor that would have equalized the two systems, including teacher certification requirements and dividing any unexpended funds between the public and private programs based on the percentage of students in each program. All failed.

I can find no good reason to make two separate sets of requirements for the public and private schools when the money to pay for the early childhood education programs is coming from the General Fund. The children who are meant to benefit most from this program are at-risk, mostly poor and mostly minority students. We should not invest public money in any separate but unequal system. I hope the Senate will rectify this inequality and that the budget conference committee will take the first steps in the direction of real fairness and quality for at-risk students statewide.