

## Bold plan for SC schools

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The summer months after the end of a legislative session afford the opportunity to reflect and regroup. Some debates stand out as being critically important, but few are as important to SC's future as those that focus on education. With the successful veto of the Open Public School Enrollment bill, the legislature missed an opportunity to create real, positive change in our public education system.

This legislation responds to the basic notion that a child's educational opportunities should not be limited simply because of the street or county where the child may live. It also reaffirms the value of having a school system that is fully accountable and fully accessible to all students. In a nutshell, the bill is designed to dramatically expand the educational choices available to children in public schools. The implementation of the plan is divided into three year-long phases.

Year One: the Department of Education would conduct a statewide inventory of existing choice options in public schools, evaluate additional choices that might be made available for students, and sponsor pilot projects expanding choices within and across districts. Several districts in SC have successfully integrated innovative programs into their curriculum. All SC districts should be able to experience this success.

Year Two: every district would design and adopt a public school choice plan that includes program options for students at elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Year Three: open public school enrollment would be offered statewide. This requirement met resistance from some legislators. Next session, the bill will be reworked to make this cross-district component voluntary. The exciting news is that some districts are already voluntarily opening up their districts to out-of-district students. As one example of these partnerships, Horry County School District has made slots in its International Baccalaureate Program available to students in a Marion County district.

Educational opportunities should not be based on arbitrary district and attendance lines. The children of South Carolina deserve our collective commitment. Our students will be more successful, and SC will perform better as a state if we are willing to be more innovative and collaborative as school districts in order to meet the individual needs of students.

This bill stands to make all SC schools better and Kershaw County schools even greater. I truly believe all Kershaw County residents want a terrific public school in their neighborhood, and that local support will, in most cases, be directed to local schools. By offering programs in the arts, math, and science, and single-gender or diverse educational approaches such as Montessori, knowledge-based, and others, local schools will provide parents and students the choice of program or learning style most suited to a student's individual needs.

Realistically, a single school or even a single school district cannot offer every possible option, hence, the importance of students being able to select another in-district school or a school in another district. In the end, our public school system should be able to interest, stimulate, and connect with students so that they will graduate with an education that will serve them well in life.

In addition to the fundamental principles of accountability and accessibility, choice and innovation in public schools will create enhanced opportunities for students to succeed, boost overall improvement statewide, and make our public school system better equipped to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy.