

Presentation to the South Carolina Education Reform Committee
Inez Tenenbaum, South Carolina State Superintendent of Education (1999-2007)
February 23, 2015

Good afternoon, Mr. Speaker, Chairman Allison, Superintendent Spearman, and distinguished members of this Committee.

First, I want to congratulate my friend and former State Department of Education colleague, Molly Spearman, on becoming State Superintendent. She is an excellent leader, a tireless advocate for public education, and I am so proud and happy for her and her family.

Mr. Speaker, congratulations are in order for you, too, for being elected as Speaker of the House. By creating this committee you signal our commitment to address the issues for poor, rural school districts proactively. This is such a positive step and one that all advocates of public education and children appreciate.

I also want to congratulate Rita Allison for becoming the Chairman of the House Education and Public Works Committee. She, too, has a long history of advocacy for public education and will serve our State well in her new leadership role. Congratulations, Chairman Allison.

It is a pleasure to be with you today to offer my thoughts on a plan for addressing the funding and other needs of rural school districts in South Carolina. I have had considerable experience with rural education, first, by growing up in rural Georgia, and second, by running the Allendale County School District during my eight years as State Superintendent of Education.

I grew up in a little town called Pineview, Georgia, that had approximately 500 people. We had a little school that had one class per grade. My mother taught fifth grade, so when I reached the fifth grade, my mother taught me. Our town was so small, that over time the county school board consolidated it with other small towns in the county. So we lost all of our schools, which took the life out of the community.

I have never believed that my education opportunities were lacking, however, because we had great teachers in our little town, and we had a culture of expectations—to make the best grades that we could and to appreciate the opportunity to learn. Not everyone had a vision for college, but thank goodness, my parents expected me to get a college education and to achieve.

One thing that many of us here have in common, is that we grew up in rural areas—so we know the challenges that rural towns and counties face, and we also know how rich the life is in rural areas.

Taking over the Allendale County School District in 1999, was a monumental task for the State Department of Education, and my staff and I soon learned that the State Department of Education lacked the capacity to run the district on a daily basis. We were very fortunate when John Tindal accepted my offer to be the State District Superintendent—he provided stability and excellent leadership to Allendale as we worked together to solved the many

problems that confronted us. Many a morning at 6:30 a.m., Mr. Tindal would call my house to talk about the district and give me a report how things were progressing. He was brave in confronting the challenges that faced us, and I will always be grateful to him for his leadership, his positive attitude, and his patience.

These were the challenges that we met head on in Allendale:

1. The physical state of repair of the school buildings in Allendale
2. The teacher shortage in core curriculum subjects
3. Principal leadership
4. Low graduation rates, high teen pregnancy, and high dropout rate
5. The quality of instruction
6. The lack of parental participation. Many parents were not able to be engage in their children's education because they worked outside of the county.

You can say that Allendale was a microcosm of the issues faced by many of our poor, rural districts. Mr. Tindal and I worked hand-in-hand to work on all of these issues with the personnel in Allendale and the leadership at the State Department of Education.

Now, we have a South Carolina Supreme Court cases that discusses these education challenges and more in the *Abbeville* decision. The Court cites these issues as those conforming underfunded rural districts:

1. Equity in funding
2. Transportation
3. Teacher quality
4. Student learning
5. Facilities
6. Consolidation of school districts

I. Equity in funding

The State Supreme Court held that "South Carolina's education funding scheme is a fractured formula denying students in the Plaintiff Districts the constitutionally required opportunity."

Superintendent Spearman has recently said that the State should try to move consistently closer over the next five years to meeting the requirements for minimum per-student funding. The State has not fully funded the base student cost since 2008. The base student cost is currently \$2,120, and if fully funded, would be \$2,801.

I agree with Superintendent Spearman that the State, at a minimum, needs to get back on track to providing full funding of the base student cost. Some have argued that Allendale had the highest per student allocation in the State and that there was not a direct correlation between the base student cost and student achievement. Poverty is a factor in the rural school districts, and when you are working with students who live in a constant state of poverty, you have to

provide more learning opportunities—such as after school programs, summer learning camps, and year round schools to help students succeed.

II. Transportation

In its decision, the Supreme Court discussed transportation in the plaintiff districts and noted that "[s]ome children spend as much as four hours per day on a school bus. Some of these are first, second, and third graders." The court also stated, "[T]he defendants have taken advantage of the statutory language by placing a burden for funding transportation on districts that can little afford such a responsibility."

Ladies and gentlemen of the committee, no child should have ride to a bus for four hours getting to and from school. This is unacceptable. State law [Section 59-66-105] says that the maximum ride time should be 90 minutes, but can be exceeded if district attendance zones are county-wide. Many rural districts are using county-wide attendance zones, and have students bus routes exceeding the 90 minute limit. One school district had special needs children with a bus route three hours long, and another had routes that were over 110 minutes long, and some of the children transported were three and four years old. The State Department of Education has the data that records each district's routes. I urge the committee to study the transportation routes in our rural counties and make it our goal that no child spends more than 90 minutes getting to and from school each day.

III. Teacher Quality

Keeping a full supply for highly qualified teachers is a challenge for most states in general, but keeping a full roster of certified teachers in all of the subject matters is an even greater, if not almost insurmountable challenge, for rural school districts.

In its 2015 supply and demand report, South Carolina's Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, & Advancement reported that special education, early childhood/elementary, sciences, and mathematics combined represent 50 percent of all teacher vacancies in the state.

So how can South Carolina increase the number of people who enter the teaching profession and later locate in rural school districts?

- Expand the number of middle and high school participating in the Teacher Cadet Program to encourage more young people to enter the teaching profession.
- Work with our colleges and universities to increase their capacity to educate more teachers.
- Increase funding for the teacher loan program with loan forgiveness for teaching in a rural area.
- Create in several of South Carolina's best colleges of education special institutes that would be designed to prepare new teachers and retrain existing teachers on working with school districts that have a high percentage of poverty. These institutes would

also be centers of training for teachers and principals to have the skills to work with at risk students.

- Research demonstrates that a positive school climate where all teachers feel invested in the common goals of the school improves teacher retention. The state should consider increasing the funding for the number of schools participating in the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching's Teacher Advancement Program (TAP). This program has collected years of research demonstrating that it positively affects the working conditions and retention rates of teachers, thereby improving the learning climate for students.
- Our goal in South Carolina should be that all teachers should be certified in the subject that they teach. South Carolina elementary teachers who teach reading would be certified in elementary reading; those who teach math, would be certified in elementary math; middle school teachers would be qualified to teach their assigned subjects and be certified to teach reading in their content area. The teachers should be assessed regularly using a system that promotes self-improvement and accountability for student learning.

IV. School Leadership

A successful school requires a great principal leader. When I became State Superintendent of Education, I worked the private and public sectors to create the School Leadership Executive Institute. It was funded annually by the General Assembly (\$1 million) and an initial gift of \$600,000 from Progress Energy. Rather than create our own in house leadership program at the State Department of Education, we did a search for the best leadership training program in the nation and found it at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina. The Center has a history of training leaders that spans decades—CEOs and other corporate leadership from Fortune 500 companies, officers from our military, and leaders from the public sector. The top leadership at the State Department of Education, our principals, and our superintendents were given the opportunity to attend this program, and everyone who attended believed that it helped us develop our personal leadership skills. Unfortunately, this school leadership executive program has been unfunded and completely closed by the State Department of Education. Our school leaders in the rural school districts can benefit from having this program restored so that they have the skills that they need to be successful and make data driven decisions.

Our goal in South Carolina is to have school leaders with a deep understanding of curriculum and instruction, how students and professionals learn, school organizations and management, and how to use information to support continuous teacher growth and school improvement.

V. Student learning

Our State Supreme Court wrote in the *Abbeville* case, "[s]tudents in these districts are grouped by economic class into what amounts to no more than education ghettos, rated by the Department of Education's guidelines as substandard."

The late Steve Morrison in a speech at Furman University talked about the rate of poverty in the plaintiff school districts, and Steve believed that poor children can learn, and as he said, "power themselves out of poverty." For all of us who have worked with children who live in poverty, we know that this is true, but children living in poverty need additional assistance in order to be successful in many cases.

In thinking about what would a high quality education program that prepares our students for college or career look like, I framed it like this: "What would an at risk child born in Allendale County need to succeed throughout his or her school career?"

a. Early childhood (Preschool and Prekindergarten)

- We all know the research about brain development in early childhood. Those children who get proper nutrition *in utero*, who are loved and nurtured from birth, whose family members verbally engage them and read to them from a very early age have a chance to power themselves out of poverty.
- All four year old at-risk children, including those living in poverty and from low-income households should be served by high quality, public pre-K programs (Headstart and public school). These programs should be year round in early childhood education in plaintiff districts.
- At risk children, from zero to five need comprehensive wraparound services to meet the child's social, emotional, and health needs. These services could be a coordination of existing services that would include a partnership with parents, parent organizations, health clinics, social services, faith- and community-based organizations, Head Start, private childcare, and public schools to create support parent education programs, early childhood education, and holistic assessment of preschool children from birth to first grade.
- Many of our children spend years from birth to prekindergarten in private child care centers and group child care homes. Our state has a stake in the quality of these centers and homes so that all of our children are well cared for and start school ready to succeed. I hope that this committee will consider making available scholarships to private child care staff for professional development at the States' technical colleges to become certified in child development.

b. Early grades (Kindergarten through grade 4)

- The State's goal should be to keep every child on grade level if at all possible.
- Funding should be provided for extended school year and potentially year round schooling for children the plaintiff districts.
- The Read to Success legislation provides "reading coaches" and "summer camps" for children who need extra time on task to reach their reading goal. A similar initiative needs to be created for math as well. The students in the plaintiff districts need "math coaches" and "math camps" during the summer months to be on grade level on math.

- South Carolina's policies in literacy and math would call for student assessments, tailored intervention, and parent notification of intervention plans—all to ensure that students could read by the third grade and have a strong foundation in the building block of the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields.

c. Middle Grades

- Research demonstrates that the transitions from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school are many times stressful to students. Also, the number of students retained between middle and high school balloons in the ninth grade.
- South Carolina needs programs to ensure the successful transitions of students from the middle grades to high schools, including sufficiently trained counselors and other guidance personnel who could focus on those most likely to drop out and ensure that all students are engaged in decision making about college and careers, as required by the Education and Economic Development Act.
- Teach all students to the same standards taught to the best students, and provide the extended time and support some students will need to meet the standards.
- South Carolina's middle grades curriculum should provide accelerated learning opportunities for students not achieving on grade level when they entered middle grades; and it would be focused on literacy and STEM disciplines, ensuring that all eighth graders could use reading as a foundation for learning and would have a readiness for algebra.

d. High School

- All South Carolina middle graders should come to high school prepared to succeed in ninth grade so they are not retained and become at risk for dropping out.
- In 2006, South Carolina passed the Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA) that significantly reformed the high schools in South Carolina. This legislation was well written and had adequate funding and leadership, but in the past eight years the original goals of the EEDA have been altered. These are suggestions to make our high schools prepare for college and career ready:
 - South Carolina needs to define the level of skills needed to be "college and career ready" so that our goals are transparent.
 - Provide funding for "career specialists," and do not merge the roles of career specialists and guidance counselors together.
 - The EEDA requires school districts to organize its curriculum around sixteen industry-based groupings, known as "areas of academic focus," "majors" or "clusters of study." School districts in urban areas have developed sophisticated, market driven clusters of study for their students based on these clusters. School districts in rural areas, however, have not been able to develop many clusters of study due to the lack of

resources and teaching staff. Partnerships with public schools, industry, and technical colleges could be formed so that students in the rural areas have access to as many clusters of study as students in the urban areas.

- South Carolina needs to have "work ready certification" for high school students that would enable them to be "career ready."
- High schools should assess students in their junior year and inform them if they are college and career ready—and make better use of the senior year to prepare students for graduation and give students a jump-start on college and careers.
- Finally, rural high schools such as Lake City High School and Scotts Branch are using the New Tech high school model through the Riley Institute at Furman. This model seems to work very well in rural high schools, and I hope that it can be duplicated in other rural high schools in South Carolina.

VI. Facilities

Our State Supreme Court had this to say about facilities in the Plaintiff Districts:

Time and time again in the Plaintiff Districts, priorities have been skewed toward popular programs. Athletic facilities, and other auxiliary initiatives received increased attention and funding, while students suffered in crumbling school and toxic academic environments.

In 1999, my first year as State Superintendent of Education, I championed and the General Assembly passed a state bond bill giving local school districts \$750 million to renovate existing buildings and construct new ones to update the school facilities in our state. The distribution formula used for this state bond bill did not favor the poorest of our school districts—Allendale County, for example, received roughly \$2.5 million, enough to renovate its middle school.

I would ask this Committee to do a study to determine the building needs for the plaintiff districts and to consider recommending another state bond bill meet the facility needs in our plaintiff districts. I am happy to see that the General Assembly is considering approving a \$500 million state bound bill, of which \$52 million is set aside for rural school districts. I do not know if this is enough to do away with the poor condition of facilities in our poorest districts, but I do know that a state school bond is the only way that our poorest districts will be able to do away with the toxic conditions in many of our schools. Research shows that the conditions of facilities does matter in the level of academic achievement of our children.

Thank you all for the opportunity to speak to you today. You have a golden opportunity to improve the quality of education in our most challenged districts. I wish the best in your endeavors and would be happy help in anyway that I can. I also want to point out that South Carolina is part of the Southern Regional Education Board, which has great capacity for

research and information on best practices. The SREB is available to provide research assistance as you study options to improve the conditions in rural school districts.