
North Carolina: First in Education Reform?

Education has been a significant public policy issue facing North Carolina since the early days of statehood. The state led the way for public higher education in 1795, when the University of North Carolina became the first state university to open its doors. Though the first public school in North Carolina did not open until 1840, sixty-one of sixty-eight counties had voluntarily established public schools by 1852, and in 1869, the General Assembly adopted a general school tax and a four-month school term.

During the early 1900s, North Carolina did several things to promote education. A state appropriation in 1901 provided money to equalize local schools and to bring schools in poorer counties up to the same standard as those in the more prosperous counties. As North Carolina proudly stakes claim to being "first in flight," the state also was first in many educational endeavors. Besides being home to the first state university to open its doors, the state led the nation in building rural consolidated schools, and before long, more children were riding motorized school buses to school each day than in any other state. North Carolina's community college system was established in 1963, and North Carolina was the first state to offer customized training and retraining of workers as an incentive to new and expanding industries. In 1965, the North Carolina School of the Arts opened as the first state-established and state-supported school in the nation for the performing arts. And in 1978, the legislature created the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics.¹

The UNC System now includes 16 public universities educating more than 155,000 students. North Carolina's community college system includes 59 institutions, serving more than 850,000 students. The state's public school

system includes 2,154 schools enrolling more than 1.2 million children. Finally, there also are 36 private colleges and universities in North Carolina, with more than 68,000 students.

All these efforts characterize the state's belief in supporting education. However, in recent years, North Carolina's public schools have led a volatile existence with education programs funded one minute but disbanded the next. In fact, a January 1997 report by *Education Week* characterized North Carolina's education policy as "Random Acts of Reform." In other words, North Carolina has experimented with many new reform ideas since the early 1980s, but the stop-and-start nature of these reform efforts often has left little opportunity to evaluate or even yield results.

The state has had 10 major educational reform efforts since 1984 ranging from a longer school year, to increased accountability efforts, to charter schools, to higher teacher pay. Though some reforms are cyclical, some themes resonate throughout North Carolina's history—such as accountability, access, and equity.

The *accountability* issue poses the question, "What are we getting for the public investment in public schools?" Considering performance-based standards of student achievement such as test scores, literacy, or dropout rates, is student performance in North Carolina providing a big enough bang for the state's buck?

Accountability also implies workforce preparedness, another important indicator of education success or failure. While North Carolina, through its community college system, was the first state to offer customized training and retraining of workers as an incentive to industries, the quality of North Carolina's workforce is questionable. While more and more employers are looking for workers with at least two years of education beyond high school, employers are having trouble finding workers with even adequate reading skills. Industry recruiters are

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able to tout relatively low labor costs for industries looking to relocate to North Carolina, but they also are having to warn industries about a shortage of skilled workers.

A second important issue in education is *access*. Since a "free appropriate education" is guaranteed by the state constitution, in the K-12 public schools, access pertains more to equal educational opportunities for special needs students. Parents want programs that identify and evaluate children with special needs while also providing individualized education for their children. Under both state and federal law, children with special needs have a right to education and all related services.

Yet another recurring issue is *equity*, particularly as it relates to different funding levels for rich and poor public school systems across North Carolina. The General Assembly appropriated money to equalize funding among local schools as far back as 1901, but the equity issue still endures in the 21st century. The latest legal challenge to the state's financing system is *Leandro v. State*. The plaintiffs assert that school funding disparities violate the state con-

stitution. More specifically, Article IX, section 2(1) of the state constitution says, "The General Assembly shall provide by taxation and otherwise for a general and uniform system of free public schools . . . wherein equal opportunities shall be provided for all students." The state Supreme Court says this means every student has the right to "a sound basic education," as measured by (1) the goals and standards adopted by the legislature; (2) the level of performance of the children of the state and its various districts on standard achievement tests; and (3) the level of the state's general educational expenditures and per-pupil expenditures.² The outcome of this case will add another chapter to the history of education and public school reform in North Carolina.

—Ran Coble

FOOTNOTE

¹ Educational history from Hugh Talmage Lefler and Albert Ray Newsome, *North Carolina: The History of a Southern State* (3rd edition), University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1973, pp. 262, 368, 532, 591, and 604.

² 346 N.C. 336 (1997), especially 355-356.

"In effect, nations move toward the pinnacle of their greatness in proportion to their educational progress. They advance if education advances; if it decays, they decay; and they are engulfed and lost in oblivion once education becomes corrupt or is completely abandoned."

—SIMÓN BOLÍVAR