Poverty and Education: A Costly Problem for North Carolina

by Barbara Barnett

Poverty is an expensive problem for North Carolina's educational system. Each year, millions of dollars are spent in North Carolina on education programs designed to stave off the ill effects of poverty or to correct the damage poverty has done. In fiscal year 1987-88 alone, more than $168 million in federal and state tax dollars went to various educational programs designed specifically to fight poverty.[1]

Education and government leaders say the money is an investment in North Carolina's economic future; for individuals, an education offers realistic hopes for good-paying jobs. On a broader scale, education gives North Carolina a solid work force, making it competitive with other states for business and industry.

Yet in spite of good intentions and government support, the education programs aimed at combating poverty reach only a fraction of those who need them. Why? Poverty affects people of all ages, all races, both sexes. It is a problem for the residents of rural eastern North Carolina, urban centers in the Piedmont, and the mountain communities to the west. The poverty problem is so widespread and the numbers of people needing help so great that current education efforts fall short, educators and state officials say.

Consider:

- In fiscal year 1988, the federal and local governments will spend more than $28 million on Project Head Start programs in North Carolina. Yet national studies say Head Start programs reach only 24 percent of the three- and four-year-olds living in poverty (although optimistic estimates range up to 50 percent, while low estimates for North Carolina say Head Start may reach as few as 16 percent).[2]
- State government will spend more than $20 million on North Carolina's high school dropout prevention program during fiscal year 1988-89. That money will be used to try to prevent 350,000 of the state's 1.1 million students—students considered at risk—from dropping out of school, educators say. North Carolina's dropout rate parallels the national average of 23 to 25 percent, meaning that for each class of freshmen who enter high school, roughly a fourth will not receive their diplomas. In 1986-87, 22,813 students left high school without completing their course work.
- The state's community college system will spend $18 million this fiscal year on its Adult

Barbara Barnett of Raleigh, a former reporter and editor for The Charlotte News *and* The Charlotte Observer, *has covered education and political issues.*

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Basic Education programs, designed to provide students with remedial reading programs. There are 1,700 literacy training programs and 20,000 classes offered by the state's 58 community colleges. More than 100,000 North Carolinians attend each year. And there are 60 private literacy councils, 36 Community Action agencies, and 26 industry-based literacy programs. Nonetheless, as many as 1.7 million people are regarded as illiterate in the state, and that figure grows by up to 25,000 people annually.

Definitions of illiteracy, and the estimates of the illiteracy problem, vary enormously. The federal government defines illiteracy as the number of adults over age 25 who have less than an eighth-grade education. Using 1980 Census figures, there were 835,620 illiterates in North Carolina (see Table 1, p. 113). Others, including the Governor's Commission on Literacy, use a much broader definition of illiteracy—the number of persons 16 and over who do not have a high-school diploma. Using that standard, the Census Bureau's figures would show that 1.7 million North Carolinians—about a fourth of the population—are illiterate. While many of these illiterates can and do hold jobs, their lack of reading and writing skills limits their prospects in the workplace.

Both educators and government leaders believe that education—particularly good reading ability—is essential to breaking the stranglehold poverty has on North Carolina's economy. "I see a direct link between the literacy issue and the poverty issue," says Dr. Janice Kennedy-Sloan, vice president for adult and continuing education in the N.C. Department of Community Colleges.

Adds William C. Friday, retired president of the University of North Carolina system: "You put the economic level of a family and the educational achievement level side-by-side, and you can pretty well predict the accomplishment level of these children in their lives—and it's low."

Friday knows whereof he speaks. As chair-

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"In every child who is born ... the potentiality of the human race is born again."

—James Agee
Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

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man of three major organizations addressing poverty—the N.C. Poverty Project, the Governor's Literacy Council, and the N.C. Rural Development Center—Friday detects a painful cycle among the poor. "About one-sixth of our population is caught up in this poverty-illiteracy cycle," he says. "That has an immediate and devastating effect on an economy that is trying to catch up with an international economy. . . . To neglect it any longer is unwise economically, it is unwise politically, and it is unwise culturally."

The causes of illiteracy are varied, and go beyond a family's economic circumstances into a broad spectrum of societal circumstances. But it is left largely to the state and to local literacy groups to fight the problem. What are the solutions? To successfully fight poverty, North Carolina must reduce its illiteracy rate, educators and government leaders say. To reduce the illiteracy rate, they say, the state must launch a three-level attack that includes:

- *preventing illiteracy* by providing high-quality preschool programs for poor children;
- *reducing the state's dropout rate* among teenagers; and
- expanding and improving *literacy training programs for adults.*

Getting a Head Start

For young children about to enter the school system, predicting academic success by looking at income levels is akin to having the power to gaze into a crystal ball, experts say. "Poverty is the single most powerful predictor of quality of life for children and families," according to the 1988 Children's Index, published by the N.C. Child Advocacy Institute, a private, nonprofit organization in Raleigh.[3] "Poverty is a key predictor of dropping out of school. Poor children, regardless of race, are three times as likely to drop out."

Since the mid-1960s, educators have fought poverty and its adverse effects on academic achievement through Project Head Start.[4] Born out of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty," Project Head Start is based on the premise that poor children face numerous obstacles that prevent them from doing well in school, and that preschool programs can lay the groundwork for future classroom successes.

Since Head Start's implementation nationwide more than two decades ago, several national studies have demonstrated that preschool can improve children's academic performance. At a 1987 hearing before Congress' Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, David A. Hamburg, M.D., president of the Carnegie Corporation in New York, said, "We believe the evidence now shows from 20 years of follow-up studies, profound potential for building strength through Head Start type of intervention at age 3 to 5. . . ."[5] In addition, the Perry Preschool Project, a Michigan program that followed disadvantaged students from preschool through age 19, showed that "preschool education contributed to increased school achievement during the years of elementary and middle school."[6]

The experts debate the effectiveness of Head Start programs because of several studies more than a decade ago, during the early years of Head Start, that questioned the programs' worth. These studies questioned whether Head Start had a lasting effect or whether its effects wore off in the later grades, although most agreed that it gave the students involved a good head start over other disadvantaged youth.[7] The Perry Preschool study found more positive results for Head Start—that Head Start students who were tracked until age 19 had a one-third higher graduation rate than non-Head Start participants, and an employment rate nearly double the rate for non-participants.[8] Most Head Start studies have found "generally positive" results, says Karabelle Pizzigati, a staff member of the U.S. House of Representatives

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Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families.

A major government study published in 1985 examined hundreds of reports, including all known Head Start studies, and came to the conclusion that "children enrolled in Head Start enjoy significant immediate gains in cognitive test scores, socioemotional test scores, and health status. In the long run, cognitive and socioemotional test scores of former Head Start students do not remain superior to those of disadvantaged children who did not attend Head Start. However, a small subset of studies find that former Head Starters are more likely to be promoted to the next grade and are less likely to be assigned to special education classes."[9]

North Carolina's Head Start programs will serve an estimated 10,550 children this fiscal year, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. There are 43 programs statewide, which together serve 91 counties. Nine counties have no Head Start program (see Table 1, p. 113). None of the programs receives state funding; however, four work in conjunction with local school systems and are housed in their buildings. Programs usually are limited to 20 students per classroom, and students learn under the supervision of a full-time teacher, a part-time staff member, and parent volunteers.

Head Start programs focus on trying to make up the educational and cultural deficits imposed by poverty, says Lois Sexton, president of the N.C. Head Start Association. Children who live in poor homes often are not exposed to books and they may not spend much time talking or playing with their parents, Sexton says. "Education itself may not be valued," she adds.

Head Start tries to interest children—and their parents—in learning. A typical day for a Head Start pupil involves activities ranging from language skills to personal hygiene to playtime.

Sexton says it is these learning activities, which may be commonplace in middle-class or upper-class homes, that can help poor children when they enter school. Pre-school children in poverty, like children from better economic circumstances, are not all alike, of course. Some can learn faster than others, and some get more encouragement at home than others. That makes designing good programs even more difficult. But

Head Start facility in Franklin County offers basic development programs for at-risk youth.

Jack Betts

effective preschool programs can make a big difference to children in poverty. Like a set of building blocks, Head Start can lay the foundation for education, and the child can improve skills as he or she progresses from grade to grade, Sexton says. "No child should miss that intervention," she says. "From a cost standpoint, it makes good sense to step in early and do what we can to prevent problems."

The N.C. Child Advocacy Institute says that preschool programs such as Head Start can be cost effective. If North Carolina were to implement "quality preschool programs," the number of students who fail first grade would drop by 50 percent, the Institute says. That translates into a $3,400 savings for each child who doesn't repeat first grade—or a total savings to the state of $1.36 million. In addition, high-quality preschool would mean a 50 percent reduction in the number of students—180,000 annually—who need special education classes. The Institute estimates a $7,200 savings per child, or a total of $648 million.[10]

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But the Institute's estimates were based on studies that were not addressed specifically to North Carolina. These projections for reductions in the failure rate, for savings for each child, and for overall savings were drawn from a formula devised by the Perry Preschool Project researchers in Michigan for national estimates, and then computed on statistics supplied by the N.C. Department of Public Instruction. Thus, they are only estimates, not hard projections. In addition, the Institute estimates that the cost of a preschool pilot project with an eight-to-one student/teacher ratio would be $3,500 per pupil—very roughly the same price as savings for each child who doesn't have to repeat the first grade. But this figure, too, is an estimate and not a hard projection.

Both Sexton and Institute officials agree that more must be done to offer good preschool programs for the state's poor children. Sexton says additional federal funding could increase the number of children who enroll in Head Start programs. She also supports the use of state funds for Head Start. But given the federal budget deficit, an increase in federal spending is unlikely. And a strained state budget in the 1989 legislature may mean little chance for state funding of Head Start programs.

The Institute proposes a pilot project that would set uniform standards for preschool programs, including a child/teacher ratio of eight to one, requirements that teachers have degrees in

child development, and requirements for a planned, approved curriculum. Gov. James G. Martin proposed spending $2 million for a pilot preschool project in his State of the State address Jan. 17, 1989. The Governor had campaigned for re-election partly on a promise of instituting preschool programs, which eventually would cost nearly $4 million a year. But those funds could get caught up in the budget debate as well.

The Dropout Problem

While Head Start can give students an advantage entering school, educators admit it is often difficult to keep poor children motivated to stay in school. As low-income families struggle to buy food, pay rent, and make ends meet, teenagers often leave school to take a job that supplements the family income. Ironically, the poor teenager who leaves school without a high school diploma and without literacy skills may be forced to work in a low-paying job—or may not find work at all. That often perpetuates the poverty cycle.

While no current statistics are available, "students at risk [of dropping out] are oftentimes students in poverty," says Anne Bryan, director of the state's Dropout Prevention Program and assistant director of support programs for the N.C. Department of Public Instruction. But "at-risk" students also include students who are learning-disabled; the victims of physical or sexual abuse; substance abusers; pregnant teens; the mentally, emotionally, or physically handicapped; and students who have failed a grade or who are reading below grade level. Poverty thus is only one of the determinants in the dropout rate.

With implementation of the state's Basic Education Program in 1985, North Carolina intensified its efforts to prevent these "at-risk" students from dropping out of school.[11] Under the comprehensive program aimed at bettering educational opportunities for all students, North Carolina allocates from $45,000 to $1 million annually to each of the state's 140 school systems, according to Bryan. The allocation is based on student population. Funds can be spent for students in all grades, she says, but the money must be used for personnel, teachers, counselors or coordinators. Each school district must submit to the state a three-year dropout prevention plan, with yearly updates.

Critics of North Carolina's schooling system often point out that schools traditionally have not been effective in dealing with dropouts. Some critics charge that the state's schools have ingrained faults that exacerbate the problem, and others point out that the Basic Education Plan was not designed to deal primarily with dropouts, and that other steps are needed.

Steps the state has taken to reduce the number of dropouts include expansion of several prevention programs, Bryan says. Among these efforts are early identification and follow-up counseling of students at risk for dropping out; in-school suspension programs that discipline unruly students but don't turn them out of the classroom and put them farther behind in their studies; extended-day programs that offer classes in the late afternoons and evenings, so students who must work in the day can continue their education; and programs aimed at helping students see the connection between getting a good education and getting a job.

Bryan says the Department of Public Instruction encourages school systems to work with their communities to establish a task force of educators, human service representatives, and business leaders to study the dropout problem and take action. The State Board of Education has set an ambitious goal of a 50 percent reduction in the number of dropouts from 1985 to 1993.[12] State spending now tops $20 million annually on dropout prevention, and the experts call for more such spending. The tab may be high, but the cost of not spending the money will be even higher, Bryan says. Citing a 1987 study by Prof. Dan Durning at Duke University's Institute for Policy Sciences and Public Affairs, Bryan says each class of dropouts costs the state $3.73 billion in lost economic activity over the class's lifetime. In addition, every class of dropouts costs North Carolina $167 million annually in welfare and unemployment payments, according to the study.[13] Durning's class computed these estimates for North Carolina, using a national formula based on 1980 U.S. Census data for the state.

A study conducted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill supports Bryan's comments that reducing dropout rates could reduce state expenditures for unemployment and welfare programs. Researchers at UNC-CH surveyed dropouts to determine their economic status without a high school education. The "1988 North Carolina High School Dropout Follow-up

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Study" compared the job status of high school dropouts with that of graduates and found that 30 percent of the dropouts were unemployed, while only 13 percent of the graduates were unemployed.[14]

Bryan says she is extremely pleased with the progress made thus far in the Basic Education Program. Dropout rates are starting to decline slightly. The figures show that of the 1.1 million students enrolled in 1984-85, the dropout rate fell from 7 percent to 6.9 percent in 1985-86 and to 6.7 percent in 1986-87.

The percentage differences are small, but the downward trend is encouraging to educators. However, Bryan says the state can do more. She suggests that educators must learn to identify potential dropouts earlier, and colleges and universities must better prepare teachers in dropout prevention.

Governor Martin's Task Force on Youth at Risk agrees that additional steps must be taken in the areas of preschool preparation and dropout prevention if the state is to successfully fight poverty. While the task force says it supports current efforts of Project Head Start and the N.C. Department of Public Instruction, the task force adds that the Basic Education Program must go forward as quickly as possible.

"North Carolina must work to guarantee this opportunity [of education] to all children; many of them currently have only the prospect of a lifetime of high unemployment, low wages, frustration and despair," the task force says in a new report.[15] The task force, comprising representatives from the public schools, government agencies, and the N.C. Business Committee for Education, calls for expanded efforts in reducing the number of dropouts. The report, which outlines the roles of the governor's office, the legislature, and the N.C. Department of Public Instruction, lists 27 recommendations for reducing the state's dropout rate. The group did not calculate the cost of the recommendations,[16] but the state Board of Education has requested $650,000 in 1989-90 to finance additional programs on dropouts. Among the 27 recommendations of the Task Force are the following:

- To develop local public-private partnerships to focus business and community resources and services on poor youngsters, other "youth at risk," and their families.
- To increase state funds to provide more counselors for children in kindergarten through third grade.
- To implement a program identifying ele-

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Table 1. Comparison of Literacy Rates, Per-Pupil Expenditures, Dropout Rates, and Head Start Programs, by County, 1988

	Illiteracy Number	Percent	County Rank	Per-Pupil Expenditure	County Rank	Dropout Rate %	Dropout Rank	Head Start Program?*
Alamance	14,138	14.2	79	$2,727	80	7.6	31	Yes
Alexander	4,864	19.5	25	2,660	89	5.8	82	Yes
Alleghany	2,405	25.1	1	3,009	30	5.3	92	Served
Anson	4,340	16.9	55	2,828	54	6.6	61	Served
Ashe	5,368	24.0	3	3,057	24	6.6	63	Served
Avery	2,682	18.6	42	3,000	32	8.8	10	Served
Beaufort	6,770	16.8	59	2,743	74	5.0	94	Served
Bertie	4,409	21.0	15	2,776	67	6.4	68	No
Bladen	5,815	19.1	32	2,931	39	6.2	74	Served
Brunswick	5,602	15.7	69	2,789	63	7.4	35	Served
Buncombe	20,945	13.0	86	2,895	41	6.6	64	Yes
Burke	13,632	18.8	37	2,797	60	7.3	38	Yes
Cabarrus	14,328	16.7	60	2,747	73	7.5	33	Yes
Caldwell	12,662	18.7	39	2,755	71	9.2	5	Served
Camden	1,048	18.0	43	3,202	10	10.0	3	Served
Carteret	4,997	12.2	89	2,673	87	8.2	17	Yes
Caswell	4,237	20.5	18	2,736	76	6.8	49	No
Catawba	14,914	14.2	78	2,688	85	6.5	65	Yes
Chatham	5,107	15.3	73	2,942	37	6.4	70	Served
Cherokee	4,414	23.3	5	2,763	69	6.4	67	Yes
Chowan	2,470	19.7	22	3,036	25	4.6	97	Yes
Clay	1,420	21.5	12	2,951	36	5.2	93	Served
Cleveland	13,895	16.7	63	2,786	64	5.7	87	Yes
Columbus	9,746	19.1	33	2,937	38	6.6	62	Yes
Craven	7,463	10.5	93	2,808	56	7.8	24	Served
Cumberland	17,101	6.9	99	2,762	70	5.7	85	Yes
Currituck	1,618	14.6	76	3,285	7	7.0	45	No
Dare	1,364	10.2	94	3,137	14	7.3	37	Served
Davidson	18,475	16.3	65	2,485	99	5.6	88	No
Davie	3,808	15.5	71	2,616	94	5.8	83	Served

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*Head Start programs are located in 43 counties, which also serve another 48 counties. Nine counties have no Head Start programs.

In this table, a county's ranking of 1 would indicate the highest ranking. That is, a ranking of 1 in the illiteracy number indicates that county has the highest *percentage* of illiterates; in the per-pupil expenditure column, a county's ranking of 1 indicates that county has the highest expenditure on schools on a per-pupil basis; and a ranking of 1 in the dropout ranking column indicates that county has the highest rate of dropouts in North Carolina.

Table 1. Comparison of Literacy Rates, Per-Pupil Expenditures, Dropout Rates, and Head Start Programs, by County, 1988
continued

	Illiteracy Number	Percent	County Rank	Per-Pupil Expenditure	County Rank	Dropout Rate %	Dropout Rank	Head Start Program?*
Duplin	7,264	17.7	47	2,794	61	6.7	54	Served
Durham	16,324	10.7	92	3,094	22	6.3	72	Yes
Edgecombe	9,754	17.4	50	2,868	45	9.1	6	Yes
Forsyth	27,531	11.3	90	3,190	12	4.5	98	Yes
Franklin	5,847	19.5	26	2,708	83	7.7	27	Served
Gaston	29,233	18.0	45	2,595	96	7.4	36	Yes
Gates	1,685	19.0	35	3,096	20	4.8	95	Served
Graham	1,629	22.6	8	3,121	15	8.5	13	Served
Granville	6,678	19.6	24	2,810	55	5.9	78	Served
Greene	2,898	18.0	44	3,327	6	7.9	23	Yes
Guilford	34,547	10.9	91	3,153	13	5.5	89	Yes
Halifax	11,597	21.0	16	3,021	28	10.1	2	Served
Harnett	9,495	15.9	68	2,637	91	6.7	57	Yes
Haywood	7,928	17.1	54	3,102	19	7.2	41	Yes
Henderson	7,688	13.1	84	2,736	77	6.7	58	Yes
Hertford	4,583	19.6	23	3,011	29	7.7	28	Yes
Hoke	3,085	15.1	75	2,635	93	5.9	79	Served
Hyde	1,020	17.4	52	3,695	1	4.8	96	Served
Iredell	12,545	15.2	74	2,636	92	7.9	21	Yes
Jackson	4,157	16.1	67	2,808	57	6.0	77	Served
Johnston	13,541	19.2	30	2,695	84	6.6	60	Yes
Jones	1,865	19.2	29	3,351	5	7.0	47	Served
Lee	4,890	13.3	82	2,782	66	5.9	81	Served
Lenoir	9,624	16.1	66	3,106	18	6.7	56	Served
Lincoln	7,115	16.8	57	2,676	86	7.3	39	Served
Macon	6,663	19.0	34	3,112	17	5.9	80	Yes
Madison	4,083	20.2	19	2,930	40	8.9	8	Served
Martin	3,806	22.6	7	3,196	11	6.0	76	Yes
McDowell	5,105	19.7	21	2,658	90	8.5	11	Yes
Mecklenburg	31,654	7.8	96	3,386	3	7.5	32	Yes
Mitchell	3,456	24.0	2	2,878	43	6.8	50	Yes
Montgomery	4,172	18.6	41	2,776	68	8.0	20	Served
Moore	6,879	13.6	81	2,984	33	6.5	66	Served
Nash	11,447	17.1	53	2,791	62	6.8	53	Served
New Hanover	9,763	9.4	95	2,861	46	7.9	22	Yes
Northampton	5,310	23.5	4	3,095	21	5.7	84	Served
Onslow	7,048	6.3	100	2,546	98	5.5	90	Yes
Orange	5,825	7.6	97	3,116	16	7.6	30	Yes

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Table 1. Comparison of Literacy Rates, Per-Pupil Expenditures, Dropout Rates, and Head Start Programs, by County, 1988
continued

	Illiteracy Number	Percent	County Rank	Per-Pupil Expenditure	County Rank	Dropout Rate %	Dropout Rank	Head Start Program?*
Pamlico	1,502	14.5	77	2,843	49	7.1	43	Served
Pasquotank	4,407	15.5	72	2,841	51	6.7	55	Served
Pender	3,438	15.5	70	2,808	58	7.4	34	Served
Perquimans	1,909	20.1	20	3,227	9	8.2	18	Served
Person	5,649	19.4	27	3,024	27	5.4	91	No
Pitt	11,996	13.3	83	3,031	26	7.7	25	Served
Polk	2,168	16.7	62	3,278	8	8.4	14	No
Randolph	15,943	17.4	49	2,477	100	9.1	7	No
Richmond	8,549	18.8	38	2,607	95	7.2	42	Served
Robeson	17,935	17.7	46	2,752	72	8.3	15	Yes
Rockingham	15,782	18.9	36	3,007	31	9.9	4	Yes
Rowan	16,300	16.4	64	2,666	88	6.9	48	Yes
Rutherford	10,313	19.2	28	2,786	65	8.2	16	No
Sampson	8,723	17.6	48	2,959	35	6.8	52	Yes
Scotland	5,416	16.8	58	2,869	44	11.5	1	Yes
Stanly	8,450	17.4	51	2,741	75	7.6	29	Served
Stokes	6,197	18.7	40	2,832	53	6.4	69	Served
Surry	13,170	22.2	10	2,729	79	6.4	71	Served
Swain	2,145	20.9	17	3,377	4	8.5	12	Served
Transylvania	3,275	14.0	80	2,804	59	6.1	75	Served
Tyrrell	884	22.2	9	3,526	2	5.7	86	No
Union	8,776	12.5	88	2,587	97	8.9	9	Yes
Vance	7,022	19.1	31	2,726	81	6.3	73	Served
Wake	22,425	7.4	98	2,961	34	6.8	51	Yes
Warren	3,491	21.5	13	3,074	23	7.7	26	Yes
Washington	2,468	16.7	61	2,860	47	4.2	99	Served
Watauga	4,129	13.0	87	2,883	42	7.1	44	Served
Wayne	12,598	13.0	85	2,733	78	4.1	100	Yes
Wilkes	12,643	21.6	11	2,718	82	7.3	40	Yes
Wilson	10,688	16.9	56	2,842	50	7.0	46	Served
Yadkin	6,030	21.2	14	2,847	48	6.7	59	Yes
Yancey	3,428	23.0	6	2,837	52	8.1	19	Served
TOTALS	835,620	17.0%		$2,897	avg. statewide	6.98%		91 *

*Head Start programs are located in 43 counties, which also serve another 48 counties, for a total of 91. Nine counties have no Head Start programs.

Sources: Adult illiteracy: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Department of Community Colleges, and N.C. Literacy Councils; Per pupil expenditures: N.C. Department of Public Instruction; High School Dropout Rate: N.C. Department of Public Instruction; Head Start programs: U.S. Department of Education; General resource: N.C. Child Advocacy Institute.

Table prepared by Kurt W. Smith

mentary students who might drop out and following their progress through school.

■ To develop a training program for all educators. Completion of the program, which would help educators identify students at risk, would be required by the State Board of Education for renewal of all N.C. education certificates.

■ To provide special merit awards for students who "have completed high school successfully in the face of great odds," including economic hardship.

■ To provide funding for Head Start programs in the counties not being served. The group did not estimate how much that would cost, but nine counties do not have Head Start programs. They are Bertie, Caswell, Currituck, Davidson, Person, Polk, Randolph, Rutherford, and Tyrrell counties (see Table 1, p. 113).

N.C. Department of Community Colleges

Adult literacy student works ABLE computer program at Wake Tech

Business groups in recent years have been supportive of state efforts to improve education overall and to reduce the problems of illiteracy and poorly trained potential workers. For instance, N.C. Citizens for Business and Industry, which acts as a statewide chamber of commerce, has participated in the development of programs aimed at reducing the number of dropouts and improving the course of instruction. But while business groups have supported educational improvements, they say privately that more care needs to be taken in choosing which programs the state funds. "Most of these programs are well-intentioned," says one prominent Piedmont industrialist. "They need to be looked at, but we also need to be careful. How many of them can we afford? How do we pick and choose?"

Many businessmen are also wary of proposals to expand government's role in some areas. For example, the N.C. Day Care Association has supported efforts to expand developmental day care programs to 4-year-olds (5-year-olds already are served by public kindergartens), but says the state should not be so intrusive as to assume responsibility for educating 4-year-olds in public schools.

Jim Hall of Wilmington, president of the N.C. Day Care Association, and the operator of Winter Park Preschools, says there's a pressing need for developmental programs for 4-year-olds, "but *not* for public schools to take over the 4-year-olds." The association has backed programs for spending more tax dollars to extend these programs to younger children, especially in poor areas of the state like the Northeast, and particularly among the children of the working poor, who must forgo day care now because of the lack of facilities. "We are definitely *for* more public dollars to take care of the 10,000 or more kids who are on waiting lists for day care and are children of the working poor. The need [for facilities and programs] is there for these at-risk kids. But the association is definitely not in favor of the Department of Public Instruction on its own taking on the education of the 4-year-olds. . . . Good quality, equal quality programs in the private sector can be operated as cheaply or cheaper than the public schools can."

Literacy for Adults

While efforts to combat the effects of poverty among youngsters and teenagers focus on programs inside the classroom, the adult poor present a different set of problems for educators and government officials. Many poor adults have unpleasant memories of their academic failures and are reluctant to return to a school building. Others are working and do not see a need to improve their reading skills. Because the adult population is so large and so diverse, programs must be multi-faceted, educators and government officials say.

Improving literacy for adults is "like tackling a big fullback," says Lee Monroe, senior education adviser to Governor Martin. "You can't hit him all at one time. You've got to target points. It's just too big an issue."

Of the 1.7 million citizens who lack a high school education, most are poor. Many are unemployed, but many also are working in low-skill jobs, unable to move to better jobs because of their lack of reading skills. (The U.S. Census Bureau estimates 49 percent of all North Carolinians living in poverty are employed.)

The illiteracy problem among these adults is further aggravated by the fact that, while thousands of people enroll each year in public or private literacy programs, many never complete them. The Governor's Commission on Literacy,[17] also established by the Martin administration, estimates as many as two-thirds of the students enrolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs in the community college system *never finish* their courses. Kennedy-Sloan says these students are easily frustrated and so overwhelmed by their economic struggles that they can't focus on their class work. "If they don't have the money to pay the rent, you can hardly teach [them] vowels," she says.

To help address this problem, the N.C. Department of Community Colleges has begun a pilot project based on the concept that the education system must address the problems students face outside the classroom if they are to perform well inside the classroom. With the help of a community college staff member, students complete a questionnaire that asks them what services they might need to help them stay in school. Included on the survey are questions about the need for day care, transportation, and a job.

Once the college staff members review the surveys, they can predict what obstacles might prevent students from attending class—or what factors might discourage them. College staffers then work with local community, church, or civic groups to meet all students' needs. For example, Kennedy-Sloan says, a church group might provide a bus for transportation. If a student is unemployed, the college can contact job placement agencies. The program, Kennedy-Sloan says, will help meet students' immediate needs, while keeping them in the program long enough to glimpse the long-term benefits of an education. The public schools might well benefit from a similar program.

The community college system is developing another program that taps into community resources. Since January 1988, all community and technical colleges have been working with local government agencies to identify people who may need social services as well as literacy training. For example, a client who comes to the Department of Social Services for food stamps may be referred to the community college for a reading program. If the Employment Security Commission (ESC) finds a client who lacks literacy skills, ESC notifies the community college and a college representative contacts the person with enrollment information.

The Urban-Rural Dichotomy

In its efforts to combat illiteracy, Kennedy-Sloan says, the community college system is noticing a dichotomy between the urban poor and the rural poor. "The way out of poverty in Raleigh-Durham is going to be different than in rural North Carolina," she says. "In an urban area, if you get a student to a high school [literacy level], he can get a minimum wage job and build on those skills. In rural areas, it's not enough to teach them to read and get a high school diploma . . . in an area where there are no jobs."

To fight rural poverty, the community colleges are again trying to tailor their programs to student needs. Literacy programs are expanding not only to offer reading improvement but also to identify the students' work skills and help them adapt to a new job. Kennedy-Sloan gave the example of a man who suddenly finds himself forced out of farming. Simply teaching the farmer to read may not help him find a job in an era when bankrupt family farms are becoming commonplace and the demand for workers with techno-

N.C. Department of Community Colleges

This Adult Basic Education class, offered by Rockingham Community College, is taught in a van.

logical skills is increasing. The community colleges can help the student improve his reading level, while they help him learn basic business principles that may enable him to start his own landscaping business, for example.

In its draft report, the Governor's Commission on Literacy praises the community colleges' efforts but notes "that progress is slow" due to the large numbers of people needing to improve literacy skills.[18] The task force recommended 32 measures to remedy the state's illiteracy problems—but again, the commission did not put a price tag on its recommendations. The recommendations call for better coordination between public and private literacy programs, greater involvement of the business community, and "customized" programs to fit the needs of special groups.

In the 1989 session of the General Assembly, the Governor's office will push for the establishment of a state Office of Literacy within the Department of Administration. The idea is that the office would provide information about existing reading programs for state residents or companies wishing to boost employees' reading skills. The Literacy Office also would identify any gaps in services and work to close them. Monroe says the office should be in the Department of Administration because that department acts as a clearinghouse for many state programs. It would also put the office under the control of the Governor. If it were in the Department of Public Instruction or the Department of Community Colleges, the Governor would not have direct control of the group. Questions over the location of this program symbolize the continuous debate about the educational bureaucracy, now spread over a variety of state agencies plus the 140 state school systems. That debate, in turn, highlights the slow progress on educational issues.

The Department of Community Colleges, which has held the bulk of the responsibility for literacy training for a quarter of a century, was hardly thrilled with the plan to put the new literacy office at Administration. Community College President Robert W. Scott said the new office would be a "super-agency" that could mean "a duplication of administrative functions." The dispute over where to put the new office is yet to be resolved.

One of the keys to fighting illiteracy, Monroe says, is greater involvement of the business community. As North Carolina's economy continues to shift from agriculture and low-skill manufacturing jobs to technology, the demands for education will increase, Monroe says. Companies will require workers with at least a high school diploma, Monroe says, and employees without these minimal skills will find themselves stuck with low-paying jobs (see Bill Finger, "Making the Transition to a Mixed Economy," *North Carolina Insight,* April 1986, for more on this subject). Business and industry can help in retraining current workers as well as educating potential employees, Monroe says. Complicating the issue, of course, are two factors: The huge number of minimum-wage jobs, usually held by those in poverty who cannot make a living at such low wages; and the impact of changes in the international economy, which can lead to large layoffs in the state's traditional industries.

To recruit businesses to literacy efforts, the Martin administration has asked chief executive officers of about 75 N.C. corporations to examine their work forces and determine how they can help employees improve reading skills. If the company finds it doesn't need a literacy program, the CEOs

can encourage employees to volunteer as reading tutors.

But UNC President Emeritus William C. Friday says corporations have provided more leadership on education and job training than have political leaders. "The corporate leadership has shown splendid reaction to this problem," he said. Some companies offer bonuses and other incentives to employees who successfully complete literacy programs or get a high school equivalency diploma. Others have set up their own literacy programs.

State government, one of North Carolina's largest employers, has begun its own literacy effort, Monroe says. Departments that report directly to the Governor have surveyed staff members to learn how many have high school diplomas. By taking this step, the state hopes not only to offer programs to make sure its own employees are reading at a high school level, but also to serve as a model for private business and industry.

The Governor's Literacy Commission proposes that the state and the business community further cooperate to create a North Carolina Compact, modeled after the much-touted Boston Compact.[19] The premise is that businesses will provide employment after graduation to high school students who agree to improve their school attendance and academic performance.

The commission's report also recommends that the state develop literacy training programs in the work place to help employees improve reading skills. Monroe says programs should be designed to match industry needs and employee interests. For example, a literacy training program might be developed exclusively for Southern Bell employees or for Burlington Industries employees.

In addition to the formation of a clearinghouse and greater involvement of the business community, the Governor's Commission on Literacy recommends the state take several other steps to combat illiteracy. Among them are the following:[20]

- To expand community college literacy programs, including the addition of a staff member to serve as a liaison between the education system and the business community. The cost of this recommendation would be about $3.5 million a year, according to the legislature's Fiscal Research Division.
- To establish a trust fund to provide financial support for public and private literacy programs.
- To offer grants to local volunteer literacy councils and private non-profit organizations to develop literacy programs outside the school building and inside libraries and community centers.
- To provide state money for research on and development of literacy programs. Currently, state funds can be spent only on program operation.
- To increase reimbursement to community colleges for full-time-equivalency students, which could cost $5.6 million. At present, the state reimburses community colleges for Adult Basic Education programs, such as literacy training, at a lower rate than that of regular curriculum programs. The reason for that, in theory, is that literacy instructors work part time, and thus should not be paid as highly as full-time instructors in regular curriculum programs. The state reimburses the community colleges $28,200 per instructional unit for regular courses, but only $22,000 for Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs, including literacy classes. "We must expect to pay similar wages and benefits in ABE programs as in curriculum programs in order to attract full-time, qualified instructors," the report says.
- To mandate a uniform state reporting system to notify community colleges of high school dropouts.

But once again, the commission failed to provide an estimate of what these recommendations, if implemented, would cost.

Recent assessments of adult literacy have focused on the need for better programs. One of them came in May 1988 when Yevonne Brannon of N.C. State University's Center for Urban Affairs and Community Services told the N.C. Gen-

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"Poverty is the color of a bruise, a birthmark on your soul."

—Ruth Moose
Writer, Albemarle

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eral Assembly that adult literacy classes were far too large and that current funding formulas were part of the problem in adult literacy. Current funding, she said, "does not allow flexibility needed for creative solutions to serving adult students in general. . . ." Brannon also reported that surveys with both administrators and students pointed up the need for much smaller classes and more one-on-one instruction. Literacy programs should hire more instructors and hold class sizes to no more than 10, she said. Brannon said her studies showed that having up to 20 people in class "is not working very well" but that many community college classes had a student-teacher ratio of 22 to 1.[21] Brannon's study also recommended a regimen of promoting industry-sponsored classes, more advertising of literacy programs, more special services for adult students, and employing more full-time instructors.

Community Colleges President Scott says that 22 to 1 figure is not the actual teacher-student ratio, however, but represents the funding ratio. "Our average ratio is about 10 to 1," says Scott. A change in the funding formula would allow the community colleges to hire more recruiters and counselors to work with the illiterate, he says.

Another recent evaluation of literacy programs, prepared by MDC, Inc., was critical of the effectiveness of literacy training in the South, but did praise two states—North Carolina and Georgia—for providing a regular mechanism for providing the training. "For the most part, however, outside of North Carolina and Georgia . . . the South's technical colleges do not see improving the literacy skills of undereducated adults as a primary mission."[22] The report also noted that literacy councils, including most of those in North Carolina—"operate on a shoestring without any paid staff."

Conclusion

The debate over poverty and illiteracy is a cyclical one. Which came first? Which causes which? Some experts contend illiteracy causes poverty, while others believe poverty leads to illiteracy. But the correlation between poverty and illiteracy is so high that, in the view of many educators and state leaders, education is the single most powerful weapon against poverty. If North Carolina does not address the related problems of illiteracy and poverty, there will be a high price to pay in terms of wasted personal potential and state economic loss, they say.

A coordinated attack on these problems would be helpful, but with the complicated system of state and federal funding sources, a mix of responsibilities among federal, state, and local governments, and even a mix of responsibilities among executive branch agencies, that coordination is easier said than done. Yet the federal government's Head Start program may have a direct impact on local school students' performance; dropout prevention programs funded by the state and by local school boards can be improved to keep youngsters in school; and literacy programs offered by state and local governments, by private employers, and even by individuals may pick up the slack and provide educational opportunities for adults who long ago slipped through the educational cracks.

One innovative program, funded by the William R. Kenan Jr. Charitable Trust, combines two such programs. It seeks to send illiterate mothers to school with their preschool children aged 3 and 4. Both learn to read and write, and both have a chance for a successful life in the future. Pilot programs of this project are underway in four North Carolina communities—Wilmington, Fayetteville, Henderson, and Madison County.

Lois Sexton says that without increased funding for preschool programs, "We will continue to have high dropout rates. We will continue to have adolescents who have a high incidence of trouble with the law and with teen pregnancy. We will continue to have children who are retained [not promoted]. If we do not address the skills and needs of workers, I think we are going to have a monumental problem maintaining people who are not self-sufficient, and we won't have the work force to compete internationally. [Head Start] is the pebble in a whole avalanche of things to come afterward."

The Governor's Commission on Literacy offers this prediction: "Unless effective steps are taken to upgrade the basic skills of both the existing work force and the new entrants to the work force of the future, a large number of individuals and North Carolina's economy as a whole will suffer."[23]

As North Carolina prepares to move into the 21st century, the state has little choice but to strengthen its efforts to combat poverty and illiteracy, says Monroe. By the year 2000, there will be an estimated 510,000 new jobs in North Carolina, and those jobs will demand higher academic skills than those of today. "We're going to have

to make changes," says Monroe. "The demands of the work force will force us to. The illiteracy problem suggests a more collaborative effort between the employers and the education system of the state."

A recent report for The Sunbelt Institute on literacy in the South put it more chillingly: "Rising skill demands have driven millions of Americans, millions of Southerners, out of the primary labor force in the past two decades. Once able to thrive in agriculture, mining, and labor-intensive manufacturing, these uneducated workers become candidates for poverty, welfare dependency, and crime—pathologies which extract a heavy price on our region both economically and socially."[24]

FOOTNOTES

[1]Jack Betts, "Policymaking and Poverty in North Carolina—Who's On First?," p. 18 of this issue. See also Bill Finger, "An Inventory of Poverty Programs, North Carolina State Government," the North Carolina Poverty Project, August 1988, p. 1.

[2]Lawrence J. Schweinhart and Jeffrey J. Koshel, "Policy Options for Preschool Programs," Eastern Michigan State University, 1986, p. 34.

[3]"The 1988 Children's Index," N.C. Child Advocacy Institute, June 21, 1988, p. 6.

[4]34 CFR 215; 45 CFR 1304.

[5]"Infancy to Adolescence: Opportunities for Success," testimony by David A. Hamburg, M.D., to Congressional Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, April 28, 1987, p. 5.

[6]L.J. Schweinhart and D.P. Weikart, "Young Children Grow Up: The Effects of the Perry Preschool Program on Youths Through Age 15," Ypsilanti, Michigan, 1980, p. 37.

[7]Gilbert Y. Steiner, *The Children's Cause*, The Brookings Institution, 1976, pp. 34-35.

[8]Schweinhart and Weikart, p. 37.

[9]"The Impact of Head Start on Children, Families and Communities," Head Start Synthesis Projects, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1985, p. 1.

[10]"Quality Preschool," brochure published by the North Carolina Child Advocacy Institute, 1987, p. 2.

[11]G.S. 115C-81.

[12]Resolution approved by N.C. State Board of Education, July 1988.

[13]Dan Durning, "Addressing the Dropout Problem in North Carolina: An Analysis of Costs, Programs, and Solutions," Duke University Institute for Policy Sciences and Public Affairs, Spring 1987.

[14]"1988 North Carolina High School Dropout Follow-Up Study," L.L. Thurstone Psychometric Laboratory at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, June 28, 1988, pp. 27-28.

[15]"Report of the Governor's Task Force on Youth at Risk," prepared by the Governor's Commission on Literacy, April 6, 1988, p. 1.

[16]*Ibid.*, pp. 4-12.

[17]Executive Order 32, issued Feb. 16, 1987, established the Governor's Literacy Council. That order was amended with Executive Order 38, issued March 12, 1987, changing the council's name to the Governor's Commission on Literacy.

[18]"Literacy in North Carolina," Governor's Commission on Literacy, July 21, 1988, p. 3.

[19]*Ibid.*, p. 15.

[20]*Ibid.*, pp. 14-22.

[21]Yevonne Brannon, "A Community Based Study of Adult Literacy in North Carolina," prepared by the Center for Urban Affairs and Community Services at N.C. State University for the N.C. Department of Community Colleges, May 1988, p. 97.

[22]Richard A. Mendel, "Workforce Literacy in the South," prepared by MDC, Inc., for the Sunbelt Institute, September 1988, p. 23.

[23]"Literacy in North Carolina," p. 2.

[24]Mendel, p. 7.

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"Them that's got shall get, them that's not shall lose— so the Bible said, and it is still news.
Mama may have, and papa may have — but God bless the child that's got his own, that's got his own.
And the strong seem to get more, while the weak ones fade — empty pockets don't ever make the grade. . .
And when you got money, you got lots of friends — crowding round your door.
When the money's gone and all your spending ends — they won't be round any more.
Rich relations give, crusts of bread and such, you can help yourself, but don't take too much.
God bless the child that's got his own."

—Billie Holiday and A. Herzog
"God Bless the Child"

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