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Grassroots movement needed to improve schools

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By Andy Brack

Charleston education advocate Jon Butzon said something at a meeting this week that struck home: Until it costs politicians more to do nothing about South Carolina's education system than it does to do something, not much will get done.

At present, there's not a great political outpouring for doing anything much differently, even with all of the education system's problems everybody knows about. If people want something other than more of the same, grassroots action needs to trump apathy.

Two years ago, state Judge Thomas Cooper ruled South Carolina had not provided a "minimally adequate education" to children living in poverty in districts along Interstate 95—the so-called "Corridor of Shame" highlighted by a documentary of the same name. Despite evidence of decrepit facilities and the need for better teachers in these districts, the judge also ruled that the state provided safe facilities and "minimally competent teachers."

More importantly, he left it to the Legislature to make any changes to fix the system.

Prior to Cooper's ruling, lawmakers were shaking in their boots because they knew they faced a potential billion-dollar funding crisis if they were forced to fix rural schools that had been neglected for years.

After Cooper's ruling, they must have been jumping around in the back rooms giving each other high-fives. Since the ruling, they've invested \$60 million to fund full-day kindergarten to 4-year-olds living in poverty. And while they've cooed and pandered with rhetoric, they've hemmed and hawed on real changes to make those schools—and all of schools across the state—the kind of places where people really want to send their children.

And today, because lawmakers have replaced local property taxes that fund schools with an increase in sales taxes, the burden rests soundly on their legislative shoulders to leapfrog into the 21st century with our public schools.

It's not rocket science what needs to happen: South Carolina needs a real investment in public education beyond what is done now.

What's clear to most people across the state, but apparently not to politicians, is that an investment of more money in winning strategies will make a difference in the lives of South Carolina's children. (Butzon wryly notes that politicians often claim throwing money at the problem won't fix it. But in South Carolina, because we really haven't tried that strategy, how can it hurt?)

A comprehensive, 18-month study by the Riley Institute at Furman University highlights prescriptions for fixing the state's education system with which educators, business leaders and parents generally agree—create smaller class sizes, involve parents more, start earlier with public education, provide better resources in classrooms, have tutoring for struggling students, invest in effective teachers, get better facilities and increase learning opportunities.

While the prescriptions for change aren't new, the fact that a huge sample of people—almost 800 people gathered from every school district in the state—had such consensus should send a clear message to lawmakers. They should hear that people want better public schools and fundamentally agree better schools are a priority.

“The people are ahead of the Legislature,” said state Superintendent of Education Jim Rex. He said the Riley Institute study reinforced what he has heard over and over in hundreds of meetings with parents, teachers and administrators across the state in the nine months he's been the state's top educator.

“What I've learned is that doing the right thing too slowly is no different than doing nothing, in terms of results,” he said.

In the coming legislative session, Rex is expected to challenge state lawmakers to look at new ways to fund education across the state that may shake up things.

It's about time.

“It comes down to a situation of apathy and passiveness on the part of way too many people,” Rex said. “As citizens, we need to get much more sophisticated about what advocacy means.”

Two big things need to happen, too.

Lawmakers need to understand that inaction or slow movement will cost them at the polls. But for them to understand, citizens need to get off the couches and hold them accountable.

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