



Minimally adequate education 'unaffordable'

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By PAUL KROHNE

pkrohne@scsba.org

The third annual Break Away South Carolina economic competitiveness report prepared for the State Chamber of Commerce and released recently had some dismal news for South Carolina.

Economic competitiveness is down across a range of factors. One of those factors is education and workforce preparedness, which is improving steadily, the report concluded, but not enough to keep track with competing states.

The latest report ought to provide the incentive South Carolina needs to finally abandon a shameful standard for our educational system.

"Minimal adequacy" in education is an objective we can no longer afford. Legislation currently being considered in the General Assembly calls for a voter referendum on amending the Constitution to reflect this commitment to stronger and better public schools. Instead of requiring a minimally adequate education, the Constitution would obligate South Carolina to support "high quality education, allowing each student to reach his highest potential."

South Carolina's obligation to provide an education for its residents is established by the Constitution, last ratified in 1895 when education was not the priority that it is today.

The Constitution is silent on the question of the level of education the General Assembly must guarantee, requiring only that the state maintain and support "a system of free public schools open to all children in the State and ... establish, organize and support such other public institutions of learning as may be desirable."

The state Supreme Court has interpreted this language to mean that South Carolina is constitutionally obligated to support only a "minimally adequate" education in all schools. What an outrage. Do the students in our public schools deserve more respect than that? Absolutely. Does having such a dismal constitutional requirement for providing education have a negative impact on our state's economic development plans? You bet it does.

In the 21st century, "minimally adequate" education is not a standard we can live with, morally or economically. In the modern economy, there are few jobs for unskilled workers. Companies do not locate in states determined to provide them with "minimally adequate" employees. They don't seek out places where their employees' children are guaranteed a barely sufficient education.

The "minimally adequate" standard also is inconsistent with the goals we have set for ourselves or our educational system in recent years. The S.C. Education Accountability Act of 1998 created a system designed to "push schools and students toward higher performance." The standards called for under the act reflect "the highest level of academic skills with the rigor necessary to improve curriculum and

instruction in South Carolina's schools so that students are encouraged to learn at unprecedented levels."

The General Assembly's own Education Oversight Committee echoes this objective, calling for student achievement in South Carolina to be ranked within the top half of states nationally by the year 2010.

And South Carolinians agree. The comprehensive, 18-month study by Furman University's Riley Institute found that South Carolinians fundamentally believe that better schools must be one of the state's top priorities.

Bringing the Constitution in line with the goals we have set and the hopes we have for our state is a change that is long overdue. We have a chance to do what is right for our state and for our future. Most importantly, the time has come to do what is right for our children.

This year, South Carolina can send the clear signal that "minimally adequate" does not describe the future we want, and that we have, as a state, a 21st century understanding of the importance of a high quality education.

And we can commit ourselves finally to providing that in every school.

Paul Krohne, Ph.D., is executive director of the South Carolina School Boards Association. He has 30 years of experience in public education and received a doctorate in school administration

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