

# Findings



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## An Education Snapshot

### *The Transformation of North Carolina Education*

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**F**ew North Carolinians are aware of the major transformation that has been occurring in education over the last several years under the guise of improving student performance and raising the standard of achievement. How the state is attempting to improve schools and raise the achievement levels of students should concern everyone who is invested in the future of this state.

This paper will provide a broad overview of what is happening in education in North Carolina. Several areas will be addressed, including: the ABCs of Public Education, student portfolios, the JobReady (or school-to-work) initiative, national teacher certification, education funding, and federal education initiatives. Solutions for improving education in North Carolina will be offered as well.

#### **ABCs of Public Education**

It is not widely known that the state's "ABCs of Public Education," begun in 1995, was the result of work by the North Carolina School Improvement Panel, which was funded by the federal government's 1994 Goals 2000 legislation.<sup>1</sup> The first of the federal goals concerned school readiness and stated that "By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn."<sup>2</sup> At the June 2000 meeting of the North Carolina State Board of Education, a document entitled, "School Readiness in North Carolina: Strategies for Defining, Measuring and Promoting Success for All Children," was submitted to the School Improvement Panel at the State Board. Most people are not aware of the document's inquisitiveness regarding families. For example, its "School Readiness Assessment" plans to look at "early experiences provided by families," and one of its "four

cornerstones of Ready Schools" is identified as "Knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which each child and family lives."<sup>3</sup> The document's "Data Collection Procedures" section states: "Parents, children and kindergarten teachers will provide information for the North Carolina School Readiness Assessment....Parents of all entering kindergartners will complete a brief information sheet about their child's health, early care, and educational experiences, interests, etc."<sup>4</sup> Note particularly the words "all" and "will," and that the government is not just asking whether children have had their vaccination shots.

Another area of concern is that two of the document's "national expert reviewers" are prominent people with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).<sup>5</sup> Under the document's "Ongoing Teacher Professional and Personal Development" one finds the declaration that "Professional development must include...membership in professional organizations like NAEYC."<sup>6</sup> The NAEYC is the largest and most powerful organization of early childhood (birth through age 8) educators that offers programs and professional development for teachers. It also serves as an accrediting agency.

The document indicates that administrators and teachers are expected to read and understand NAEYC's "Developmentally Appropriate Practices."<sup>7</sup> What most people do not know is that in its policy statements, the NAEYC considers it developmentally inappropriate to divide curriculum into separate subjects (like math and reading) and allot time for each.<sup>8</sup> This opinion runs contrary to hundreds of years of proven educational instruction. The NAEYC is also incorrectly critical of phonics instruction in its position statement.

The state legislature responded to concerns about NAEYC materials, most

notably a book that explains to caregivers how to respond to children's questions about their genitals.<sup>9</sup> In 1997, North Carolina's child care laws were amended to prevent the Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child Development and the Child Care Commission from promoting or requiring "the utilization of training materials, curriculum or policy developed or provided by the National Association for the Education of Young Children..."<sup>10</sup> But in 1999, another provision was enacted by the General Assembly which lifted the prohibition on the use of NAEYC materials.<sup>11</sup>

The end-of-grade tests are also an important part of the ABCs of Public Education, and in Spring 2001, students in the 5th grade not scoring proficient—at grade level—on the end-of-grade reading and math exams will not move on to the next grade. This will also be the case for 3rd and 8th grade students in Spring 2002. In 2000, 4th grade students were also given a writing exam, and those not proficient will be remediated in 2001 and given a test which must show sufficient progress, or they will not be able to move to sixth grade in 2002. All students in grades three through eight are given end-of-grade tests, but grades three, five, eight and high school are "gateway" levels where students must pass exams in the areas indicated above or they will not graduate to the next level. Beginning with the graduating class of 2003, students will be required to pass a new exit exam of essential skills and a computer skills test in order to graduate high school.<sup>12</sup> With 31 percent of the state's students not "proficient" in reading and math, the results could be profound.<sup>13</sup> Richard Jaeger, director of the Center for Education Research and Evaluation at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, has warned: "There is no single test that can accurately

judge whether every student should be promoted or retained. This might work politically, but it is a dangerous trend that can hurt students far more than it helps.”<sup>14</sup>

The point in mentioning end-of-grade tests is that most people have no idea how the test questions are developed and how they are scored. For example, grading in the writing exams is subjective.<sup>15</sup> To obtain questions for the end-of-grade tests, questions are first field-tested. One question not in use now, but field-tested for a 3rd grade, open-ended reading test, was: “Who should win the race (and why) between a rabbit and a deer, if the rabbit cheated?” One would think that the answer is simple—the deer should win the race because the rabbit cheated. However, the student would not be given the maximum number of points for that answer. The maximum score for this question is only given to those students who also consider the matter from the cheater’s perspective.<sup>16</sup>

With end-of-grade tests of great importance not only to students but also to how schools’ and teachers’ success is measured, one often finds teachers “teaching to the test.” North Carolina State Superintendent of Public Instruction Mike Ward has as much as acknowledged this.<sup>17</sup> And Dr. Gail Jones, associate professor of education at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, has cautioned: “As educators, we have to ask ourselves what these tests are actually measuring if large numbers of teachers are spending more than half their class time having students practice for end-of-grade tests. Are students just learning to take tests, or are they learning problem-solving skills and developing a deeper understanding of ideas?”<sup>18</sup> On August 5, 1998, Dr. Jones released the results of a statewide survey of elementary teachers, who gave the state’s ABCs of Public Education low marks “for the negative effects they say it has on schools as well as student and teacher morale.”<sup>19</sup>

The state’s assessments have even adversely impacted some charter schools. Healthy Start’s principal, Tom Williams, is quoted as claiming: “The state would like us to believe that the same students who did so well on a national test are below grade level by state standards. Something is clearly wrong here.”<sup>20</sup> In June 1999, the average scores of the school’s third graders placed the class in the 81st percentile nationally on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. However, the charter school students were taught traditional literature rather than Judy Blume, and reportedly Lou Fabrizio, director of the state’s accountability program, “did not

dispute Williams’ conclusion that teaching lessons different from those in the state curriculum could hurt a school’s end-of-grade test scores.”<sup>21</sup> Related to this, the “Grading Our Schools, 1999” report by the John Locke Foundation’s NC Alliance for Smart Schools, indicated that while there was a continued upward trend in ABC test results, “scores on independent national tests showed little or no gain.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, while state officials point to rising SAT scores, North Carolina’s national ranking remained at 48th in 1999 and in 2000.<sup>23</sup> It is important to look at the state’s ranking rather than absolute score because if every state’s scores are rising, then North Carolina at 48th means the state is remaining at the low end of the rating chart and not improving any more than any other state.

### Student Portfolios

Over the next two or three years, according to State Superintendent Ward, the state will consider using student portfolios as measures of achievement.<sup>24</sup> Portfolios would include students’ test scores, examples of school work, and other projects (e.g., senior essay projects).<sup>25</sup> But Lindalyn Kakadelis, a member of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education and a member of the N.C. Standards and Accountability Committee, wrote in *The Charlotte Observer*, that “there is no data available to prove the senior essay project and completion of a portfolio increases academic achievement. The scoring is subjective and offers no objective measure of what is accomplished.”<sup>26</sup>

### JobReady/School-to-Work

Most people are not aware that the State Board of Education is in the process of eliminating what is known as the General Track, which is made up of about one-third of the students in the state. Since most of the students in that track are there because they are not sure what career they want to pursue, it is logical to conclude that most of them will be switching to the College Tech-Prep Track in order to keep their options open. It is also logical to assume that these students will be the most likely to change their minds regarding their career choices as they move through high school, and this is where the problem arises.

A student must take at least four career/technical units of credit in a single career path to be a “completer,” and at least one must be an upper level course (e.g., Welding II after Welding I).<sup>27</sup> On March 16 of this year, a hearing was held in the NC State Department of Public Instruction building in Raleigh, and the report of the

hearing officer includes the following concerning state graduation requirements: “Kayren McKnight, an assistant principal and parent, favors improving standards but not at the cost of narrowing their options. She questioned the ability of 14-year-olds to make a career choice and stick with that choice for four years. The courses of study appear to be nothing more than tracks. They also do not address the needs of students who plan to enter the military, community college and then a four-year college, fire fighting or law enforcement. In short, we should not take any action that limits the options of children, who are apt to discover new interests during their school careers.”<sup>28</sup>

There are currently 10 career areas or occupational clusters (e.g., Health Sciences, Agricultural and Natural Resources Technologies) with Arts and Sciences to be added soon, but the poorer school districts can offer only a few of these. When the State Department of Public Instruction was asked why there could not be alternative requirements to being a “completer,” they pointed to research by the Southern Regional Education Board’s “High Schools That Work” project and by Mathematica Policy Research that supports the current requirements. However, Gene Bottoms, director of the “High Schools that Work” project, and Alan Hershey, who heads Mathematica’s research in this area, have both said that this is false.<sup>29</sup> There needs to be more flexibility in the requirements for “completers.”

But what happens when students change career areas, since the state is promoting “integrated curricula,” in which English, math, and other courses are taught in ways relevant to the students’ career areas? For example, if it’s important for a student to learn Algebra specifically as it applies to Health Sciences, then isn’t it also important for the same student to learn Algebra as it applies to Engineering Technologies, if he or she changes to that career area? And if it is not important, then why shouldn’t the student learn general Algebra in the first place?

There is also the question of what happens in poorer counties when students change career paths and their upper level career course has a scheduling conflict with Senior English or another course needed for graduation. Although students can still graduate, they would not be “completers” without the four career/technical units of credit in a single career path. It seems likely that employers will soon start looking for some type of “completer” identification (e.g., perhaps skill certification on

diplomas) in hiring decisions. One might also ask how this would affect home and private schools since they cannot possibly offer the vast array of career/technical courses offered by public schools.

### **National Teacher Certification**

The N.C. General Assembly has been putting millions of tax dollars into a program to help North Carolina teachers become nationally certified. However, there is no evidence that national teacher certification has improved students' academic performance. In fact, in a recent article in *Education Week*, there is a report that "researchers at the Consortium for Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison looked at the effects of certification by the national board in five school districts (and found)...it was difficult for the principals to link any improvements in student learning to their teachers' achievement of certification."<sup>30</sup> Additional state funding for nationally certified teachers, regardless of the academic performance of their students, discriminates against the many, fine, non-nationally certified teachers in this state whose students' performance has increased.

Another question to consider has to do with the soundness of the national certification process. Any process that allows the candidate to videotape his or her own teaching on whatever day he or she chooses is automatically suspect.<sup>31</sup> Even the worst teachers will have one or two good teaching days out of the 180-day school year. When James Martin was governor, senior education advisor Lee Monroe said concerning this issue, "Our position has been and will always continue to be that it (teacher certification) is the state's role and the state's right."<sup>32</sup>

### **Education Funding**

The North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE) is constantly saying that we need more money to solve our educational problems. This, however, is not the case. Funding for education has soared over the past several decades. According to a study conducted a few years ago, of the top five school systems in the state in SAT scores and the nationally standardized California Achievement Test (CAT), three of them (Burlington, Elkin and Hendersonville) were not even in the top two dozen in terms of total per-pupil expenditures.<sup>33</sup> More recently, the N.C. Alliance for Smart Schools' "Grading Our Schools, '99" report indicated that the top 10 districts ranked by per-pupil spending spent an average of \$7,387 per student, yet had an

average of 68.2 percent of their children at grade level on the ABC tests. According to the same report, the bottom 10 districts spent an average of \$4,886 per student, but had an average of 72 percent of their students at grade level on the ABC test.<sup>34</sup>

Further evidence that we do not need more money for education can be found in the fact that although there are calls for additional funding at the state and national levels in order to reduce class sizes, scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading tests show this will not help student achievement. A 1999 report, published by the Heritage Foundation and based upon the 1998 NAEP reading exam, reads: "On average, being in a small class does not increase the likelihood that a student will attain a higher score on the NAEP reading test, and children in the smallest classes (those with 20 or fewer students per teacher) do not score higher than students in the largest classes (those with 31 or more students per teacher)."<sup>35</sup>

### **Federal Education Initiatives**

As indicated at the first of this paper, some of the transformation of North Carolina's education is the result of federal education initiatives. On September 4, 1997, Speaker of the NC House of Representatives, Harold J. Brubaker, directed the House Select Committee for Federal Education Grants to look at the impact of federal education grants on North Carolina. Not only did the Select Committee look at the impact of major federal initiatives such as the Goals 2000 Education America Act and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, but it also looked at how federal funds for sexual abstinence before marriage education were being used. The misuse of these funds was alarming, as Select Committee consultant, Mrs. Ann Frazier, discovered that some of these funds had even been used for a video on head lice.

### **Improving N.C. Education**

What specifically would improve education at the primary level in North Carolina is an intensive phonics instruction program. While some state legislative leaders have been reluctant to say students should be able to read prior to the 3rd grade, the North Carolina General Assembly passed a law in 1996 instructing the State Board of Education to develop a program to improve reading achievement in public schools which included a renewed emphasis on phonics instruction.<sup>36</sup> By law, teachers are supposed to include phonics instruction. The problem is that teachers have the discretion to use other reading instruction

methods in addition to the phonics method.

In a scholarly paper concerning the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's research on reading, Dr. Bonita Grossman found that "children who fall behind at an early age (K and Grade 1) fall further and further behind over time....Lack of phonemic awareness seems to be a major obstacle for learning to read. Phonemic awareness is the ability to segment words and syllables into constituent sound units or phonemes."<sup>37</sup> Actually, students in the first grade can become successful readers, as evidenced by students at that grade level at Union Primary School in Brunswick County almost doubling their nationally standardized California Achievement Test scores after switching to a systematic intensive phonics method of reading instruction.<sup>38</sup> There should be similar pilot projects for schools in North Carolina where students are currently scoring poorly on reading exams. If the results are positive, the project could be taken statewide.

Another positive means of improving education in grades K-12 in North Carolina would be for our school systems to compile their teachers' successful instruction methods and activities, and distribute them for other teachers to use voluntarily. Research has indicated that when students are introduced to a successful teaching method or activity previously unfamiliar to them, discipline problems decrease by over 25 percent.<sup>39</sup> This inexpensive means of improving education could improve teaching and reduce discipline problems and the drop-out rate as well.

Another solution for improving education in North Carolina is to offer students vouchers to attend the school of their parents choice so that their individual needs can be met best. The main objection to vouchers seems to be that they will take monies away from the public schools.

Actually, the opposite may be true, as vouchers could result in public schools receiving more money per pupil. In 1998-99, per pupil expenditures for public schools students in North Carolina was \$5,899, while private schools per pupil costs were about half that.<sup>40</sup> Rounding these figures to \$6,000 and \$3,000 respectively, a public school with 1,000 students would receive \$6 million. If 100 of these students took a voucher of \$3,000 each to a private school to cover costs, the public school would not only have the \$5.4 million it should receive for the 900 students left there, but \$300,000 extra that the 100 students did not take with them to the private school. This extra

money per pupil for the public school could be used, for example, to avoid a tax increase to build new schools due to student population growth. Concerning school systems where student population growth is low or negative, “caps” on the number of vouchers could solve that problem. The same type of “caps” could also prevent a single school in a district from being impacted severely and causing redistricting. High growth or large districts would not even have to be concerned about the possibility of these problems.

## Conclusion

Most North Carolinians are completely unaware of what has been described in this paper. However, the effect of these transformations on education upon the people will be major. Thus, it is important that the citizenry be informed, the issues discussed, and judgments made about the future of education in North Carolina.

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