

COMMENTARY

Adequate education, our unfinished business

South Carolinians played essential roles 50 years ago in shaping the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation decision. Descendants of a number of them have just received Congressional Gold Medals; the highest honor the president and Congress can bestow upon civilians, for the courage and endurance of their forbears as plaintiffs in *Briggs v. Elliott*, the Clarendon County case that was the most significant legal and factual case of the five consolidated into the *Brown* decision.

Today's generation of South Carolinians now has its own opportunity — if not the moral obligation — to make good on the still-unfinished business of providing an adequate education to every child, and to advance the economic well-being of the state.

It is no stretch of facts to say that South Carolina's struggle to build a unified public school system of quality is only a half-century-old. Before then, the state's history of commitment to public education was truly grim.

Today, despite laudable progress in many areas, uneven funding in our school districts has created the sorry circumstance in which students in our state's poor, rural communities have been relegated to underfunded, underachieving public schools that are hard to staff, while students in urban communities generally experience better schools.

The consequences for rural South Carolina are horrendous, and the implications



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for the entire state are dire. That is why eight rural school districts, representing 34 school districts — more than one-third of our state's districts — have brought a lawsuit to address the issue, which ultimately will have to be resolved by the General Assembly.

The problem is caused by a lack of sufficient property taxes generated in our rural communities that would create local revenues to support their school districts along with state-appropriated funds.

Consider these results:

- Some 49 percent of students in the plaintiff school districts score below "basic" achievement, compared to 18 percent of students in the better schools in the state. Although the Legislature has established the standard of achievement to be "proficient," not "basic," by 2010, almost 90 percent of the students in the plaintiff districts in the lawsuit score less than "proficient" now.
- Few schools in these rural districts offer early childhood and after-school programs, summer school, reading specialists and parental involvement programs on a regular basis.
- None of the middle schools in these districts has both certified science teachers and labs. None offers four years of the same foreign language.
- The statewide turnover rate for teachers is 9.4 percent, but in Hampton School District 2, it is more than 25 percent.
- The statewide percentage of teachers with substandard certificates and those teaching

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out of their fields is 6.6 percent, but in the Jasper School District, it averages nearly 20 percent.

- While the average national SAT score this year is 1,026 and in South Carolina it is 986, it is only 793 in Florence School District 4.
- Some of the state's better districts spend more than \$3,000 per pupil on buildings and capital outlay, compared to \$694 (77 percent less) in the plaintiff districts.
- To make matters worse, the General Assembly in recent years has eliminated supplemental general funds and Education Improvement Act funds for school buildings.

How can we expect children who, through the simple accident of geography, live in our essential rural communities to become productive citizens if this is their lot in life? We can't. This offends our core value of fairness. Unequal funding of education is just another way of denying access to education.

Our public schools — all of them, not some of them — are the manifestation of South Carolina's belief that all children should develop the knowledge, skills and

values needed for them to become productive adults, capable of sustaining themselves and the public life of their communities, no matter where they live in this state.

It is in our economic self-interest to assure higher-quality schools for all our state's children — to provide an educated, productive workforce that is competitive in a world economy. We must either improve our ability to compete in today's skills-driven economy and the even more demanding workplaces of the future or face greater poverty and joblessness, overcrowded prisons and a diminished quality of life.

Addressing this problem will give struggling students the opportunities and needed help to succeed, and that is the only way our entire state will progress in educational standings and economic development.

I know that the price of an opportunity for an adequate education for all our children will be large. However, I am optimistic that in the end, regardless of the final lower-court outcome, our state Supreme Court will require it. It is a price we must pay, a charge to our account long overdue, legally and morally. History, indeed, is neither linear nor pretty.

The son of the Rev. J.A. DeLaine said at the Congressional Gold Medal presentation, "We need some change down there, and we need some help for that change."

If we rise to his challenge, we can both honor the 50-year-old promise of *Briggs v. Elliott* and assure all of our communities, urban and rural, a more prosperous future.

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