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A shame indeed

Economic disparities evident in documentary

April 23, 2005

"Corridor of Shame: The neglect of South Carolina's Rural Schools" isn't a Hollywood blockbuster. It's a small film, produced not for awards but for awareness. It was made to educate us about rural areas of South Carolina where education is an everyday struggle, not because of a decline in concern but continually declining financial support.

It's the movie some people in power don't want you to see.

One state lawmaker even tried to oust the board of SCETV, because the network plans to broadcast the film over statewide television. He claimed it was prejudicial, all because it showed the truth, that education in our state is not equal, that some of our lawmakers are shirking their responsibilities to our state's future, that not all of our children have the same opportunities.

And that we all, South Carolinians statewide, have a stake in seeing that situation changed.

Our governor's answer to education is Put Parents in Charge, which does nothing to enhance the quality of public education and even less for state revenues. Gov. Mark Sanford's proposal would give tax credits to parents who put their children in private schools or school them in the home. The plan has the potential to be an additional drain on overall revenues because it also includes tax credits for businesses that provide "scholarships" to private schools and take that money as a deduction from their tax bills.

Last week the Ways and Means Committee of the state House of Representatives amended the governor's plan, making his statewide proposal one that would be operated as a pilot program in just two school districts. The state Department of Education would pick schools from our wealthiest and our poorest districts.

But even this watered-down version should be unacceptable to those concerned about public education rather than politics.

Education in South Carolina is funded at the local level through property taxes. In the corridor along I-95 are some of our poorest districts, among them Dillon District 2, Jasper County and Marion District 7, all featured in the documentary. They have low property tax revenues because their industries have closed entirely or moved away. Their schools are poorly funded at the local level not because the people don't care but because they don't have the luxury of adding their own money to the limited funds the schools receive through normal channels.

They need, they want, they hope — they have even sued — for

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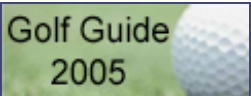


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promised support from the state, support that will be further eroded if our governor continues his emphasis on private schools receiving public dollars rather than any real plan to improve South Carolina's schools statewide.

In the documentary, the viewer goes into these schools, sees the students and hears the teachers and administrators talk about buildings that are so substandard a heavy rainstorm can result in a coiled snake in a classroom or a ceiling that collapses in an elementary school. Sewage backs up in the halls and the coat closets at another school. In one high school, students wear coats and gloves because they can see their breath in the cold air, as cold as outside, just not as windy.

You will hear, as well, parents and teachers who envy the schools of the Upstate, who wish their children had computer and science labs with equipment that worked and more than one sink, reading rooms that would hold more than six or seven students at the time, restrooms that afford privacy and teachers who stayed more than one year before moving on to districts where they can make more money, have more benefits, have better facilities to do the jobs they love to do.

Yet many of these teachers remain, some driving an hour each way from their home districts where they could make much more money, because they know these children need them. They struggle to speak at times, as they talk of the students they think of as their own. And the children? Their faces will both warm you and haunt you, as you look at the faces of your own children and understand your life, their lives, could so easily be different.

Our governor shouldn't be spending so much of his time and effort on enabling a few parents to take tax credits for private or home-school education for some of South Carolina's children. He should be using his power, his charisma and his passion to improve public schools for all of South Carolina's children.

That's our state's responsibility to her children, its pledge. It should be our lawmakers' priority. And it would be our governor's finest legacy.

Money is not the answer to every problem. But as Sen. Lindsey Graham said so well in the documentary, "If you aren't getting any, it's a start."

Find a copy of "Corridor of Shame" at the Web site: www.corridorofshame.com. There will also be a viewing at the Strom Thurmond Institute's Self Auditorium at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday.

Our governor repeatedly insists he supports public education. His actions belie those words. Our state owes preparation for the future to all of its children, not just those fortunate enough to live where the economy offers adequate support to make up for the state's failings.

Tax credits that would further deplete public school funding are not the answer.

We need a real plan for public education in South Carolina, not a public relations campaign.

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