

8 Proven, Affordable Solutions to the *Abbeville* Ruling

The “Help Our Pupils Excel” (H.O.P.E.) Plan



On November 12, 2014, the Supreme Court of South Carolina mandated that the General Assembly develop a plan to fix the problem of poor educational outcomes for students in the neediest school districts in the state and later set a June 2016 deadline. In response, special Senate and House committees have heard extensive testimony, including a long, expensive proposal from the *Abbeville* plaintiff districts that outlined their preferred remedies. Many important ideas have been discussed, such as the need to recruit and retain highly effective leaders for struggling schools.

But the world we live in and the resulting education needs have evolved dramatically since the suit was first conceived over two decades ago. New methods and education options exist today that we simply didn't have then. With flood relief, infrastructure needs, rising health care costs and more competing for scarce dollars, it imperative that these proven, cost-effective strategies be included as part of the final answer.

South Carolina has a generational opportunity not just to play catch up, but to proactively create a chance for every student to excel. But this means an education paradigm shift that welcomes real reform and aligns inputs with defined outcomes. This should be informed by three core strategies:

- **Reprioritize current resources on high-quality teaching and in-school leadership.**
- **Enhance local accountability for student learning and local autonomy to accomplish the mission.**
- **Empower parents and students with more high-quality options.**

It's not enough to overlay more offices, mandates and spending on top of outdated systems. Instead, South Carolina must think strategically about how to leverage scarce dollars and new innovations to deliver better results for students. The ideas outlined here do just that and are receiving bipartisan support around the country.

The payoffs have been stunning: rising graduation rates, higher college enrollment in minority communities, increasing academic achievement among the students that need it most, better use of scarce taxpayer dollars...and students, parents and teachers who enjoy being treated as unique individuals, not just part of a system.

Each of the following key reforms – taken together as a strategic roadmap – can create a network of high-quality options for parents and students whatever their income and wherever their zip code and transform education in the Palmetto State.

Currently, charter schools, virtual schools, home schools, private schools and many traditional public schools are creating a thriving environment for South Carolina's children. Expanding access to these existing options is both cost-effective and common sense.

There is no “one size fits all” solution to fix the education inequities in our state. Rather, an “all of the above” approach will help lawmakers meet their legal obligation and provide the best chance for every child to find the education that equips them to be successful, lifelong learners and reach their full potential.

1. Let the Education Finance Act (EFA) work

Why not fully fund the Education Finance Act by the end of the decade in return for protecting the EFA formula from state and district mandates and programs that drain dollars from the classroom? This might entail a BRAC-type process to determine the necessity and effectiveness of current programs that are draining funds out of the EFA. Base student cost dollars should flow to the classroom for instruction. This could reduce class sizes and allow woefully outdated textbooks to be replaced. Another similar innovation would be to redefine instructional services in statute in a way that directs more dollars toward actual teaching. Small districts should also be consolidated to achieve efficiencies and get more dollars into the classroom for students and teachers.

2. Equitably fund all forms of public education

Charter Schools are public schools in every way - yet in South Carolina, they receive less funding than traditional schools, with no transportation dollars and very limited access to facilities funding (in the form of a \$1 million revolving loan fund for the entire state). Despite these challenges diverting scarce resources out of the classroom, many of these entrepreneurial schools continue to thrive. Addressing these funding disparities would allow high-quality South Carolina charters to expand and replicate themselves in more rural areas, offering proven alternatives for families.

3. Expand & codify exceptional needs scholarships & credits

South Carolina’s first private school choice programs, the Exceptional Needs Scholarships (ECENC) and the parental tax credit scholarship (RECENC) have proven successful and deserve to be “promoted” from year-to-year provisos to permanent law. Codification and indexing both programs to inflation, as well as raising the revenue caps (currently \$8M for the ECENC and \$4M for the RECENC) will help even more kids in the target districts.

4. Enact Education Savings Accounts (ESAs)

Another exciting innovation sweeping the country: Education Savings Accounts (ESAs). Modeled on the popular idea of Health Savings Accounts and now available in Arizona, Florida, Tennessee, Nevada and Mississippi, ESAs are the “iPhone” of education options, giving parents direct access to their child’s funding from the state student funding formula to create the ultimate customized education. How does it work? The state deposits the money into a dedicated personal account and parents may then spend that money on a wide variety of approved services—including tuition, therapy and tutoring—whatever their child needs. Unused funds can even be rolled over from year to year to save for college. It’s a bold, opportunity-creating idea that South Carolina would do well to explore as a “third option” for our exceptional needs students and as an important opportunity-generating option for low income children in the plaintiff districts.

5. Unleash more online options

Building on the success of VirtualSC, a robust course access program would give public school students access to wide array of high-quality online courses offered by a variety of providers that they otherwise wouldn’t have. In 2013, Louisiana established the Supplemental Course Academy, a highly successful model for this kind of policy that has proven to be a huge boon to families, especially those living in rural communities. The program is growing by leaps and bounds, with students enrolling in 19,000 classes in 2014-15, a 700% increase over the prior school year, translating into untold opportunities for students.

6. Create true public school open/option enrollment

A true public school choice effort in South Carolina, led by several members of the SC Senate Education Committee, languished when transportation became an issue. Models to overcome this obstacle exist: now is the time for a parent to be able to choose any public school for their child. The Westside Community Schools (Nebraska) “regional centers of learning” idea, which allows for Open Enrollment (a narrower area of residence), and Option Enrollment (a broader area of residence) is worth exploring for the Palmetto State.

7. Establish an Achievement School District (ASD)

Our neighbors in Georgia, Louisiana and Tennessee have created Achievement School Districts (ASDs), designed to oversee the turnaround of the state’s lowest-performing schools. By placing high-caliber, accountable leadership over these schools and removing bureaucratic red tape from their path, ASDs are providing the autonomy and innovation necessary to create truly transformational environments to help raise achievement for students who have lived in poverty for generations.

8. Incent excellence in teaching & school leadership

Last, but certainly not least, effective teachers and school leaders – especially in high-poverty areas – should be paid at nationally competitive levels. But this must start with effective evaluation, a policy issue with which South Carolina is still grappling. One interim idea is to create wider pay bands within the state salary schedule to give school leaders more discretion to reward and retain excellent teachers. Research shows that teachers are the #1 in-school determiner of student learning, and we must strengthen efforts to recognize teaching as a respected profession and recruit those with the most potential to excel from our colleges and within our communities. Higher education institutions can be key partners in forging new, innovative pathways to effective teaching, cultivating cadres of teachers with empathy, resiliency, and resolve.

It is essential that proven, cost-effective innovations like those outlined here are included in the final legislative response to *Abbeville*, if we are truly determined to give every South Carolina student the opportunity to write their own education success story.