Reaching for Higher Standards:

South Carolina Reports on Progress Toward the National Education Goals

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Two years ago the President of the United States and the 50 Governors came together for the nation's first Education Summit. Born of an urgent realization that America's future prosperity was at stake, the Summit produced six ambitious goals for the nation's performance in education:

**Goal 1:** By the year 2000, all children in American will start school ready to learn.

**Goal 2:** By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.

**Goal 3:** By the year 2000, American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so that they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.

**Goal 4:** By the year 2000, U.S. students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.

**Goal 5:** By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

**Goal 6:** By the year 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

To track the nation's progress toward the goals, the Governors and the President established the National Education Goals Panel. The Panel committed to issue a series of annual reports describing the performance of American students in outcome-based terms. Each Governor was also asked to issue his or her own report, describing state-level efforts and progress toward the goals.

*Reaching for Higher Standards* represents the first report by South Carolina to its citizens on the state's standing in relation to the goals.

**What the Goals Mean for South Carolina**

No less than the rest of the nation, South Carolina faces a crisis in its ability to supply its industry with a critical resource: the corps of skilled workers needed to keep the state economically competitive in an economy where the most
ordinary transactions cross not only national but international boundaries. In the global marketplace, South Carolina's workers may be in less direct competition with Georgia than with Japan. Unless we can match the high skill and education levels that characterize the workforces of many other industrialized nations, our society is in jeopardy.

The National Education Goals can serve as signposts to help point the way toward a future in which South Carolina's children achieve at the high levels of academic performance that are our best guarantee of a productive citizenry and a prosperous economy.

The data presented in *Reaching for Higher Standards* show clearly that South Carolina has much hard work to do to reach the goals. That comes as no surprise. What is noteworthy about the report is that it gives us, for the first time, a clear look at where we are in education and why, drawing on data not just from the education system but many other sources as well. The kind of comprehensive analysis it presents gives us the tools we need to be able not just to report progress, but to make it happen.

The real message of *Reaching for Higher Standards* is a positive one: that we can establish meaningful targets for achievement; that we believe our efforts will make a difference; and that we have the will to try.

**What the Report Tells Us**

South Carolina has long been considered a national leader in education reform, from the passage of the Education Finance Act in 1977, through more recent reforms such as the Education Improvement Act and the Target 2000 Act. Those statutes and the programs they enacted have had remarkable success both in improving the quality of the education offered to our students, and in improving student performance. In recent years, however, the forward momentum of those earlier reforms has tended to slow and stall.

*Reaching for Higher Standards* suggests several possible reasons for this leveling-off in student achievement gains:

- South Carolina's earlier reforms were largely directed at bringing children up to minimum standards, and they have been successful in doing so. But the next step -- taking our students to higher levels of achievement -- will require a different approach.

- Much of South Carolina's student population is disadvantaged, in both economic and social terms. Children who are hungry or abused, or who have never seen a doctor, make poor students. The prevalence of such problems makes it increasingly important to coordinate the services offered by schools with those offered by other agencies.

- At the same time, *Reaching for Higher Standards* makes it clear that many of the problems facing our students are the result of a serious deterioration
in the quality of family life. In South Carolina today, one-quarter of all South Carolina families with children are headed by single parents. Teen motherhood is so common that by the time they are 20, one-fifth of all the women in South Carolina have given birth to one or more children. Births to unmarried mothers have risen steadily and now represent about one-fifth of all births.

The bottom line of all these trends is that South Carolina's children are increasingly growing up in families that are ill-equipped to give them the kind of sustained adult attention they need to succeed in school and in later life. Almost 60 percent of all mothers of children under six are working, and so are a great many of the other relatives who in earlier times would have been available to provide family support.

Unless South Carolina's citizens -- as individuals and as families -- assume greater responsibility for the choices they make that affect their children, progress toward our goals will be slow.

The Outlook for the Future

In our efforts to reach the goals, we can -- and should -- be optimistic. Though it is clear that we have a long way to go, it is also clear that we already have in place many of the programs and policies that can help us reach our destination. South Carolina can be encouraged by ongoing efforts and outcomes such as the following:

- Though its student performance overall tends to hover at or below national averages, South Carolina's education system has contributed at least its share of extraordinary achievements and achievers. The state regularly produces national and international finalists in such prestigious competitions as the Knowledge Master Open and the Odyssey of the Mind. The successes of its Advanced Placement program, in which students are taught and tested on challenging high-level coursework, have drawn national attention. Specialized instructional programs such as the Governor's School for Science and Math are helping to keep South Carolina's best and brightest students in-state.

- Under the direction of its new State Superintendent of Education, South Carolina is embarking on a massive restructuring of its educational system, using the National Education Goals as a framework from which to build new curricula, new assessments, new teaching methods, and new systems of accountability.

- Parent education levels, which have an important impact on children's success in school, are rising.

- Children's readiness for school, as assessed on the readiness test administered in first grade, has gone up dramatically (especially for black students) since the first use of the test in 1979.
New data presented in *Reaching for Higher Standards* show that many students who drop out of school go on later to complete high school or equivalency degrees. When those students are taken into account, the rate for adults not holding high school degrees or GED's declines from 31% to 18%.

College enrollment is on the upswing in South Carolina.

Programs such as the Special Schools offered through the State Board for Technical and Comprehensive Education, and the Governor's Initiative for Work Force Excellence, have played important roles in increasing access to workforce training.

On the human services side, the state can also point to significant accomplishments:

- The state's infant mortality rate has dropped dramatically.
- Medicaid coverage for pregnant women has been greatly expanded. The number of women and infants served more than doubled between January 1990 and June 1991.
- South Carolina's reported incidence of student alcohol and drug use is significantly below national trends.
- South Carolina is in the process of redirecting its health and human services dollars to target seven high-priority areas, four of which address issues directly related to the achievement of the National Education Goals: child care/child development, at-risk youth/teen pregnancy, school-based health initiatives, and the problems of emotionally disturbed children.

Based on the progress it has already made, South Carolina has every reason to believe that its contributions toward meeting the National Education Goals will be real and substantial. But the news is not all good. Findings that indicate areas in need of further attention are presented below.

**Goal 1:**

- Although it is true that the level of assessed readiness for students is substantially higher now than it was a decade ago, over a quarter of South Carolina's students still test not ready for school.

- Other indicators of readiness are related to actual student performance in the early grades. The great majority of South Carolina's students meet basic skills standards in grades 1 - 3, but the state's rates of retention, special education referrals, and students overage for grade are relatively high. One-fifth of all black males are held back in the first grade; almost half are overage by grade 3. As measures of student readiness these
indicators are flawed, however; they may be better measures of the ways in which schools react to children than the ways in which children react to school.

- Poverty is still widespread among South Carolina children under 6.
- Though parent education levels have increased, almost one-quarter of all mothers of newborns have less than 12 years of education.
- The state's infant mortality rate, though improved, remains nearly twice the rate of other industrialized nations, including Japan, Finland, and Switzerland.
- Four of every ten pregnant women do not get prenatal care until at least the fourth month of pregnancy. Almost 60% of minority women in the state report less than adequate prenatal care.
- Over one-fifth of children in South Carolina have no public or private health insurance.
- In a 1989 survey of kindergarten students in selected South Carolina school districts, over one-third had not had a medical check-up in the previous year, and slightly less than a third had never been to a dentist.
- In 1990, only a little over half of all children at two years of age had received the immunizations necessary to protect them from avoidable disease.
- South Carolina's pre-school programs are serving slightly less than half of the children 3 and 4 years old whose family incomes are less than 75% of the state's median income.

Goal 2:
- The survival rate for South Carolina's students (which compares eighth grade enrollment with the number of graduates five years later) is just short of 70%. Black males have the lowest survival rate.
- More students drop out in ninth grade than any other.

Goal 3:
- South Carolina students take the Stanford-8 in grade 4. On 7 out of the 9 areas tested, less than half of the state's students score above the national average. White students tend to score higher than black students; economically advantaged students outperform those on free and reduced-price lunch.
The Basic Skills Assessment Program is used to test students at grade 8. Over three-quarters of South Carolina students meet the BSAP standard in reading, math and writing at that grade level; but over half score below standard on science.

South Carolina does not test students in grade 12 except for those who have not yet passed the exit exam. Seventy percent of first-time test takers meet standard on all three parts of the exit exam, and eventually over 90% meet standard. But by that time many students have dropped out.

South Carolina students appear to do well on relatively simple skills, but much less well on critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Voter turnout is the only indicator currently available to measure citizenship. On that indicator, South Carolina ranks 50th in the nation.

Advanced foreign language study is not available in almost 70% of South Carolina schools. Only 1% of elementary schools offer foreign languages, and only 10% of our students who start a foreign language continue to the advanced level.

Goal 4:

South Carolina students consistently score below the national average on SAT math, though the gap is narrowing. Black students score substantially below white students but are gaining at a faster rate than white students.

On both the Stanford-8 math test and the Stanford-8 science test, our students tend to score at the national average.

Fewer than 50% of math teachers and 60% of science teachers have college majors in those fields. The lack of qualified teachers may be a significant factor in student math and science performance.

Goal 5:

Approximately one-quarter of South Carolina's population of prime working age (20 - 50) has less than four years of high school.

South Carolina lacks good measures of literacy. But none of the measures currently available indicates an average literacy level above the seventh to eighth grade range.

A little over one-quarter of South Carolina residents 18-20 years of age are enrolled in public institutions of higher education; another 8% are enrolled in private colleges. Fall 1990 enrollment is approximately 80% white, 18% black.
Goal 6:

- Most alcohol and drug use in South Carolina takes place outside schools (most frequently in homes).
- Alcohol is used significantly more widely by students than other illegal substances.
- Risky behavior associated with alcohol and drug use is widespread among South Carolina students. Among high school seniors, about one-quarter report having driven after drinking in the past 12 months; 10% report having driven after using drugs in that time period.
- In a survey of South Carolina high school students, 40% of the male students surveyed and 12% of the female students reported carrying a weapon for self-protection within the previous 30 days.
- Over one-half of South Carolina school administrators believe middle schools and high schools are becoming unsafe.