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House Education Policy Review and Reform Task Force
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Good afternoon – and thank you for this opportunity to make a few observations as this Task Force begins its important work. I congratulate Speaker Jay Lucas for organizing this effort, and I thank all of you for being a part of it. It is long overdue. I know that Chairperson Rita Allison will give all a fair hearing, and I commend her for taking on this important work.

The state of rural education in South Carolina is well-known to all of us – and our Supreme Court has issued a ruling that offers this Task Force a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reshape the education infrastructure in our low-income, rural communities. The needs have been established, and the Supreme Court has called for redress.

In my remarks, I will make five broad observations about the work of the Task Force, discuss the role of the State government, and then suggest some policy recommendations for your consideration.

Strategic Overview for Improving Low-Income, Rural Education

First, I urge you to think strategically. The Court has given the challenge and also a great opportunity to develop a meaningful, research-based education agenda. You truly have a significant, even generational, opportunity to get this right. I urge you to be strategic and carefully develop your long-term plan.

Improving rural education has been an issue before our Legislature and Executive Branch for many decades. As the Court noted in the *Abbeville* case, the Legislature has supported and passed many positive education reforms, including the EIA in 1984 – which I championed when I was Governor. But that was a good long time ago – 30 years.

Despite the many efforts, education in rural South Carolina -- especially in the 33 low-income *Abbeville* districts – still does not meet the Constitutional definition of “minimal adequacy.” Indeed, we have slipped backward as this case made its way through the Court for more than 20 years.

Now the Court has given us the opportunity to make a fresh start. I urge this Task Force to start a new conversation that can lead to broad public support for your reform agenda. Everyone – students, parents, teachers, superintendents, business, community and other school leaders – can be a winner if we all pull together and work together.

As the Supreme Court noted:

“The winner here is not the Plaintiff Districts, but fittingly, the students in these districts and throughout the state. Further, there is no loser. The substance of our finding places before the parties a new opportunity, resting solely on the Court’s precedent, but leaning toward a conversation unencumbered by blame.”

My second point is to think expansively. Bring forward recommendations that do more than just pass the constitutional test of “minimal adequacy.” We have been doing that for far too long and look where it has gotten us.

Please take this opportunity to re-think how we approach rural, low-income education. Don’t get boxed into a construct that making positive change is too expensive, too complicated, and can’t be done. You’re starting with a fresh slate.

Third, have a sense of urgency. Twenty-one years is a long time to wait for a solution. There is an old Irish saying that seems to fit here: *“Take your time, but be quick about it.”* Use your time for in-depth thinking to develop an education and budget proposal that will lead to *real* comprehensive reform.

At the same time, have a sense of urgency. Recognize that now we are catching up. Some of the students in our rural schools today are likely to be the children of the very students who were ill-served and struggling for an adequate education during the last 20-plus years.

There are 130,000 elementary and secondary students in the Plaintiff districts. We cannot lose another generation of children when we have a chance to do right by them now.

Fourth, think comprehensively. Don’t be piecemeal about what you are trying to do. That’s how we got here in the first place. We need a coherent plan that puts our students on a path to high school graduation and some career, technical or college education. If we want South Carolina 20 years from now to be prosperous and growing economically, we need *all* of our students ready to be part of our future workforce.

We have many good education programs currently underway in South Carolina, such as the New Tech schools in Summerton and Walterboro. It is vitally important that we provide the education infrastructure and support, laws and regulations, funding and technical assistance to duplicate the successes *all over the state* – and especially in the 250 Abbeville schools.

To plan comprehensively, though, perhaps a first step should be to take *inventory* of our successful education programs throughout the State. Then *analyze* them to determine *which* would work well in our low-income, rural districts. Not all of them will, but we should consider thoroughly our existing successes for *adaptation* to this reform effort.

Equally important, in my view, is strong leadership to develop partnerships to bring together *every* asset in an *entire* community that will serve to keep our young people

engaged in learning. You will be amazed at how many resources are in a community that *never* have been tapped to support education.

In the greater Cincinnati area, which also includes parts of Kentucky, the StriveTogether partnership includes more than 300 community assets. Working together, they are having a *collective impact* on students, schools and communities. So I urge you to cultivate these community-education partnerships in every Plaintiff school and district.

Fifth, I encourage the Task Force to think long term. Consider what type of state you want South Carolina to be in 2035 . . . what can be done *now* and in the near term that can help to create *for the future* a prosperous and vibrant rural South Carolina with a well-equipped workforce. Lean into the future. Smell the future.

There is a direct link between the socio-economic and education challenges facing rural South Carolina and the long-term economic and job growth of our whole state. Indeed, the Rural School and Community Trust indicates that Mississippi, Kentucky and South Carolina are the three states in the entire nation with the most “urgent” challenges when it comes to rural education. In my view, if we invest on the front end to improve education, we likely will reduce long-term costs on the back end for unemployment, health care, social services and incarceration.

Role of State Government in Improving Rural, Low-Income Schools

Now I will move to the role of the State government. In the early 1980s, we passed the EIA and, for a good while, we were making progress starting from a very low base all across the state, including in our rural schools. Basic skills scores, attendance, and the percentage of students taking chemistry and AP courses increased across the state at a rate way above the national increase – and even more so for African-American and low-income students.

Starting in about 1992, many of the costs that traditionally were paid for by the State government – such as transportation, fringe benefits, and some help for school building – began to be placed back on local school districts. And many times during the past 10-15 years, the State cut back appropriations for the Education Finance Act, which low-wealth districts with high-need students depend on for operations and instruction. Added together, these policies had a huge negative impact on low-wealth, rural districts with high-need students. Those districts depend a very great deal on predictable State funding for quality operations and instruction.

So, over the course of 20 years, our State policies left behind 25 percent of our children. It was an unstated policy and an incremental policy because our vision was too narrow. I suggest to you that no community, no business, no corporation and no State – including this great one of ours – can expect to have a vibrant future if it leaves behind *one-fourth* of its people.

The recent recession only added to our woes. In the last number of years, the State cut \$600 million dollars from what should have been in our education budget. Fortunately, our national economy is now growing and showing every sign of a strong and sustained recovery. We now have an opportunity to replace the \$600 million in education funding that was lost, plus add a little more. I believe that a significant portion of any new funds should be directed to the *Abbeville* districts, given the Supreme Court decision. They should be given priority.

The Supreme Court was very emphatic in telling the State to move in a new direction – to work with the *Abbeville* districts and come up with a sensible, practical plan that offers many more students a pathway to high school graduation and some form of technical, community college or higher education. That is your charge, and I'm confident you will succeed.

Policy Recommendations

Now let me share with you some of my policy recommendations for moving forward. From my experience here in South Carolina and nationally, there are many worthwhile and sensible elements that should go into the framework for a comprehensive rural education agenda. The Plaintiff schools and districts need the policy support, coordination and funding from the State and its various agencies. My recommendations are as follows.

Attract and Retain Effective Teachers and Leaders. You must have a laser-like focus on improving teacher quality, as well as finding and retaining effective leaders. This will require competitive compensation packages and multi-year incentives to those teachers and leaders who can engage children of poverty in learning to high standards.

Provide a Healthy Start. Place a very strong focus on the 0-to-5 age group to give them a healthy start. We know that a high percentage of a child's brain development occurs during these critical early years. I encourage you to work with child development and health experts to support and expand services for visiting nurses, good nutrition programs, and to engage parents so they truly understand the importance of helping their children learn and thrive in these first five years.

Early Childhood Education is Imperative. Provide quality early childhood education for all 4-year olds and for those 3-year-old children with developmental delays. And offer home visits and family literacy opportunities to families of younger children with multiple risk factors. The reality is that many mothers may have left school early because of teenage pregnancy. They need to finish school, as well.

Strengthen Elementary Schools. I have been a relentless proponent of the goal that all children need to be able to read, and read well, by the end of the 3rd grade. I am pleased that the State Legislature and the Governor put a strong focus on this issue last year. But achieving this goal and improving the basics in our rural schools will happen only if we provide additional support – such as, reading and math coaches, tailored professional development to help teachers to be more effective, and so forth. Students in

elementary grades also need physical education and instruction in science, social studies and the arts.

Support Middle School Reform and Rigor. To make learning environments more engaging and learning more personalized, middle school students need access to a full range of courses with modern technology and laboratories. These years present an opportunity to raise the expectations of 7th and 8th graders through pre-career, technology, occupational and college exploration opportunities. Please look at successful GEAR-UP programs to see what might have application in our rural middle and high schools.

Provide Afterschool and Summer Learning. Engaging, hands-on academic enrichment opportunities are needed in each elementary and middle school to help struggling students. Such opportunities also should leverage the inspiration of master teachers and the community spirit of mentors and tutors from youth, arts, culture, faith-based, science, community and business organizations.

Reform High Schools. We need to offer rigorous high school courses in academic, career and technical fields taught by quality instructors on and off the traditional high school campus. On-line and blended learning are needed so students can take a full sequence of courses that enable them to be occupational, career, workforce or college ready upon high school graduation. Please explore the potential of competency-based and formative, on-line assessment to give quick feedback to students and teachers so that instruction can be personalized to keep students on track.

Offer Accelerated Opportunities. While working toward a high school diploma, students should be given as many opportunities as possible to participate in accelerated programs to earn credit toward a postsecondary certificate or degree – for instance, dual enrollment; early college; New Tech; Advanced Placement; and so forth.

Arts and Music are Part of a High-Quality Education. Dedicated instruction in these subjects can inspire students to be innovative and creative, as well as disciplined. In today's society, exciting music and arts education during the school day, as well as in afterschool and summer programs, will make learning come alive for students, parents and the community.

Expand Family Outreach and Engagement. To make sure this involvement is ongoing and consistent, each school should employ a Family Engagement and Afterschool Coordinator – and a wing of the school should be transformed into a community learning center. I have been a strong proponent of designing schools as community learning centers, both for students and their parents to improve their skills and education. These types of schools are especially well-suited for our rural communities. They need to be open later and longer, at least six days a week and all through the year. I have visited many such schools, and they are in constant use for multiple purposes.

Update school facilities, labs and technology. A run-down school with outdated or non-existent science, math, reading, technology, career-tech and foreign language labs or

antiquated music and art facilities does indeed send a powerful message of low expectations.

Improve the Transportation System. Better transportation should include stable and adequate funding for reductions in regular student commuting time, so that student learning is not impeded. In addition, students should have more access to advanced career, technology, and academic courses at technical colleges and other locations, as well as access to afterschool and summer learning opportunities

Build Local Capacity for the Long Haul. The Plaintiff Districts waited 20 years for the courts to rule, and they are going to need a good 10 to 20 years more to make any plan you propose sustainable. You might ask each Plaintiff District to develop a multi-year education reform plan, working with community and business leaders and a technical college or university. The plan should integrate and update all aspects of education – early education to high school graduation, the teaching force, the school leadership team, and family and community engagement.

I know I have given you a lot of suggestions to think about. But – for more of our rural, low-income students to succeed – it will take a comprehensive education plan and infrastructure to make meaningful, long-term improvements throughout the education spectrum.

Long-Term Capacity Building and State-Community Partnerships

All of these recommendations depend on long-term capacity building in the Plaintiff districts, as well as in the State Department of Education. We need a dedicated group of senior-level experts working with the State Superintendent to help implement the agenda you develop.

And ten years from now, these experts still need to be in place to sustain the effort. Low-wealth, rural schools *cannot* do it alone. The experts can offer technical assistance and help break down regulation barriers that get in the way. They can help each local district accomplish its multi-year goals and they certainly can monitor the achievement of "minimally adequate education" opportunities in every Plaintiff school. They also can be the hub for improving the quality of data and make it useful and timely to teachers, principals and local superintendents.

As I said earlier, I believe school-community partnerships are essential for successful education in *any* area – and particularly in our low-income, rural areas. Strong leadership will be required to bring the variety of assets and programs together to work toward the common goal of better teaching and learning in the community. So I urge you to cultivate these partnerships to develop *collective impact* in every Plaintiff district and school.

Conclusion

I will conclude by summarizing my main points. With the talent assembled here by the Speaker and the strong leadership of Chairperson Rita Allison and Superintendent Molly Spearman, you have a unique opportunity to reshape education in our low-income, rural areas.

I encourage you to make a real effort to discard old assumptions and mindsets and make a fresh start. I also urge – as a first step – that you start a *new and serious* conversation that will encourage broad public support for a comprehensive reform package.

As a second step, carefully and systematically analyze existing programs in the *Abbeville* districts – *all* programs that touch education in any way – to determine the *collective impact* that could result if their leadership would bring them together in partnership.

And thoughtfully consider the policy recommendations suggested by me and others to determine what would be appropriate and positive enhancements to the *collective impact* effort. In other words, make the best of what's already there . . . and then add what will make it GREAT!

Be expansive in your thinking -- have a wide lens. And please recognize the critical link between the socio-economic challenges of our rural communities and schools and our future economic success.

Remember that this reform agenda has to stretch out 5 to 10 or even 20 years to have a sustainable impact. So you have to be *in* this and plan for the long haul.

Be creative in developing a funding formula that recognizes the unique challenges of our rural communities. Providing equity may require extra investments and the creation of targeted incentive funds and support for the Plaintiff schools.

I am quite willing to work with you to assemble and organize an advisory panel of experts, including national experts, if that is of any help to you in your work.

I firmly believe that a vibrant and growing rural sector needs to be part of South Carolina's future. I am sure you do, too. This will happen *only* if we reform and transform education in our rural, low-income school districts. I stand ready to help you in any way that I can.

Thank you.