



Accelerating the Pace

The Future of Education in the American South

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND
GUIDE FOR POLICYMAKERS**

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In 2017, the seven nonprofit organizations known together as the Columbia Group asked thousands of parents, students, teachers, principals, researchers, business leaders, state policymakers, and others for their views on the future of education in the South. The key finding: *There is much consensus on new directions for education across political affiliation, location, race, age, and gender.*

The Columbia Group consists of seven nonpartisan organizations that work to improve education in Southern states:

- A+ Education Partnership in Alabama
- Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education
- Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence in Kentucky
- Education's Next Horizon in Louisiana
- Mississippi First
- Public School Forum of North Carolina
- SCORE (State Collaborative on Reforming Education) in Tennessee

THE ISSUE

In a historic shift, nearly every student now needs some type of education beyond high school, including career and technical training, to succeed in today's economy. In summer 2017, the U.S. Department of Labor reported a record-high 6.2 million job openings. Yet many employers report they cannot find the well-prepared candidates they need in the South and across the country. The problem is students' lack of preparation for college and career training. In 2017, the ACT college admissions test examined the college readiness of "underserved learners" – those from low-income families, traditionally underserved minority groups, and students whose parents did not go to college. ACT found that *only 9 percent of these students in the 2017 high school graduating class were prepared for college-level work.*

In fall 2017, the Columbia Group organizations commissioned the first **Education Poll of the South**. Registered voters across 10 Southern states and portions of Florida and Virginia were asked for their views on improving education. The results show broad recognition among voters across the South of the serious inequities children face, and strong support for addressing these issues. Among the key poll's findings:

- **74 percent of voters polled in the South saw differences in the quality of education for students** across each of their states. Only 13 percent said the quality of education is consistent for all students across their states. Another 13 percent said they did not know.
- **64 percent of voters in the South said differences exist in how schools are funded** across their state. Only 12 percent said schools were funded evenly, but 24 percent said they did not know.
- **85 percent of voters in the South supported "improving public schools by addressing differences in the quality of education** across all schools in the state." Only 6 percent – about one in 17 voters – opposed this idea, and 7 percent did not know.

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- **84 percent supported the “state improving public schools by addressing differences in funding** across all public schools.” A majority even supported state and local tax increases for education, if necessary, although more voters preferred that states shift resources from other areas into education.
- **Voters’ top priorities for state leaders were the economy and jobs**, followed by improving K-12 education and improving higher education. These priorities rated higher on voters’ minds than infrastructure, tax cuts or the environment.
- **Voters’ top priorities for public schools were to give all children in their community an equal opportunity for a good education** no matter their circumstances, to provide more effective teachers, and to prepare all high school graduates for the real world.

These were findings among registered voters across the South, representative of each state's voters by political affiliation, gender, income levels, and racial/ethnic background. Nearly three out of four were parents, although 40 percent had children older than school age.

(The poll was conducted by Public Opinion Strategies of Alexandria, Virginia, in October 2017 of 2,200 registered voters in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia, northern Florida and southern Virginia. For complete details, visit www.acceleratingthepace.org.)

THE STRATEGY

Student achievement in the South has risen significantly overall in the past few decades. But gaps remain between more affluent and white students and their peers who are black, Hispanic or from low-income families. In a grave trend, these achievement gaps have actually widened in some states, grade levels and subjects. If schools do not help more students catch up more quickly – even as they raise expectations for all children – the region’s economic prospects will worsen. In some areas, they already have.

Now is the time for states to develop a long-term vision for improving education so that many more children can succeed in school and life. The Columbia Group organizations are pushing for states to use the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, to help schools raise achievement and improve opportunities for every child. Together, these organizations – with guidance from the people in every Southern state – issue a new challenge for improving education:

While Southern states have made great strides in many areas of education, the rapid economic and demographic changes in the region require states to make more progress — and at a faster pace. States must finally deal with the historic inequities in education that continue to hold back many parts of the region. This means all of the South’s children should have a rigorous and engaging education, and students who are behind or historically underserved should receive the extra help and support they need to narrow the gap between them and their peers.

Many other nonpartisan organizations are urging a similar agenda, including the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Southern Regional Education Board, and the Council of Chief State School Officers, whose work is cited throughout this report. This movement in education calls for greater “equity,” indicating that some students may need additional support to succeed. No child’s circumstances or location should predict their access to a good education that helps prepare them for life and work. But significant numbers of students nationally – and especially in the South – are limited for those very reasons. Fixing these deficiencies should be the central focus of all schools in every state, with collaboration and support from every state and community.

FOUR WAYS TO IMPROVE EDUCATION, CLOSE GAPS

To help each Southern child have the educational opportunities they deserve, states need to take bold new action on four main priorities:

- 1. Prepare the South’s finest to work in classrooms and schools.** Research shows that effective teachers are the most important factor in a child’s education. States need to recruit more talented young people into teaching and prepare them better to teach children and lead schools. *Preparing and supporting more high-quality teachers needs to become one of the Southern states’ top priorities.* In fact, each state in the South should aspire to become among the nation’s best places to teach. Factors to help states strengthen the teaching field include:
 - **Teacher recruitment:** States must push colleges to recruit even stronger candidates into teaching. States also must tap additional pools of talent: Major shortages of teachers of color remain a problem that must be addressed.
 - **Preparation:** States also need to continue to push college-based teacher preparation programs to meet higher standards and give all future teachers significant clinical experience in classrooms. Few colleges track their graduates’ success, but states such as Tennessee now monitor these programs’ effectiveness closely. Louisiana has required colleges to redesign their teacher-prep programs completely.
 - **Flexibility:** Schools need new models that match great teachers with highest-need students. Some schools are allowing larger or smaller groups of students to meet with teachers for specialized instruction.
 - **Pay and benefits:** Many Southern states have slipped nationally in average teacher pay. But just as important is *how* states pay teachers: Most states only reward years on the job or degrees completed (even low-quality credentials).
 - **Distribution of teachers:** Many educators flock to wealthy school systems for higher salaries. States should ensure that some of the highest quality teachers work with the students who need them the most. Advocates in Kentucky and Alabama are among those pushing for smarter approaches.
 - **Continued learning and support:** Many new and veteran teachers do not have the support they need to grow as professionals. Teachers need more time for their own learning, to analyze student work, and to confer with colleagues.
 - **Evaluations:** States need to continue to refine how teachers and principals collaborate. Teachers’ job evaluations and the in-depth conversations that ensue can help.
 - **Teacher-leadership roles:** In Alabama and other states, advocates have called for a major overhaul of teaching, including new leadership roles and pay structures for those who mentor new teachers and lead professional training.
 - **School leaders:** Teachers need excellent principals to lead their schools. But many aspiring principals earn low-quality graduate degrees. States need to require stronger preparation and continued learning for principals.

2. Give today's students the support they need. A rising number of students are from poor families and communities, and they need different types of support than earlier generations.

A stronger start. While many Southern states were pioneers in providing statewide pre-kindergarten classes for four-year-olds, much work remains to ensure all young children are prepared to start school. *Only about half of the South's three- and four-year-olds are enrolled in public preschool.* Most three-year-olds in the region do not attend preschool at all. These often are the children who start school already behind. New research also shows the importance of child development starting from birth. States need to respond with new types of support for children's early education and health. Quality child care also is limited for most low-income families.

New types of support. Today's students are very different from those in generations past. They use technology constantly, are from more diverse backgrounds, and a majority come from low-income families. The Columbia Group organizations found that today's students need:

- ▶ **More rigorous, meaningful classes.** Many students complain of low expectations from their schools and communities. Students also need more real-life experiences such as projects in their community and interaction with businesses and nonprofit organizations.
- ▶ **Greater help with family and emotional health issues.** Such support can be the difference between success and failure.
- ▶ **Better school climates, fairer discipline.** Many states are tracking students' views of their schools and are focusing more on student absences under the ESSA law, providing an opportunity for improvements. Black students in the South were *five times* as likely to be suspended as white students, one study found – tremendously out of proportion with their enrollment. Teachers and principals need training in more research-based discipline practices and how to address root issues that affect students' learning.

3. Strengthen the bridge from high school into college or work. Students should be able to finish high school truly ready for what is next. And those options should be much more accessible and seamless.

4. Match resources with students' specific needs. The school finance systems of many Southern states have not changed much since the region's first education reform laws passed in the 1990s. Nor have most states examined resources for schools in light of the need to prepare *all* high school graduates for college, career training, or the workforce. The nation's highest-poverty school districts receive an average of \$1,200 less in state and local funding per student than the wealthiest districts. This means students who need the *most* help to succeed in school often get the *least* support. States should examine the resources required for schools to meet higher goals and do everything possible to provide them, while requiring strong results.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

On improving education:

- In which ways do residents of your state and community want their schools to improve? What do your local teachers, principals, parents and students say?
- What differences exist in the educational opportunities of students in your community and across the state? What steps can you actively take to address these gaps?

On making Southern states the best places to teach:

- How are colleges in your state working to improve teacher preparation? Do you know how each college's graduates are faring as teachers – and do they stay in the profession?
- How do teacher salaries differ across your state and when compared with those in neighboring states and the nation? What can be done to improve teacher salaries, and how can your state match teachers with the students who need them most?
- How can your state and local schools improve mentoring, support and continued training for classroom teachers?
- How well do colleges and other programs in your state prepare school principals for their important jobs? How can these programs improve?

On providing today's students with the support they need:

- Is every child in your community met with high expectations in academics and personal growth? What steps are missing, and how can you show leadership?
- Can you help schools connect with local agencies and other partners to address families' challenges, opioid addiction, and students' emotional health?
- What can be done to help students from low-income families and other disadvantaged groups get the extra help and support they may need to succeed in school and beyond?

On helping more students acquire career training and prepare for college:

- How can the state work to build a more direct bridge from high school into career training or college for every student? What obstacles hold some students and schools back, and how can they be addressed?

On ensuring school funding is adequate and targeted:

- Does your school funding system provide the resources all schools need?
- When was the funding system last updated?
- What steps can you take to provide more "equity" in school funding to target resources for the purposes and geographic areas where they are needed the most?

For the complete report and poll results, visit www.acceleratingthepace.org.