

Accelerating the Pace

The Future of Education in the American South



A report from the Columbia Group members:

- **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**

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**A 2018 report from the Columbia Group member organizations,
with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**

The Columbia Group is an informal network of state-based organizations in the Southeast that work to improve education. The group has convened regularly for more than 25 years to exchange ideas, identify regional trends, formulate strategies, and collaborate on regional projects. Each member of the Columbia Group works in different contexts, and has different histories and priorities. These organizations are, however, united in their dedication to - and success in - communicating the central role that better education plays in the future of their states and in recommending and implementing ways to ensure that education in these states is in fact better. The efforts of the member organizations have led to notable successes and have had tangible impacts on education policy and practice within their respective states.

Over a quarter of a century, the Columbia Group has benefited from partnerships with a range of regional and national organizations. Current partners with the Columbia Group include the Policy Innovators in Education (PIE) Network, the Southern Education Foundation (SEF), and the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB).

The principal author of *Accelerating the Pace: The Future of Education in the American South* is Alan Richard, a veteran education journalist and advocate, formerly of *Education Week*, SREB and other organizations, and a native of South Carolina.

For a digital copy of this report and additional materials, visit www.acceleratingthepace.org

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Accelerating the Pace

The Future of Education in the American South

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
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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.

- **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.



The South has come a long way in education, but needs to make more progress – *at a faster pace.*

Education in the American South has improved dramatically in recent decades. Once a region known for widespread illiteracy, poverty and segregation, many parts of the region today are thriving economically. Even so, many Southerners feel left behind. Their children do not have the same educational opportunities as other children in the same state – and sometimes the same county or school district. The impact can last for children's entire lives: limiting job possibilities, affecting health care and crime rates, and allowing entire communities to languish.

With rapid changes in the South's demographics and population, and drastically different workforce demands as technology evolves at blinding speeds, the time has come for a new commitment from the leaders of our states. The South – and indeed, the United States as a whole – can no longer afford to tolerate an education system that offers great opportunity for some and falls terribly short for others. Rising levels of poverty and changes in the economy demand a new approach.

Seven nonprofit organizations that work to improve education in their respective states, known collectively as the Columbia Group (so named because these organizations first met in Columbia, South Carolina), spent nearly a year asking teachers and principals, business leaders, state policymakers, parents, students, and others for their views on improving education in the South. These Southerners identified which challenges in education matter most to them and their communities – and how states might better address these issues.

These many conversations – and the first-ever **Education Poll of the South** – show a remarkable consensus among Southerners for new priorities in education, regardless of political affiliation, location, race, age or gender.

Members of the Columbia Group, with guidance from the people of our states, make this new call for improving education in the South:

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.

States need to take bold new action on these four main priorities:

- ▶ **Prepare the South's finest to work in classrooms and schools.** The South can become the nation's best place to teach. Students need teachers who are better prepared, supported, and are continually learning so that they can teach every child well.
- ▶ **Give today's students the support they need.** A growing number of students are from poor families and communities. They need different types of support than earlier generations.
- ▶ **Strengthen the bridge from high school into college or work.** All students should be able to finish high school truly ready for their next step – and those options should be easily accessible and seamless.
- ▶ **Match resources with students' specific needs.** All children deserve an excellent education. States need to help raise expectations for every child, and provide underserved students with the help they need to catch up faster.

The Columbia Group member organizations come from seven Southern states, but this is a report for all of the South, and many of the issues presented here apply to all 50 states. Each state is different and requires its own solutions, but states should not work in isolation. They can learn from each other, look for best practices across state lines, and share their knowledge and experience. Doing so will help more of the region's people to have the educational opportunities they deserve. The Columbia Group consists of these organizations:

- **A+ Education Partnership in Alabama**
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In this report, the Columbia Group organizations explore how the South has improved schools over the years – and show that these improvements have not reached every child and community. Throughout the report, case studies highlight new and innovative programs in the South that are bringing measurable change to some communities and may be examples for other states and school districts to follow.

The Columbia Group member organizations are not alone in calling for this new commitment to improve education. Many other organizations spanning different political and ideological perspectives are advancing these solutions in their own ways:

- The **National Conference of State Legislatures**, or NCSL, sent a bipartisan study group of state legislators from across the nation to visit several countries outpacing the United States on a variety of education measures. Its findings are in the 2016 report *No Time to Lose: How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State*, cited throughout this report.
- The **Southern Regional Education Board**, or SREB, continues to assist states by convening bipartisan commissions of state leaders to make policy recommendations on early childhood education, teacher preparation, college affordability, and more. Since the 1950s, SREB has set regional goals for education and consulted with its 16 member states to improve education at all levels. SREB also provides professional development for thousands of educators annually.
- The **Council of Chief State School Officers**, or CCSSO, the nonpartisan association for state superintendents of education, joined with the Aspen Institute Education & Society Program to publish *Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Education Chiefs* in 2017. The report calls on state leaders to set many specific new goals to meet the needs of underserved students.
- The nonprofit **Southern Education Foundation** and **Policy Innovators in Education (PIE) Network** also were partners in this work.



How it happened: *A short history of education reform in the modern South*

HIGHER STANDARDS, NEW EXPECTATIONS

Thirty-five years ago, when the nation's economic prospects were under threat by low levels of education, the South began to set the pace nationally for pursuing higher goals for students. Responding to the landmark *A Nation at Risk* report, published in 1983 by President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education, Southern states took action. The current generation faces a similar challenge that will impact the nation's future.

"I doubt that there is another region in the nation that is pursuing quality improvement in education as is the South," Mark Musick of the Southern Regional Education Board told *The New York Times* in March 1983. He was speaking for a slate of Southern governors who led the push for improving education, including Governor Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, a Republican who later became the U.S. education secretary and a U.S. senator; and South Carolina Governor Richard W. "Dick" Riley, a Democrat who served eight years as the U.S. education secretary. Others included North Carolina governors Jim Hunt and Jim Martin, and Mississippi Governor William Winter, who in 1983 led the state to raise teacher salaries by 10 percent, established kindergarten statewide, and championed the state's first law requiring children to attend school.

How much progress?

The South has seen major improvements in education in the past few decades, but much work remains.

- ▶ From 1970 to 1980, the Southern states more than doubled their investment in K-12 schools, from just \$602 per student to \$1,546. This still fell well short of the national level of spending on education, which was \$2,214 in 1980, according to the Southern Growth Policies Board. Today, the national average is \$11,400, although most Southern states invest far less per student.
- ▶ In 1980, only 59.2 percent of adults ages 25 and older in the South had finished high school – a substantial improvement from a decade earlier. The national rate in 1980 was 68.6 percent. The 2016 national rate was 83 percent, and most Southern states are even higher or nearly that high, although most students now need more than a high school diploma to succeed in the workforce.



No region is better positioned than the South to do this, because of the strong connections between education and economic development.”

- J.B. Buxton, Southern Regional Education Board adviser and former education policy adviser to the governor of North Carolina

States such as Kentucky and North Carolina in the 1990s were among the first to set state academic standards, to measure students' progress, and to require that schools improve. This movement helped to ensure that children in all communities were expected to achieve at the same levels as everyone else. Higher standards have helped states to narrow and even close the gaps between what children are expected to learn in other states compared to those in the South.

In more recent years, most Southern states have committed to even higher academic standards, setting new expectations for all students. Standards are simply a guide for what students are expected to know

and be able to do in each grade and academic subject, and they should be updated every few years. Standards help guarantee that no one who moves into the region experiences a drop-off in their child's education – and that children in the South take a backseat to no one.

All seven Columbia Group organizations and many partners across the South are pushing for states to use the new federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, to raise achievement among every student group – by wealth, racial background, for students with disabilities, and students learning English. Under the ESSA law, states were required to file detailed plans with the U.S. Department of Education that show how they will monitor achievement for such student groups and help improve the lowest-performing schools.

MEASURING PROGRESS

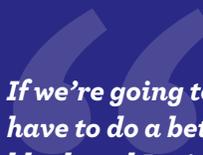
The Southern states have shown a commitment to measure students' progress, but schools need better types of tests to help teachers understand more quickly what students know and can do and where they need help. Test scores provide an important baseline for monitoring schools' overall performance and helping meet the needs of students of color, students with disabilities, and those from low-income homes. Tests should measure each student's growth toward meeting their state's academic standards. And test scores should play a partial role in how teachers' performance is evaluated.

Every state needs a long-term vision for improving education to help many more children succeed in school and life. “Most state education systems are falling dangerously behind the world in a number of international comparisons... leaving the United States overwhelmingly underprepared to succeed in the 21st century economy,” NCSL's study commission warned. “Pockets of improvement in a few districts or states are not enough to retain our country's global competitiveness.”



We tolerate inequalities. We say we want to have equality in the system. We underfund the kids who need the most... We're not being radical enough about what we need to do to improve educational opportunities for our kids.”

- Gene Wilhoit, University of Kentucky, former state education commissioner of Arkansas and Kentucky, former executive director of CCSSO



If we're going to make a difference in this country's workforce and moral stature in the world, we have to do a better [job] of supporting learning for all kids... to move the needle for low-income, black and Latino students.”

- John Denning, senior program officer, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and longtime education policy expert in North Carolina

Major gaps remain: *Addressing differences in student achievement*

Southern states can help all students achieve at higher levels and those who are behind to catch up faster — because these states have made similar strides in the past.

Student achievement in the South has risen significantly overall in the past few decades. And achievement has risen across the Southern states for most student groups – measured by race, gender, family income, location – in the last 15 years. But gaps between more affluent and white students, and their peers who are black, Hispanic and from low-income families, are closing too slowly. **In a grave trend, these “achievement gaps” actually have widened in some states, grade levels and academic subjects.** (See pages 8-9.)

Many schools have tried to address these achievement gaps over the years, and some have made substantial progress. But on the whole, states are not helping schools close these gaps quickly enough. If schools do not help more students catch up more quickly – even as states raise expectations for all children – the region’s economic prospects will worsen. In some parts of the region, they have already. This is not what most state leaders and families want for the future of the South.

Even so, some Southern states are national leaders in improving results in reading, math and other subjects. In 2015, Tennessee ranked among the top half of states in 4th grade math on the Nation’s Report Card for the first time since the test began more than 40 years ago. The state was ranked 25th in the nation in 4th grade math scores, up from 46th four years earlier. Tennessee’s students also ranked among the top half in the nation in 4th and 8th grade science scores.

But some gaps have grown – even in a fast-improving state such as Tennessee – showing the larger challenge for many states. From 2007 to 2015, gaps widened slightly between that state’s students from low-income families and their better-off peers in 4th and 8th grade math and reading. Most economically disadvantaged students’ scores rose over those years, but not as fast as their peers from more affluent families. Still, the state’s goal is to rank among the top half of states in all subjects and grades by 2020 as measured on the Nation’s Report Card, also known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (or NAEP). Just like in any Southern state, reaching this goal will not be possible without faster improvement among all groups of students.

The ESSA law delegates more power to the states but requires them to continue measuring student achievement overall and for specific groups of students. The law, which replaced the No Child Left Behind Act, also requires states to submit plans for how they will raise achievement for all students and provide intensive help for struggling schools.

How states implement the new law and use federal funding will be crucial to addressing the historical inequities in education that continue to plague the South and much of the country. Under ESSA, Tennessee is providing districts with more autonomy to improve the lowest performing schools before state intervention through the Achievement School District. The state also is considering new partnership zones in which it will work with local districts on school improvement. In Louisiana, the state plans to intervene in roughly 240 schools. The Columbia Group organizations will monitor their respective states' school improvement work.

INCREASING EDUCATIONAL 'EQUITY'

The Columbia Group organizations are calling for greater "equity" in the education system. What does this mean? CCSSO defines it this way:

“Some students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds are starting with less than their peers and therefore require additional resources to achieve the same level of success. Educational equity means that every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, despite race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background, or family income.”

In an equitable education system, “the circumstances children are born into do not predict their access to the resources and educational rigor necessary for success,” CCSSO added. “All students have the knowledge and skills they will need to pursue the college or career path of their choice, and will have help in doing so.”

Some achievement gaps have worsened

Southern states have made major overall gains in student achievement over time. But many black and Hispanic students and students from low-income families are not making enough progress to catch up with their higher-income and white classmates. In many states, gaps in achievement actually *widened* for some students between 2005 and 2015 in some grades and subjects. (For more detail, see Appendix, Page 35.) A look at these gaps in each state:

ALABAMA

- Gaps *widened* for black 4th graders in math and for Hispanic students in 4th grade reading and math and 8th grade reading.
- Gaps also *widened* for students from low-income families in 4th grade reading and math and 8th grade math.

ARKANSAS

- Gaps *narrowed* for students from low-income families in 4th grade reading and 8th grade reading and math – but *widened* in 4th grade math.
- Gaps *narrowed* for black and Hispanic students in 8th grade math, and for black and Hispanic students in 4th grade reading.

FLORIDA

- Gaps *narrowed* for students from low-income families in 4th grade reading and 8th grade reading and math – but *widened* in 4th grade math.
- Gaps *widened* or stayed the same for black and Hispanic students in 4th grade reading and math and 8th grade reading.
- Gaps *narrowed* for black and Hispanic students in 8th grade math.

GEORGIA

- Gaps *narrowed* substantially for 4th and 8th grade students from low-income families in both reading and math.
- Gaps *narrowed* for black and Hispanic students in 4th grade math.
- In 4th grade reading, gaps *widened* for black students and stayed the same for Hispanic students. Gaps *widened* for black and Hispanic students in 8th grade reading.
- In 8th grade math, gaps stayed the same for Hispanic students and *widened* for black students.

KENTUCKY

- Gaps for black students *widened* in 4th and 8th grade reading and math.
- Gaps *narrowed* for students from low-income families in 4th grade math and 8th grade reading and math – but *widened* in 4th grade reading.

LOUISIANA

- Gaps *narrowed* for black students in 4th and 8th grade reading and math – and for students from low-income families in 4th and 8th grade math and in 8th grade reading.
- Gaps *widened* for students from low-income families in 4th grade reading.

MISSISSIPPI

- Gaps *widened* for students from low-income families in 4th and 8th grade reading and math.
- Gaps for black students *widened* in 4th grade math and 8th grade reading and math.

NORTH CAROLINA

- Gaps *widened* for students from low-income families in 4th and 8th grade reading and math.
- The gap for black students *narrowed* in 8th grade math, but *widened* in 4th grade reading and math and 8th grade reading.
- Gaps for Hispanic students *widened* in 4th and 8th grade reading, stayed the same in 4th grade math, and *narrowed* in 8th grade math.

SOUTH CAROLINA

- The gap for students from low-income families *narrowed* in 4th grade math. But gaps *widened* for these students in 4th grade reading and 8th grade reading and math.
- Gaps for black students *narrowed* in 4th grade math, but *widened* in 4th grade reading and 8th grade reading and math.
- Gaps for Hispanic students *narrowed* in 4th and 8th grade math and *widened* in 4th grade reading.

TENNESSEE

- Gaps *widened* for students from low-income families in 4th and 8th grade reading and math.
- Gaps *widened* for black students in 4th and 8th grade reading and math.
- Gaps *narrowed* for Hispanic students in 4th grade reading, but *widened* in 4th grade math. Data were not available for Hispanic 8th graders.

VIRGINIA

- Gaps for students from low-income families *narrowed* slightly in 4th grade math, but *widened* in 4th grade reading and 8th grade reading and math.
- The gaps for black students *narrowed* in 4th grade math and 8th grade reading, but *widened* in 4th grade reading. The gap in 8th grade math stayed the same.

WEST VIRGINIA

- The gap in 8th grade reading *narrowed* for students from low-income families.
- Gaps *widened* in 4th and 8th grade math for students from low-income families. The 4th grade reading gap stayed the same.
- Gaps for black students *narrowed* in 4th and 8th grade reading, but *widened* in 4th and 8th grade math. Data for Hispanic students were not available.

Source: The Nation's Report Card, or NAEP – the National Assessment of Educational Progress, from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, 2016.

Results from the Education Poll of the South

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 of the serious inequities children face in education among all voters across the South – and strong support for addressing these issues. Among the key findings:

- ▶ **74 percent of voters in the South saw differences in their states in how well students are educated**, saying their states do not adequately educate all students. Only 13 percent said all schools in their states do an adequate job. Another 13 percent did not know.
- ▶ **64 percent of voters saw differences in how schools are funded** across their states. Only 12 percent said schools are funded evenly, but 24 percent did not know.
- ▶ **85 percent of voters 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.
- ▶ **84 percent supported their “state improving public schools by addressing differences in funding across all public schools.”** Only 8 percent opposed the idea, and 7 percent did not know.
- ▶ **Voters also overwhelmingly support adjusting the school funding systems in their states to ensure greater fairness among poor and wealthier communities:** 83 percent supported the idea, and half of voters strongly supported the idea. 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 closely by improving K-12 education and improving higher education.** These priorities rated higher on voters’ minds than infrastructure, tax cuts or the environment. The economy and education also were rated highest by every key demographic group, gender, political affiliation and level of education – across every state.
- ▶ **Voters said their top priorities for public schools were to help all children in their community have an equal opportunity for a good education no matter their circumstances**, for schools to have more effective teachers, and to prepare all high school graduates for the real world.

These were findings among voters registered across the South, representative of each state’s voters by political affiliation, gender, income levels, and racial/ethnic background. Nearly three 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.)

Key Findings from The Education Poll of the South

Would you support or oppose your state improving public schools by addressing differences in the quality of education across all schools in the state?

85% Support
6% Oppose
9% Don't know

How would you rate the public schools in your state?

18% Getting better
34% Getting worse
39% Staying about the same

Are all public schools in your state funded at an even level or do differences exist between how schools are funded?

64% Differences exist in funding
12% All schools funded at even level
24% Don't know

Would you support your state adjusting the school funding system to ensure greater fairness among poor and wealthier communities?

84% Support
9% Oppose
8% Don't know

Describe yourself politically on most issues.

40% Conservative
31% Moderate
23% Liberal
6% Something else/undecided

Do public schools in your state do an adequate job of educating all students in schools across the state, or do differences exist in how well students are educated?

74% Differences exist
13% All schools do an adequate job
13% Don't know

The Columbia Group organizations also commissioned focus groups of registered voters to discuss education issues and seek their views on how to improve education. The focus groups were held in summer and fall of 2017 in small-town London, Kentucky and in suburban Atlanta. The Columbia Group also observed two similar focus groups of Tennessee voters conducted by SCORE. Voters in these groups often voiced similar views to those collected in the **Education Poll of the South**.

COMMENTS FROM DISCUSSION ON EDUCATION IN SUBURBAN ATLANTA:

“Education is key to making children in this state succeed in the future.”

“The worst schools get worse . . . and that gap just constantly keeps increasing [between schools].”

“When I came to high school here [from Maryland], it seemed like it got easier . . . It didn’t challenge me that much.”

“I think a lot of people care a heck of a lot about making the schools better.”

“It all starts with the pay for teachers . . . You kind of get what you pay for.”

COMMENTS FROM DISCUSSION ON EDUCATION IN LONDON, KENTUCKY:

“I think they should stop cutting funding in education . . . There are areas in Kentucky [where] the only meal they get is when they go to school.”

“We need more vocational classes in school. We don’t have skilled workers to build houses . . . We don’t have people who just know how to do things.”

“Kids are getting smarter but they don’t know how to apply it.”

“I think low expectations is a really big problem here.”

“The teachers don’t make \$35,000 or \$40,000 a year and [are] spending thousands [of their own money] on the classroom.”

“ . . . There’s more poverty in other areas of the county and the kids don’t get the same opportunity.”

“For a lot of these smaller districts, they’re spending all the money they have . . . to keep the lights on.”

“Typically [in] your suburban areas, there’s more money there than in the big city.”



The new challenge – *preparing ALL students for education after high school*

For the first time, the economy demands that virtually every American has some type of education beyond high school. This is a historic shift that demands more from states and their education systems.

The U.S. Department of Labor reported 6.2 million job openings – a record high – in the summer of 2017. Schools and hospitals needed the most employees, but hundreds of thousands of jobs remained open in manufacturing, construction and other fields. Yet many employers report they cannot find the well-trained workers they need across the country and in the South. This issue poses a serious economic challenge for the United States.

While every student may not need to attend college, the South still suffers from a major shortage of adults with two- and four-year degrees and with career certifications. In Alabama, for example, only one in three working-age adults had an associate degree or higher in 2014 – including only 37 percent of white adults and 25 percent of black adults. Most Southern states are still well below national averages in such rates of education attainment. Nationally, about 43 percent of working-age adults have an associate degree or higher.

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” for the first time. These students included those from low-income families, those in traditionally underserved minority groups, and those whose parents did not go to college. **ACT found that only 9 percent of these students in the high school senior class of 2017 were prepared for college-level work.** Only 54 percent of all other students were fully prepared for college work. “We knew it was bad, but we didn’t know it was this bad,” ACT’s chief executive told *The Washington Post*. Many college freshmen in the South must take remedial math and English courses, and most of those students do not complete two- or four-year degrees, according to SREB.

Some states have set ambitious goals for helping more people attend and finish college and career training. For example, Tennessee has set a goal of having 55 percent of adults hold a postsecondary credential of some type by 2025. By then, a majority of jobs will require that level of training. Currently, only about 39 percent of Tennesseans have some type of postsecondary credential, according to SCORE. In 2017, Tennessee became the first state to provide free community college and technical school tuition for all state residents, through the Tennessee Promise program. Students in any age group can use the scholarships for career training, and they can begin academic courses at community colleges and then transfer to four-year universities.

New state investments in career and technical education programs could help many communities. **States also should consider requiring that high schools give every student an opportunity to earn either an associate degree or career certification while in high school – or at least to work toward such a credential.** Many high schools will need to work with community and technical colleges, employers, and four-year universities to make this happen. Some of the best public school systems now have career and technical centers or high schools that provide challenging courses in high-demand career fields. Students bound for four-year universities also take these courses. Students can use the latest technology to pursue jobs and training in high-tech manufacturing, green energy, graphic design, engineering, and other advanced fields. But many schools and communities across the region do not have such high-quality programs.

Other countries are doing better, according to the NCSL study group that visited Singapore, Switzerland and Canada. In those nations, “career and technical education (CTE) is not perceived as a route for students lacking strong academic skills, but as another approach to education, skills development and good jobs,” the group’s report said. In the United States, “very few [schools] have an entire CTE system that provides the kind and quality of opportunities available to students” in those nations, the report said. (See sidebar on Georgia business leaders’ views, page 15.)

A lack of high-quality career-oriented courses has led to shortages of qualified workers in many states and career fields. The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education’s 2017 *EdQuest Georgia* blueprint for education in the state urged policymakers to expand the state’s existing career pathways for high school students.

Education’s Next Horizon, an organization in Louisiana, in 2017 found a strong link between the state’s lack of qualified workers and the poor transitions available to students from middle and high school into career training. In response to this issue, Louisiana has begun the Jump Start program, which links high school with the state’s technical college system to ensure more students earn career certifications. The first Louisiana cohort graduates in 2018.

Other states also are taking action. Georgia’s Move On When Ready program began to provide dual-enrollment courses statewide so that high school students can start taking college-level classes. North Carolina helped to start a national movement of “early colleges,” which allows high school students to take college courses while in high school – even housing some high school programs on college campuses.



Business people now realize we’re just not getting anywhere we want to go as a state if we don’t increase investment [in education].”

– Brigitte Blom Ramsey, Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

In a 2017 report, SREB's Computer Science Commission led by Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson called for states to make career paths in that lucrative field much more accessible for students in the South. Arkansas now requires all high schools to offer computer science and technology courses, leading to the enrollment of thousands more students in such courses in the state – and a 600 percent increase in the rate of African-American girls taking coding courses. SREB also has helped Kentucky build a new statewide nursing career pathway that will enroll more high school students in dual-enrollment courses and lead to college degrees in that high-need field.

Business leaders: Strengthen links between schools, career training

The Columbia Group organizations interviewed business leaders and employers in the South on how to improve education in the region and across the nation.

Their message was clear: Help more children succeed, starting at a young age. Build stronger transitions from high school into college and work. Support students better. And address inequities in resources and opportunity.

“We have good support for education among state leaders and the business side (in the South), but we don't have a vision for where we want to go with education,” said Tim Cairl, the director of education policy for the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. He suggested that Georgia adjust its school-funding system to ensure high-poverty students and communities are served well.

“Where do we want to be in the next five to 10 years?” Cairl asked during a Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education roundtable in Atlanta.

“Seventy percent of the population is never going to get a college degree,” said Mike Kenig, the vice chairman of Holder Construction Co. States need to do more to support that 70 percent, including more support for career and technical education programs, the Atlanta-area businessman added.

David W. Scheible, the former chairman and CEO of Graphic Packaging Holding Inc., a company based in Atlanta that employed 14,000 people globally, said that education in Georgia seems divided between less affluent rural areas and more affluent greater Atlanta. “We really need to have two separate solutions,” he said. Some urban

or suburban areas have more resources for early childhood programs and for educating English learners, while many rural families struggle with healthcare, transportation issues, and find it harder to access strong early childhood programs, he added.

Scheible echoed Kenig's concerns about career and technical education opportunities: “There are 200,000 jobs in metro Atlanta that can't be filled. There is a gap between what companies need and what we deliver through the education system.”

“Our kids fall behind at an early age,” said Kevin Greiner, the president and CEO of Gas South in Atlanta and a former chairman of the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education board. “Early education doesn't cover all kids and doesn't start early enough.”

Amy Hutchins, Georgia Power's education and workforce development manager, said most schools do the best they can but may need help in supporting students living in poverty, in dealing with high levels of turnover of good teachers and principals, and in addressing chronic student absences. She and other business leaders also cited the need to provide students with behavioral and mental health support.

Ann Cramer, a senior consultant with Coxe Curry & Associates and a former IBM executive, acknowledged that Georgia has some excellent schools but said inequities impact the entire state. “We are making improvements but they are incremental,” she said. “What are we willing to invest and how do we build that public will?”



Giving more children a stronger start – *from birth*

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. Some children in the South still do not have access to high-quality preschool.

In fact, most three-year-olds in the region do not attend preschool at all. New research shows the importance of child development at an even earlier age – from birth to age three. More families also need better access to high-quality child care.

The need for higher-quality preschool. *Only about half of the South's three- and four-year-olds are enrolled in public preschool. In some states, the numbers of children in preschool are even lower – including some states where enrollments are extremely low. While some families prefer private or religious preschools, too many children have no access to preschool at all. These can be the same children who arrive for school already behind in early literacy, math and social skills.*

SREB has found that research clearly shows preschool does help prepare children for school, but only when programs are of very high quality. The best programs include home visiting, in which teachers can work directly with parents on children's early skills and developmental issues, according to researcher Katharine Stevens of the American Enterprise Institute's extensive reviews of pre-K research. For example, the nonprofit Nurse-Family Partnership supplies nurses who visit the homes of low-income, first-time mothers across the nation. South Carolina is now expanding the program across most of its state through a public-private partnership. The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education recommends that "our state expand the Great Start Georgia systems now active in 12 counties, providing home visits by nurses and mentors for visiting with parents," said Steve Dolinger, president of the organization.

Alabama is a national pacesetter for the expansion of state-funded, high-quality pre-K classes. Enrollment of 4-year-olds in the state's pre-K program increased from just 6 percent in 2011 to 28 percent in 2017, according to the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. Alabama is the only Southern state that meets all 10 of the National Institute for Early Education Research's newest quality ratings. These ratings require every classroom to have a lead teacher who holds a bachelor's degree and significant training in early childhood education.

Child care still a major challenge. Efforts to improve child care quality, affordability, and safety are underway in many states and communities in the South. These involve better training and pay for child care workers, and new state child-care tax credits and subsidies that allow more parents to enter the workforce. One-third of Georgia's zip codes are considered "child care deserts" where the need for child care is "much higher" than what is available, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education has found. The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning found in 2016 that the state's child care system adds about \$2.2 billion in benefits to the state economy each year by allowing more adults to work. But Georgia is among the states where only a fraction of low-income families are served by child care centers rated high in quality. Federal funds under the ESSA law can be used to address early childhood program quality, availability, and training. The nonpartisan Alliance for Early Success has developed a birth-through-age-eight policy framework for states that includes tax credits, children's health insurance, prenatal care, and more.

Southern states still rank low on children's overall well-being. Except for Virginia, in 2017 no state in the South ranked higher than 33rd nationally in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's annual *KIDS COUNT* report, which covers many indicators of children's health, education, and family life. Some states are improving, but others in the region have dropped further down the list in recent years. *KIDS COUNT* shows that most Southern states still lag the rest of the nation in infant birth weight, parents who have secure employment, and the rate of teens who are either in school or working.

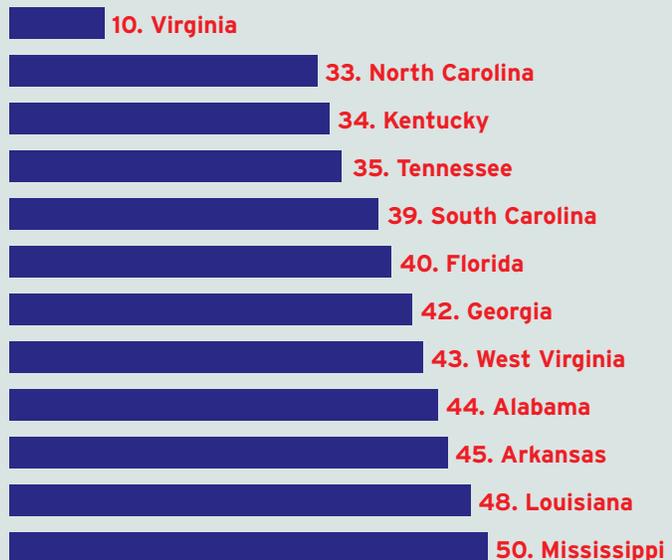
Percentages of four-year-olds in state pre-K in 2016:

Florida	76%
West Virginia	66%
Georgia	60%
South Carolina	40%
Arkansas	32%
Louisiana	32%
Kentucky	26%
Tennessee	22%
North Carolina	22%
Alabama	19%
Virginia	18%
Mississippi	4%

NOTE: Louisiana's rates do not reflect the state's new, larger pre-K program.
SOURCE: National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), State of Preschool Yearbook, 2016.

How states stack up in children's health, education

The annual *KIDS COUNT* Data Book examines and ranks children's well-being in all 50 states using a variety of measures of family and child health, economic circumstances, and education. No Southern state except Virginia ranked higher than 33rd nationally in 2017.



SOURCE: Annie E. Casey Foundation's annual *KIDS COUNT* report, 2017.

How to improve. Some states are making major improvements in providing early childhood services. Louisiana’s combined set of public pre-K programs for four-year-olds has seen a huge expansion and now enrolls nearly nine in 10 at-risk children in the state – among the highest rates in the South. Now streamlined under one state agency, Louisiana’s program also has some of the nation’s highest quality standards, and the state is developing a new report card system on child care center quality. “This is a tremendous step forward for our state,” said John Warner Smith of Education’s Next Horizon in Louisiana. But no state funds in Louisiana are directed toward early care and education for children under age four, and major cuts to child-care subsidies in recent years mean that 25,000 fewer children are being served, indicative of the problem across the region.

CCSSO has called enhanced early learning “a critical strategy for improving the quality of K-12 education, with a high return on investment.” It recommended that states make additional pre-K seats available for children zoned for low-performing elementary schools and for English-language learners, raise salaries and credential requirements for early childhood teachers, and halt expulsions and suspensions of three- and four-year-olds in favor of research-based discipline practices.

Similarly, SREB’s bipartisan Early Childhood Commission called for states to make high-quality early childhood programs available to more children – especially three- and four-year-olds from low-income families – and to ensure stronger results. The commission recommended four ways states can improve early childhood education programs:

- **Raise program quality.** Incentivize training for schools and private child care centers. Create program standards from birth to third grade, and improve ratings systems to help more families find high-quality child care. For example, Kentucky now requires all early learning programs to join its All STARS quality rating and improvement system.
- **Build a higher quality early childhood workforce.** Ensure teachers have specialized, continual training. North Carolina now requires teachers to have a bachelor’s degree and a specialized birth-through-pre-K license.
- **Expand access.** Serve as many new children as possible (especially those in disadvantaged families) through high-quality programs.
- **Streamline oversight.** Many programs are run by an array of state agencies with separate budgets, making improvements and coordination harder.



Making the South the nation's best place to teach

Research shows that effective teachers are the most important factor in a child's education. Therefore, preparing and supporting more high-quality teachers needs to become one of the South's top priorities.

To find teachers in some parts of the South, schools are forced to depend on emergency-placement programs, long-term substitutes, or teachers from other countries. States must work harder to provide a larger supply of outstanding educators to teach the region's children.

In fact, each state in the South should aspire to become among *the nation's best places to teach*. Better pay and benefits are important, but there is plenty more to do. **For teaching to become a top professional career choice in the South – like in many countries that currently outpace the United States in overall achievement – states need to focus much more attention and resources on this profession.**

NCSL's bipartisan study group found that university-based programs that prepare American teachers for the classroom typically have lower entrance and exit standards than programs in higher performing nations. The panel also found that American colleges graduate too many elementary school teachers but struggle to produce teachers in high-demand subjects.

States are required under the ESSA law to ensure that "low-income students and students of color will no longer be taught disproportionately by ineffective, inexperienced, or out-of-field teachers," CCSSO reports. Unfortunately, most Southern states have taken little action.

To help guide states toward new solutions, the Columbia Group organizations identified nine key factors that states can use to strengthen the teaching profession:

- 1. Teacher Recruitment:** To make teaching a top career choice for more of the region's most talented and high-achieving young people, colleges of education need to recruit prospective teachers much more widely, especially in high-need fields, starting in high school, as with Tennessee's Teach Today, Change Tomorrow program. A number of creative programs at universities are working to recruit better candidates into teaching, but this should be the case for every college. (See sidebar on UAB Teach, Page 20.)

A+ Education Partnership in Alabama researched the challenge for states in recruiting and keeping “millennials” in the profession. It found that many young professionals do not see themselves in the same career for a lifetime, raising questions for states and for universities that prepare educators.

States also must increase efforts to build a *more diverse teaching workforce*. Failing to do so eliminates an entire pool of potential talent from the profession: Only one in 20 teachers in Kentucky is a person of color, compared with more than one in five students in the state, the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence found. This imbalance hurts student achievement. A 2017 study found that black students in the United States who had at least one black teacher in 12 years of school were much more likely to finish high school and attend college than their peers without such educators. Many schools in Kentucky, and likely in other states, have no teachers of color at all.

Growing more science, technology, engineering, math teachers

The South has not yet solved teacher shortages in some geographic areas and academic subjects, especially in the STEM fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

A program in Alabama and many other states is helping to change that and may be a model for other states and colleges. UAB Teach at the University of Alabama at Birmingham is beginning to graduate new classes of high-caliber STEM teachers each year.

UAB Teach is an affiliate of the UTeach Institute, an innovative teacher-preparation program started in 1997 at the University of Texas at Austin that helps students simultaneously earn bachelor’s degrees in STEM fields and their teaching certification, with no additional time or cost. It is like two degrees in one. UTeach works with 44 universities, including schools in Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana (where it is called Geaux Teach), and Tennessee.

The 2018 UAB Teach graduating class was set to produce four new STEM teachers, 16 the following year, and 30 to 50 a year thereafter.

“We’re going to end the science and math teacher shortage in central Alabama – and make a dent in the shortage statewide,” said Lee Meadows, a professor and co-director of UAB Teach.

UAB Teach actively recruits high school students who may be interested in STEM fields and helps them see teaching as

a viable career. The program is part of campus orientation, so any STEM-related majors at UAB can apply to the program and earn their credentials to teach while finishing a degree. UAB students can even try the program for free and start working with younger students in local schools right away.

The program also includes leadership development activities, and its students interact with 200 mentor teachers in the field. Master teachers on staff at UAB lead some of the education courses and provide support.

UAB Teach students work in diverse schools and prepare to lead classes that need their help the most. They can also lead Advanced Placement courses right from the start, Meadows said.



Research on UTeach in Texas shows a major impact: Nearly nine of 10 students in the program enter teaching, and 80 percent are still teachers five years later. UAB provides scholarships for students if they stay in teaching for a set number of years.

“State leaders should focus on hiring more diverse teachers, principals, and system leaders to reflect changing student demographics,” CCSSO has urged, recommending that states adopt more research-based programs for teacher recruitment, set ambitious goals for improvement, and report publicly on their progress.

North Carolina has re-started a statewide Teacher Fellows program and begun other new teacher recruiting efforts. Also, the Call Me MISTER program that recruits and prepares young black men to become teachers, started by Clemson University in South Carolina, has expanded into colleges across the region and nation. And the Woodrow Wilson Georgia Teaching Fellowship is preparing new classes of STEM teachers for schools in disadvantaged communities across the state.

2. Preparation: States need to continue to push all teacher preparation programs to meet higher standards. These programs should be more rigorous overall and provide future teachers with lengthy clinical experience inside classrooms. Universities’ teacher-prep programs have improved their standards overall: The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation now requires programs to provide graduates with adequate subject knowledge and teaching practices, along with more in-depth clinical experiences in classrooms. The Council also requires programs to improve candidate quality and show greater impact. Still, the National Center for Teacher Quality found in 2017 that only 42 percent of university-based, secondary teacher-prep programs in the U.S. helped prospective teachers build knowledge of both *their subject* and *how to teach it well*.

Determining the quality of teacher-prep programs can be a challenge. SREB’s bipartisan Teacher Preparation Commission reported in 2017 that “few programs track where their graduates accept teaching positions, what they teach, how their students perform, or how long they remain in the profession.” Tennessee, North Carolina and Louisiana use data systems to monitor the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs. In 2017, Tennessee issued its first ratings of teacher-prep programs and gave high marks to a few university-based programs and some nontraditional programs such as Teach for America. Programs’ ratings are based in part on observations in graduates’ classrooms.

Louisiana may be the South’s best example of a state that has overhauled its teacher-prep system. The state required university-based programs to rebuild from the ground up, adding yearlong teacher residencies in classrooms and other steps to prepare better teachers.

States have many other points of leverage to improve teacher preparation. How teachers qualify for licensure and how states evaluate teacher-prep programs – and encourage innovation – are among the recommendations in CCSSO’s guide for improving teacher preparation. It highlights Georgia’s multitiered teacher-licensure program that requires clinical experience in classrooms. The guide also cites several colleges in the South for innovations in teacher preparation: Louisiana Tech University, Mercer University in Georgia, Clemson University in South Carolina, and Lipscomb University in Tennessee.

3. Pay and benefits: Many Southern states have slipped nationally in average teacher pay, after about two decades of narrowing the gap with the nation. Just as important as the amount of pay, however, is *how* states pay teachers. States need to overhaul teacher pay structures to reward these professionals' success with students and for assignments in high-need areas. Current salary structures in most states only reward teachers' years on the job or degrees completed (even for low-quality credentials). In higher-performing countries, the NCSL study group found that teachers earn salaries more on par with engineers and accountants.

4. Distribution of teachers: Many of the best educators flock to school systems in wealthy areas for higher pay. But other countries send more of their best teachers into high-need schools and pay those teachers more. A Prichard Committee study group in Kentucky is among those that have recommended states require smarter teacher assignments and greater support for teachers willing to join struggling schools.

5. Continued learning and support: Many new and veteran teachers do not have the training, mentors, or continued support they need to succeed and grow as professionals. Proven models such as TNTP and the New Teacher Center provide states with roadmaps for teacher "induction" and recommendations to help retain the best teachers.

NCSL found that other nations have more comprehensive induction for new teachers that includes help from master teachers. In some high-performing countries, some teachers only spend about one-third of their time in classrooms, allowing them more time to build their knowledge and skills. While some school districts have adopted similar strategies, many new teachers across the South do not have such support.

The Prichard Committee's study group in Kentucky found that every teacher needs more time to analyze students' work, meet with parents, and confer with colleagues. Many teachers may need training in understanding students living in poverty and English-language learners and in dealing with highly stressed students and families.

6. Job evaluations: States need to continue to refine how teachers, principals, and other educators work together to improve instruction. Teachers' job evaluations, and more importantly the conversations that ensue between teachers and school leaders, can help to improve classroom instruction. A 2017 state survey showed that more than two-thirds of Tennessee's teachers, more than double the rate from a few years earlier, say the state's new evaluation system has helped them to improve teaching and raise student achievement.

7. Flexibility: New approaches to teaching and class schedules can help school systems match some of their best teachers with students who need them the most, sometimes at no extra cost. Researchers at Public Impact and other experts offer new models for schools and classrooms; for instance, an expert math teacher can spend time with multiple classes of students for specific lessons. Every school also must be able to use technology to offer supplemental courses for students.

8. Teacher-leadership roles: Elevating high-performing teachers into teacher-leadership roles can raise the quality of teaching throughout a district. A+ Education Partnership in Alabama led a statewide commission that called for a major overhaul of the state's teaching profession, including new types of leadership roles and salary structures for Alabama teachers who take on various academic duties that are critical in successful schools.

The most effective professional learning and support for educators can come from within schools and districts, Gene Wilhoit of the University of Kentucky argues. Providing teachers more time for sharing challenges with each other and examining student work can help them target classroom strategies to meet students' needs, said the former executive director of CCSSO and state education superintendent in Arkansas and Kentucky. States can repurpose funding – including some federal funds – to help schools, districts, and regions build such learning networks and pay more for master teachers who can lead the training, he said.

9. School leaders: Teachers cannot do their best unless they are supported by outstanding principals. Therefore, preparation and continued training for principals are critical to support for teachers. "In the U.S., although it is understood that great schools require great leaders, recruitment, selection and training systems that foster such leadership have not been uniformly developed," NCSL reported.

Too many aspiring principals who seek advanced leadership training rely on low-quality, online-only graduate degrees that require few clinical hours. Not all online degree programs are of poor quality, and some traditional principal preparation programs also lack rigor and quality. Yet many states reward weak credentials with higher pay and promotions. States should change salary and certification structures, rebuild more graduate programs for school leaders, and require more on-the-job clinical experiences to better prepare principals to improve students' opportunities to learn.

Some Southern states are already taking steps to improve their principal pipeline. The A+ Partnership in Alabama runs statewide learning networks of principals, school and district leaders, and teacher-coaches that participants say vastly increase their knowledge and skills as educators. The Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement supports school leaders in that state and helps them learn to use real-time student data to guide instruction. Other promising efforts include the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce's leadership program, which links school principals with business leaders for training and mentoring.

Alabama's program for AP teachers adds rigor to other classrooms, too

At Hewitt-Trussville High School outside Birmingham, master teacher Suzanne Culbreth pointed to a colorful triangle that she had drawn on the whiteboard. "There's lots of different ways to find the area of a triangle, right?" Her students nodded, then scooted their desks together in small groups to tackle a multi-step geometry problem. This class was different, though. The students were teachers.

Culbreth's class was part of A+ College Ready's annual workshops for teachers in Alabama. Each summer, teachers gather at schools across the state to further their own knowledge and teaching practices. Originally for high school teachers in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, the workshops have expanded to serve all teachers in grades 6-12 to help them set high expectations and use more challenging and engaging instruction. The training is a collaboration between A+ Education Partnership and the Alabama State Department of Education. About 1,200 teachers each year attend the sessions.

The program has helped Alabama make historic progress in AP enrollment and passing rates but also has helped improve the rigor of courses for all middle and high school students. The state saw its number of AP exams taken by students nearly triple to about 49,000 between the 2008-09 and 2016-17 school years. More than 26,000 Alabama students took an AP exam in 2017 (some take more than one exam), earning more than 19,000 qualifying scores.

More work remains for many states. In 2013, the most recent year available from the College Board, nearly 11 percent of Alabama's graduating seniors passed an AP exam, compared with 20 percent nationally, more than 27 percent in Virginia and Florida, and only 5 percent in Louisiana and 4 percent in Mississippi.

Alabama's professional development program asks teachers to help their students learn differently, said Teri Thompson, the vice president of operations for A+ College Ready. Alabama students can compete with their national and international peers, but teachers and students need to believe they can, she added.

Alabama Commissioner of Higher Education Jim Purcell told an auditorium of educators at one of the summer workshops in 2017 that the state has many job openings in a variety of fields but not enough skilled workers to fill them. He said the state needs to find the resources to educate its people to higher levels. "We have the potential and the people to do it," Purcell said.



Basil Conway, a math professor at Columbus State University just across the state line in Georgia, led another class for the Alabama teachers. He recalled growing up in Lee County, Alabama, where an AP teacher told him he would not be able to handle her class. Another teacher mentored him and steered him into advanced courses. Conway later returned to his old high school as the math department chairman, where he expanded AP courses substantially. "It's about being equitable with your instruction and reaching everybody," he said.



What today's students need – *in and out of the classroom*

Today's students are very different from those in generations past. They use technology constantly, and a world of knowledge is at their fingertips. Yet they complain that school often is not challenging or engaging.

They also come from more diverse backgrounds, and increasingly they are from poorer households. Starting in 2013, at least 51 percent of the nation's schoolchildren come from low-income families, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. In about 40 states, students from low-income families represent at least 40 percent of public school enrollment. Many of the states with a majority of low-income students are in the South, the Southern Education Foundation and SREB have shown. In Mississippi, more than seven in 10 children enrolled in public schools come from low-income families. The United States also now has a higher rate of children living in poverty than most developed nations – even Mexico, Chile and Israel, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Students across the South told the Columbia Group in interviews that they are often met with low expectations from their schools – and sometimes their own families and communities. "Some of the teachers stereotype certain kids," said Karah Crowe, who was readying for her senior year at Jackson County High School in Kentucky. (See sidebar on *Student Voices in Kentucky*, page 29.)

Students consistently say they need more rigorous, meaningful classes to prepare them for college and work by incorporating real-life experiences such as projects in their community and interaction with businesses and nonprofit groups. A+ Partnership in Alabama holds intensive summer training institutes for the state's teachers, adding rigor to classroom lessons and preparing more students for advanced work. (See sidebar on *A+ Partnership's AP programs*, page 24.)

Students deserve a greater role in their own learning, Gene Wilhoit of the University of Kentucky argues. Stan Torzewski, an AP history teacher and youth leadership group advisor at Fern Creek High School in Louisville, Kentucky, agreed: "Teachers don't want to let go of that [control] sometimes, but when you do, it's amazing what students come up with." Don Trowel, a senior at Fern Creek, said he and other students are becoming leaders in their section of Louisville and have a voice in improving "what's going on in the school, but also change what's happening in the community."

Indeed, support for students must come from the community, too. Roger Cleveland, an associate professor of educational leadership and policy at Eastern Kentucky University, helped found youth academies in the city of Lexington to provide targeted support for African American boys. The BMW Academy started when he gathered a small group at his church on Saturdays for tutoring, ACT preparation, and leadership activities. The academy has since expanded to four locations and serves about 450 students in grades 1-12. Test scores for participating students have risen dramatically. The work also led to the founding of the Carter G. Woodson Academy, a school-within-a-school for boys, mostly boys of color, at Lexington's Frederick Douglass High School. "You can go to high-performing schools and boys of color still struggle," Cleveland said. He argued that extra support can make all the difference.

Immigrant students and English-language learners are major emerging student groups in the South.

In suburban Gwinnett County near Atlanta, for example, about 75 percent of the 178,000 students are now students of color, and students come from more than 100 countries. Gini Pupo-Walker of the Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition said states need to help educators and communities better understand these students. Immigrant parents have high aspirations for their children, and these students have low rates of discipline problems and school absences, Pupo-Walker said. More schools need to "understand the cultural context" of these students, she said, "making sure teachers can help their students reach their full potential."

Students also reported that family and mental health issues often can make the difference between success and failure.

"I have had so much help with emotional support [at school]," said Tyler Henry, a 19-year-old from Richmond, Kentucky, who was planning to enter Berea College or Eastern Kentucky University. After his father went to prison, Tyler moved out of his home at the age of 10 and suffered abuse from a relative. He recalled when a teacher in eighth grade "pulled me out of class and told me how much potential I had," he said.

States need to help schools "move with light speed" to better support students' social and emotional learning and their personal development, said Brigitte Blom Ramsey, the executive director of the Prichard Committee in Kentucky. "In the last decade, there's been more focus on academics, sometimes at the expense of the whole child."

Kentucky has a network of family resource centers in public schools across the state, although their state funding has ended. Still, many schools and communities valued the Family Resource Youth Service Centers (FRYSC, or "frisky") enough to keep more than 800 of them open. Parents and students can seek help at the centers for academic and family issues, and the network of centers provides teachers with training in referring students and families to mental health professionals and other resources, said Melissa Goins, the director of the FRYSC network. The centers also help schools deal with children impacted by the opioid abuse crisis, which has devastated some communities.

Research also shows significant links between students' health and their performance in school. In Tennessee, SCORE held a summit in 2017 on the link between students' health and learning, to share promising practices. Many teachers and principals need additional support to address students' health issues. Educators and community partners need to work together more to ensure students can learn at their full potential, said SCORE President David Mansouri.

Despite such needs, many states have shown a "total lack of focus on issues outside of school that affect education," said Caroline Novak, the president of A+ Education Partnership in Alabama. "The way poverty plays out in the South seems to me a real call to arms to provide these resources." (See sidebar on Marietta High School in Georgia, page 27.)

Many states now include non-academic factors such as school climate and student discipline rates in their new school accountability systems under the federal ESSA law, providing an opportunity for improvements, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education. Research shows school discipline is much harsher for some students than for others: In 2015, black students in Kentucky were suspended *four times* more often than white students. “These differences are large enough to have a significant impact on the excluded students’ opportunities to learn,” the Prichard Committee found.

A ‘cocoon’ for students: Support to help everyone graduate

In her 12 years as the principal of Marietta High School outside Atlanta, Leigh Colburn could not figure out how to graduate the roughly 25 percent of her 2,400 students who were leaving school early. So, she left the principal’s office and moved downstairs to start the Graduate Marietta Student Success Center, which opened after two years of planning and extensive surveys of students.

The recommendations from Marietta students were overwhelming even to a seasoned educator: they needed drug and grief counseling; help finding a parent a job; support for homelessness, domestic violence, and depression; strategies for addressing gang violence; information about sexuality; and more. Nearly 200 wanted suicide prevention support for themselves or a loved one.

“I didn’t have the expertise, the resources, or the funding to answer this situation, and it was humbling,” Colburn said.

Students’ answers on the surveys led Colburn to open the Student Success Center in fall 2016, and it is already considered an example for many communities to follow. Several other Atlanta-area schools are opening their own centers, and Georgia legislators are discussing how to spread the idea statewide.

Students can huddle at the Good Vibes Café at the center, where culinary and special needs students sell coffee, juice, and snacks. The center has comfortable space for support group meetings, afterschool tutoring, SAT prep classes, and more. There is no stigma in being there. “Kids can just hang out, study, and get hummus and smoothies,” Colburn said.

The center has a community food pantry with enough free food, including fresh meat and produce, to nourish 80 families a month. Teen mothers – pregnancy is a main reason girls quit school – can grab free diapers and formula

and meet with mentors. There is even a laundry room. Delta Air Lines employees donate soaps and other toiletries, free to take.

A social worker, a psychologist for individual counseling, an affordable housing adviser, and the city’s parole officer all have desks at the center. Colburn worked with state and local agencies on grants and to move existing staff housed elsewhere into the school. The staff helps students qualify for health insurance to help pay for counseling and other clinicians. Hundreds of parents also have come to the center to take English classes.

Sixteen staff members and partners now work at the center, although only five are employed by the school. The only new salary was Colburn’s. Hundreds fewer students are suspended from school compared with previous years, Colburn said. “Our center works because our kids created it,” the former principal said.

You could have heard a pin drop when they testified in front of legislators . . . Kids have a way of cutting right through it.”

– Leigh Colburn, education consultant, former principal of Marietta High School in Georgia

A study by the University of Pennsylvania found *about half of students in 13 Southern states who were suspended or expelled were black*, despite their representing only one-quarter of all students. In 132 school districts in those states, black students were *five times* as likely to be suspended as white students. The Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition has found that more than 60 percent of students who were suspended and expelled in its state were black but only represent about 22 percent of enrollment.

Teachers and principals need training in more restorative, research-based discipline practices, CCSSO recommended. Schools also need better capacity to refer students to state or local agencies for family or mental health issues. CCSSO also urged that states' school report cards should show discipline data for all student groups. A network has formed in Georgia for schools pursuing such discipline practices; the nonprofit organization Georgia Appleseed works with school systems and the state Department of Education to implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS. The Public School Forum of North Carolina also is expanding training for educators on improving school climate and how to recognize more serious student needs and make referrals to address them.

Several Southern states have added chronic absences as a measure of schools' performance – and for good reason. CCSSO cites research that shows students who miss 15 or more days a year “have lower achievement in math and English/language arts, lower ratings on school climate measures, and lower graduation rates.” Many student absences occur because of family or health-related issues. “Attendance plays a critical role in student achievement, way more than people realize,” said Elaine Allensworth, the Lewis-Sebring director of the Consortium on School Research at the University of Chicago. Research links even moderate numbers of school absences to lack of preparation for college, she said. The nonprofit group AttendanceWorks offers states and schools resources for dealing with student absences more effectively.

Students, families and many education groups also are concerned about racial segregation in schools. Public schools in the South once were lauded for pushing to make schools more integrated and diverse in the 1970s and 1980s. But research shows a growing “resegregation” of schools in many states by race/ethnicity and also by family income. States can do more to encourage schools and communities to pursue smarter student-assignment strategies. Research shows that students in diverse schools have higher achievement and are better prepared for the workplace and civic engagement.

Another major area of concern: how students with disabilities and gifted and talented students are identified. Hispanic students in Kentucky and students with limited English skills are identified as having learning disabilities far less often than their classmates – meaning they may not get the services they need, Kentucky Center for Education and Workforce Statistics data show. And black students can be identified for special education too often. Hispanic and black students in Kentucky were *less than half as likely* as white students to be identified as gifted and talented, and students from low-income families were identified as gifted and talented *one-third as often* as those who are better off economically. Students with limited English proficiency and learning differences were rarely identified, the Prichard Committee found.

Students say they need a whole new level of support

The Columbia Group organizations asked members of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence’s Student Voice Team — a youth-led group that makes students partners in the work to improve education in Kentucky — about their schools and how to improve them. Many students said they had to fight low expectations at school, from teachers, or from their families and communities.

Sahar Mohammadzadeh of Lexington, Kentucky, a rising high school senior in fall 2017, served as the chief editor of *Ready or Not: Stories from the Students Behind the Statistics*, a book on students’ transition into college and work compiled from interviews with students across the state. She saw a “huge disparity” in the opportunities available to rural and urban students compared with their suburban peers. The book offers several key findings: The state has a “school counseling crisis,” limiting the help and guidance schools can provide. Some students still do not see the value in continuing their education beyond high school, and neither do their families. And there may be an overreliance on standardized tests to measure college readiness.

Others said schools do not see each student’s talents and interests as important to their future, including art or music. “[Students] are told these are not the important things in school” when they are actually critical to careers and life, said Jamie Smith from Lexington, Kentucky, now at Brown University. She reported a “tracking system” in her schools starting in third grade in which gifted students were placed on a different level than everyone else. “Expectations are important in the achievement gap,” she said. “It begins so young.”

Rosalyn Huff, now a student at Columbia University, saw serious differences in how students of color like her were disciplined at her high school in Lexington, Kentucky. A heavy police presence in the school was “traumatizing” and “really scary for a lot of people,” she said. Her school too often stressed removing students rather than dealing with underlying issues or building community dialogue, she said.

Mental health and support has a drastic impact on students’ academic success, said Gentry Fitch, now a Robertson Scholar at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, who grew up on the outskirts of Lexington, Kentucky. It is “a crosscutting issue that does not discriminate” by race or family, and it shows up in grades and test scores, he said.

Fitch said a majority of students at his old high school were from low-income families, and the school lacked the staff to support many students. On average, Kentucky schools provide one guidance counselor for every 444 students, he said, when 250-to-1 is recommended. Students often lack the emotional support they need, and special education students can be “alienated and clearly separate” from others, said Fitch, who helped start an advocacy group for students with learning differences.

Amanda Wahlstedt, from rural Knox County, Kentucky, in Appalachia, said in a Columbia Group discussion that her educators were not equipped to deal with abuse in her family. In poor communities, middle-class teachers and principals may not realize that some students face challenges such as not having enough food, she said. “I just couldn’t trust the community around me to let me feel like I was in a safe place” in school, said Wahlstedt, now a student on a Questbridge Scholarship at Wellesley College. “That’s true for a lot of students.”



The view from coal country: Challenges in rural schools

Jenny Ceesay grew up with 12 siblings, in deep Appalachia. Her family did not have an indoor bathroom until her eighth-grade year, and the family's only water source for a time was from a cave. Her father died when she was seven.

After Ceesay moved to another county, a guidance counselor reviewed her records and placed her in a summer program at Berea College in Kentucky. Community folks were “not expecting anything of me except to get pregnant and get married before I was grown,” she said.

Now the director of programs with Partners for Education at Berea College, she said that many of the students she encounters today in her work share a similar background to her own. Looking across a room full of high school students at a summer program, Ceesay said: “Everybody in this group is going to college.”

Partners for Education was awarded a major U.S. Department of Education grant to develop a “Promise Neighborhood” of services based on the region’s needs. Modeled on a similar effort for Harlem students in New York City, the Berea program has built an extensive menu of services for children in Appalachia. These

include summer college-exploration and leadership institutes for older students, and summer learning in STEM fields for younger children who gain access to technology they otherwise might never see. Partners for Education also provides an array of help for schools and communities across the hollows of eastern Kentucky: home visiting to

first-time mothers, mobile early childhood activities on buses, in-classroom aides to help students, college visits for teens, and more.

Dreama Gentry, the founding director of the Berea program, which serves about 40,000 students in 33 school districts, said she is concerned that many state and federal policies are not helping rural and small-town schools. “We lost 10,000 coal jobs and all the related jobs in these counties in the last seven years,” said

Gentry, a native of Crab Orchard, Kentucky, and a first-generation college graduate. She noted one local county where the average income was higher in 1970 than today. School districts “can’t afford their teachers. The funding models are off for rural communities,” she said.

Jenna Lawson, the Promise Neighborhood academic coordinator in Knox County, Kentucky, said many families battle hunger and opioid abuse and the schools must work to improve education in that environment. “We have areas the sun doesn’t touch,” she said.

One of the areas served by the Berea programs is Owsley County, one of the nation’s poorest school districts. A family’s average annual income is about \$21,000, said Tim Bobrowski, the superintendent. His hometown, the county seat of Booneville, has fewer than 100 residents, with a town square, a couple of schools, some churches, a few dozen homes, and little else.

The district is partnering with a neighboring county and exploring new models for high school – including work-based learning. With coal gone and tobacco in less demand these days, Bobrowski and his community are taking steps to prepare his district’s 700 students for new types of work and to make more jobs available locally using technology. Every student has a take-home digital tablet, and the high school operates a farm and open-air market where students work and farmers sell produce.

Jobs are far from plentiful in what was part of coal country before the mines closed. More than 100 people now work out of a little storefront next to Booneville’s supermarket as support or call center staff for such companies as Amazon and Playstation. The center is one of several Teleworks USA locations across the region, and it has brought more new jobs to the community in the past decade than all other industries combined. That is why the schools are “rethinking the way we offer things for kids,” Bobrowski said.

“

School districts can’t afford their teachers. The funding models are off for rural communities.”

– Dreama Gentry, the founding director of the Berea program

Finding enough resources to serve each child

The school finance systems of many Southern states have not changed much since the region's first education reform laws were passed in the 1990s. Nor have most states examined how they provide resources for schools with the aim of preparing all high school graduates for college, career training, or the workforce.

Some states in the region are weighing major changes in their school funding systems. More money alone is not the answer, but limited resources clearly hamper some students' educational opportunities.

The differences in resources for schools are stark: The Education Trust has found that the nation's highest-poverty school districts receive on average about \$1,200 less per student in state and local funding than the nation's wealthiest districts. This means **students who need the most extra help to succeed in school often get the least support**. Some students need more support, at times, to help them catch up.

The Southern states can become leaders in addressing this issue. Some children need a more specialized education that helps them catch up with their peers faster. If a child or entire neighborhood or school is behind, additional human and financial resources for expert educators and targeted services may be necessary. It likely will require new funding – and repurposing of some existing resources – to meet the needs of today's students now and into the future.

How school funding has evolved: Some low-wealth school districts have sued Southern states in recent years and decades, demanding a greater share of state resources. In North Carolina, rulings in the *Leandro* case continue to impact how school funding is distributed. In Arkansas, a major court ruling forced the legislature to raise spending on schools by hundreds of millions of dollars, and the state responded by consolidating dozens of small school districts. In South Carolina, the supreme court found major differences in school funding but ruled the state constitution only requires the state to provide a “minimally adequate” education.

All Southern states should examine the resources actually required for schools to meet higher goals, and then do everything possible to provide those resources – while requiring strong results.

“Money is not the only thing that matters to school success,” the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education said in its roadmap for the future of education in its state. However, disparities in resources have led to increasing inequalities among the state’s schools. “Districts with more resources can pay teachers more and attract higher-quality teaching candidates. More affluent districts can provide students with enrichment activities and support services missing in cash-strapped districts,” the group found.

Recognizing the problem: The nonprofit Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights visited schools across the country in tough financial straits, including some in the South. “What we found was disturbing and wrong,” the group’s 2015 report said. It cited leaders of the rural Carroll County schools in **Mississippi**, who said their system was so broke that the superintendent had surrendered most of his salary. The district was down to one guidance counselor for all of its schools. “We can’t afford to give every child a textbook to take home,” said the deputy superintendent, the district’s only full-time central office employee. “We would love to offer Advanced Placement courses. We have none.”

In **Kentucky**, years of state budget shortfalls have exacerbated inequities in some of the state’s poorest areas, especially in rural eastern Kentucky and in Louisville. Sherron Jackson, the Kentucky NAACP education committee chairman and a retired state higher education official, said a coalition of leaders across the state is pushing for the state to do more for schools where children simply do not have the same quality of teaching and support as those in affluent areas. “We’re interested in making sure those playing fields get leveled,” he said.

In **South Carolina**, an educator in the Dillon County schools lamented in the Leadership Conference’s report that her small-town district was only able to offer one AP course, calculus, and two high schools had to share the same teacher. She spoke of her niece in a wealthier district in the state where all middle and high school students have their own iPads, and students have dozens of AP and career courses that lead to certification in many fields. “We’ve had to cut art and music in the primary schools” to balance the budget, Dillon County Superintendent Ray Rogers said in the report. His district was among those in the TV documentary *Corridor of Shame*, named for the rural areas along Interstate 95 in the state. “There’s good people in South Carolina. They just don’t know the plight of the poor kids,” he said.

These examples are indicative of the school funding challenge in many states. The fact is, “states and districts still often invest less in educating low-income students and students of color than they do in educating affluent and white students. These funding gaps occur across districts, at different schools within the same district, and even within the same school,” CCSSO found.

States taking action: State leaders have tried to provide more resources for schools over time. But the Great Recession forced many states to cut their education budgets. Unfortunately, some states have not restored the funding cut from schools in those years, impacting the lowest-wealth rural and urban communities the most.

In 2017, **North Carolina** leaders appointed multiple task forces to study school funding in the state. Like many Southern states, North Carolina uses an “allotment”-based funding system, with additional funding for specific students, including those in special education. The system worked well for years, but demographics of the state’s children have changed dramatically, and larger counties are growing in population rapidly while rural areas are losing population. The state is considering a “weighted” student funding system that would give greater additional resources for high-need students, said Keith Poston of the Public School Forum of North Carolina, which was bringing together stakeholders to help the state reach consensus for change.

A similar debate has unfolded in **Mississippi**. After a majority of voters opposed a constitutional ballot question for additional resources for schools, state leaders considered a “weighted student” funding system, but the 2017 legislative session ended without action on school funding, said Rachel Canter, the executive director of Mississippi First.

In **Kentucky**, the 2017 state budget was burdened by a nearly \$1 billion deficit in its pension fund for teachers, which lawmakers must deal with – while also considering new investments in public schools, including funding for newly enacted charter schools. **Louisiana** also has faced serious state budget deficits in recent years. And Caroline Novak of the A+ Education Partnership in **Alabama** said her state has yet to return to its 2008 funding level for K-12 schools. Policymakers there are beginning to discuss a weighted student funding system. “We’re now so starved. Money isn’t everything, but it certainly is necessary,” she said.

Georgia leaders also are exploring major changes to the state’s school funding system. Like many states, Georgia already has an “equalization formula” to supplement funding for some smaller, poorer school systems because of their limited ability to provide for schools through local taxes. But this model, passed into law in 1985, likely is not enough to address differences in students’ quality of education. The governor’s statewide Education Reform Commission in 2017 recommended a weighted student funding system that would add more funding to districts for students with special needs – including those with disabilities, those living in poverty, gifted and talented, and others. The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education praised the commission’s work, but warned that the weighted system would not be based on the actual costs of students’ needs. It recommended the state first determine those costs, then strive to provide the additional resources needed.

This strategy is needed in many states across the South: Determine how much funding actually is required to provide all of today’s children with the education they need – and to address gaps between wealthier and poorer areas of each state – and then help to make up the difference.

IN CLOSING

The South already has proven it can make major strides in improving education. The region’s most pressing challenge into the future is *raising the overall quality of education for every child, while simultaneously helping underprivileged students make far more progress than in the past.*

Most Southerners realize the importance of this challenge and strongly support more attention to these issues by every state and local leader. Consensus also is substantial among voters, educators, business leaders, parents and students on many of the priorities states need to address. The Columbia Group organizations will collaborate with leaders across many different sectors to move forward on this ambitious vision for improving education for every child.

– Appendix –

Alabama students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by economic status

Economic Status	2005		2015		Change	
	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income
4th Grade Reading	12	34	19	45	+7	+11
4th Grade Math	10	34	15	43	+5	+9
8th Grade Reading	11	32	17	37	+6	+5
8th Grade Math	5	24	7	29	+2	+5

Alabama students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by race/ethnicity

Race	2005			2015			Change		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
4th Grade Reading	32	8	N/A	37	15	16	+5	+7	N/A
4th Grade Math	30	7	N/A	35	10	14	+5	+3	N/A
8th Grade Reading	31	9	N/A	33	12	21	+2	+3	N/A
8th Grade Math	22	3	N/A	23	5	11	+1	+2	N/A

*No long-term data available for Hispanic students.

Arkansas students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by economic status

Economic Status	2005		2015		Change	
	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income
4th Grade Reading	19	43	24	48	+5	+5
4th Grade Math	22	49	25	46	+3	-3
8th Grade Reading	16	35	17	42	+1	+7
8th Grade Math	13	30	16	38	+3	+8

Arkansas students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by race/ethnicity

Race	2005			2015			Change		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
4th Grade Reading	37	10	21	37	17	23	0	+7	+2
4th Grade Math	42	10	25	38	15	25	-4	+5	0
8th Grade Reading	33	9	13	33	8	21	0	-1	+8
8th Grade Math	28	4	15	31	10	18	+3	+6	+3

Florida students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by economic status

Economic Status	2005		2015		Change	
	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income
4th Grade Reading	19	42	29	55	+10	+13
4th Grade Math	22	53	31	60	+9	+7
8th Grade Reading	17	32	22	45	+5	+13
8th Grade Math	13	36	16	44	+3	+8

Florida students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by race/ethnicity

Race	2005			2015			Change		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
4th Grade Reading	39	13	25	49	20	34	+10	+7	+9
4th Grade Math	49	16	28	54	21	38	+5	+5	+10
8th Grade Reading	33	11	21	40	15	26	+7	+4	+5
8th Grade Math	36	8	16	36	11	22	0	+3	+6

Georgia students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by economic status

Economic Status	2005		2015		Change	
	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income
4th Grade Reading	13	41	23	55	+10	+14
4th Grade Math	16	45	23	56	+7	+11
8th Grade Reading	12	36	20	46	+8	+10
8th Grade Math	9	35	15	52	+6	+17

Georgia students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by race/ethnicity

Race	2005			2015			Change		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
4th Grade Reading	37	12	14	45	22	22	+8	+10	+8
4th Grade Math	43	12	22	47	19	28	+4	+7	+6
8th Grade Reading	35	10	14	43	15	21	+8	+5	+7
8th Grade Math	34	8	12	41	13	19	+7	+5	+7

Kentucky students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by economic status

Economic Status	2005		2015		Change	
	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income
4th Grade Reading	22	39	29	57	+7	+18
4th Grade Math	16	37	29	59	+13	+22
8th Grade Reading	22	38	26	49	+4	+11
8th Grade Math	14	31	17	41	+3	+10

Kentucky students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by race/ethnicity

Race	2005			2015			Change		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
4th Grade Reading	33	15	N/A	44	23	23	+11	+8	N/A
4th Grade Math	29	9	N/A	44	20	30	+15	+11	N/A
8th Grade Reading	32	15	N/A	39	15	31	+7	0	N/A
8th Grade Math	24	9	N/A	30	12	21	+6	+3	N/A

*No long-term data available for Hispanic students.

Louisiana students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by economic status

Economic Status	2005		2015		Change	
	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income
4th Grade Reading	12	36	21	44	+9	+8
4th Grade Math	15	41	21	49	+6	+8
8th Grade Reading	12	30	16	36	+4	+6
8th Grade Math	8	27	10	33	+2	+6

Louisiana students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by race/ethnicity

Race	2005			2015			Change		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
4th Grade Reading	32	9	N/A	37	17	30	+5	+8	N/A
4th Grade Math	38	9	N/A	40	16	35	+2	+7	N/A
8th Grade Reading	30	9	N/A	32	12	25	+2	+3	N/A
8th Grade Math	25	5	N/A	27	7	19	+2	+2	N/A

Mississippi students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by economic status

Economic Status	2005		2015		Change	
	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income
4th Grade Reading	11	34	19	45	+8	+11
4th Grade Math	12	36	21	52	+9	+16
8th Grade Reading	10	33	13	39	+3	+6
8th Grade Math	7	25	14	42	+7	+17

Mississippi students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by race/ethnicity

Race	2005			2015			Change		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
4th Grade Reading	31	7	N/A	38	14	19	+7	+7	N/A
4th Grade Math	32	7	N/A	44	15	24	+12	+8	N/A
8th Grade Reading	30	7	N/A	32	8	N/A	+2	+1	N/A
8th Grade Math	24	4	N/A	34	10	19	+10	+6	N/A

*No long-term data available for Hispanic students.

North Carolina students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by economic status

Economic Status	2005		2015		Change	
	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income
4th Grade Reading	14	41	25	59	+11	+18
4th Grade Math	22	54	30	67	+8	+13
8th Grade Reading	14	35	18	48	+4	+13
8th Grade Math	15	43	19	52	+4	+9

North Carolina students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by race/ethnicity

Race	2005			2015			Change		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
4th Grade Reading	39	13	17	51	23	23	+12	+10	+6
4th Grade Math	52	17	26	59	22	33	+7	+5	+7
8th Grade Reading	35	10	17	40	13	21	+5	+3	+4
8th Grade Math	42	12	16	43	16	23	+1	+4	+7

South Carolina students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by economic status

Economic Status	2005		2015		Change	
	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income
4th Grade Reading	13	40	21	53	+8	+13
4th Grade Math	19	54	24	57	+5	+3
8th Grade Reading	13	35	17	43	+4	+8
8th Grade Math	15	43	14	41	-1	-2

South Carolina students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by race/ethnicity

Race	2005			2015			Change		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
4th Grade Reading	36	11	29	46	15	21	+10	+4	-8
4th Grade Math	53	13	30	48	16	34	-5	+3	+4
8th Grade Reading	34	11	N/A	38	11	17	+4	0	N/A
8th Grade Math	44	10	19	36	8	22	-8	-2	+3

*No long-term data available for Hispanic students.

Tennessee students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by economic status

Economic Status	2005		2015		Change	
	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income
4th Grade Reading	14	37	22	50	+8	+13
4th Grade Math	14	40	27	58	+13	+18
8th Grade Reading	14	35	20	48	+6	+13
8th Grade Math	9	30	17	44	+8	+14

Tennessee students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by race/ethnicity

Race	2005			2015			Change		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
4th Grade Reading	33	11	13	39	16	27	+6	+5	+14
4th Grade Math	35	9	26	48	20	32	+13	+11	+6
8th Grade Reading	31	9	N/A	38	15	23	+7	+6	N/A
8th Grade Math	26	3	N/A	34	9	24	+8	+6	N/A

*No long-term data available for Hispanic students.

Virginia students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by economic status

Economic Status	2005		2015		Change	
	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income
4th Grade Reading	16	47	22	58	+6	+11
4th Grade Math	16	52	27	62	+11	+10
8th Grade Reading	18	42	17	48	-1	+6
8th Grade Math	11	41	17	50	+6	+9

Virginia students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by race/ethnicity

Race	2005			2015			Change		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
4th Grade Reading	45	15	26	52	19	32	+7	+4	+6
4th Grade Math	50	14	22	57	25	29	+7	+11	+7
8th Grade Reading	45	16	23	44	16	25	-1	0	+2
8th Grade Math	43	9	20	46	12	29	+3	+3	+9

West Virginia students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by economic status

Economic Status	2005		2015		Change	
	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income	Low Income	Non-Low Income
4th Grade Reading	17	36	25	44	+8	+8
4th Grade Math	18	34	26	50	+8	+16
8th Grade Reading	13	30	22	36	+9	+6
8th Grade Math	10	25	15	31	+5	+6

West Virginia students at or above Proficient level on NAEP, by race/ethnicity

Race	2005			2015			Change		
	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic
4th Grade Reading	26	15	N/A	30	21	N/A	+4	+6	N/A
4th Grade Math	25	17	N/A	34	11	N/A	+9	-6	N/A
8th Grade Reading	22	10	N/A	27	20	N/A	+5	+10	N/A
8th Grade Math	18	6	N/A	21	8	N/A	+3	+2	N/A

*No long-term data available for Hispanic students.

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