

SOUTH CAROLINA EDUCATION OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE
Full Committee Meeting
Minutes of the Meeting
Monday, October 11, 2021
Blatt Building, Room 433
1:00 PM

Members Present (In-person or remote): Ellen Weaver, Chair; Dr. Bob Couch; April Allen; Rep. Terry Alexander; Rep. Raye Felder; Barbara Hairfield; Neil Robinson, Jr.; Sen. Greg Hembree; Melanie Barton; Sen. Kevin Johnson; Brian Newsome; Scott Turner (remote); Dr. Patti Tate (remote); and Jamie Shuster (remote)

EOC Staff Present: Matthew Ferguson; Gabrielle Fulton; Hope Johnson-Jones; Dr. Rainey Knight; Dr. Matthew Lavery; Dr. Jenny May; and Dana Yow

Guests Present (In-person or remote): Dr. Tommy Hodges, USC; Dr. George Peterson, Clemson; and Diane Sigmon (remote).

At 1:00 p.m., Ms. Weaver called the meeting to order and welcomed meeting guests. The minutes from the EOC retreat were approved as submitted. Ms. Hairfield reported on the Academic Standards Subcommittee meeting held September 20th, sharing that no actions were taken.

Mr. Ferguson presented an update on 2021 Report Card data. He shared that the EOC has secured a data sharing agreement with the Department of Education. Mr. Ferguson acknowledged Dr. Lavery's work in contributing to the analysis of the School Report Card data. Mr. Ferguson shared that while the Report Card data is not what we want, it was not a surprise. Mr. Ferguson shared that we should expect these results to be our floor, rather than our expectation, and that we can expect to grow from last year's results.

Mr. Ferguson shared that testing was disproportionate between pupils in poverty and pupils not in poverty. School districts with lower percentages of students tested tended to serve higher proportions of students in poverty. Additionally, African American students are more likely to be missing from testing results than their white peers. While overall, 86% of students were tested, the distinct characteristics of the remaining 14% who were not tested make it difficult to compare results, particularly when compared to previous years.

Sen. Johnson inquired about the results from Clarendon 2, as these represent his home district, asking for clarification on the percentage of students tested. Mr. Ferguson replied that approximately 28% of students were tested in Clarendon 2.

Overall, approximately half of all students did not meet grade level standards in ELA or math. Mr. Ferguson shared that when students are testing "Does Not Meet," they tend to be two grades below their actual grade level. Significantly, these results are disparate based on ethnicity. Rep. Alexander asked to clarify whether these results accounted for all grade levels. Mr. Ferguson shared that the results account only for grades 3-8.

Mr. Ferguson shared that in 2017, 2018, and 2019, students made incremental growth, but after COVID-19, we dropped back. Even though COVID-19 happened, results are higher than those in 2017 and 2019. However, even without the pandemic, we were not doing well, particularly in certain subgroups. Mr. Ferguson shared that 7 of 10 students in poverty do not currently meet ELA standards.

Mr. Ferguson followed up on a question from Dr. Turner during the ASA subcommittee meeting, about the intersection between race and poverty. Mr. Ferguson shared that black students and Hispanic students not in poverty score similarly to white students in poverty. Therefore, the achievement gap cannot be explained by poverty alone.

Rep. Alexander asked whether data supported the idea that students in poor school districts have less access to education. Mr. Ferguson replied that while the data is not currently broken down by school district poverty rates, Rep. Alexander was right that access and community opportunity affect results, not an inability of students to be taught.

Sen. Johnson offered that poverty may not be a central factor in student success, rather it is based on school leadership, and that when leadership was present, students excelled even with poverty. Mr. Ferguson replied that he agreed, and that as we discuss data internally, it is important to recognize that there are layers to the data – layers that may be related to either schools themselves or to broader community access.

Ms. Barton inquired if there were any outliers in the data presented by Mr. Ferguson, and if so, what can we learn from those outliers? Mr. Ferguson highlighted that math scored more negatively than ELA. Additionally, 56 percent of black students did not meet standards, meaning that over half are about two grades behind in math.

Mr. Ferguson emphasized that this disparity could not be attributed to COVID-19, as scores from 2017 closely resembled those in 2021 after the pandemic. Ethnicity and poverty are layered, Mr. Ferguson said.

Mr. Ferguson next addressed graduation rates as compared to CCR, stating that they do not align. Mr. Ferguson posed the following question: What are we graduating students to and with what skills? While the graduation rate is increasing, what skills are we providing to these graduates?

Ms. Weaver posed the following question: What does a SC diploma mean compared to other states? This gap between CCR and graduation rates highlights a disconnect that is worrisome. Mr. Ferguson said that achievement gaps are present, pervasive, and exacerbated by the pandemic.

Sen. Johnson stated that his understanding was that these tests were voluntary because of the pandemic, and highlights that when we talk about progress, African American students lag behind their white counterparts. Senator Johnson referenced an article from April in the *Sumter Item* regarding CCTC grants for black students -- that this is a good example of directing resources to where they are needed.

Dr. Newsome agreed with Senator Johnson's point, stating that the committee needs to drill down and look at what schools and teachers are doing to be successful, talk less about COVID-19, and look more towards the future. Mr. Ferguson replied to this point, highlighting that COVID-19 is now the new normal and that it cannot be used as an excuse for poor results.

Sen. Hembree asked whether SCREADY was required. Mr. Ferguson replied that yes, it was offered to everyone, but that some thought it was voluntary because we were not able to hold schools accountable for parents opting out; some schools did not test.

Ms. Hairfield stated that in lower grades, a quarter year of learning may be more significant because these are the grades when students learn their most basic foundational skills. Therefore, teachers in the following year have to both catch students up and meet the standards of the current year. This is not the students' fault, but rather the system's. This creates a fear for teachers as the gap widens with each year that goes on, forcing teachers to address students who have fallen behind while teaching two modalities. Mr. Ferguson replied to this, stating that it is important to prioritize standards and highlight high quality education materials, as Dr. Steiner shared at the EOC retreat.

Rep. Alexander states that we cannot blame COVID for disparities; COVID added to the problems of the already neglected.

Ms. Weaver stated that we need to analyze how money was used, not how much money was used, and how to apply these funds to the areas of the largest need.

Ms. Barton stated that data does not include grades K, 1, or 2 and that enrollment tanked in these grades; in a few years, we will see a huge difference.

Rep. Alexander agreed, as did Dr. Turner, adding that we need to look at the number of preschool teachers leaving the profession and need to do something to keep teachers in the classroom.

Next, Dean Tommy Hodges introduced himself and SC-Teacher. Dr. Hodges provided a brief history of the program, which began because most evidence was either anecdotal or from out of state. Therefore, it began with the goal to bolster or debunk current narratives in SC education with data to make informed policy and practice decisions. Additionally, the program has the future goal of creating a research hub for campuses that focuses on educator preparation, engaging practitioners working alongside researchers, and providing the technical support needed for these goals. Dr. Hodges highlights the opportunity for unified data collection across the state, for compliance and improvement goals. Additionally, we need to understand teacher working conditions to understand student resources and need a toolkit so districts can understand that data and meaningfully implement it.

The program has eight district partners, five from higher education, six state and national agencies and organizations, and is now in its fourth year of existence. Dr. Hodges stated that a history of accomplishments and resources (including reports and a blog) are available on their website. Dr. Hodges states that we need to combine anecdotal evidence with data in order to create a complete picture of what it is like to be a teacher in South Carolina.

Dr. Hodges next reported on Teacher Retention, CERRA data regarding vacancies. School-level factors affecting retention included school climate, teacher salaries, and poverty level. Urban and rural retention don't differ much, which is different than many other states. Higher poverty minority students suffer the most from teacher retention, and it is important we develop high quality leaders as a direct correlation to teacher retention. Dr. Hodges makes several recommendations for examining the data, stating that school types and poverty rates need to be considered in policy making decisions.

Dr. Hodges next presented the Vacancy Report. Within the report, 1.2% of all positions were reported vacant, with the highest vacancy in Special Education, early childhood, and math. It is more difficult to recruit in rural regions than in urban ones; therefore, these rural regions tend to have higher vacancy rates. Upstate had the fewest, with Lowcountry and Pee Dee having the

highest vacancy rates. To address these gaps, we need to identify and retain high quality teachers across the board and examine vacancy compared to FTE positions.

Dr. Hodges then provided several key takeaways regarding vacancies. Vacancies are non-uniform, so the solution to these vacancies cannot be uniform. Therefore, we need to be strategic about existing dollars rather than consider new dollars. Further, how do we use this information to know where to go next? There is something to be said about high quality mentoring in a teacher's first three years in the profession.

Dr. Hodges introduced a new program launching in Charleston, the Charleston Men of Color program aiming to include more men of color in the classroom in their first years of teaching. Embedded in CCAP, there is a focus on microcredentials. CCAP is grounded in knowledge and experience of teachers, all designed by and for SC teachers.

Dr. Hodges next reported on results of a pilot study of teacher exit interviews. All teachers in SC go through exit interviews, but these are often designed by districts and conducted in person, which creates problems for providing honest feedback. Therefore, they adapted the NCCS staff survey in 5 districts who are partners. Dr. Hodges reported the following takeaways: half of educators were engaged in lateral movement and 1 in 5 teachers gain income from other sources/second jobs. The number one reason teachers leave is wanting a job that is more conveniently located; second, early retirement; third, dissatisfaction with the current leadership.

Dr. Hodges reported the following takeaways specific to COVID-19: teachers did not leave for health reasons, but for worry of lack of effectiveness and ability to teach during COVID responsibly. He noted that school boards highly affected teacher departures, and while salary is not a big factor in leaving, it was the #1 factor for teachers deciding if they would return. Dr. Hodges stated that this highlights the need to balance workload compared to salary. When comparing lateral and non-lateral movement, lateral movers had a more negative view of leadership than non-lateral movers. Dean Hodges highlights that lateral movement comes with high cost to the system, and that there is a deep need for robust infrastructure and unified data systems.

Ms. Weaver stated that this was intriguing and that our state is often in triage mode when it comes to teacher retention, and it may make sense to focus on principal development. Ms. Weaver asked if there were currently any prominent factors/programs involved in creating high quality principals. Dr. Hodges replied that SCASA has a leadership development program and while there are pockets of innovation, it is important to look at whether they are talking to each other.

Ms. Barton highlighted issues in effectiveness and inquired about what USC is doing to beef up reading skills. Dean Hodges replied that they use a balanced literacy approach, bringing phonics and reading comprehension together for a balanced approach to literary education.

Sen. Hembree stated that a teacher crisis occurs every year and that concern is exacerbated by COVID-19. As a system, this gives us hope -- 1.2% is a problem, but not a crisis. We need to be real about it and not merely accept narratives that we are provided. Sen. Hembree stated that to make a real difference, we also need improvement in teacher and leader education.

Ms. Weaver stated that Dr. Steiner at the retreat highlighted the need for hands-on education for teachers and inquired if this is happening. Dr. Hodges replied yes, the Dean came to USC for hands-on methods, which is an extremely powerful method of teaching grounded in practice from the beginning.

Ms. Weaver next welcomed Dean George Peterson, who began with a personal story of taking a personal charge to make an innovative department of education. Dr. Peterson highlighted that better prepared teachers are more effective and more likely to stay. Dr. Peterson examined SC teacher standards compared to traditionally prepared teachers. Dr. Peterson highlighted several other programs conducted in his department such as Expressway to TigerTown (students receive high school dual credit, attend technical college, transfer coursework to Clemson, and then can graduate as a Junior Education major.) This program allows students to have the benefits of a four-year education in only three years, with less debt associated with the costs of higher education. Therefore, Dr. Peterson argued, this will increase the diversity of the workforce.

Next, Dr. Peterson highlighted the Online MAT Program. In the first fall and spring of senior year, students can finish their degree and take MAT courses online. Therefore, they are not losing money to get into the teaching field and therefore, we can hopefully bring more teachers to it. Dr. Peterson highlighted his department's study of why elementary teachers stay, finding that the number one reason is efficacy, followed by principal leadership, and salary.

Dr. Peterson next introduced the USDE SEED grant, a new program using artificial intelligence (AI) to personalize development pathways for teachers individually, partnering with 35 schools in 10 districts. Dean Peterson defined education deserts, areas that are not within one hour of a technical college or open access school, highlighting that access to a four-year degree is not equal across the state. Therefore, Dr. Peterson argued, it is critical to provide access to online degrees. The program's key goal is to understand organizational learning and create pathways for teachers while allowing them to stay in their community. Dean Peterson highlighted that the program has demonstrated relatedness and is ready to scale, in order to gather more data and understand where we will be effective. Workforce development will benefit from a degree like this, support communities, increase access to higher education, and decrease costs of college.

Ms. Weaver stated that it is exciting to see how the program is looking past education to increasing access overall. Ms. Weaver posed the question: How do you recognize creativity as an asset, not a liability, and how do we encourage innovation? Dr. Peterson replied that teachers and principals are creative, but that we need to re-examine schools.

Ms. Barton posed the question: How do we think differently about teacher education? The state needs more teachers while at the same time, we should be holding teachers to higher standards. Dean Peterson replies that he agrees and believes that if we think of as many pathways as possible with clear expectations, this could become possible.

Mr. Ferguson asked a clarifying question: Do you receive Department of Education data on how the students of graduates perform once they are teaching in school for system input? Dr. Peterson replied no. Mr. Ferguson asked if this data would be helpful. Dean Peterson replied that yes, it would be -- as innovation requires data. Mr. Ferguson clarified if this was because teachers in residency help transition. Dean Peterson replied that yes, engagement with teachers after they leave is key.

With no more comments, Ms. Weaver provided a closing statement and the meeting adjourned.