

Ferrel Guillory: A Strategy For Struggling Schools

By Administrator
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By Ferrel Guillory, Vice Chairman of Education NC.

North Carolina has a name and a legal definition for its most-struggling schools. But neither the name nor the definition adequately describes schools that as many as 250,000 young North Carolinians attend.

These schools are known as “low-performing.” In law, they are defined as having a performance grade of D or F and as not having exceeded the expected year-to-year rise in students’ scores on standardized tests. By official count, North Carolina has 480 low-performing schools.

And yet, test-score statistics do not capture the full reality of the most-struggling schools. Located in rural communities as well as in metropolitan neighborhoods, these schools are filled with students from lower-income and in-poverty households, many of whom show up with “toxic stress” from their daily living environment. Many of their students have few books in the home or reliable broad-band internet connection. Their school districts have difficulty recruiting and keeping enough well-qualified teachers.

For more than two decades, the state has had these schools on its agenda as a result of the landmark Supreme Court ruling in the still-ongoing *Leandro* case. On the ruling’s 20th anniversary in July 2017, I wrote, “It remains clear that North Carolina will not meet that legal promise of equity in education without an all-out assault on low-performing schools.”

In recent years, no such assault has yet been marshaled. Currently, the state has an array of initiatives, some perhaps promising, but overall disjointed. Several school districts have adopted the “restart” model that gives low-performing schools charter-like administrative flexibility. The Rowan-Salisbury system has become a “renewal” district, which also has a plan for major consolidation. The new Innovative School District is authorized to take over a total of five schools, and now has two. Plus, the UNC system may set up “laboratory” schools in districts where 25 percent of schools are low-performing.

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Meanwhile, the Republican-majority General Assembly offered off-ramps to parents dissatisfied with nearby traditional public schools. The state has authorized more charter schools, as well as a “virtual” charter. It has provided state subsidy to lower-income families for private school tuition. No doubt, parents have found satisfying alternatives for their children, although as a whole both charters and private institutions have a wide range of strong schools and low-performing schools, just as the public system does.

While adopting alternatives and new initiatives, North Carolina also down-graded a systematic, if not very glitzy, effort to turn around its low-performing schools. In 2007-09, the state targeted 130 schools, which received leadership and instructional coaching along with upgraded professional development for teachers and principals.

That effort got a boost in 2010-11 when the state received a Race to the Top grant, part of the Obama administration’s economic stimulus package. An assessment in 2015 by researchers from N.C. State University and Vanderbilt University found that “North Carolina’s lowest-achieving schools in 2009-10 improved their performance during the four years” in which the state had federal assistance. When Race to the Top expired, the legislature did not appropriate state funds to sustain the same level of effort.

What’s more, the legislature mandated \$8 million in cuts to the Department of Public Instruction budget over the past two years. In executing budget cuts, DPI dismissed more than two dozen field staffers assigned to carry out the in-district and in-school turnaround efforts. (For an extended examination of these developments, [click here](#).)

For some elected officials, reducing taxes and cutting bureaucracy have an appeal. But they also have consequences. The recent tension over the ISD selection of a Wayne County elementary school is indicative. The fight centered on the governance and operation of the school; still, it has resulted already in moves to bolster that school. But what about the dozen schools still on the ISD prospect list, and the scores of other low-performing schools with diminished access to instructional support?

In an essay distributed this week, John McArthur of the Brookings Institution proposed three big problems to fix in 2019. He didn’t have the state’s low-performing schools in mind, but he concluded with the relevant-to-North Carolina observation that American society cannot afford

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to leave behind its “marginalized” people.

“All human beings need to be actively included in progress,” he wrote. “It is no longer good enough for societies to succeed on average; they need to succeed for everyone.”

Students in North Carolina’s most-struggling schools are marginalized educationally. And high on its 2019 agenda, North Carolina surely should resume and renew a strategic educational campaign directed toward its most vulnerable students.

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By Ferrel Guillory is the Director of the Program on Public Life, Professor of the Practice at the UNC School of Media and Journalism, and the Vice Chairman of EducationNC.