Decrease in Access to Quality Early Education in NC

By Qi Xing

Among the 40 states and District of Columbia that offer state-funded prekindergarten programs to eligible four-year-olds, North Carolina is considered one of several that has been providing high-quality public early education to at-risk four-year-olds since 2001 (renamed NC PreKindergarten from More at Four in 2011). Despite the national reputation of quality and receipt of the federal Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge Fund, a competitive grant program focusing on improving early learning and development programs for young children, the state is cutting prekindergarten funding and other government subsidies to low-income families through two bills from the 2013-2014 legislative session. This decrease in funding will hurt mostly young children from low-income families in North Carolina.

The first bill is the Current Operations and Capital Improvements Appropriations Act of 2013. In this bill, funding for the NC Pre-Kindergarten program is reduced by nearly $4 million, which leads to a cut of 2,500 slots for 2013-2014 and 2014-2015, in addition to 5,000 slots lost due to the expiration of Governor Perdue’s executive order. This bill also reduced the child care subsidy amount to low-income working families. As a result, more than 1000 low-income families in 10 counties have lost their spots in child care centers or after school programs. This will force some parents to quit their job or school in order to care for their children at home, thus negatively affecting families’ financial well-being.

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Ravitch Calls Recent Ed Legislation in NC “Reprehensible”
By Allison Rose Socol

In a live online chat hosted in December by Talking Points Memo, a Web-based news organization, historian of education Diane Ravitch weighed in on the education legislation passed by the North Carolina General Assembly during the 2013 regular session. Ravitch is a professor at New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. She served as the Assistant Secretary of Education in the administration of President George H.W. Bush. She led the effort to establish national standardized testing and was an early advocate of No Child Left Behind, school vouchers, and charter schools. However, in recent years, Ravitch has changed her mind about school reform.

During the live chat, Ravitch said that to recruit and retain teachers with a high level of content knowledge and pedagogical skills, states must set high standards for entry, pay teachers living wages, and encourage educators to exercise professional autonomy and leadership. But the North Carolina legislature is “reprehensible in their apparent contempt for teachers,” said Ravitch. She cited the General Assembly’s elimination of the North Carolina Teaching Fellows program and their decision to increase funding for Teach for America as evidence that the governor and legislature “prefer inexperienced teachers who won’t stay long.” The NC Teaching Fellows program at UNC Chapel Hill Continued on Page 3
The second bill that has an indirect impact on access to early childhood education is the IRC Update (H82), which is an act to update the reference to the internal revenue code and to decouple from certain provisions of the Federal American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012. In this bill, the state version of Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) was dismantled. The tax credits have been helping low-income working families to pay for basic necessities, like purchasing food, and they also reduce child poverty more than any other program and improve children’s chance of success as adults. As a result of this elimination, children will feel the negative impact too because they benefit when they live in families with adequate resources to meet their basic needs. When a family has difficulty putting food on the table due to the loss of the credits, they will not have the purchase power to enroll their children in a preschool program.

Research has shown that high quality early childhood education yields both individual and societal benefits. Early on that would put extra pressure on the kindergarten teachers who need to teach them skills that they are supposed to learn from preschool.

Despite the current trends to defund public prekindergarten programs in North Carolina and over 20 other states in the country, the importance of early childhood education continues to gain recognition and bipartisan support at the federal level. In November, Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.), and Rep. Richard Hanna (R-N.Y.) introduced the Strong Start for America’s Children Act (S1697) proposing a 10-year initiative aiming to improve and expand high-quality early learning opportunities for children from birth to age five. The bill would fund preschool for 4-year old children from families earning below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), and encourage states to spend their own funds to support preschool for young children with family incomes above that income level. However, we should give policymakers in North Carolina some credit for choosing to shrink the public prekindergarten program instead of compromising the overall quality of the program.

To track the bill Strong Start for America’s Children Act (S1697) in Congress, go to https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/s1697

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“Intelligence plus character--that is the goal of true education.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.
An Open Letter to Former NC Governor James B. Hunt, Jr.

In the fall of 2013, Former NC Gov. Jim Hunt spoke to the UNC community about education in the state of NC. The following letter was written in response to Gov. Hunt's lecture. The complete text of the lecture is available here: http://publicpolicy.unc.edu/about/133292PPALambethLecturePublication2013_d3.pdf

Dear Mr. Hunt,

Having heard you speak at the 2013 Thomas W. Lambeth Lecture, I feel compelled to write this open letter in order to express my sincere gratitude for your unwavering vocal support of public education and public school teachers. Your decision to use this prominent platform to advocate on behalf of the state's educators during these troublesome times was a gesture that speaks to your sincerity regarding the importance of education. It is hugely significant for educators to know that they still have the backing of such distinguished individuals as yourself. Thank you.

Unlike you, I cannot claim to be a native Carolinian. I was not born here. I did not grow up or attend school here. I am, however, passionately invested in the future of North Carolina and in its public education system. I first moved to North Carolina from the United Kingdom to teach children with special educational needs at a middle school in one of the state's large urban districts. It did not take long for me to feel very much at home in the “Old North State.” You speak proudly of your home state, and so you should. North Carolina is a special place, with the astounding natural beauty of its landscape, its fascinating history, and its rich cultural traditions. But what truly sets North Carolina apart from other Southern states is what you described as being its “progressive nature.” To this day, an outsider’s perceptions of the South often default to the heinous history of slavery and images of secession, segregation, and the hard fought battle for civil rights. Thankfully, due to the forward thinking of such visionaries as John Ehringhaus, Terry Sanford, Robert W. Scott, James E. Holshouser, and yourself, North Carolina has emerged as a forerunner within the New South; a bastion of commerce and education. Although there is still much work to be done regarding social and racial equality, North Carolina has come a long way.

Since first arriving in 2004, I have had continual involvement in North Carolina’s public education system. I spent six years working as a classroom teacher, three years as an assistant principal, and I am currently enrolled as a graduate student, working toward a PhD in education policy at UNC-Chapel Hill. I am not writing to you today as a scholar of educational policy wanting to bring your attention to the potential of recent legislation to nullify all of the efforts made in advancing North Carolina’s fortunes and reputation. As was made clear in your speech, you fully understand the imminent threat to public education. Instead, I wish to briefly describe my experiences as a teacher, school administrator, and graduate student over the last nine years, and hopefully add further credence to your arguments made here at UNC.

Without doubt, the proudest moments of my career occurred during my days in the classroom. I cannot think of many jobs that offer the kinds of intrinsic rewards that teaching does. But, as you explained in your speech, teaching is also one of the most challenging jobs in society. Your description of teachers combatting the effects of poverty, hunger, and neglect truly resonated with me.

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Quick Insights

How does student performance in NC compare internationally?

**Math**

87%: Percentage of international education systems that NC surpassed on the TIMSS math test. NC students scored higher than 41 of 47 participating international education systems.

**Science**

81%: Percentage of international education systems that NC surpassed on the TIMSS science test. NC students scored higher than 38 of 47 participating international education systems.

Comparisons are made using the 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) assessment for 8th grade students in math and science. Reported results are from the 2013 IES report U.S. States in a Global Context.
Recruiting undergraduate students to teaching by supporting them with a full-time scholarship. Fellows participated in four years of work with youth in schools and enrolled in education courses.

Ravitch also spoke about the General Assembly’s decision to eliminate the “master’s bump.” Until this year, teachers could earn approximately 10% more per year by obtaining a master’s degree. In July 2013, Governor Pat McCrory signed a budget bill that eliminated automatic pay increases for teachers with advanced degrees. Teachers who will graduate from master’s programs after May 2014, even those who are already enrolled and have completed coursework, will not be eligible for this additional salary. Ravitch said that taking away a stipend for additional professional development sends a signal that education doesn’t matter. Although, she acknowledged that not all master’s degrees are equal. “I wouldn’t pay anyone extra for a masters’ degree in cooking or basket weaving. But I would definitely pay extra for a masters’ degree in the subject being taught,” she said. “At present, NC treats teachers very shabbily, and it will hurt the kids and the schools for years to come,” said Ravitch.

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What the state legislature needs to understand is something that you already know; the role of the teacher goes far beyond academic instruction. Public school teachers are on the frontline fighting against social inequality on behalf of their students, and wider society, every day, and I challenge any skeptic to spend some time volunteering in a public school to witness and understand the lived reality of a teacher. Teachers should be admired and praised for their dedication under such compelling circumstances. And yet, as you so powerfully argued, political discourse on teachers in recent times has been largely disrespectful. A multi-year salary freeze has resulted in North Carolina now being ranked 45th in the nation for teacher pay. The vast majority of teachers did not enter the profession for the money, and they remain dedicated to their students in spite of the attempts by legislators to question their competence and work ethic, but this is immoral.

As a school administrator, I had the opportunity to observe a range of teachers at work in their classrooms. I am speaking from experience when I say that North Carolina has a large number of highly skilled teachers; teachers whose professionalism, creativity, and caring inspire students and changes lives. But how much longer can teachers be expected to continue to absorb the cost of cuts in funding to education? When we devalue our teachers, it is our students who stand to pay the price.

Mr. Hunt, please know that there are many people living in North Carolina who share your concerns. It is an unfortunate truth that all of the progress made toward building North Carolina’s strong education system and economy could easily be reversed. I, for one, do not intend to sit back and allow this demise to become a reality, and I call upon all other people who agree with this sentiment to follow your lead and speak up.

Sincerely,

Mark Johnson

Mark Johnson is a Ph.D. student in Education at UNC-Chapel Hill

Join us for the UNC School of Education 2014 Education Policy Colloquium Series

This year’s topic is Leveraging Educational Research for Action and Advocacy

Ted Fiske (former Education Editor of The New York Times)

Getting the Word Out: Using Your Research to Craft Opinion-Editorials (Op-Eds)

Wednesday, February 12
12 - 1pm, 02 Peabody Hall, UNC-Chapel Hill

Judith Rizzo (The Hunt Institute)

Building and Sustaining an Advocacy Coalition: The Story of the Common Core and the Use of Research Evidence in It

Wednesday, March 5
12 - 1pm, 02 Peabody Hall, UNC-Chapel Hill