

HOPE AND HUMAN SUFFERING (The Hope of Children)

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all.

--Emily Dickinson

Secure in the knowledge that vast numbers of South Carolina's children are suffering, we have been greeted each morning for weeks with headlines that South Carolina's Public Schools are in a crisis and that our state's elected leader is rejecting stimulus funds from the Federal Government. Yet education is a fundamental human right guaranteed to every child in South Carolina in our constitutional covenant.

According to independent estimates, South Carolina ranks 51st in the nation in high school graduation rates. 53.8% of children entering the 9th grade graduate from high school in South Carolina.

The high school crisis is concentrated in South Carolina's "drop-out factories" – schools where 60% or fewer of the students progress to the 12th grade in four years. There are 96 school drop-out factories in South Carolina.

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, in addition to those who drop out, up to another third of the students graduate from these drop-out factories without the knowledge and skills necessary for success in college or in the workplace. These individuals face serious economic challenges throughout their lives.

South Carolina's low graduation rate has a negative economic impact on its communities and the entire state. The impact is great.

What are the potential economic benefits to individuals and the state of South Carolina of investing in an improved education system where people graduate from high school in larger numbers? What are the dollar benefits of relieving this suffering?

- More than 28,000 students did not graduate from South Carolina's high schools in 2008; the lost lifetime earnings in South Carolina for that one class of drop-outs alone totals more than \$7.4 billion.

Steve Morison

Presented on the occasion of receiving the "Spirit of Democracy" Award

From

The S.C. League of Women Voters

April 18, 2009

- South Carolina would save more than \$320 million in healthcare costs over the course of the lifetimes of each class of drop-outs had they earned their diplomas.
- South Carolina households would have over \$1.3 billion in accumulated wealth if all heads of household had graduated from high school.
- More than \$2.6 billion would be added to South Carolina's economy by 2020 if students of color graduated at the same rate as white students.
- If South Carolina's high schools graduated all students ready for college, the State would save over \$54 million a year in community college remediation costs alone.
- South Carolina's economy would see a combined of savings and revenue of over \$150 million in reduced crime spending and increased earnings each year if the male high school graduation rate increased by just 5%.

And then there's the suffering...

W. H. Auden, a Nobel Prize winning poet in his poem *Musee des Beaux Arts* describes the casual nature of our response to much human suffering eloquently. Inspired by the Artistry of a great master depicting the scene in which Icarus, having flown too close to the sun, drops to his death in the sea while the rest of the world goes on taking little notice or turning away, he writes:

About suffering they were never wrong,
 The old masters; how well, they understood
 Its human position; how it takes place
 While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
 How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
 For the miraculous birth, there always must be
 Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
 On a pond at the edge of the wood:
 They never forgot
 That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
 Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
 Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the tortuous horse
 Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
 In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
 Quite leisurely from the disaster; plowman may
 Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
 But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
 As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
 Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,

Steve Morison

Presented on the occasion of receiving the "Spirit of Democracy" Award

From

The S.C. League of Women Voters

April 18, 2009

Had somewhere to go and sailed calmly on.

We can, like the delicate expensive ship, sail on, turning away from the human suffering represented by these statistics because we have somewhere to get to. We can, on the other hand, say that when only 25% of South Carolina's eighth graders read at a proficient level, it is too much human suffering. When only 10% of South Carolina's black eighth graders read at a proficient level that is unacceptable human suffering. When only 15% of Hispanic South Carolina's eighth graders read at a proficient level, too, that is unacceptable. We could say that when 89% of our low income children in the eighth grade read below a proficient level, meaning below grade level, we are dooming another generation of children to a cycle of ignorance and poverty and despair. We could look that human suffering squarely in the eye.

If South Carolina's high schools and colleges were to raise graduation rates of Hispanic, African-American, and Native American students to the levels of white students by 2020, the potential increase in personal income in the state would add more than \$2.6 billion to South Carolina's economy.

Who makes a difference in the lives of these individual children? Who relieves the human suffering? Teachers. This year more than 6,880 teachers in South Carolina will not be returning to school where they taught last year. What's more, replacing these individuals could cost the state up to \$75 million. In the school districts where the drop-out factories number the greatest, we provide our children with the lowest paid teachers, the fewest teachers with advanced degrees, the most teachers who do not speak English as a first language, the most teachers with substandard certificates, and the most substitute teachers. We provide these teachers with the least adequate infrastructure, the oldest books, the oldest school buildings, and the lowest levels of leadership support, social services support and technology support.

In the face of this, our state leadership has capitulated -- recommending that teachers' salaries be frozen and the major incentive for teacher advancement to the true level of expertise be cut and refusing federal help designed specifically to reach our children.

Our drop-out factory districts already have the highest teacher turn-over and are the least able to attract and retain highly qualified teachers.

In 1992, some of the superintendents of the state's poorest and most isolated public school districts banded together to champion the fundamental right to an education for every child regardless of race, wealth or geography. The case continues today in South Carolina's Supreme Court. We have the honor of representing those superintendents and their children. Our claim is simple. In South Carolina, if you are born black and poor and in the country, the quality of your education is inadequate, awful and unconstitutional. By virtue, then, of the accidents of the place where they are born, many of our children are doomed to a continuing

Steve Morison

Presented on the occasion of receiving the "Spirit of Democracy" Award

From

The S.C. League of Women Voters

April 18, 2009

cycle of poor education, ignorance, poverty and despair. The struggle for education justice in South Carolina is brilliantly chronicled in Dr. Tom Truitt's recent book, Going Up the River of Shame and Bud Ferrilo's award winning documentary "Corridor of Shame."

Let me tell you a bit about the children we represent and the conditions in their schools and what we believe the constitution requires. First, we adults have a legal and moral covenant with each child in South Carolina. We have promised all of our children safe and adequate facilities where they will have the opportunity to:

1. Learn to read, write and speak the English language and gain a fundamental knowledge of mathematics and physical sciences.
2. Gain an understanding of economic, social and political systems and government processes and history; and
3. Develop academic and vocational skills.

Note the genius of the structure. First we covenant to provide an individual skill set: reading, writing, speaking, math, and science—a skill set which prepares a child to understand and interact with the world around them, a world of ideas and things and people. Second, we covenant to provide each child with ways of interacting with the broader world of economics, politics and society and a knowledge of what has gone on before—history—and how to get things done—government processes. Finally, we promise them the opportunity to think and do through education—to learn for a lifetime and to earn for a lifetime, academic and vocational skills.

If these are our constitutional covenants, who are our children and how are we doing? The children we represent are rural and poor in S.C. If you are rural and poor, you are black. The children we represent are ninety plus percent African-American and ninety plus percent on free and reduced lunch. Many of the working mothers of our children must leave for work before dawn and certainly before their children are sent to school so they can wait tables, clean rooms, cook or serve in coastal resort communities. They return home by bus in the evening well after school is out and their children are home. They work hard just to provide food, shelter and clothing. Most of our children have no books or reading material in their homes and few adults to read to them. They begin school with a 3000-5000 word vocabulary. Their parents probably have not graduated from high school, much less college. In contrast, a middle-class child with a college-educated mother starts school with a vocabulary of 30,000-50,000 words. Still, the mothers we represent love their children. They want the best for them. They want them to be educated. And our children arrive at school bright eyed and curious and in the 32nd percentile of readiness to learn.

So what happens? Our poor rural African-American children in need of the greatest excellence in education are given the least...the least educated teachers, the least prepared teachers, the

Steve Morison

Presented on the occasion of receiving the "Spirit of Democracy" Award

From

The S.C. League of Women Voters

April 18, 2009

least experienced teachers, the least stable faculty, the least experienced principals and administrators, the oldest school buildings, the least adequate labs, libraries and technical support, and the fewest opportunities for year-round, day-long learning.

If we systematically provide our children with the greatest needs with the fewest resources, what outcomes do we get? We regularly get the lowest reading and math scores, the lowest SATs, the lowest graduation rates and the highest drop-out rates. We know that if a child does not graduate from high school, that child has a 35% chance of ending up in jail and a 65% chance of ending up on welfare as an adult.

If you want a safer South Carolina, teach a boy or girl to read.

If you want a healthier South Carolina, teach a girl or boy basic science and math.

If you want a wealthier, more competitive South Carolina, educate all of our children at least through high school.

What is the alternative? What if we continue to choose not to keep our covenants with our children? Every day of our one hundred and three days of trial in Manning, S.C. we drove by a little cinder block church on a side street near the courthouse square. One day the sign outside advertising the Sunday sermon said, "To hold a man down, you must stay with him." If South Carolina continues to hold her poor, black, isolated children down, then South Carolina must stay with them, remaining last where she wants to be first and first where she wants to be last. We can change this. We must. Education justice is a matter of economic justice. It is a matter of social justice. And it is a matter of racial justice.

Our poorest and most isolated African-American rural students need just three things: a great teacher in every classroom, an environment that surrounds those teachers giving them the full-time ability to teach (providing them with leadership, training, technology, safe and adequate facilities, and a nurturing environment where they can grow and meet the challenges of the children they are teaching), and our children, if they fall behind or begin behind, need additional time with those great teachers in that nurturing, safe, adequate environment. If we provide our children with great teachers at every turn, even our poorest and most isolated children from the deepest poverty in the state of South Carolina achieve at remarkable levels. We can test them all we want and they will pass. We just need to give them a chance to pass the test.

How, then, does it make sense to freeze teachers' salaries and reject help when teachers and children are the investment that will lead our economy in the future?

Steve Morison

Presented on the occasion of receiving the "Spirit of Democracy" Award

From

The S.C. League of Women Voters

April 18, 2009

Seamus Heany, another Nobel Prize winning poet, is far more eloquent on the issue of hope in the face of suffering than I could ever be. He wrote in "The Cure at Troy":

Human beings suffer
they torture one another
they get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
can fully right a wrong
inflicted or endured.

The innocent in gaols
beat on their bars together.
A hunger-striker's father
stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
faints at the funeral home

History says, Don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up
and hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
on the far side of revenge.
Believe that a future shore
is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
and cures and healing wells.

Call the miracle self-healing:
The utter self revealing
double take of feeling.
If there is fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
the outcry and the birth-cry
of new life at its term.

Steve Morison
Presented on the occasion of receiving the "Spirit of Democracy" Award
From
The S.C. League of Women Voters
April 18, 2009

While I breathe, I hope for the future of our children and an adequate education for all of them. It cannot begin by rejecting federal help and freezing teacher salaries.

Steve Morison

Presented on the occasion of receiving the “Spirit of Democracy” Award

From

The S.C. League of Women Voters

April 18, 2009

Steve Morison
Presented on the occasion of receiving the “Spirit of Democracy” Award
From
The S.C. League of Women Voters
April 18, 2009