

Transforming South Carolina by Transforming Children of Poverty

Dr. Jim Rex

State Superintendent of Education

Suite 1006

1429 Senate Street

Columbia, SC 29201

Transforming South Carolina by Transforming Children of Poverty

In 2010, Bryan Coburn, Debbie Moore, and Derenda Marshall all became finalists for South Carolina's Teacher of the Year. Bryan was ultimately tapped for the state's top honor while Debbie and Derenda each served as one of four Honor Roll teachers. Here is what makes their recognition and selection so remarkable: all three were children who grew up in lower socio-economic homes.

Debbie (Moore, 2009-10) describes herself as a quiet little girl. Her hair tangled, her clothes worn, she was one of eight children living in a "small rundown house by the edge of the main road." She told us that when she took the school bus that first exciting day, she arrived without any school supplies—no pencils, no paper. In fact, it hadn't crossed her mind to bring a pencil as she had never even held one. She entered school already behind—unprepared to begin reading and writing.

As Debbie tells it, her teacher gave her an odd look, "You didn't bring a pencil or paper?" she asked. "You're one of those Wright kids, aren't you? Just how many more kids does your mom have at home?" Debbie was poor, she was unprepared, and she came without parental support. She did not realize until much later that she had been labeled and marginalized. In fact, it was not until the sixth grade that a teacher finally embraced this bright child who was eager to learn. "All of a sudden, I started to shine," she remembers, "I was a star in her eyes, and that made me want to be a star in my eyes too."

Looking back through a teacher's eyes, she wonders why she wasn't seen as "a diamond in the rough." Today, she sees each of her students as beautiful gems. "Some of these gems have been kept safe, polished and shined repeatedly," she explains, "while

others have been left on a shelf, tossed in a drawer, or even dropped a time or two. That doesn't mean that they've lost their value. They just need a little more polish and work to bring out their shine. That's okay, because I've got that time and polish. I care about my students. I want them to shine. I'm a teacher."

The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) reports that in 2009, South Carolina had 591,014 families with 1,049,241 children. Of those children, **19 percent**, or **196,803**, lived in poverty. Today, a poor family, as defined by the federal government's poverty index (FPL), is a family of four with an income of \$22,050 or less. However, the NCCP is quick to point out that poverty's reality is markedly different. The Center notes that in 2009, a family of four actually needs an income of about twice the federal poverty level to meet basic needs. Poverty, they explain, is still being measured by an outdated standard developed in the 1960s (NCCP, 2010).

I agree with researcher Richard D. Young, Director of Governmental Research at the University of South Carolina's Institute for Public Service and Policy Research. He authored *An Overview: Poverty in America with Some Focus on South Carolina* (Young, 2005) and writes that poverty in our state is *ubiquitous*. "South Carolina has a particularly high concentration of impoverished persons," Young says (2005, p.1). "It exists in both urban areas as well as rural areas of the state. It affects men and women, young and old, and all ethnic and racial groups" (2005, p. 9).

When reviewing the common causes of poverty, Young first lists **inadequate education**. "Lack of educational attainment is a major cause of poverty. . . . Without the knowledge, skills and abilities derived from the completion of high school, college, and/or technical schools, individuals are at very high risk of being poor" (2005, p. 5).

Second on Young's list is **family composition and circumstances** (Young, 2005, p. 5). In a discussion paper titled *The Impact of Family Income on Child Achievement* (Institute for Research on Poverty, discussion paper no.1305-05), co-writers Gordon Dahl (University of Rochester and NBER) and Lance Lochner (University of Western Ontario and NBER) (Dahl, 2005) write, "Researchers have provided several explanations for why family income might affect child development. First, poverty is associated with increased levels of parental stress, depression, and poor health-conditions which might adversely affect parents' ability to nurture their children. . . . Low income parents also report a higher level of frustration and aggravation with their children, and these children are more likely to have poor verbal development and exhibit higher levels of distractibility and hostility in the classroom" (Parker et. al, 1999). Single parent homes and children living with grandparents or guardians other than parents also factor into poverty's reach.

Young's third common cause of poverty is **disability**. In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that "families with members with a disability were more likely than other families to live in poverty." Further, in 2000, **14.7 percent** of South Carolina families had a member with a disability (Young, 2005).

Derenda's (Marshall, 2009-10) mother suffered from serious, debilitating health issues. Her father worked two jobs to make ends meet. She seldom saw him. A grandmother, who came to "help," tended to be verbally abusive; in fact, yelling and screaming became the norm once she arrived. "Life in my household was not always easy. Despite everything, my mother was always there to help me study. Although she had only finished the sixth grade, she did the best she could. She was determined that I would

go to college, receive an excellent education, and fulfill my dream of becoming a teacher.”

Derenda recalls several saving graces during her “wonder years.” She remembers how much it meant to have her mother wave goodbye and send her off to school with a “Have a great day. I know you can do it!” She returned home each afternoon to find Mom on the porch eager to learn about her day. After listening to all the adventures, discoveries, and accomplishments, she’d say, “Let’s get started on tonight’s lessons.”

Derenda also credits her sixth-grade teacher with positively impacting her life. “Mrs. Gilliam told me, ‘You can do better and you will.’ when I did not turn in my best work. She helped me advance in math by trusting me to calculate the class book orders. Knowing I loved to read and my family did not have extra money, she made sure I also got books from the order.” Derenda also loved the hands-on experiences in her seventh-grade science class that helped her make connections to the world around her.

Derenda’s mom lived to see her become a teacher. Derenda has taught for 25 years, 22 of them in Title I schools. She explains, “As a product of a lower socio-economic home, I am devoted to teaching in schools where poverty levels are high, challenges are numerous and students are at-risk. I believe my greatest contributions to education are helping all students be the best they can and inspiring them to succeed by believing in and pursuing their dreams.”

Seventy-five percent of South Carolina’s students attend Title I schools(NAEP, 2010). I am inspired by the tenacity demonstrated by teachers like Derenda who choose to teach in these schools. They are determined that children of poverty succeed, and many

give beyond what is required. The Teacher of the Year application asks each nominee to explain what the most pressing issue is in education. Several years ago, the answers varied. Some discussed PACT scores or the irregularities in the No Child Left Behind legislation. Some talked about teacher recruitment or retention. Interestingly, over the past four years, the teachers, statewide, are expressing grave concerns about poverty's shadow on the lives of South Carolina's children. Many of our teachers proactively take matters into their own hands.

There is Brenda (Kuhfuss, 2005-06) in Greenville, who rides the school bus home with her students during the first week of school to see where they live. She follows up with a home visit and makes notes: one child has no food in the pantry; one child has a parent in prison; one child has no bed or blanket to sleep on; another no coat; another no books in the house and no school supplies. The list is an eye-opener.

Brenda takes this list to several denominations within her school's assigned attendance area. Every year, people generously donate. Brenda and her husband then load up his pick-up truck with bunk beds, blankets, a kitchen table, food, sweaters and coats, books to read, pencils and paper, and they make deliveries.

Brenda knows first hand that a child who does not get a good night's sleep or comes to class with a rumbling stomach cannot learn.

There's Tim (Bunch, 2004-05), an English teacher at DJJ who, even after being assaulted by a student, chooses to work behind the barbed wire fence. With his own money, he buys each of his students a new journal. Together, they write some of the most moving poetry you will ever read. For the first time in some of these young men's lives, they feel that they are good at something and someone cares about them.

Demetrius (Williams, 2005-06), from Horry County, grew up in an impoverished community outside of Conway. Her mother, who worked long, hard hours as a maid in Myrtle Beach, encouraged her daughter to have what she did not—a college education. Demetrius studied hard and on a full scholarship graduated from college with honors. New teaching credential in hand, she could have taught at any school district in the state. But Demetrius knew where she was needed. She returned to her hometown where she teaches at an elementary school during the day and provides classes for parents at a cooperating church in the evening.

Bryan Coburn (2010) also grew up in a low socio-economic home. He is quick to point out that it was filled with a strong work ethic and family pride. Times were still difficult. Thursday evenings the family of four traditionally had crackers and peanut butter for the evening meal—knowing that Dad’s check would not arrive until the next day. On Friday nights, he remembers a big treat: popcorn and one glass of Pepsi, which was poured into a small jam jar. It became a great contest among the siblings to see how long they could make their jar of soda last.

Although many of Bryan’s classmates were much better off, he recalls no disparities in the classroom. His teachers were excellent and never made him feel that he had less than others. In fact, their expectations for him were high.

As Bryan prepared to attend college on a Pell grant, his father was completing his associate degree. Once his dad earned a degree, things picked up financially for the family. For Bryan, it drove home the importance of education.

When asked how he addresses issues of poverty in his classrooms, especially in light of tight economic times for a growing number of students, Bryan says, “I talk

frankly with students who have poverty issues. I tell them that poverty doesn't define who you are. I assure them that it is a temporary situation that can be rectified by education. It's funny," he reflects, "a lot of those students think of teachers as wealthy. You have to let them know that you understand."

Bryan also says he sees more students shouldering some of the financial burdens. "Students will talk about Mom being laid off or Dad looking for a job. You can see the economic strain in their faces. Most kids work so that they can buy extra items for themselves; these kids work to put food on the table or gas in the family car."

I believe that the estimate of **196,803** South Carolina children living in poverty is low. As the recession lengthens, that number continues to grow. Education and educators hold keys that can open doors for children of poverty. The Center of Excellence to Prepare Teachers of Children of Poverty is a critical component in the battle against poverty in the Pee Dee. Educators can't do it alone. The South Carolina legislators have to step up.

We are experiencing a serious financial crisis in South Carolina. School districts begin this school year with \$750 million less in state funding than they began with two years ago. The state's Base Student Cost, the fundamental building block of financing for local school districts, has been cut to levels not seen since 1995.

Schools have eliminated as many as 6,000 positions in the last two years, including up to 4,000 classroom teaching jobs. Teachers who remain employed are seeing salary freezes and pay cuts. Local districts are projecting between 64,000 and 78,000 classroom teacher furlough days, which would mean lost wages of between \$17 million and \$20 million for teachers alone (Rex, 2010).

As teaching positions are cut, student-teacher ratios are worsening and classrooms are becoming more crowded. Programs from art to music to foreign language are being cut. Critical after-school learning centers, reading support programs, and more are being cut. Parents are being forced to pay increased fees for in-school and after-school activities. And in the midst of this turmoil, voucher lobbyists financed with out-of-state money continue to seek public tax subsidies for private school tuitions.

Educators, parents, and businessmen and women must demand that the legislators revisit Act 388. That 2006 change in South Carolina's tax system is not only crippling, but it threatens to marginalize many of the hard-fought gains made over the past decade. We need to work on a comprehensive review of tax policy with the goal of providing fair and equitable funding for every public school in South Carolina.

Children cannot control the family financial situation. Indeed, the source of their poverty is irrelevant. It is our responsibility as adults to provide an opportunity for every child in South Carolina to experience not a minimally adequate but an exceptional education. When we create a fair, equitable, and fully funded public school system, we also create a workforce of productive citizens.

On January 20, 1937, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave his second inaugural address, he said, "I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day by day. . . . The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little" (Roosevelt, 1937).

I agree. Only when we provide an exceptional education for all of our students, will we lift our state out of the throes of poverty.

References

- Bunch, T. (2004-05). *South Carolina State Teacher of the Year Application*
- Coburn, B. (May 2010). Telephone interview with Gardner-Jones, K.
- Dahl, G., Lochner, L. (2005). p.4. *The Impact of Family Income on Child Achievement*
Retrieved from <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/dps/pdfs/dp/130505.pdf>
- Kuhfuss, B. (2005-06). *South Carolina State Teacher of the Year Application*
- Marshall, D. (2009-10). *South Carolina State Teacher of the Year Application*
- Moore, D. (2009-10). *South Carolina State Teacher of the Year Application*
- NAEP-State Profiles. Retrieved June 4, 2010 from
<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>
- National Center for Children in Poverty. Retrieved May 14, 2010 from
http://www.nccp.org/profiles/state_profile.php?state=SC&id=7
- Rex, J. (2010). Author. South Carolina Department of Education
- Roosevelt, F.D. (1937). Second Inaugural Address, paragraphs 24 and 29
Retrieved from www.bartleby.com/124/pres50.html
- Williams, D. (2005-06). *South Carolina State Teacher of the Year Application*
- Young, R. (2005). *An Overview: Poverty in America with Some Focus on South Carolina*. (pp. 1-9). Retrieved from <http://www.ipspr.sc.edu/ejournal>