



## **Legislative Agenda for 2024**

### *Executive Summary*

The South Carolina Education Association (The SCEA) believes that a free, high-quality public education is a right of every child. Public education serves as the backbone of our state in ensuring the health of our democracy, development of our economy, and strength of our communities.

To ensure that all children in South Carolina receive the highest quality education, The SCEA recommends that the General Assembly abide by Article XI of the SC Constitution and pursue the following actions:

### **Ensure Equitable & Effective Education Funding**

#### **1. Fully Fund Public Schools**

The General Assembly should ensure equitable opportunities for students of all abilities and post-secondary education pathways. Expecting school districts to add additional funds at the local level fails to meet the State Constitution's requirement to provide free and accessible public education to all students.

It also limits student opportunity by zip code and the ability of their localities to provide additional funds. Furthermore, no public money should be used to fund private school vouchers in any form.

#### **2. Tax Abatement Reduction**

Tax abatements took \$534 million from South Carolina public schools in fiscal year 2021 and \$2.2 billion over the past five years according to "Good Jobs First." Those figures add up to South Carolina public schools losing more revenue to tax abatements than any other state in the nation.

Legislation to exempt schools and school operations from tax abatements must be adopted. The SCEA suggests the following to alleviate the loss of revenue to our schools.

- a) School districts should receive 20 percent of the tax abatement profits from the businesses to whom they are provided.
- b) School districts/educators should have a "seat at the table" when the tax abatement agreements are made with perspective businesses.
- c) Accountability to the tax abatement and the stipulations should be required to ensure the businesses are complying with the agreement.

- d) There should be a time limit for tax abatements that are reasonable, allowing less revenue loss for public schools.

### **3. Fund the Outcome**

Our current education system fails to equally prioritize all targets of the Profile of a South Carolina Graduate. To foster life and career characteristics, the General Assembly must fully fund opportunities for students to pursue vocational learning and dual credit coursework to ensure they graduate ready for post-secondary education pathways.

### **4. Prioritize the Classroom**

A high quality, effective classroom teacher in every classroom is the most important contributing factor to student achievement. To maximize teacher effectiveness, state funding should be prioritized to:

- a) Reduce class sizes and caseloads by at least 10 to promote individualized instruction. For example, high school classes should have no more than 25 students per class and elementary classes no more than 20.
- b) Provide all South Carolina educators daily duty-free lunch and daily instructional planning time, free from interruption.
- c) Provide all students, educators, and school staff in South Carolina with equal and reliable access to support services such as school/career counselors, mental healthcare professionals, social workers, nurses, student resource officers, bus aides, and teacher aides.
- d) Increase the classroom supply fund at a rate that maintains pace with inflation.

## **Respect Educators as Professionals**

### **1. Provide Competitive Compensation**

South Carolina is facing a historic educator and school staff shortage crisis. In a 2022 nationwide study, increased pay was the number one factor to address burnout and increase retention according to surveyed educators and school staff. According to the NEA annual Rankings and Estimates report, South Carolina ranks 37<sup>th</sup> nationally for average teacher pay and 40<sup>th</sup> for starting teacher pay. Wages for educators and education support professionals both fall far below the minimum livable wage for South Carolina's most affordable metro areas according to the Economic Policy Institute. The charge of the General Assembly is clear.

For the state to become competitive and attract and retain the most talented educators and ESPs, a fully funded investment in raises to a minimum \$50,000 for all teachers and a minimum of \$36,000 for all support staff must be made. In addition, the state must add, and fund step increases to year 28 to ensure all districts may better retain veteran educators.

Additionally, the state must ensure that districts fairly compensate all educators for trainings,

meetings, and extracurricular activities attended outside of their contracted workday.

## **2. Increase Unencumbered Time**

Education Support Professionals must be given sufficient unencumbered time for a daily break of 30 minutes and any necessary transition time in duties must be accounted for and included in their working hours.

Teachers must be provided daily duty-free lunch and daily instructional planning time free from interruption.

While elementary school and special education teachers will be guaranteed 30 minutes of duty-free unencumbered time by July of 2023, unlike many of our surrounding and competing states, South Carolina has no law that requires educators daily guaranteed time for instructional planning and preparation. Also, some districts provide one or both types of unencumbered time to teachers each day, but many give teachers no non-instructional or duty-free time during their workday.

Therefore, teachers spend many hours beyond what they are contracted for planning lessons, contacting families, evaluating students, and completing administrative duties. Teacher-directed preparation time and time free from duty for lunch should be protected from interruption during the school day.

Furthermore, time spent in classroom preparation or in any other school events outside of the teacher's contracted workdays and times should be respected with further compensation.

## **3. Reduce Burdensome Paperwork**

South Carolina requires a rigorous certification and licensure process for state educators that includes a renewal requirements every five years. Once properly licensed, educators should be respected as professionals without the need for burdensome certification filings, redundant annual trainings, and additional coursework paid at the expense of the teacher.

The state should streamline the certification accountability requirements so that after the initial licensure process is met, a Lifetime Certificate will be granted without objection after 3 years of certificated teaching.

In addition, the Read to Succeed Act and requirements to achieve a Read to Succeed endorsement must be repealed.

## **4. Produce a Fair and Equitable Contract**

Educators must be treated as professionals starting from the date they sign their contracts. Most often, contracts for educators in South Carolina offer no benefit or protection while allowing significant leeway for districts and administrators. Teacher contracts must become more equitable for educators.

While many issues in teacher contracts need to be addressed, the following must be included:

- a) A later contract acceptance date — when educators are offered reemployment by their district,

they must accept that offer before May 10 — often before the district determines staffing assignments for the coming year and certainly ahead of any updated information regarding pay for the upcoming year. Educators should be given a grace period to be released from their contract to make the right decision for themselves and their families without fear of reprisal.

b) Educators need to understand the compensation and benefits they are accepting and who maintains and adjusts their benefits. Contracts must be required to clearly outline all benefits and compensation provided, clearly delineating which benefits are provided by the district and which are provided by the state and how the educator accepting the contract may find more detailed information about each benefit.

c) The number of days worked per year, the daily hours, the years' experience, the worksite and subject taught.

## **5. Incentivize Careers in Hard-to-Staff Regions**

The statewide teacher shortage disproportionately affects hard-to-staff areas of our state. The state should incentivize teacher commitments to hard-to-staff regions by:

a) Forgiving teacher student loan debt to encourage teacher relocation.

b) Providing home payment assistance, providing funding for districts to create “teacher housing villages,” or instituting state-funded teacher residency programs so that teachers can afford to live in the same communities in which they work.

c) Rewarding teachers with state-funded service bonuses for consecutive years of work in those school districts.

d) Providing state-funded increases to the state salary schedule to year 28 to help hard-to-staff districts retain veteran educators.

## **6. Improve Teacher Recruitment & Retention Programs**

Training and mentoring South Carolina educators should be a priority of the state. Rather than watering down the professionalism of the education field, the General Assembly must find more ways to increase and retain the pool of highly trained educators in South Carolina.

For recruitment, this must include expanding the LIFE Scholarship to education majors and paying student-teachers an apprenticeship stipend. In addition, expanding and funding “grow your own” educator pathway programs will help increase the pool of new teacher recruits in our state. Revisiting the rules governing the employment of veteran, retired teachers would help schools maintain an experienced educator workforce.

In addition, 50% of new educators leave during their first five years of teaching, most often citing lack of support for their reason for leaving the profession. To increase support, mentorship must be well-funded and respected by ensuring all mentors have adequate training to be effective and reasonable caseloads, as well as state-funded stipends and non-instructional time to directly observe and

support early career teachers.

First year educators should be further supported by implementing a co-teaching model for educators to teach with an experienced veteran educator in their first year.

Further, to ensure retention, state-funded mentorship should extend for at least the first three years of an educator's career with a mentor in a relevant content area and grade level.

Finally, to respect the investment of time teachers must make to recertify and keep their expertise current, the General Assembly must fund a stipend outside the classroom supply fund for recertification and required professional development if lifetime certification is not passed.

## **7. Trust Educators as Education Experts**

Educators are highly trained and experienced in the field of education and the content they teach; they believe in their duty to set their students up to be successful contributors to society.

The General Assembly should seek to protect the relationship and community between parents, educators, and schools and to respect the frontline expertise of educators by refraining from passing any legislation that limits what history our children can learn and what books they can read.

In addition, educators should have the freedom to teach the honest, complete facts about historical events without political censorship, undue scrutiny, or top-down bureaucratic policies and processes that impede timely, natural communication between educators and parents.

## **8. Provide Comprehensive Benefits**

An important way to reward public service is to keep promises made to educators and school staff regarding their benefits by maintaining and funding the current defined-benefit retirement plan for all educators and extending a health benefit that includes affordable enhanced dental, vision, prescription drug coverage, and hearing aids.

Additionally, the state should require districts to offer a sick leave bank to all public-school employees and should pay employees their daily rate for any unused sick leave beyond 90 days while actively employed.

## **Provide an Education of Excellence**

### **1. Increase Learning Time**

Standardized tests fail to properly evaluate student learning and yet a significant portion of the school calendar is dedicated to this manner of testing, nonetheless. Meaningful lessons that are culturally relevant and engage students in authentic learning experiences are being sacrificed to prepare students for these tests.

The state should eliminate all non-mandatory testing and explore applying for a flexibility waiver to further reduce those tests that are required by federal law.

Furthermore, educators are highly trained in assessment, evaluation, and intervention for student growth. Educators should be given the highest possible degree of autonomy to select the best way to authentically measure student growth.

## **2. Invest in Student and Educator Wellness**

Due to the disruption posed by the pandemic and the systemic defunding of education support staff, it is critical that resources for addressing mental health be made accessible to more families, students, and educators.

The mental health crisis is a complex problem with complex, comprehensive solutions that must be the shared responsibility of everyone who touches young people's lives, including the General Assembly. First, the legislature must fund and take action to get mental health resources to families and caregivers.

The next critical element is to remove the stigma around mental health and fund training for educators and school staff to talk to students about awareness of their feelings and signals of mental health problems.

Further, educators and school staff are impacted by the same factors affecting the mental health of students and require comprehensive mental health support.

The state should make serious investments in programs and curricula that encourage the development of holistic wellness and that encourage the de-stigmatizing of mental health issues and partner with local mental health professionals to provide on-site mental health care services for students, educators, and school staff.

South Carolina must provide funding for public schools for counselors and social workers at a ratio of 250:1, the ratio most recently recommended by the American School Counselor Association and the National Association of Social Workers, as well as comprehensive training for teachers, families, and community members to recognize when a student is experiencing a mental health crisis and how to get help for them.

## **3. Invest in School Safety**

Schools should be the safest place in any community. The pandemic has exacerbated existing school safety issues. According to a survey from the American Psychological Association, one-third of teachers report that they experienced at least one incident of verbal harassment or threat of violence from students during the pandemic.

At least 18% of school psychologists and social workers, 15% of school administrators, and 22% of other school staff reported at least one violent incident by a student. Violence against educators is a public health problem that requires comprehensive, research-based solutions.

The General Assembly will provide legislation that protects all students and staff from bullying, harassment and intimidation by other students and staff.

First, the legislature must provide the funding schools need to hire, train, and retain necessary staff at

their schools such as counselors and social workers at a ratio of 250:1, the ratio most recently recommended by the American School Counselor Association and the National Association of Social Workers.

In addition, the research from the APA Task Force recommends schools and districts focus on policies and practices that address student mental health, enhance student engagement, channel more resources into public education, and increase educator involvement in decision-making.

Schools should be required to file a safety plan with the school district and each district should file a compilation with the South Carolina Department of Education. Furthermore, many of today's youth have grown up in the shadow of mass shootings, including recent gun violence in our own state.

Active shooter drills are commonly practiced, starting in elementary school, and can cause additional trauma while failing to prevent the cause of gun violence. Educators are increasingly expected to transform from nurturers to law enforcement officers and first responders at a moment's notice — having to react and decide the best ways to protect their students based on the circumstances.

The General Assembly must support common sense gun reforms and implement research-based policies to proactively prevent gun violence in our communities and schools.

The General Assembly should support the respectful treatment of all students in creating a safe learning environment free from any bias.

#### **4. Invest in Early Childhood Literacy**

The General Assembly must provide state funded universal 4K to all students to ensure their opportunity to enter kindergarten and elementary school with the skills and background needed to be successful readers and learners.

#### **5. Support Post-Secondary Pathways**

Every child in South Carolina deserves to leave high school prepared for the next phase of their career so they can successfully contribute to the development and success of our state. Therefore, the General Assembly must invest in making opportunities for all post-secondary pathway preparation available to all students by restoring funding for vocational coursework and dual-credit courses.

In addition, legislation that offers schools the opportunity to utilize competency-based grading must be passed.