



Quality Public Education:  
Endangered in North Carolina?

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Those of us who set out to follow legislation for AAUW in North Carolina in January of this year soon found that we had far more than we had bargained for on our hands. It soon emerged that we were not just up against a few bills we disapproved of but an onslaught of bills that sought to drastically change our state. The Legislature saw government in North Carolina as broken and in need of fixing. But bills presented in Raleigh were not always written there. The close resemblance to measures passed in Wisconsin, Texas, Florida and elsewhere soon became apparent as did close ties between Radical Republican Lawmakers and ALEC, the corporate-sponsored bill writing enterprise that has provided the Tea Party agenda nationally.

In following a one-size fits all Tea Party strategy, the legislature failed to consider that what might be broken in another state might not be broken in NC. In no area was this more apparent than that of education. A heading for an informative article on this subject reads **North Carolina Becomes the Front Line of a Brutal Corporate Assault on Education Raging in America** (Kristen Rawls in *Alternet* [www.alternet.org/](http://www.alternet.org/), July 31, 2013.) The 2013 legislative session included attacks on voting rights, abortion rights, Medicaid access, unemployment benefits, and the environment in addition to those on education. But in no other area did it galvanize as much opposition as with education.

North Carolina has taken education very seriously for decades, maintaining a higher tax rate than most other Southern states in order to fund education. It has long taken pride in its university system and seen education as the path to economic

success for the state. At the very moment the Legislature is declaring public education broken, the state is graduating more high school students than ever in its history, 82% of the students who begin high school together graduate in four years. Because of the state's deep concern for education, Chris Fitzsimon of *NC Policy Watch* says there are two things "that the folks running the General Assembly and the moneyed interests behind them are petrified that people in North Carolina will realize about this legislative session." They are "that voters will understand that they made another round of deep cuts to education and they used the money to give big tax cuts to millionaires and corporations." (Posted by Chris Fitzsimon on 7/30/13 in [Fitzsimon File.](#))

We look here at the changes made by this legislative session in the area of public education, not by looking at individual bills passed, but by looking at the content of the budget approved by both house. Then we will look at changes in philosophy and direction as they are revealed in legislation passed that encourages the privatization of public education in North Carolina.

We are dependent for our discussion of the 2013-15 Fiscal Year Final Budget on the report on that budget made by Tazra Mitchell, Policy Analyst for the Budget and Tax Center of the North Carolina Justice Center, released in August. (Available [www.ncjustice.org](http://www.ncjustice.org) > Budget & Tax > 2013-2015 Final Budget). In her overview, Mitchell comments:

Instead of investing adequate resources in schools, health care, public safety and the other building blocks of a strong and enduring economy, state lawmakers chose to make room for tax cuts for the wealthy and profitable businesses that will cost \$683.8 million in lost revenue over the next two years, and \$2.8 billion over the next five years.

Selected points regarding funding for education in the 2014 fiscal year from Mitchell's analysis: <sup>1</sup>

- The budget falls 2.2% short of what was needed to maintain current service levels for school children and college students. It is far from adequate and does not make up for cuts in prior years. (The current appropriation for public education is 6.4% below the pre-recession investment in FY1008, and that of the University System a whopping 9.7% below that level.)
- The budget increases the teacher-to-student ratios that are used to determine total funding for classroom teachers, meaning local school districts will have to cut teacher positions or find other funding sources. The Department of Public Instruction estimates that this could result in 5,200 fewer teachers.
- The budget also cuts 21% of the funding for teacher assistants, which equates to 3,800 positions.
- Funding for textbooks is 25% of what the Department of Public Instruction determined is needed.
- The budget includes \$7 million to create a controversial school safety program in elementary and middle schools that trains and employs security officers. It also gives local sheriffs permission to establish a volunteer school officer program, composed of trained former police or military retirees.
- It cuts \$3.2 million from the National Board Certification Loan Program which provides loans to teachers pursuing certification to improve performance and achievement and phases out the salary incentive for teachers and school staff who earn advanced degrees, unless required for their positions,
- Recurring funding for the NC Center for the Advancement of Teaching is replaced with one time funding, pending further review.

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<sup>1</sup> The report compares the current budget to the continuation budget, accounting for the changing costs required to deliver the same level of services approved by the previous General Assembly. It takes into consideration rising costs and increasing population.

- It phases out tenure for teachers. There is no salary increase for teachers who have gone for years without one and are currently at the bottom of the nation's teacher pay scale.

The Budget and Tax Center's budget review also contains information on community college funding and University system funding that we will not review here.

While the legislature seemed to express contempt for public school teachers, an indifference to public school excellence, and a general lack of awareness or concern for the state's tradition of strong support for public education, they demonstrated some interest and enthusiasm about changing the direction of public education in North Carolina in the direction of privatization.

While an effort to establish a separate board of Education for Charter Schools died in the legislature, the number and power of charter schools was increased. Charter schools are expected to proliferate in the state in the coming year. Charter schools can select their students and do not have to meet all the requirements that public schools do. They do not have to provide transportation, free lunches, and special services to students in need of both, although the state provides them with the same per pupil funding that it provides the public schools. Their teachers do not have to meet the educational requirements of the public schools. There are already indications that some of the private schools founded to avoid school integration, frequently in the guise of religious schools, will remake themselves into charter schools.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Southeastern Academy near Lumberton, a private school until last spring, was approved to become a public charter school in the fall. It has received a governance warning from the Office of Charter Schools, after holding a one day open enrollment period rather than the sixty days it had proposed.  
(<http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/2013/08/14/private-turned-charter-school-raises-questions-of-access/>)

Charter schools are often in the hands of for-profit corporations. A more controversial, aspect of the move toward privatization of public education is the introduction of a voucher program in North Carolina for the first time. In the first year \$10 million is included in the budget for this program, expected to increase in size. The program will provide students up to \$4,200 a year in taxpayer funding to pay for tuition and expenses at private or religious schools. It is limited to families earning up to 133% of the income threshold for the national school lunch program (\$57,945 for a family of four). This will not begin to pay the tuition at a high-quality private school but it will enable students to attend many religious schools and local academies. Nationally, public school students are regularly outperforming voucher recipients in the school districts that have been using vouchers the longest.

As we are all aware, there is considerable citizen outcry over new developments in education in North Carolina. Anyone who takes seriously the core AAUW principle that “quality public education is the foundation of a democratic society” and lives in North Carolina should consider if this is a moment to become an activist in North Carolina.

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August, 2013