3

High-Poverty, High-Performance Schools, Districts, and States

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THE CENTRAL CONTENTION of plaintiffs in financial adequacy cases is that schools, particularly high-poverty schools, can achieve more only with higher spending. It is true that poverty has consistent and substantial effects on achievement, but many studies show little consistent effect of the amount spent on K–12 schools (Hanushek 1997). State legislators are justifiably concerned about spending more on education: not only are they pressed against raising taxes, but they are increasingly aware of the facts about the futility of additional spending. National comparisons show the United States has been and is a top spender on schools; yet American students fall further behind students in other countries, the longer they are in school (Walberg 2001). Ever larger expenditures, moreover, in the last several decades have not resulted in higher achievement.

Even so, the surveys of schools, districts, and states reviewed in this chapter show that some are able to make outstanding

progress in overcoming the effects of poverty; without necessarily spending more money, they produce much higher levels of achievement than their peers. These surveys not only identify such high performers (also called "outliers") but reveal the reasons for their success.

The chapter begins with a more detailed explanation of high-poverty, high-performance outliers. To set this research in a legal context, the chapter next turns to evidentiary material from an adequacy litigation case in South Carolina that suggests the causes of high performance, including evidence-based legislation described in appendix 3.1. It is followed by a summary of large-scale national studies of schools, showing that high-performance outlier schools can be found throughout the nation.

The next section summarizes field studies in New York City and Texas that identify outlier schools and confirm a pattern of outlier performance. The last section shows that outlying school districts and states use on a larger scale the features that make schools high performers. Thus, research reviewed in this chapter shows the prevalence and causes of high-poverty, high-performance schools, districts, and states that are unrelated to spending.

Understanding High Performance

Poverty and factors related to it usually impair learning; they overwhelm the impact of school and neighborhood factors. A recent study, for example, showed that poverty and related socioeconomic and demographic factors accounted for 93 percent of the variance in students' twelfth-grade mathematics scores in a large national sample (Hoxby 2001).

Figure 3.1 illustrates the relationship between poverty and achievement proficiency in South Carolina school districts: the higher the percentage of students in poverty in the district, the

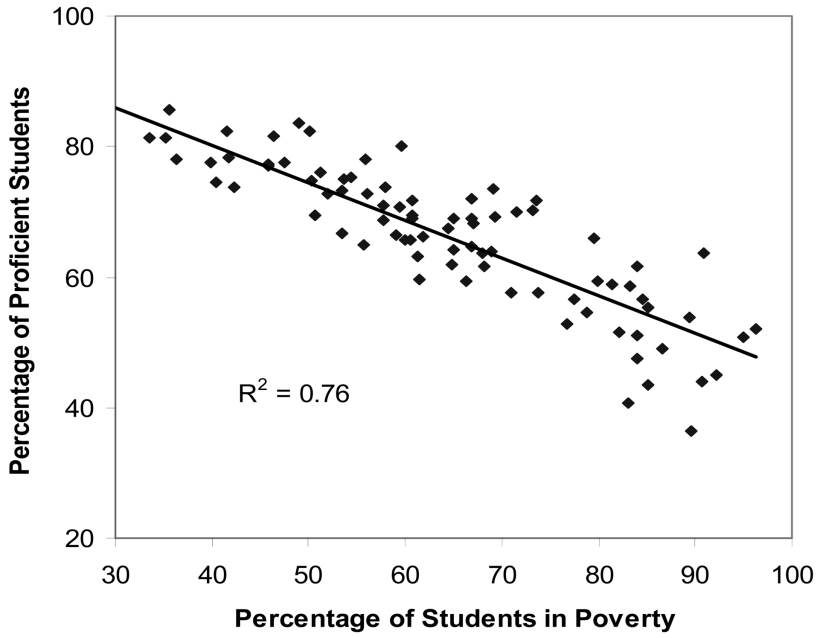

Figure 3.1 The Relation between Poverty and Proficiency in Eighty-five South Carolina School Districts

lower the percentage of proficient students. There are, however, important exceptions. The degree of exception can be taken as the vertical distance above and below the (regression) line, which indicates the general or average relation between poverty and proficiency. Districts below the line can be called "underachievers"; those above the line, "overachievers." Those far above the line are highly efficient districts whose students achieve far more than those in districts that are comparable in poverty.

As illustrated in the right-hand portion of figure 3.1 (the same district as in the last row of table 3.1), the clearest such high-poverty, high performer has 91 percent of its students in poverty, though 64 percent of its students scored proficient on the state tests, which placed them far ahead of their peers of similar poverty levels. The right-hand portion of figure 3.1

Table 3.1 Poverty and Proficiency Levels of South Carolina Plaintiff Districts and a High-poverty, High-performance Nonplaintiff District

District Category	*Percent Proficient*	*Percent in Poverty*	*Expenditure per Student*
Plaintiff A	57	85	$6,108
Plaintiff B	54	89	$7,895
Plaintiff C	49	87	$8,211
Plaintiff D	44	91	$8,031
Plaintiff E	41	83	$7,365
Plaintiff F	45	92	$10,536
Plaintiff G	36	90	$8,404
Nonplaintiff	64	91	$7,176

shows that only 38 percent of the students in another district with the same level of poverty were proficient, a colossal difference of 26 percent.

In fact, the high-performing district had poverty levels equal to or higher than all but one of the seven plaintiff districts that brought a lawsuit against the state of South Carolina. Even so, as shown in table 3.1, the high-performing district had a substantially higher proficiency level and spent less money per student than all but one of the plaintiff districts. This chapter shows that many such high-poverty, high-performance schools, districts, and states can be identified, and the reasons for their superiority can be found.

A Case Study of a Successful, Allegedly Inadequate State

It seems ironic that South Carolina was taken to court in an adequacy lawsuit since it is among the top states in its standards and accountability system, and the districts, including those of the plaintiffs, have made excellent progress on the rigorous state tests (Finn and Kanstoroom 2001 and further evidence below). Table 3.2 shows that South Carolina is one of five states given

Table 3.2 States Classified by Quality of Standards and Accountability

	Solid Standards A or B	*Mediocre Standards C*	*Inferior Standards D or F*
Strong Accountability	*The Honor Roll:* Alabama, California, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas	*Shaky Foundations:* Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Maryland, Nevada, New York, Oklahoma, Virginia, West Virginia	*Trouble Ahead:* Kentucky, New Mexico
Weak Accountability	*Unrealized Potential:* Arizona, Massachusetts, South Dakota	*Going through the Motions:* Delaware, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Ohio, Utah, Wisconsin	*Irresponsible States:* Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Jersey, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Vermont, Washington, Wyoming

Source: Finn and Kanstoroom, 2001.

an "A" or "B" for its standards and a "strong" designation for its accountability system. South Carolina ranks in the upper 10 percent of states in the nation because it has clear, measurable, comprehensive, and rigorous standards, and because it uses report cards and ratings of schools, rewards successful schools,

Table 3.3 South Carolina's Testing and Accountability Program Report Card

Criteria	*Grade*
Academic Alignment: High-stakes tests are aligned with academic content knowledge and skills as specified by the states' curriculum standards.	B−
Test Quality: The tests can determine that those curriculum standards have been met.	B+
Sunshine: The policies and procedures surrounding the tests are open to public scrutiny and to continuing improvement.	B−
Policy: The accountability systems affect education in a way consistent with the goals of the state.	A−

has authority to reconstitute or make major changes to failing schools, and exercises such authority.

In Table 3.3, South Carolina is also ranked in the upper range for its testing and accountability program (Princeton Review 2003). Independent organizations unassociated with the litigation carried out both the ranking studies.

Besides a highly ranked standards and accountability system, the South Carolina legislature enacted a series of laws reflecting considerable control-group research by psychologists and other research evidence by social scientists accumulated during the past few decades (Walberg 2006). The high points of the legislation are shown in the appendix together with evaluative comments on supporting evidence. As the comments indicate, most of the legislation embodies principles that promote student achievement.

Accumulating evidence suggests that standards, accountability, and evidence-based programs cost effectively raise achievement (Walberg 2005). A recent analysis, for example, showed that state achievement gains on the National Assess-

ment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were related to the quality and features of their accountability systems, including extensive testing, school report cards, high school exit examinations, and consequences for school staff. High levels of accountability led to higher NAEP score gains, particularly for African American and Hispanic students (Carnoy and Loeb 2002). Accountability for meeting common standards not only provides information for rational decision making but also increases the likelihood that students, particularly at-risk students, will not miss crucial knowledge and skills they need for subsequent learning and, we can hope, for life beyond school.

As Caroline Hoxby (2002) points out, test and other accountability costs are surprisingly small and represent a tiny percentage of K–12 costs. For twenty-five states with available information, accountability costs of about twenty dollars per student were only about 0.3 percent of the average costs of around $7,250 per student.

Did the South Carolina accountability system and evidence-based legislation pay off? Reflecting general state trends from 1999 to 2002, the plaintiff districts in nearly all years had rising percentages of students at the required level of proficiency. The average percentage of those meeting state requirements in the plaintiff districts rose from 22 to 43 percent, nearly doubling in three years.

How did the schools attain such results? Deposition testimony from a principal in one of the plaintiff districts concretely reveals how she had achieved outstanding success in line with the standards and testing system. Her testimony may have harmed plaintiffs' case because her school had no more money than other schools. Despite the high rate of poverty in her school, more than 90 percent of her students scored above the required proficiency level. Her school won an exemplary learning award from Clemson University and was one of the top

twenty-three Title 1 (the federal education program for students in poverty) schools in the nation. How did she and her staff accomplish these feats?

The principal had long lived in the neighborhood of the school, and she and her staff were dedicated and worked long hours. She kept up with research literature on effective teaching and, according to what she learned, closely guided her staff, especially newcomers. She required weekly lesson plans of all teaching staff and visited classrooms every day. She and the staff carried out weekly testing on material similar to that required by the state standards and collaborated after school to identify strengths and weaknesses and to make plans for improving the instructional program.

Such leadership activities are straightforward and commonsensical. These and similar results-oriented techniques are prevalent themes in the surveys and case studies of high-poverty, high-performance schools shown in later sections of this chapter.

National and State Surveys of Schools

A 2001 Education Trust study (Jerald 2001) showed that of the roughly 89,000 elementary and secondary schools in the nation, 4,577 were high-performance outliers.[1] They served well more

1. As this book was going to press, a study (Harris 2006) was released that estimates there are fewer high-poverty, high-performing schools than estimated in the Education Trust study. This finding, however, corroborates the main point of the Education Trust study and the extensive research of other investigators reviewed in this chapter: some schools, districts, and states substantially reduce the adverse consequences of poverty on students' learning. The Harris study also concludes that the adverse effects of poverty are often underestimated. The studies reviewed here vary in their estimates of the poverty effect, partly because poverty is measured in various ways; the purpose of the studies, however, is not to measure poverty effects but to discover what can reduce their adverse consequences, whatever the degree of poverty and however large its

than a million poor students and more than a partly overlapping group of a million minority students in the top one-third of schools in their states. These schools often outperformed predominantly white schools in advantaged communities. What are the common features of such schools?

An earlier, less formal, and less explicitly described study by the Education Trust (1999) profiled 366 schools in twenty-one states with greater than 50 percent poverty levels, schools that had been identified as high performing or making substantial improvements. Their common features include

- State standards used extensively to design curriculum and instruction, assess student work, and evaluate teachers.
- Increased instructional time in reading and math to help students meet standards.
- A larger proportion of funds devoted to support professional development focused on changing instructional practice.
- Comprehensive systems put in effect to monitor individual student progress and to provide extra support to students as soon as needed.
- Focused efforts to involve parents in helping students meet standards.
- State or district accountability systems in place that have real consequences for adults in the schools.

A similar but smaller study of twenty-one high-performing, high-poverty schools around the country (Carter 2000) spon-

usual effect. Harris principally recommends that policymakers focus on student outcomes attributable to schools, extend their efforts to homes and communities, and recognize that both homes and schools affect student learning—points that the studies reviewed in this chapter also have made. The studies in this chapter also point to other constructive policies to reduce poverty effects.

sored by the Heritage Foundation showed the following common features:

- Principals' autonomy in hiring and budgeting.
- Measurable goals to establish a culture of achievement.
- Parents encouraged to make their homes centers of learning.
- Master teachers helping the other faculty.
- Regular testing to guide the improvement of student achievement.
- Student self-discipline promoted to help concentration on learning.
- Belief that effort creates ability.

It might be argued that outlier performance is evanescent: high-poverty schools may perform well one year but fail the next. The consistent pattern of their features, however, dispels this argument. In addition, a longitudinal study of 257 high-poverty California schools involving some 257 principals and 5,500 teachers (Williams and others 2005) showed that high-performing schools identified the first year tended to perform well in the following years of the study. The research team from the American Institutes of Research, EdSource, Stanford University, and the University of California at Berkeley found that the identified high-performing schools

- Prioritized student achievement,
- Implemented a coherent, standards-based curriculum and instructional program,
- Used assessment data to improve student achievement and instruction,
- Ensured availability of instructional resources,

- Had principals that effectively managed an accountability-based school improvement process, and
- Were located in districts that focused on accountability and student achievement.

Catholic and Public Schools

Groups of schools controlled by a single organization such as a school district or religious organization can be high performers on average. Because they are the most numerous among private schools, Catholic schools have been most often studied. Well-controlled survey analyses by economists and sociologists show that Catholic schools generally outperform public schools (Bryk 1993).

Valerie Lee (1997) summarized the reasons that Catholic schools do well in general: They follow a delimited core curriculum followed by nearly all students, regardless of their family background, academic preparation, or future educational plans. They engender a strong sense of community exemplified by frequent opportunities for face-to-face interactions and shared experiences among adults and students; school events such as athletics, drama, and music shared by most adults and students; and teachers who see their responsibilities beyond classroom subject matter extending into hallways, school grounds, neighborhood, and homes. Finally, Catholic schools are decentralized: funds are concentrated and decisions are made at the school level.

For my testimony in adequacy litigation in New York City, Paul Peterson and I (2002) found that Catholic schools are also cost effective and especially suited to diminish poverty effects. We investigated several hundred Catholic and public schools in three New York City boroughs—Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx.

To make the figures comparable, we subtracted the costs of government-funded special programs from each public school's expenditures, including compensatory programs for children in poverty, bilingual education for children with limited proficiency in English and for non-English speakers, and special programs for children with various categories of special needs such as learning disabilities and mental retardation. The costs of transportation and food services were also subtracted from public school outlays. We deducted the public school costs of the central office and of the thirty-two community school boards that oversee and regulate public schools.

With these adjustments, Catholic schools' per-student costs were 46.8 percent of those of public schools. Even so, Catholic school achievement in reading and mathematics exceeded achievement in public schools in the three boroughs among students in high, middle, and low ranges of poverty. Most striking, however, was that the adverse poverty effect was substantially diminished in Catholic schools. In other words, the differences between schools of middle-class and poor children were far smaller in Catholic than in public schools.

My visits to Catholic schools showed why they excelled in both effectiveness and efficiency: they had to compete for their (often black Protestant) customers, that is, parents and students. My visits and interviews with principals revealed that in public schools, procedures and practices were largely instituted from the central office, the thirty-two community boards, and the U.S. Department of Education—entities that fund and regulate the public schools and their complicated categorical programs. The public schools faced frequently replaced administrators and "policy churn" from constantly changing regulatory mandates from above. Grade levels and attendance boundaries were altered without parental or staff consultation. In public school classrooms, many students were inattentive, lacked books, and

failed to complete assignments. Children were often resting, chatting, and walking around the classroom.

In contrast, interviews and observations in Catholic schools revealed an atmosphere of courtesy, fairness, and respect. The schools had strong principal leadership with a clear mission for learning. Most decisions were made at the school site. An academic curriculum was taught well to large classes. Students kept notebooks of assignments and notes for each subject, and their homework was completed and graded every day. Parents and teachers were in close contact in the school and by telephone. Finally, the central office and schools had few administrative and support staff such as program developers, consultants, vice principals, and teacher aides.

African American Private Schools

Besides Catholic schools, other nonsectarian southern and northern private schools appear to have well served low-income African Americans, some of whom have risen to distinguished positions. Thomas Sowell (1974) reported case studies of schools that have produced outstanding members of the African American elite. Of the schools he studied, four (located in Atlanta, Baltimore, New Orleans, and Washington) educated a long list of graduates who have made important breakthroughs, including the first African American state superintendent of schools, Supreme Court Justice, and military general, as well as the discoverer of blood plasma, a Nobel Prize winner, and the first black U.S. senator in this century.

Sowell attributed the outstanding success of these schools and of other successful schools he studied neither to random events nor to the students' natural abilities but to the social order of the schools and to their concerted, persevering educational efforts: "Each of these schools currently maintaining high

standards was a very quiet and orderly school, whether located in a middle-class suburb of Atlanta or in the heart of a deteriorating ghetto in Brooklyn" (p. 54). Strong principals concentrated on achievement and discipline.

> 'Respect' was the word most used by those interviewed to describe the attitudes of students and parents toward these schools. 'The teacher was *always* right' was a phrase that was used again and again to describe the attitude of the black parents of a generation or more ago. . . . Even today, in those few instances where schools have the confidence of black parents, a wise student maintains a discrete silence at home about his difficulties with teachers, and hopes that the teachers do the same. (p. 54)

Public School Case Studies

Other case studies of high-performance public schools show the critical role of results-oriented principals and staff in high-poverty schools. An investigation of eleven high-poverty, high-performance successful public schools in New York City (New York City Department of Education 2001) showed strong leadership of the staff by principals. Observations and interviews in schools in Harlem; Pittsburgh; Wichita, Kansas; Clay, West Virginia; Mission City, Texas; and Ajax, Ontario, Canada (Cawelti, 1999) showed the following common features:

- Strong principal leadership.
- A focus on clear standards and on improving results.
- Teamwork to ensure accountability.
- Teachers committed to helping all students achieve.
- Multiple changes made to improve the instructional life of students.
- These efforts sustained in concert.

Similar themes were uncovered in twenty-six Texas high-achieving schools with over 60 percent of students in poverty (Lein, Johnson, and Ragland 1996):

- Focus on the academic success of each student.
- No-excuse attitude that all children should learn.
- Experimentation to discover the best teaching methods.
- All adults included in fostering student learning.
- Humane, almost familial, treatment of students.

Studies of School Districts and States

Except for the South Carolina example, the research reviewed above concerns schools, but districts and states can "scale up" accountability and evidence-based practices to increase the effectiveness of high-poverty schools within their purview. Two examples are instructive.

An investigation of school districts with large percentages of poor children who made substantial achievement gains included Brazosport Independent School District, Clute, Texas; Twin Falls, Idaho, School District; Ysleta Independent School District, El Paso, Texas; and Barbour County School District, Philippi, West Virginia (Cawelti and Protheroe 2001). Their common features remind us of those found in high-performance schools:

- High expectations and focus on achievement results.
- Decentralized budgeting and management at the school level.
- Aligned curricula and instruction to state standards and tests.
- Sustained evidence-based practices.

- Frequent testing, practice, and reteaching for students in need of it.

Similarly, a large-scale RAND study (Grissmer and Flanagan 1998) commissioned by the National Educational Goals Panel showed that North Carolina and Texas, the two states that made the biggest recent gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, were distinctive in employing

- Grade-by-grade standards with aligned curricula and textbooks,
- Expectations that all students would meet the standards,
- Statewide assessments linked to the standards,
- Accountability for results with rewards and sanctions for performance,
- Deregulation and increased flexibility in ways the standards could be met, and
- Computerized feedback systems and achievement data for continuous improvement.

Echoing many previous studies, the research showed the major cost factors made no difference in state performance. These included per-pupil spending, pupil-teacher ratios, proportion of teachers with advanced degrees, and teacher experience.

Conclusions

Despite plaintiffs' adequacy lawsuits, money is not the answer to poor school performance. Ever greater infusions of money have a bad record of improving learning. Because achievement levels have remained low and spending has risen substantially, the productivity of American schools fell by more than 50 percent from 1970 to 2000. If schools were as productive in the

year 2000 as they were in 1970, the *average* seventeen-year-old would score at the level that fewer than 5 percent of seventeen-year-olds attained in 1970 (Hoxby, forthcoming).

Even so, the research reviewed above documents the prevalence of high-poverty, high-performance schools in more than a dozen independent investigations. Of course, this conclusion might be inescapable since most distributions of human and group phenomena show the normal distribution of a large middling group and few high and low outliers. Even so, the fact that some schools, districts, and states can beat the poverty odds to achieve well suggests that others also can. The new federal No Child Left Behind act may induce more schools to rise to the challenge since it allows students in failing schools to seek supplementary educational services and, in cases of repeated failure, allows students to transfer to successful schools. The new achievement information required by the act should provide a better basis for parent choice.

The studies described in this chapter identify the factors that make for outstanding success. Although the research rigor and findings vary from study to study, the common success themes are clearly identified, rigorous content goals; results-oriented management; staff teamwork oriented toward student success; curriculum and instruction aligned with state standards; frequent testing and use of information about student performance to guide teaching and learning; and a humane, goal-directed atmosphere in the school. Remarkably, the school-level findings about the constructive role of standards, accountability, testing, and instructional alignment are echoed at the district and state levels.

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Appendix 3.1
Analysis of South Carolina's Education Legislation, 1977–2000

Legislation	*Features*	*Evaluation*
The Education Finance Act of 1977	Guaranteed each student the availability of at least a minimum education appropriate to individual needs and equal to similar students, notwithstanding geographic and economic factors; created student weighting formulas, instituted tax-paying index.	Within a normal range, the amount of educational spending is a highly inconsistent influence on achievement but fair allotments seem reasonable.
	Funded half-day kindergarten program for five-year-olds.	*Academic* kindergartens can improve achievement.
Basic Skills Assessment Program of 1978	Established statewide K–12 educational objectives in the basic skills of mathematics, reading, and writing for K–12 and minimum standards in mathematics, reading, and writing in several grades.	Objectives, standards, and testing improve achievement.
Educator Improvement Act of 1979	Intended to provide a fair and comprehensive program for the training, certification, initial employment, and evaluation of public educators.	The usual teacher qualifications such as education levels and experience are weak, inconsistent influences on achievement.
	Provided entrance examination for selective admission into teacher education programs.	Verbal and subject mastery are linked to student achievement.

Legislation	*Features*	*Evaluation*
Education Improvement Act of 1984	General: Included the following goals: raise student performance, teach and test basic skills, evaluate the teaching profession, improve leadership, implement quality controls, reward productivity, create more effective partnerships, and provide school buildings.	Goal setting, emphasis on identified skills, quality controls, rewards for performance, and parental partnerships can improve achievement.
	Specific: Increased graduation requirements, began child development programs for four-year olds, instituted Advanced Placement courses and examinations, supported gifted and talent programs, funded statewide testing programs.	Evidence supports the achievement efficacy of these elements.
	Specific: Began school incentives reward program and evaluation of the quality of student performance.	Rewards and accountability tend to improve achievement.
Target 2000 School Reform of 1989	Created "flexibility through deregulation" and local innovation funds.	Operational control at the local district level accords with policies in highly achieving states and nations.
	Supported parental education programs.	Evidence supports parent involvement.
Early Childhood Development and Academic Assistance Act of 1993	Early childhood development and academic assistance initiatives including parent programs; accelerated children in grades K–3; academic assistance for children needy children aged 4–12.	Evidence supports parent involvement and childhood programs to give children a good start in schooling.

Legislation	*Features*	*Evaluation*
Education Accountability Act of 1998	Standards required in math, English/language arts, social studies and science, with a high school exit exam; assessments required in grades 3–8; end of course assessments in benchmark courses in grades 9–12; readiness tests for grades 1 and 2 to be developed; tests administered to all tenth grades to guide curriculums and counsel students; norm-referenced tests administered to random samples for evaluating the system.	Evidence supports testing and accountability.
	For failing students in grades 3–8, a conference must be held of the student, parents, and school personnel to develop an academic plan for improvement; for repeated failure, student must be retained in grade or attend summer school.	Incentives, parent involvement, and summer school improve achievement.
	Required annual reporting on status of and improvement in achievement must be advertised, reported to parents and on accreditation forms; districts must develop strategic plans on accountability systems.	Reporting and local planning probably have positive effects.
	Established Palmetto Gold and Silver Awards for high performance and rapid improvement; schools that fail must report, with their districts, improvement plans; the State Superintendent may replace principals and manage schools.	Rewards and sanctions matter in human affairs, and evidence supports their use in education.

Legislation	*Features*	*Evaluation*
	Created the Education and Oversight Committee to monitor and evaluate the act; has gubernatorial representative, six legislators, five business people, and five education representatives.	Such a group can uncover possible flaws and recommend remedies.
	Programs begun for failing schools including grant programs for retraining staff, teacher specialists, principal specialists, principal mentors, professional and school improvement activities, and grant programs for homework centers.	Such assistance would seem likely to help; homework can have large effects on learning.
First Steps to Readiness Act of 1999	Provided preschool preparation and readiness for school through prenatal and maternity care, nutrition, health awareness, scholarships for day care, half- to full-day kindergarten.	Well-designed early childhood programs constructively influence students' success in school and life.
Alternative Schools Act of 1999	Provided special programs for roughly 5 percent of disruptive students or consortia of alternative schools.	Safe and orderly schools are conducive to learning; reduced disruption means more learning time and concentration.
Parent Involvement in Their Children's Education Act of 2000	Delineated responsibilities of governor, state superintendent, state board, local boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, and parents to increase parent involvement; identified educationally constructive parental activities.	Parent involvement in their children's learning increases achievement.