

SC Must Do Better to Help Rural Young Children

By Darnell Byrd McPherson and Jamie Moon

South Carolina is a national success story with the resurgence of metro areas, an envy for our booming high-tech manufacturing and tourism industries, and even for improving outcomes for our young children during a period where other states are faltering.

We cannot say the same for our rural communities, though, as highlighted by a recent report – *Why Rural Matters*. The report, authored by the Rural School and Community Trust with support from the Institute for Child Success, found that we are still leaving too many of our children behind in the rural parts of South Carolina. Our state ranked 4th in the nation for urgent rural education needs. One of those urgent needs was investment in rural schools. We rank as the 12th lowest state for per-student spending in rural communities, spending \$5,203 compared to the nation’s highest rate of \$12,500. It is true that state legislators are making some progress in funding for rural schools and in early childhood. But these data tell us we must do more.

According to *Why Rural Matters*, South Carolina has some of the nation’s lowest achievement for rural students: 6th-lowest for 4th graders in reading and math, and a dismal picture in 8th grade as well. We can’t afford continued low achievement caused by underinvestment in rural South Carolina. It weighs down our economy. It burdens state taxpayers. Our families, children, and citizens deserve better.

Affordable, high-quality childcare options are very limited in rural areas, which keeps some parents from returning to work or school. But this year, the S.C. Legislature passed an Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for working families that will return some money to working families with the lowest incomes. Research shows these tax credits can lead to higher educational outcomes for children living in poverty. The funds help low-income parents afford childcare and transportation, leading to the inclusion of tax credits as a key policy tool promoted by Early Childhood Common Agenda – a coalition led by The Children’s Trust of South Carolina, the United Way Association of South Carolina, and the Institute for Child Success.

Overall, our education and early childhood systems are improving in South Carolina. But the alarming ranking on the *Why Rural Matters* report and low achievement in rural communities remind us that until we invest in the least-resourced parts of our state, we limit our potential for success and discount the future of many children and families.

Jamie Moon is the President of the Institute for Child Success, a research and policy organization headquartered in Greenville, SC (www.instituteforchildsuccess.org.) Darnell Byrd McPherson is Executive Director of Darlington County First Steps and serves on the ICS Board of Directors.