

A Case Study of the Educational Reform Efforts of Former Mississippi Governor William F. Winter

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Former Mississippi Governor William F. Winter*

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While serving as governor of Mississippi from 1980 until 1984, William F. Winter envisioned education as a key to moving Mississippi away from poverty. He championed educational reform as the means for improving schools with low student achievement. From the beginning of his tenure, Winter's goal was to improve K-12 education by implementing three needed improvements: public kindergarten, compulsory attendance, and a lay board of education. During the first two years of his administration, Winter struggled to gain support from within the legislative body itself. Mores of Mississippi, which relegated African Americans to a lesser role of social status, were difficult to overcome without causing a great deal of social upheaval. Winter's goal of educational reform was inclusive and not just aimed at the Whites of Mississippi. This necessitated carefully calculated planning. It was not until a controversial ending to the 1982 regular session that Winter began to explore options of calling a special session and promoting the goals for education to the constituents of the legislators. Through a series

of nine public forums that were carefully crafted to explore the issues and spotlight the legislators for that particular venue, Winter and his band of young supporters, called the “Boys of Spring”, were able to bring about a paradigm shift in attitudes and beliefs. The focus of this study is to examine Winter’s leadership style, relate the story of reform, and highlight one man’s dream for his state. Winter was a master at surrounding himself with a high quality and high energy staff, designing a plan for success, and knowing what changes needed to be made and how to bring them about effectively.

Specifically, this study will highlight hard work with purpose. It will also illustrate that those closest to a problem or issue should always be part of the solution to the problem, and finally, the study will show how a leader is only as good as the people with whom he or she surrounds himself/herself, with. The efforts that resulted in this study could and should be used to solve other problems of this society, especially those related to education.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to my wife and very best friend, Ruth Ellen Wilkerson Hawkins, and our two sons, Grant Allen and Bradley Scott who have been the inspiration for my very existence in life. The lessons in life from J.L., Lula, and Marlin Hawkins have carried me to this point. I also would dedicate this to all the educators who have touched my life in my working venues: Rocky Ford, Colorado High School, Vivian Field Junior High, Newman Smith High School, Oklahoma State University, and Jackson Preparatory School. Specifically, I would name and say thank you to friends who have supported me in unusual ways: Mike Sparks, my student teaching mentor teacher; Ellen Cook, the first Master Teacher I ever watched work; Jane Rice, the best English teacher ever; Jackson Prep teachers, especially my dear friends Carolyn Tatum, Jenni Smith, and Sherye Green and Karen Hardin at Cameron University, who provided much help in setup. Finally, I would mention the four men who have touched my life in an immeasurable way: Dr. Charles Blanton, Dr. Terry Land, Dr. Larry Kruse, and Coach Lance Brown.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	11
III. METHODOLOGY.....	29
Statement of the Problem.....	29
Research Questions.....	29
Design of the Study.....	30
Purpose of the Study.....	32
Significance of the Study.....	33
Rationale for Case Study.....	34
Summary.....	34
IV. WILLIAM WINTER'S STORY.....	35
Early Years.....	35
Political Risks.....	43
Reform Foes and Allies.....	86
William's Final Reform Effort.....	103
V. CONCLUSION.....	112
REFERENCES.....	130

APPENDIX		Page
A	GEORGE NIGH.....	142
B	DAVID CREWS.....	146
C	CHARLES DEATON.....	155
D	RAY MABUS.....	160
E	DICK RILEY.....	162
F	BILL MINOR.....	165
G	JOHN HENEGAN.....	170
H	ELISE WINTER.....	173
I	WILLIAM F. WINTER.....	177

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Educational reform was needed in Mississippi in order improve the state not only educationally but to improve the national image of Mississippi and to improve the state economically by attracting new and much needed industrial development.

Integration of Mississippi's public schools had a significant impact on educational opportunities for both black and white students. By the fall of 1970, every public school district in Mississippi had been desegregated. At practically every turn, whites worked to subvert desegregation. As white districts consolidated administrative personnel, black administrators were often fired or demoted to secondary roles. Many black principals were demoted to assistant principals and black teachers who supported the civil rights movement were labeled as less qualified than white teachers and fired. In 1969-1970 Mississippi public schools had 168 black principals; by 1970-1971, that number was down to nineteen. The number of black teachers fell 12 percent, while the number of white teachers rose by about 9 percent. The loss of black role models was one more indication that integration would be conducted on terms established by the white community. In addition to creating a unitary school system, desegregation produced several unintended consequences. Most notable was "white flight" and creation of private schools. In 1968, the Mississippi Private School Association was formed and

by 1970, there were over 60 private schools affiliated with the MPSA. Between 1966 and 1970, the number of private school in Mississippi nearly doubled (Bolton, 1970)

Eubanks (2006) in his book *Ever is a long, long time* speaks to Mississippi in 1965 instituting a “freedom of choice” plan for its schools, which supposedly permitted all parents, black and white, to send their children to the school of their choice, even the white school in town. Just as the white power structure wanted, very few blacks made that choice. What was said by most grown-ups was that freedom of choice was the freedom to choose to have white people destroy you. Eubanks said that there was certainly a great deal of truth in that. Those few blacks who chose to go to the white school eventually came back to the black school with broken spirits and tales of mistreatment by students and teacher. Relating a personal story, he said:

We were at the center of the black social order where black professionals like my parents, teachers, county agents, and small business owners lived. Because I was the child of educated professionals, some might say I belonged to a privileged class of people, blacks with a sense of *noblesse oblige*, if there could be such a thing in Mississippi. My family was far from being part of a privileged class: We were BLACK, my parent’s meager incomes barely above the poverty line, and we were outsiders. In Mississippi, as far as white people were concerned, you couldn’t get any lower than that.

Mississippi’s social and political system was set up to keep black people poor and uneducated. Even if you had an education, professional options were few and many parents held jobs that was part of that limited realm. When I was growing up, it all seemed painfully normal, nothing exceptional: but looking back now, I realize how extraordinary it was. We lived a dignified life in an undignified system of racial segregation, largely ignoring the confines of the system. What I asked myself time and again when I discovered a tie between my parents and the Sovereignty Commission files was, were my parents threatening because of the way they lived their lives? Along with the feared outside agitating advocates of integration, what I knew and remembered from over-hearing snatches of adult conversation was that people like my parents had to be watched and kept in line, just to make sure they did not try to rise above their station and try to be equal to

white folks. Together, my parents fit the profile of the dreaded “uppity negroes” who had to be kept in check. (Eubanks, 2006)

Education reform was needed.

State leadership in Mississippi realized in the early 1960’s that significant progress could not take place in the state without an educated citizenry. A case in point was Senate Bill 1670 authorizing the Mississippi Research and Development Council to contract for an exhaustive study of the state’s educational needs and to “make recommendations calculated to produce a coordinated educational program which will attain the maximum development of human and other resources in the state of Mississippi. Another example was Governor Paul B. Johnson’s letter of transmittal to fellow Mississippians, highlighting two major concerns of the report. He declared: “(1) our children are not receiving as effective an education as they need, if they are to compete successfully in the world in which they are going to have to make a living; and (2) our economic development goals cannot be achieved unless we greatly strengthen our total educational system” (DeVitis & Vold, 1991).

Mississippi is a state with navigable rivers, fertile soil, natural resources, and a climate that lends itself to almost any activity with over 250 days of sunshine. Mississippi is a decidedly diverse state. The state is home to excellence in the arts, history embodied in architecture, and graciousness in manners. Educationally Mississippi has fifteen community colleges, eight private institutions, and eight public institutions of higher education.

The relatively calm and serene beauty of the state has been historically overwhelmed by events associated with rights of all of the Mississippi citizens. In May of

1954, the U.S. Supreme Court in its' landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision ruled segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Two years later in 1956, Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland co-authored the "Southern Manifesto" which called for massive resistance to the U.S. Supreme Court desegregation rulings. Also in 1956, the Mississippi House voted 129-2 for a bill sponsored by House Speaker Walter Sillers to create the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission to fight integration. Eight days later on March 29, 1956, Governor J.P. Coleman signed the Sovereignty Commission bill into law and sat a chairman of the commission. In 1961, James Meredith (a black man) applied for admission to the University of Mississippi and was rejected. The next year (1962) Meredith's enrollment application to Ole Miss was ordered to be "made effective immediately." With the help of federal troops ordered in by President John F. Kennedy, Meredith enrolled at Ole Miss. The U.S. Supreme Court ordered that public school integration must occur "with all deliberate speed."

Mississippi has had a history of denying equal educational opportunities to its minority children. For the first half of the 20th Century, Mississippi's public education system was one of separate and not equal. In 1916, the per capita expenditure for each white child in school was \$10.60, and for each black child, \$2.26: in 1939, for every \$9.88 spent on each white student only \$1.00 was spent on blacks. The 1943 ratios were \$8.27 for whites to \$1.75 for blacks. In 1965, the ratios were \$10.29 to \$2.10 (Wilson, 1967).

Reform was needed.

It was a full 15 years after *Brown vs. Board of Education* that Mississippi seriously began the process of integrating its public school system. By that point, white flight may have rendered school integration plans largely ineffective (Hayden, 1955). Mississippi looked like many other states before integration, white students getting a majority of the tax money and the black students receiving less money which translated to poor facilities, poor materials, lower paid teachers and more importantly loss of consortium that would be gained by having black role models to help them overcome these dire conditions. After integration, the state's problems were only beginning. The private school population rose from 21,817 students in 1967 to 63,366 students in 1972. This "white flight" also shifted emphasis from public to private schools. With a majority of the state legislature being white, a majority of funds would not be sent to the public schools hence a further decrease in the quality of public education would result in loss of economic development, national image, and social conditions (W. Winter, personal communication, April 12, 2005).

Few informed Mississippians would fail to classify the state's poor educational system as one of the greatest impediments to state progress. Indeed, just as economic data have reminded them of their general impoverishment, grim statistics have substantiated Mississippi's poor record and lowly status in educating its citizenry. In virtually every category of public education, from high school graduation rates and expenditures per schoolchild to pupil performance on standardized tests or teacher salaries, statistics have regularly place Mississippi at or near the bottom of the nation. Statistics led the state of Mississippi to a sobering reassessment of its priorities. In recent years, citizens have

come to a greater understanding of the relationship between economic impoverishment and a poor educational system. Perhaps at no time in the history of Mississippi has this relationship been more skillfully communicated than in the successful 1979 gubernatorial campaign of William F. Winter. (DeVitis & Vold, 1991).

Legislative interaction was at the forefront of problems with education in Mississippi. In the early 1960's State Legislator Russell Fox from Claiborne County was categorized as "vicious" by journalist Bill Minor. He said that Fox worked very closely with House Speaker Walter Sillers. When Fox and Sillers did not want to hear any more about some bill that would improve education for blacks, Russell Fox would be the "killer of the legislation." With as many as 10 to 20 legislators standing, waiting to be recognized, Sillers would recognize Fox, who would get up and say, "Mr. Speaker, gentlemen, does this mean that those negras can be paid the same as the whites in this bill?" "Mr. Speaker," Fox would continue, "I move we indefinitely postpone this bill." That was the way it was done to keep the whites in a position of supremacy and blacks in a position of oppression (Crosby, 2005).

Students at black elementary schools were given the "hand me down" books that had been used for years. In the front cover of all public school books was a place to list the student and what year he had used the book. When the front cover label was filled, a new one was inserted on the inside of the back cover and it to would be filled with students' names and the year of use. When both labels were full and after a period of at least twelve years, the books would then be given to the black elementary school students to use. The books would be old and outdated but they were better than nothing and could

serve as a guide to teaching. A former student bearing witness to this time said that he could remember it like it was yesterday when his mother would say, “Let me see the book,” and just nod knowing it was all they had to go by (W. Johnson, personal communication March 1, 2006).

Reform was needed.

On Friday November 7, 2003, the William F. Winter Archives and History building was dedicated in Jackson, Mississippi. The building stands as a testimony to the life-long efforts of former governor William F. Winter. The building houses books, maps, government records, films, and newspapers relating to Mississippi history. The keynote address was given by Pulitzer Prize winning historian and journalist David Halbersam. Speaking at the dedication, Halbersam said that Governor Winter had helped forge positive changes in a state with a history complicated by race. He also said,

Governor, you’re my favorite politician. You’re my hero. I believed for a long time that America would not be whole until Mississippi really became part of it. And you, more than any other politician, are the architect of a new Mississippi and thus, the New America. (Pettus, 2003).

The early years of life are commonly referred to as the formative years, and this was certainly true for former Mississippi Governor William F. Winter. He was born in 1923 in Grenada, Mississippi, where he learned the value of formal education at an early age from his school teacher parents. An area in the family barn, cleaned out and furnished by Winter’s father, was his first schoolroom. After learning the basics of reading from his mother, Winter read anything he could find. He was particularly partial to the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*.

While serving as governor of Mississippi from 1980 until 1984, Winter envisioned education as a key to moving Mississippi away from poverty by creating schools that would allow all Mississippians to gain an opportunity to either learn a trade or skill or attend college. The components of Winter's improvement plan were based on three pillars of change: public kindergarten, a compulsory attendance law, and a lay board of education. He championed educational reform as the means for improving schools with low student academic achievement. Winter labeled himself as a racial moderate and was an intellectual, which was not always popular or a helpful attribute in Mississippi politics. His calls for educational reform were not popular in a state where a majority of white children were in the private schools that were opened as a result of court ordered desegregation. The call for educational reform was construed by many Mississippians as an attempt to improve the plight of the Blacks in Mississippi. Constantly and consistently, William Winter would speak to "what is good for Mississippi" and not let his comments carry color themes (W. Winter, personal communication October 19, 2004). Through educational reform, Winter hoped to lead Mississippi to the head of the class of the New South (Anklam, 1982). In a National Public Radio interview in 1994, William Winter said that his kindergarten efforts were not supported because kindergarten was thought to be only for the white children in private schools and the legislature was not about to change it. Winter said in a NPR (National Public Radio) interview in 2004 that black children didn't go to school after 6th grade when he was a child. Winter said he never saw them get on the bus as he did, and only a very few of the children he started elementary school with graduated from high

school. Winter said he really never understood until years later why. Even though his parents taught him to respect everyone, he was, as a child, only observing and not questioning. Winter related how he had to overcome a very personal prejudice that was attached to his very name. He said his mother and father named him William Forrest Winter, with the Forrest coming from Nathaniel Forrest, the founder of the Ku Klux Klan organization (W. Winter, personal communication, October 19, 2004). A top aide of William Winter Dick Molpus, said that on more than one occasion he heard from Delta residents, “the best way to ruin a good field hand is to educate him.” Unfortunately, during the first two years of his administration the plan never received the legislative backing needed for passage. While race was never addressed publicly and openly, according to William Winter, the real battle in educational reform was in changing attitudes as well as those that took place in the political arenas of the state legislature.

In December 1982, after adjournment of the regular session of the state legislature, where yet another attempt at reform failed, Winter called a special legislative session to focus only on education-related items. Before the special session started, Winter and his committed supporters, “The Boys of Spring,” crisscrossed the state holding a series of nine public forums for the purpose of gaining support for the legislation that was to come up in the special session (Mullins, 1992). When the special session convened in December, 1982, public support that was organized from and a derivative of the nine public meetings drove the passage of the Education Reform Act of 1982, which provided legislation for mandatory kindergarten, compulsory attendance, and a lay state board of education. Two decades later, credit for that landmark legislation

is attributed to Winter, his supporters and staff, and those who served in the 1982 state legislature.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Widespread educational reform in this country has occurred rarely. A noted historian of U.S. education, Carl Kaestle (1990), believes that reform on a broad base has been successful only when the reformers have firmly shaped public consensus behind their proposed changes.

An illustration of public consensus supporting reform was the reaction of Americans to the launching of Sputnik by the Russians on October 4, 1957. Diane Ravitch in her book *The Troubled Crusade: American Education 1945-1980*, claims that this event ended the debate that had been evident since the end of World War II about the quality of American education. The proponents of a more rigorous educational system felt they were finally proven correct. A new crisis in education arose and created another need for reformers. Critics blamed the schools for failing to provide national security because of Russian superiority, which was the result of a better educated populace in math and science. For the first time since the end of World War II, Americans were united in their belief that the national interest was dependent on improving the quality of the nation's schools. There was a demand that the federal government intervene quickly (Ravitch, 1985).

The school crisis caused major private foundations, which had previously been primarily interested in higher education, to contribute to the efforts to improve public

education. The Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, and the National Science Foundation significantly increased their roles in school reform. Comprehensive high schools, curriculum innovations, different teaching models, language laboratories, non-graded programs, and summer institutes for teachers were a few of the areas addressed by the reformers. The other major reform movement of the 1950's, and the one of particular interest in this study, was not the result of public consensus, but rather the result of racial inequality in education. The Supreme Court's decision in 1954 started a very gradual process of restructuring the educational systems. The racial issue slowly became a central factor in most educational decisions as to how schools would be funded, how teachers would be trained and employed, how academic progress was to be assessed, and how students were assigned to schools (Ravitch, 1985).

The national process of social change accelerated into the decade of the sixties and cut short the curriculum reform that had begun in 1957. The education structure had new problems and pressures such as higher enrollment, more black students, higher dropouts and social upheavals. The more rigorous curriculum was replaced with the "smorgasbord" curriculum. This differentiated curriculum allowed schools to accommodate the masses with wide diversities in interest and abilities. The pursuit of academic excellence was superseded by concern for the needs of the disadvantaged.

During the early sixties, the colleges and universities relaxed admission requirements to provide greater access to those who might profit from higher education. As these standards were reduced, high schools lowered their graduation requirements (Ravitch, 1985).

The federal government rushed into the education arena to help meet the needs of disadvantage minority children with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965. The Act, which was a landmark in the history of education in America, authorized many remedial and compensatory programs which were initiated by federal agencies, state agencies, and local school systems. This Act and the Higher Education Act passed also in 1965 started the rapid escalations of federal expenditures for education. In 1966, the federal education largesse was 4.5 billion dollars. By 1970, it had almost doubled to 8.8 billion dollars (Cremin, 1990).

Kaestle said that major national reforms of public education come in cycles. These cycles are often labeled as “liberal”, which means emphasis on equal access and student diversity, or “conservative”, which means emphasis on standards and traditional academic knowledge. Kaestle felt these cycles of school reform had “limited effects compared to their goals.” Reform is difficult because schools are “inert institutions with limited resources” to devote to change (Kaestle, 1990).

Many of the reform movements in states have led to a model that is based on accountability. Former southern governors Bill Clinton and George Bush were strong in pursuing educational reform which occurred with more rapidity than in most other southern states. President Bush, using the model he developed in Texas in the late 1980’s, pushed for, and gained adoption of No Child Left Behind. This testing-based model was, in Texas at least, a model that relied on thorough and periodic tests that must be passed to promote to next grade or in the case of the eleventh grade, passed in order to earn a high school diploma (No Child Left Behind, 2003).

Georgia was the forerunner of the shift in scholarship programs for high school graduates. Governor Zell Miller staked his political future on giving Georgia high school graduates a college scholarship if they had achieved a B average or better. While Governor Miller funded the program with lottery dollars, other states could not find the same level of support. Georgia was initially a leader in the reform efforts, but has in recent years found it difficult to fund the “Hope Scholarship” program (“HOPE”, 1998).

While the South has shown leadership in some areas of reform, choice or vouchers has been slow to emerge as an accepted method of changing the face of education. Charter schools have had difficulties in being successful because of uncertain funding methodologies (C. Blanton, personal communication, October 18, 2004).

It has become much more feasible for citizens to remove their children from the public schools and teach them at home. In some states, a written statement to that effect is all that is needed to remove the child from the public schools and not be in violation of compulsory attendance laws. In a select few Southern states, a statement is not even required to withdraw children from school. The home schooled students in 12 Southern states have seen marked increases in achievement scores, while all Southern states showed an increase in 14-year-old students’ math scores. Only 54.8 percent of Mississippi’s population had completed four years of high school in 1980. Nationally, the completion rate was 75 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 1987).

Mississippi ranked forty-sixth in the percentage of its population enrolled in vocational or technical training with four out of every 1,000. The national figure was ninety-three out of every 1000. For every 100 students who graduated from high school, there were 59

who dropped out somewhere during the 12 year process. Nationally the figure was 29, and the southern region of the United States was 38 (Southern Regional Education Board, 1981).

In 1980, Mississippi's teachers were the lowest paid in the nation. The average salary for a classroom teacher was \$11,851, compared to the southeastern average or \$13,819. The declining enrollment in teacher education reflected the sparse benefits of the profession. In 1971, education provided 39 percent of all baccalaureate degrees conferred by Mississippi's eight public institutions of higher learning. Ten years later in 1981, this percentage had declined to 20 percent (Mississippi Department of Education, 1981).

In the school year 1980-1981, of the over 12,000 Mississippi students who dropped out of school, 255 were first graders. An estimated 6,000 six year olds did not start school in 1980. The Mississippi Legislature had repealed a compulsory attendance law in the early sixties as schools began to desegregate. In 1977, another compulsory attendance law was passed for children ages 7 – 13, but it was not enforced, and there were no penalties (Weaver, 1982).

The lag in Southern schools' levels of achievement for African-American children was a major concern. Passage rates for African-American students varied from 70% to 89% on standardized tests (*No Child Left Behind*, 2003). The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools studying these achievement levels found African-American students two to three years behind white students in achievement levels. The issue that was of concern, not only in the South, but all across America, was the lack of money to

fund education. States were cutting education budgets in order to help with deficits in other areas (Weaver, 1982).

The issues that Governor Winter saw, addressed, and corrected under his leadership in 1982 reflect directly the needs addressed previously. He identified and addressed testing, choice, scholarships, and dollars for education. Governor Winter evaluated the state of education in Mississippi and offered a change. Winter (1) determined the need, which was to improve key components of the educational system in Mississippi. He desired to create public kindergarten, implement compulsory attendance, and create a lay board of education. He then used two different techniques to meet the needs of education in the state. He used the limited power and authority he had over the legislative branch, and a grassroots effort to touch the people and gain their support. This combination allowed Winter to make up for a weak chief executive by going directly to the constituents and gaining their support. Winter, after (2) designing a plan to reform education, (3) developed the exact plan to meet the needs of the state. He would call a special session of the legislature, before which he would hold a series of nine town hall meetings all over Mississippi to gain public input and discuss their needs and his plan. Winter then took the fourth step by (4) delivering the plan to the people of Mississippi, asking for their help and support in the passage of the plan. When the special session met in December 1982, the groundwork had been laid for a change in education in the state. (W. Winter, personal communication, October 19, 2004)

While many governors talked about reform, urged reform, and laid a foundation for it, few actually saw any changes because of lack of support from state legislatures.

Mike Huckabee, current Governor of Arkansas is a prime example. For a complete year, 2003, Huckabee promoted very progressive plans to reform the Arkansas public school system that had been ruled unconstitutional in November 2002. Huckabee said, "I would hate for it to be said of me by future historians that I simply played politics with the law and with the children of Arkansas." During the regular session of the legislature, Governor Huckabee was optimistic that a reform package would be passed. In an attempt to gain passage the governor gave a very passionate plea to reform education and wipe away decades of ranking at or near the bottom, not only regionally but nationally as well. Unlike Mississippi had done in 1982, Arkansas legislators failed to heed the call of the governor and as of today Arkansas still has no reform package in place (Henry, 2003).

The report, *A Nation At Risk*, was the catalyst for continuous attempts at education reform. Noted history professor at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mars Vinovshis served as an advisor to all presidents elected after *A Nation At Risk* was released in 1983. George H. W. Bush pushed educational reform titled *America 2000* which sought five competencies for all high school graduates to possess. The five competencies were: 1) identifies, organizes plans and allocates resources, 2) works well with others, 3) acquires and uses information, 4) understands complex-inter-relationships, and 5) works with a variety of technologies. (*What Work Requires of Schools*, 2000).

President Clinton's *Goals 2000* addressed children's school readiness, completion of high school, student achievement and citizenship, teacher education and professional development, national ranking of science and math, adult literacy and lifelong learning,