

## Some reforms have bipartisan support

By John Hood  
December 1, 2014

Although the gap between Republicans and Democrats in North Carolina is rather wide on many issues — tax policy and Medicaid expansion come to mind — there are still some prospects for bipartisan cooperation in 2015 and beyond.

Perhaps the most promising opportunities are to be found in the state's largest-single spending category: education. There is widespread agreement about the broad social and economic benefits that a better-educated population would produce. And there is ample common ground to move forward on public-school reforms.

As it happens, the biggest differences between the parties involve educational services delivered outside of K-12 public schools. Many Republicans have long championed programs offering scholarships or tax breaks to parents choosing private schools. Their argument is that expanding the options not only maximizes success for participating students but also enhances the performance of district-run public schools through competition.

For their part, Democrats have long championed expanded enrollment in state-designed, state-funded early childhood programs such as North Carolina Pre-K. Many would like to see the state follow Oklahoma's lead and adopt universal preschool. They argue that if more children came to kindergarten ready to learn, that would shrink achievement gaps by income or race and save taxpayer money in the long run by reducing high-school dropouts, welfare dependency, and criminality.

Both programmatic claims — about school choice and expanded preschool — are testable. As I read the empirical evidence, I see more support for the former than the latter. Most peer-reviewed studies on the topic show that localities, state, or nations with greater choice and competition tend to have greater student success, all other things being equal. As for preschool, there is some evidence for long-term benefits for disadvantaged students attending high-quality programs. There is virtually no evidence that expanding such programs to include children from stable, non-poor families would produce benefits greater than the cost, as George Mason University expert David Armor points out in a new Cato Institute report.

Set aside these matters for now, however. What's clear is that most Democrats in the North Carolina legislature aren't going to vote for broader school choice anytime soon, while most Republicans aren't going to vote for universal preschool. What they might agree is on improving the operation and governance of public schools.

For example, whatever comes of the new commission reviewing the Common Core State Standards, lawmakers of both parties agree that North Carolina ought to have high academic standards and a clear, rigorous curriculum to implement them. Student mastery of this curriculum ought to be assessed in part by a battery of tests that allow for valid comparisons across schools, districts, and states. And when schools as a whole or teachers in particular demonstrate a consistent pattern of delivering higher-than-average student gains on these tests — or receive high marks from other evaluations — their efforts ought to be financially rewarded and replicated as much as possible in other classrooms.

These are school-reform principles that both Democratic and Republican leaders have often embraced here in North Carolina. Former governors Jim Hunt and Jim Martin embraced them. Former legislative leaders and school superintendents have embraced them. Translating them into specific legislation and practical policies won't be easy. But nothing worth doing ever is.

Similarly, politicians, educators, and the general public have long struggled with North Carolina's goofy governance structure for education. The governor appoints most of the state board of education. The state superintendent of public instruction is independently elected. The General Assembly legislates education policy, subject to gubernatorial veto. Elected school boards and appointed district superintendents implement policies at the local level.

Most agree we need a different system to create clearer lines of authority and accountability. My own preference is to make the state school board look more like the state community college board: a mixture of gubernatorial and legislative appointees who are then responsible for hiring a CEO. But other models may be worth considering, too.

Education policy will always be contentious. That need not prevent bipartisan action on school reform, as long as lawmakers focus on areas of agreement and keep an open mind.