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Tackling poverty and improving education go hand in hand

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Molly Shaw

Today, education sits at the forefront of policy and community reform. President Obama focused on pre-kindergarten education, quality teaching, and student internet access in his State of the Union address last month, and lawmakers across the country have begun setting a higher bar for students.

Many states, including North Carolina, have adopted Common Core standards and assessments that require students to learn more, think critically, and develop multi-disciplinary skill sets. Recent "Read to Achieve" legislation in North Carolina requires proficiency in reading for all third-graders.

We agree that children benefit from higher expectations and standards and encourage continued focus on education. We also urge communities to ensure that low-income students have what they need to succeed in school, and that educational policies and practices include solutions for addressing systemic poverty.

On January 22, 2014, Communities In Schools, in partnership with nine organizations, hosted the Charlotte 2014 Education Summit. More than 400 citizens focused on key topics, including poverty and its effect on school success. Nationally, children living in low-income families are five times as likely to drop out of school, and in 2012, only 51 percent of Mecklenburg County's economically disadvantaged third-graders were on grade level in reading and math. As we determine how to best educate our students, we must first ensure that they are ready to learn, and that foundations of school success (e.g., food, clothing, stable housing, health and dental care) are in place for each child.

Student success has never been more critical to our community and our economy. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, an estimated 53,800 students dropped out of North Carolina's Class of 2010. If just half of those students graduated from high school, collectively, they would likely have earned as much as \$292 million more per year and contributed \$28 million in increased annual tax revenue.

Just as important as meeting the needs of individual children, however, is working to end the generational poverty that creates such needs. The most recent data from the Council for Children's Rights' 2012 The State of Mecklenburg Children demonstrates that more than 1 in 5 children in Mecklenburg County live in poverty, a dramatic increase of 76 percent from 2007. The time to act is now.

We as committed community servants urge all decision makers and citizens to embrace education and poverty reform in tandem. Our community cannot achieve its goals without both. Mecklenburg County's recent decision to launch a task force on alleviating poverty is a strong start, and we hope others will follow suit. Charlotte citizens have a strong history of coming together to address community challenges, and we believe this time will be no exception.