



## Get with the (4-k) Program

by : Dan Cook

How long must South Carolinians wait for an equitable and respectable education system? The answer might be "forever," because 16 years is apparently not enough.

Sixteen years ago, a [coalition of rural school districts filed suit against](#) the General Assembly, arguing that the Legislature's formula for funding schools was unfair to students in poor rural areas. It took a decade for that case to make it before 3rd Circuit Judge Thomas W. Cooper Jr. as the parties fought over jurisdiction and other matters. But finally the case was heard in 2003 and 2004, with Cooper asked to decide whether the state was providing a "minimally adequate" education to children in the poorest rural districts.

That phrase — "minimally adequate" — was and remains a lightning rod for well-deserved criticism by education advocates, who contend that the constitutionally required standard sets the bar far too low. Nonetheless, the question of whether students were receiving such a bare-bones education — as opposed to a positive and enriching one — is the issue Cooper was asked to decide.

And decide he did — sort of. On Dec. 29, 2005, Cooper ruled that the General Assembly was meeting its admittedly minimal obligations in terms of facilities and teachers in rural areas. However, the judge also ruled that "the constitutional requirement of adequate funding is not met by the defendants as a result of their failure to adequately fund early childhood intervention programs."

That's right: The judge ruled that what happens before kids get to school is also part of the state's educational obligation. And there is ample evidence to back him up in research showing that pre-kindergarten programs foster lifelong benefits, from reduced crime rates to increased achievement, wages and productivity.

Though the ruling basically gave half a loaf to each side, it put the Legislature on the hot seat in terms of coming up with a plan to expand 4-year-old kindergarten programs. Trouble is, the Legislature — ever true to form — did the least it could get away with, moving toward expanding 4-k programs in the districts that sued the state but not implementing the change statewide.

Because of Cooper's half-a-loaf ruling, lawyers for both sides asked him to revisit his decision. Last week, he declined.

When all is said and done — 16 years after the suit was filed — poor rural students will still suffer from substandard facilities (see the documentary [Corridor of Shame](#) for the evidence), but they will have 4-k programs. Meanwhile, the urban poor in Richland County and elsewhere will have better buildings than their rural counterparts but no state-guaranteed 4-k programs. In 2006, South Carolina First Steps estimated that less than one-third of 4-year-olds in the state were being served by a public 4-k program.

With South Carolina's manufacturing jobs evaporating and call centers becoming the state's growth industry, the need for a well-educated population has rarely been clearer. Nobel Prize winner James Heckman noted a few years ago that 20 percent of American adults are functionally illiterate. In South Carolina, where less than half of all ninth-graders finish high school within four years, that percentage is probably far higher. Forget about the hydrogen economy — there won't be much of an economy at all unless South Carolina can raise its education level.