

People's Alliance PAC 2008 Questionnaire
June St. Clair Atkinson
North Carolina State Superintendent

Candidate's Name: June St. Clair Atkinson

1. What strengths and/or skills do you have that would make you a good Superintendent of Public Instruction?

My educational background, extensive experience in public education, and partnership building are strengths for continuing in my role as State Superintendent, my current position since 2005. During my years in education, I have served as a public teacher where I worked with business and industry to seek employment for my students. I have served in key administrative leadership roles in public education and have been recognized both by state and national organizations for my leadership and innovation as an educator. I am an author of several books. I have traveled to all 115 school districts and know first hand the challenges of each school district in the state.

I have a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy from NC State University, a Master's in Vocational-Technical Education, Virginia Tech, and a Bachelor's in Business Education, Radford University.

My record shows that I have built partnerships with business/industry groups, educators, and others to improve public education for all students.

2. How do you plan to work with the North Carolina School Board to accomplish your goals?

My current and past work with the State Board demonstrates my success in working effectively with this policy group. When I ran for State Superintendent in 2004, I talked extensively about how all students must graduate from high school prepared for the 21st century. At my first work session with the State Board, I outlined the following as educational priorities:

- Graduation of all students
- Reading
- Change in the accountability system and NCLB
- Greater use of technology in the classroom
- Development of a statewide professional development system
- Change in the processes for helping struggling schools

Since that time, the State Board has adopted the mission that all students will graduate from high school and be ready for work, further education and life in the 21st century. A strategic reading plan has been developed and the General Assembly has funded reading literacy coaches. The State Board Chair and I appointed an accountability commission whose recommendations will be discussed and presented for action in May 2008.

Through grants and funding from the General Assembly, technology access and use have both been expanded. The General Assembly has funded more positions for us to develop a system of professional development for teachers and DPI's process for helping struggling schools has been revised and is now being piloted in the state.

3. How do you plan to work with the North Carolina School Board to accomplish your goals?

During my three years in working with the State Board as State Superintendent, I have strived to develop a partnership and to provide leadership "behind the scenes" and at Board meetings. I have been candid and kept in the forefront how decisions will have an impact on our 1.4 million students before policy is adopted. I have shared input I have received from educators, business people, parents, and students with the Board so that they can make the best policy decisions.

I will continue to work in a collaborative and candid way to improve public education. I will make sure that policy changes have adequate discussion, input, and study.

4. What are some ways that the North Carolina schools can reduce the achievement gap? Discuss how North Carolina should evaluate programs that are in place and how should the state ensure accountability of funds?

-Expand focus on early childhood education. Research has shown that for every \$1 invested in early childhood education for at-risk students, we receive a \$17 return—an excellent investment. (Accountability—longitudinal studies of student success)

--Focus on reading skills for k-3 students and professional development of teachers in these grades. Data from Reading First schools (a federal grant) show that students' reading scores are improving as a result of this focus. (Accountability—End-of grade and on-going assessment of student reading achievement)

--Focus on reading in the content area at the middle school level through the use of reading coaches. Data from reading end-of-grade tests show that reading scores are improving in schools with literacy coaches. These coaches were hired in the 200 middle schools having the lowest reading scores. (Accountability—Reading and on-going assessment of student achievement as well as the use of EVASS, a system now in use to measure student progress over time)

--Increased expansion of technology use to improve achievement. Data from a third party evaluation show that schools using appropriate technology and following the guiding principles established by DPI have higher student achievement over time. (Accountability--third party evaluation about impact and student achievement)

--Greater access and participation in advanced placement courses of underserved students (Accountability—College placement data)

--Greater access and participation in arts education and career-technical education.
(Accountability—graduation and drop-out rates)

5. Describe the current situation in terms of the drop-out rate and suspension rate in North Carolina. What do you know about current programs that are in place to address these issues? What more can be done?

North Carolina lost 23,550 students during 2006-07. Given a strong will of educators, parents, and citizens, we could get these students back in school, as some districts have done to reduce their drop-out rates. We can increase our graduation rate by developing a more differentiated and engaging instructional program for drop outs and students at risk who do not see the relevancy of schools.

We must change the 9th grade experience where we have the largest drop-out rate of any grade. That experience must include the establishment of an infrastructure where each at-risk student has a mentor, a counselor, and a teacher who surround each student with focused assistance and support.

We should expand opportunities to participate in the arts and career-technical education (CTE or vocational education). Student follow-up studies have shown that of the students completing a sequence in CTE, at least 50 percent of the students indicate they stayed in school because of access to CTE.

A notable example of an effective high school is Highland School of Technology, Gaston County. Its high school graduation rate for 2006-07 was 97.5 percent. Effective practices of this school include: 11 months of employment for all teachers, school organized around career themes, extensive business/industry involvement, extensive support for all students, and engaging technology use.

Communities in Schools programs should be expanded. Research shows that this initiative is among the best drop-out prevention programs in North Carolina.

In 2006-07, 308,010 students were suspended for one to ten days. While we must make sure that our schools are safe and students do not infringe on the rights of other students to learn, it is time for us to examine if some local policies of zero tolerance are having the wrong impact. Ninth graders are the most frequently suspended. Again, we must move forward to having smaller learning communities and support for ninth graders who need a different learning environment.

6. What are some of the programs that are working well in North Carolina?

--Early college high schools

--Career centers

- Career or economic themed schools within schools
- Literacy coaches
- Ninth grade academies
- Teaching through the arts
- Advanced placement courses
- Case management pilots for at-risk students
- Inquiry-based science programs for elementary and middle schools
- Positive behavior support initiatives

7. Evaluate the effectiveness of the current accountability/testing system in North Carolina. What changes, if any, would you recommend?

The current accountability/testing system served us well in the 20th century and it is time to make changes to reflect 21st century needs. I have recommended the following changes to the Commission appointed by the State Board.

- Replace the writing test with a system of writing accountability that would reflect the way we teach writing and how we can use technology in that process

- Change the high school accountability model to reflect the purposes of schools by including the graduation rate (the no. of students who start the ninth grade and finish three to five years later.) Also include a college and work ready assessment that is recognized by business/industry, community colleges, and universities.

- Develop a formative assessment system that would focus on helping teachers and students get immediate feedback about next steps in the learning process.

- Include more than just test scores to determine the effectiveness of a school and the progress of students.

- Reduce the number of state tests administered by the high school level for accountability purposes.

8. What are the educational needs of the Latino students in North Carolina and what steps are being taken to meet these needs? What additional steps, if any, should be taken?

One of the biggest needs is to help Latino students become proficient in English. One school district has begun to use MP3 players as a way to reinforce English language

instruction when students are not in school. This program needs to be expanded to all school districts. Other school systems have started accelerated English programs for middle and high school students who do not know English. With the help of communities and education, we need to continue offering support for new Latino students and family when they enroll in schools. Categorical funding for students who have English as a second language needs to be increased.

9. How should the \$660 million court-mandated reform be funded? How should it be distributed?

One of the best uses of these dollars would be to equip each classroom with 21st century technology. (The minimum items are listed on DPI's web site.) Our third party evaluation of schools having 21st century technology, technology specialists, and appropriate staff development shows much improved student achievement and retention of experienced and beginning teachers. This type of expenditure would help us with recruitment and retention of teachers and student achievement. It is projected that \$660 million would allow us to equip every classroom so that would not have to make choices for allocations. It would be important, however, that every school show commitment to provide the necessary staff development for each teacher and principal.