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Education can reverse downward spiral

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We travel to be educated, to see a different view of the world, and to immerse ourselves in another culture. When my son was 11, we started traveling internationally to experience first-hand our diverse planet with its diverse continents and diversity of people. I wanted my son to understand that we are not only citizens of Greenville, of South Carolina and of the United States, but also we are citizens of the world.

Recently, we went to Peru, and I returned with something "stuck in my craw." This may have started with a visit to Villa El Salvador, a shantytown of 350,000 built on a sand flat south of Lima. Villa El Salvador is a squatter settlement in which residents organized to provide their own services, even doing what they could to bring beauty to their lives. One cardboard "home" was surrounded by a fence of sticks, and small trees were planted inside the fence. Regardless of the positive things that can be said about Villa El Salvador, the residents have not escaped from poverty.

Perhaps this feeling came from witnessing thousands of poor women marching through the streets of Lima shaking empty milk cans to protest the proposed scaling back of a free milk program for children. With estimates that 50 percent to 70 percent of preschool children in Peru are malnourished, the determined pace of the women was not surprising even in the face of riot police who lined the streets.

So, what's "stuck in my craw?" It was not seeing poverty, especially among children. Although it is not as severe as in a developing country like Peru, poverty is in our own backyard. A New Majority: Low Income Students in the South's Public Schools, reports that, for the first time in more than 40 years, the South is the only region in the nation where children from low-income families represent a majority (54 percent) of public school students. In South Carolina, the child poverty rate is 20.6 percent. In Greenville, the percent of children living below the federal poverty level grew from 13.8 percent in 2000 to 19.7 percent in 2006.

What "stuck in my craw" is that we clearly know the personal consequences of being caught in a downward spiral of low educational attainment, low income and poverty. Do we understand the impact of that downward spiral on economic development? Do we recognize the impact of that downward spiral on our community's development?

When a child does not have adequate nutrition, preventing optimal learning, our community pays.

When we squander the natural instinct of young children to learn by not providing them with quality early childhood experiences, our community pays.

When one student drops out of school, our community pays.

When teens give birth, our community pays.

When a plant closes and illiterate workers are displaced, our community pays.

When one student can't afford a college education, our community pays.

When talents of our senior citizens are wasted, our community pays.

Prosperity for only a few will not sustain a healthy community. As I witnessed in Peru, the cost of low educational attainment, low per capita income and poverty to personal, economic and community aspirations is incalculable.

Education can reverse this downward spiral. Education is the pathway out of poverty. Many in Peru recognize that education is the essential element for progress and the most important first step for reducing long-term poverty; however, as a poor country, there are insufficient resources to assure prosperity for all. We have those resources; yet, we continue to under-invest in education.

We must invest in quality early childhood education. We must mentor and tutor students in middle grades and in high school before they drop out.

Before they are displaced, we must invest in employees who do not have basic reading, writing and mathematical skills by providing literacy classes on site or by helping them participate in adult literacy programs in the community.

We must assure that all citizens experience the excitement and pleasure of learning, and we must demonstrate that continuously learning is a way of life.

We must invest in our colleges and universities so tuition is within reach. We must invest in opportunities for senior citizens to be actively involved in the community and to be stimulated mentally, socially and physically.

The report on low income students in the South concluded, "Poverty and lack of a good education beget poverty and inequality." We cannot continue to expect someone else -- someone other than ourselves -- to solve this problem. We must stop the downward spiral of low educational attainment, low income and poverty through education.
