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Benchmarks give North Carolina targets to shoot for**Progress, slowly**

For a state mired in poverty and mediocrity in the 19th century, North Carolina made remarkable progress in the latter half of the 20th century. Hoping to build on that, some political, academic, civic and business leaders set up a way 10 years ago to chart the state's progress on key indicators of civic health. They created the N.C. Progress Board to take regular soundings.

That development hasn't always pleased state leaders. They sometimes seem to regard the board's findings as an assessment of their political performance rather than as a key benchmark in how the state is doing -- and especially where it needs to focus its resources in the near- and long-term future.

The Easley administration, for example, has some doubts about the board's methods and its goals in the latest report. That's a defensive way to view a report that, after all, is meant to help state policymakers understand how North Carolina compares with its chief competitors.

Released quietly a week ago, the report shows mixed progress, with some good news in two areas the state's citizens are always concerned about -- education and the economy.

North Carolina has exceeded the national average in math proficiency among fourth graders, retains a lower pupil-teacher ratio than the national average and is narrowing the gap with the average SAT score. But the state's high school graduation rate (just above 65 percent) remains abysmal, as does the national graduate rate (a bit over 70 percent). In recent years the dropout rate has inched upward, giving our state the 16th highest dropout rate in the country. From these kinds of data it's reasonable to conclude that the resources the state has poured into education have had a beneficial effect in the lower grades, but challenges remain in keeping students in school in upper grades.

The state got high marks on four key economic issues, including short-term growth and favorable economic climate. But per capita income still trails the national average and ranks 36th nationally -- and fifth in the Southeast.

The Progress Board report examines eight facets of N.C. life: children and families, communities, education, workforce, environment, economy, infrastructure and accountable government. In coming years the board intends to regularly update its findings and assign letter grades for the state's overall performance.

It's not clear what grades the state's current status would get, but the report says, "North Carolina's progress toward its long-range targets has been mixed. Given the state's fiscal challenges the last four years, this is not surprising."

Nor is it acceptable. Our state made dramatic progress in recent decades by investing carefully in education and other human needs. A thriving economy enabled the state to make such investments, and being competitive is the key to continuing such gains. The Progress Board's evaluations will help keep the state on course.

Read the report

The Progress Board report is available at www.ncprogress.org/

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