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Never-changing formula once again fails schools

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MICHAEL FRONING and ERIC J. COOPER

Albert Einstein once defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Alabama's system of funding public education reminds us of this oft-quoted description. Our never-changing formula does not take into account the 21st-century reality that schools face in Alabama and across the nation.

The tipping point in America's increasing tilt toward diversity has been reached. As recently as June, it was announced that Hispanics have become the largest minority group in the United States. Researchers predict that by 2020, nonwhites will comprise 50 percent of the students in the nation's public schools. By 2050, according to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, the Hispanic/Latino American population will increase 300 percent to 24 percent of the total population.

As the demographics change in the nation and in Alabama, so do the schools' responsibilities to meet the needs of diverse students. These children are becoming increasingly segregated in urban and rural areas, where the schools are asked to meet their staggering educational and social needs. The choices we make in terms of funding and the goal of racial balance in student achievement in our public schools remain central to the continued vitality of our state.

As resources decline or are restricted, there is a resulting restriction on what is learned and taught. Groups of students under economic stress do not receive the same education as those in schools in wealthier areas. Some people even argue that students in poverty cannot learn at the same rate as others no matter what the resources, and they use this reasoning to attack equity funding formulas. Parents who can afford it choose to live in well-to-do neighborhoods, or choose private schooling for their children. They clearly understand the value of well-funded schools, smaller class sizes and up-to-date materials. Is it only the

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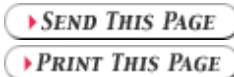
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children of the wealthy who deserve these advantages?

Recently, the Republican administration in Washington pushed through the most sweeping educational legislation in our nation's history, No Child Left Behind. That law now makes all of us responsible for seeing that every child has the opportunity to achieve very high standards. Urban children, suburban children, rural children, new English learners all must reach 100 percent proficiency in the core subjects of reading and mathematics. There is to be no more averaging or grouping to hide the results of small groups of students. This is new thinking, and it presents new challenges.

We are hopeful about the choices Alabama will make about the future of its schools. We understand that the single most important school-based factor in student achievement is the teacher. At the University of Alabama at Birmingham, our student teachers are trained to understand that the diversity of the student body needs to be celebrated and incorporated into daily lessons and projects. Researchers like Jared Diamond of UCLA and Claude Steele of Stanford University have demonstrated the power of this approach.

Diversity used as a pathway for deep and enriched learning leads to success in our modern educational, social and workplace environments. And research suggests that the more diverse the learning environment, and the more direct attention paid to it, the more likely students will become critical thinkers, good problem-solvers, decision-makers and good citizens.

Our community must address the deepening achievement gap between white and nonwhite students and the potential racial and economic isolation that may arise from poor planning and a lack of dynamic funding of our schools.

Einstein said something else that bears on our current situation: "The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them."

The choice Alabama's citizens will make on the Riley tax proposal is one of the most significant decisions in the history of the state. As educators of your children and their future teachers, we encourage each of you to vote yes on Sept. 9. Michael Froning, Ed.D. (mfroning@uab.edu), is dean of the UAB School of Education. Eric J. Cooper, Ed.D. (nua4556@aol.com), is president of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education with offices in New York and Washington, D.C.

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