

Creating quality educational opportunities for pre-school children, youth and adults

Goal: To provide a complete spectrum of educational opportunities that prepare youth to meet the challenges of the ever-increasing “knowledge economy” and enable the current adult population to remain competitive in the workplace.

Prioritized issues that can be affected by community actions:

- A. *Increase annually the percentage of high school graduates with a diploma*
- B. *Increase the educational/training level of older youth and adults to better meet the current and future needs of industry*
- C. *Expand opportunities for post-secondary education and workforce development*
- D. *Recognize the value of early childhood development for school success and future job readiness*

Standardized test scores

Fundamental to improving high school graduation rates for students is meeting academic standards in elementary and middle school. Poor achievement in the early years of school leads to student discouragement and a dislike for learning, which are often underlying causes for a person dropping out of high school.

During the last decade both the state and federal government have passed legislation requiring standardized testing of public school students. In South Carolina the main standardized test for elementary and middle school students has been the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT). The test is given annually to students in grades 3 through 8 and covers four subjects – English/ Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies. Students are scored using the following ratings:

PACT	Definition
Below Basic	Not prepared for work at next grade; must have academic assistance plan.
Basic	Minimally prepared for work at the next grade
Proficient	Well prepared for work at the next grade
Advanced	Very well prepared for work at the next grade

Currently a student meets standards on the PACT if he scores Basic or above. A Basic score implies a student is “minimally prepared” for work at the next grade. Table 3.1 shows the percentage of students by district who scored at least Basic or above in English and Math in spring 2008.

Table 3.1 Percent of students meeting standards by school district on PACT — 2008

Grade	Subject	Lee County	Clarendon Dist. 1	Clarendon Dist. 2	Clarendon Dist. 3	Sumter Dist. 2	Sumter Dist. 17	South Carolina
3	English	62.3	95.2	79.0	87.6	86.2	84.0	86.7
	Math	42.7	72.2	55.4	84.8	73.8	72.4	77.2
4	English	58.1	78.3	85.2	69.3	80.0	77.1	80.8
	Math	52.9	66.7	68.3	73.3	80.8	77.9	79.0
5	English	48.3	65.6	68.4	87.1	77.3	74.8	77.6
	Math	46.4	59.4	64.2	86.2	77.4	76.7	78.0
6	English	37.2	53.6	62.8	71.6	68.4	64.8	74.8
	Math	39.4	56.1	61.2	71.8	69.8	68.0	75.7
7	English	46.8	57.4	60.6	63.0	62.5	67.9	73.0
	Math	59.4	66.2	65.5	78.6	67.7	67.2	77.8
8	English	50.9	67.2	52.8	64.9	60.9	65.3	71.0
	Math	43.0	63.8	62.6	55.0	60.6	63.3	69.7

Source: S.C. Department of Education

Red totals indicate less than 60 percent of district students scored Basic or better on PACT.

Orange totals indicate district percentage of students scoring Basic or better was over 60 percent but still 10 percent or more below the state average.

Analysis of the data clearly shows students in Lee County and Clarendon Districts 1 and 2 struggle. In only one grade subject (3rd grade English) of the 12 total did Lee schools have at least 60 percent of students “minimally prepared” for the next grade according to the state standards in 2008. In that category, 62.3 percent of Lee 3rd graders were at least minimally prepared for 4th grade English, but the state average was still more than 10 percent higher (86.7 percent).

In four of the 12 grade/subject categories in Clarendon District 1 in 2008, less than 60 percent of students were minimally prepared for work in the next grade. However, this was an improvement from 2007 when less than 60 percent of students were minimally prepared for the next grade in seven of 12 grade/subject categories. Clarendon 2’s totals were slightly better but still had plenty of room for improvement. In 2008, Clarendon 3 was a bright spot with students in five grade/subject categories scoring above the state average on the PACT.

In the two Sumter districts, PACT scores were competitive with state averages in Grades 3 through 5 in 2008. However, a drop-off was apparent in Grades 6-8. This trend also occurred in 2007.

Significant percentages of students failing to meet standards in the middle-school grades often lead to increased high school dropout rates. The percentages show Lee County and Clarendon Districts 1 and 2 have “warning signs ahead” for significant future high school dropouts. Without a high school diploma, these students will have a major disadvantage of finding success in the workplace.

It’s necessary to mention, starting in the 2008-2009 academic year PACT will no longer be administered to the state’s public school students. Changes were necessitated not because of test quality, but instead due to the length of time it took to get test results returned and the lack of feedback for teachers on individual student performance.

Public school graduation rates

Table 3.2 Overall eighth grade-to-graduation rate estimates by county

County	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	3-yr. avg.	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	3-yr. avg.	3-yr. avg. hike	2006-2007
Clarendon	54.3%	57.5%	57.5%	56.4%	57.5%	61.3%	62.3%	60.4%	+4.0%	66.4%
Lee	43.5%	50.6%	52.1%	48.4%	45.2%	55.8%	61.7%	54.2%	+5.8%	47.3%
Sumter	53.1%	53.2%	58.8%	55.0%	60.2%	64.7%	66.7%	63.9%	+8.9%	67.2%
STATE	56.8%	57.2%	64.8%	59.5%	60.9%	61.8%	66.2%	63.0%	+3.5%	67.5%

Source: SC Department of Education eighth grade enrollment and diploma data

Research shows the most-effective means of measuring public school graduation rates at this time in the tri-county region is via an eighth grade measurement of enrollment and total diploma counts four academic years later. (All of the public school superintendents in the three counties have agreed that this methodology is likely the most accurate calculation of graduation rates at the present time.) Using the formula, Table 3.2 reveals relatively low graduation rates at the start of this decade with improvement in recent years as the three-year averages indicate. In the most recent academic year, Lee County’s improvement did falter. The table illustrates Sumter’s graduation rate is currently on par with the state average in the mid-60s. The best estimates have the current national graduation rate at about 72.2 percent. As PACT scores revealed previously, Lee and Clarendon counties face significant problems with dropouts.

The percentages listed are best described as “overall graduation rate estimates” and not on-time, four-year, graduation rates. The rates provide realistic estimates of the percentage of eighth graders who graduate from public high schools with a diploma, regardless of the number of years it takes them to finish. Students who earn non-diploma certificates from high school and those who drop out but enter Adult Education and eventually earn a GED are not included in the totals.

Given the increasingly global nature of the economy – with greater overseas accessibility to cheap labor and technological advances requiring fewer, but higher-skilled, workers – every region in the U.S. is becoming more dependent on having access to an educated workforce to be competitive. In the future an ever-increasing number of jobs in the U.S. will require at least some level of post-secondary training. Efforts must be made to continue improvements in public school graduation rates toward the national average and enroll more local students in post-secondary education. Even if a student isn’t college bound, a high school diploma is currently often a requirement for minimum-level entry into the labor market.

Dropouts or non-diploma recipients

Table 3.3 Cohort class dropouts or non-diploma recipients by county

County	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	3 class total	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	3 class total	3 class total decrease	2006-2007
Clarendon	237	207	211	655	204	186	186	576	-79	164
Lee	160	116	114	390	136	80	79	295	-95	116
Sumter	698	679	580	1,957	592	480	459	1,531	-426	488
REGION TOTAL	1,095	1,002	905	3,002	932	746	724	2,402	-600	768

Source: SC Department of Education eighth grade enrollment and diploma data

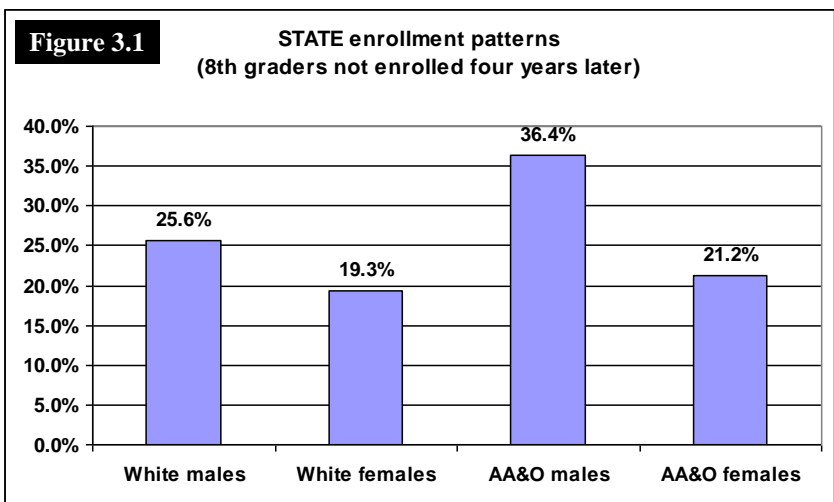
Table 3.3 translates county graduation rates into total numbers of dropouts or non-diploma recipients per cohort class. As county graduation rates have improved in recent years, total dropouts and non-diploma recipients have declined in the region from a three-year total of 3,002 for the first three cohorts to 2,402 in the latter three cohorts. Efforts must be made to build on recent success. If the tri-county region performed at the national average graduation rate of 72.2 percent, there would have been 1,755 dropouts or non-diploma recipients (647 less) in the latter three-year total.

Widespread research indicates high school dropouts face significant challenges in the workplace with the highest levels of unemployment and lowest potential wages if they do obtain employment. Generally as an individual achieves more education beyond high school, he can expect to obtain more job and financial security.

Who’s dropping out? — Demographic breakdown of students

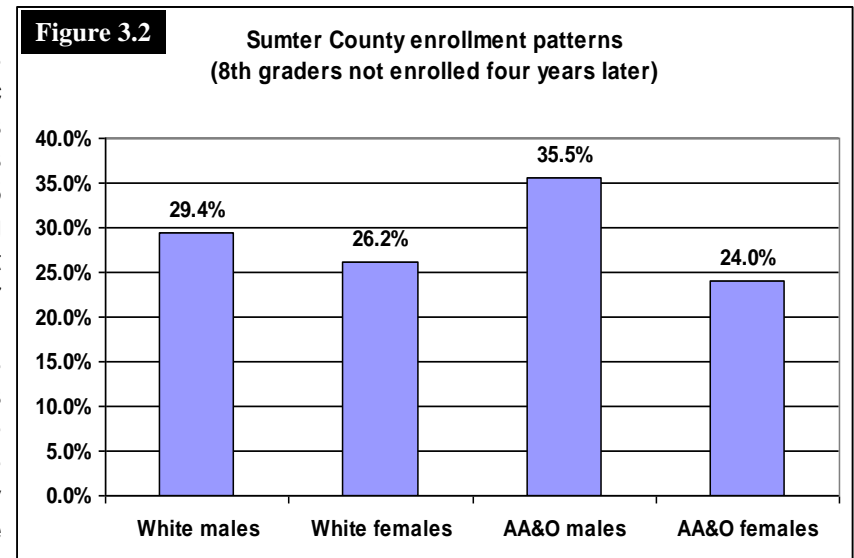
Analysis regarding the race and gender of high school students not earning a state diploma is limited to some extent. The most-effective measurement is to weigh a cohort’s eighth-grade enrollment by race/gender against its 12th grade enrollment four years later. This calculation will show total students by race and gender that have left school before graduation. Figure 3.1 provides state percentages of “leavers” by race/gender. As can be seen, minority males in the state drop out of high school at a much higher rate than the three other main demographics. The chart details that during the academic years of 2002-

03, 2003-04, and 2006-07, 36.4 percent of eighth-grade minority males in the state never made it to 12th grade. White males followed second at 25.6 percent of eighth graders not advancing through the system. ***The totals would even be a few percent higher if we were able to measure diploma counts by demographic – these percentages listed only reveal those students staying in school.*** Many attribute these high dropout rates to the breakdown of the American family via divorce and out-of-wedlock births contributing to unruly adolescent males.



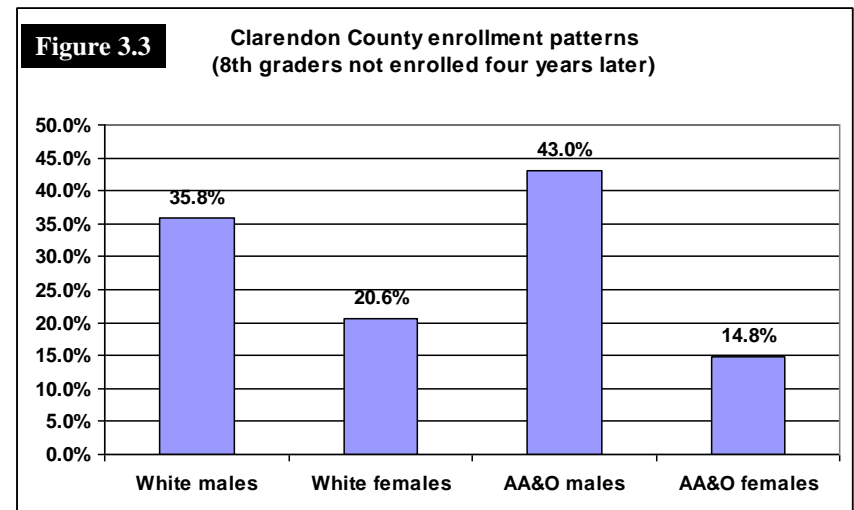
Sumter County dropouts

Enrollment statistics show that Sumter's dropout percentages by demographic are very similar to the state average as revealed in Figure 3.2. Minority males comprise the highest percentage at 35.5 percent of eighth graders not advancing to the 12th grade. White males are next at a 29.4 percent rate, slightly higher than the state average of 25.6 percent. The data from the three academic years showed 26.2 percent of white females leaving high schools in Sumter, compared to the state average of 19.3 percent. Dropout percentages for minority females in Sumter were similar to the state average.



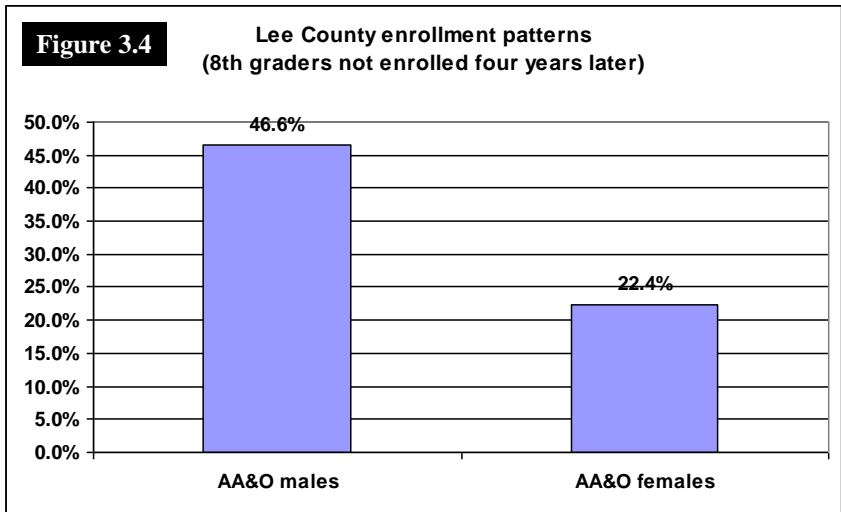
Clarendon County dropouts

Dropout percentages in Clarendon County were above the state average. For the three years, 43 percent of minority males left high school before finishing the 12th grade, 6.6 percent above the state average. The percentage of white males dropping out (35.8 percent) was more than 10 percent above the state average. Clarendon has had better success with female students however. The dropout rate for minority females was 14.8 percent, 6.4 percent less than the state. White female dropouts were on par with the state level.



Lee County dropouts

Demographic analysis of dropouts in Lee County removes white males and females since grade enrollments in these two categories are generally less than 10 students annually. Historically, Lee has the highest dropout rate in the tri-county area and that held true in our analysis. For the three years, 46.6 percent of Lee County minority males left high school before completing the 12th grade, a total of 10.2 percent above the state average. Lee minority females dropped out of high school at about the state average.



Students entering post-secondary education

Table 3.4 shows the percentage of eighth graders by cohort class who entered some form of post-secondary training in the first fall term after when they would have finished high school. For example, an estimated 43.5 percent of Clarendon County eighth graders who were in the graduating class of 2001-02 enrolled in post-secondary training in Fall 2002. (Post-secondary training includes 4-year college, 2-year college, a technical college degree program, a technical college diploma/certificate program and proprietary schools.) The cohort percentages and five-year averages show Clarendon and Sumter counties follow relatively close behind the state average for students entering post-secondary. The U.S. average is likely in the low-50s, or 4 percent to 5 percent above the state average. It's necessary to mention this analysis doesn't include a small percentage of high school graduates who wait to enter post-secondary training more than six months after high school.

Table 3.4 Eighth graders entering post-secondary directly after high school

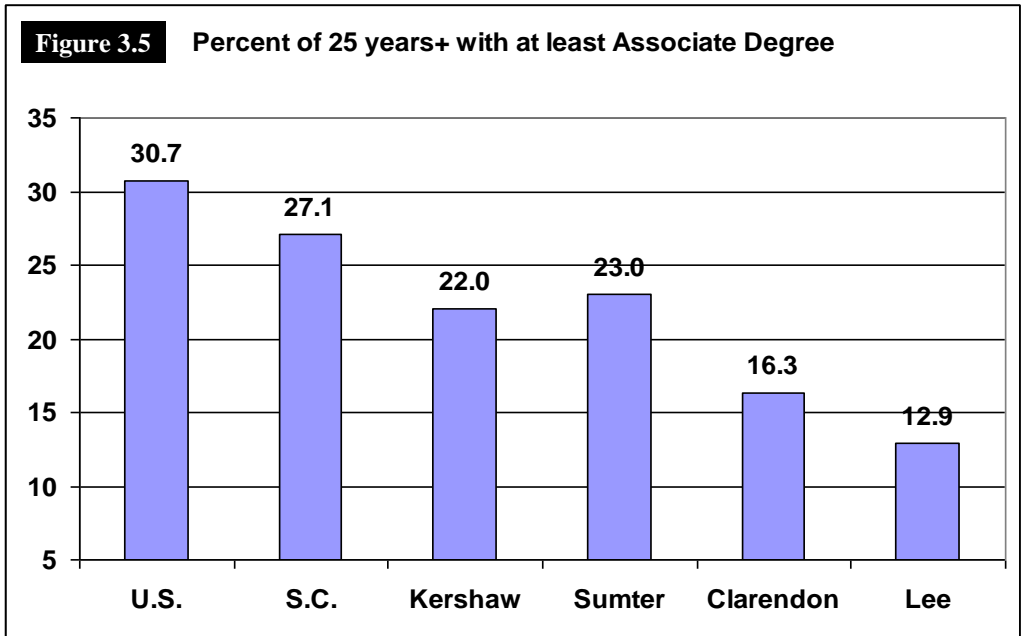
County	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	5-year average
Clarendon	43.5%	43.3%	50.5%	44.5%	43.7%	45.1%
Lee	27.5%	22.8%	12.5%	45.8%	28.0%	26.3%
Sumter	41.3%	43.3%	43.1%	42.6%	47.5%	43.5%
STATE	42.9%	49.8%	46.2%	47.4%	49.7%	47.1%

Source: SC Department of Education eighth grade enrollment totals and College Freshman Report

As mentioned previously, in the 21st Century “knowledge economy” an increasing number of jobs will require at least some level of post-secondary education as a prerequisite. Some research groups say up to 85 percent of jobs in 2020 in the U.S. will require post-secondary training. A large percentage of these occupations will be “middle-skill” jobs that generally require some significant education and training beyond high school but less than a bachelor’s degree. Educational training for these “middle-skill” jobs includes associate’s degrees, vocational certificates, significant on-the-job training, previous work experience or generally “some college” but less than a bachelor’s degree.

Educational attainment levels of adults

The role of education is paramount in the current and future U.S. economy. Given the loss of lower-skilled, lower-wage manufacturing jobs overseas and increasing technological advances requiring fewer but higher-skilled workers, having an educated workforce is critical for retaining and recruiting jobs to an area. Figure 3.5 shows the percentage of adults – 25 years old and older – with at least an associate’s degree in the tri-county area as compared to Kershaw County, the state average and the



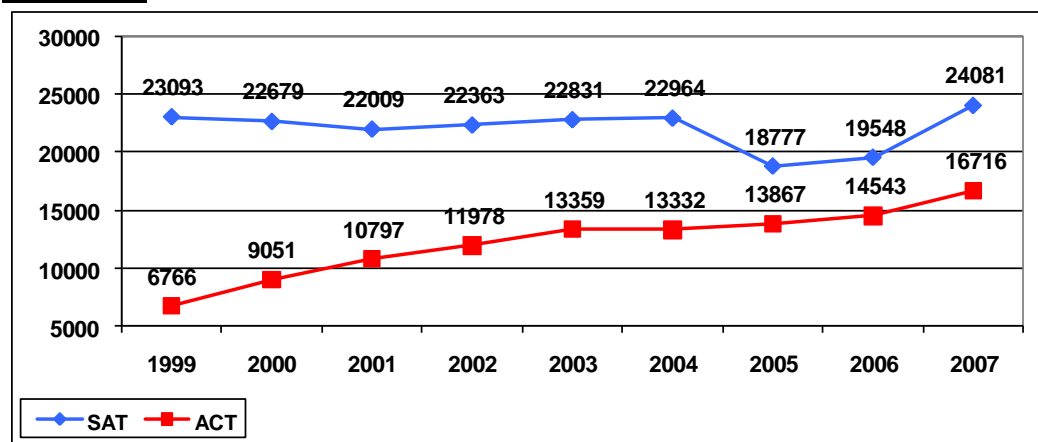
U.S. in 2000 according to the U.S. Census. Sumter County’s 23 percent of adults with at least an associate’s degree leads the region but still falls well behind the state and U.S. Growth in this category is critical for counties, given more and more jobs will require at least middle-skill acquisition as referenced in the previous section.

College entrance exams

Two specialized tests that students in the state take to qualify for college entry are the SAT and the ACT. The two exams differ in focus with the SAT based more on logic and analysis; while the ACT is a test of curriculum-based and classroom-based achievement.

The SAT is currently the main college entrance exam in 21 states, including South Carolina. In these states at least 50 percent of high school students take the test as the main college entrance exam. The remaining 29 states use the ACT as the main college entrance exam. Although the SAT continues to be the more popular test for college-bound students in the state, the ACT student share has grown through the years as represented in Figure 3.6. The major reason for the shift is that some students feel more comfortable with the curriculum-based ACT. All South Carolina colleges and universities now accept either the SAT or ACT for admission.

Figure 3.6 SAT participation, ACT participation in state



Source: SC Department of Education

In the tri-county area, slightly more students take the ACT over the SAT. In 2007 the totals were 575 ACT test takers and 484 SAT test takers.

SAT

Historically, the SAT has been composed of Math and Verbal sections with each having an equal weight of 800 points for a maximum score of 1,600. In 2006, the SAT added a third section for writing that is also scored up to 800 points. However, most analysis of SAT scores still focuses on just the Math and Verbal sections and our analysis does so as well.

Historically, South Carolina has scored among the lowest of any state on the SAT. That trend continued in 2006 and 2007 with a two-year average score of 985, 34 points below the U.S. average of 1,019. In 2007, South Carolina ranked 20th of 21 states where at least 50 percent of students took the SAT. Maine was the only state with a lower average score, but it requires **all** high school students take the test as part of a college readiness initiative. South Carolina has somewhat closed the gap on the U.S. average over the last decade as represented by a seven-point increase in its two-year averages but it still hasn't surpassed other states, except Maine. Traditionally, Southern states score lowest on the SAT. A comparison of South Carolina to other states in the South that use the SAT as the main college admissions' exam shows two states – Georgia and Florida – didn't surpass our state by much in scoring in 2007.

Table 3.5
Ranking the Southern States on 2007 SAT

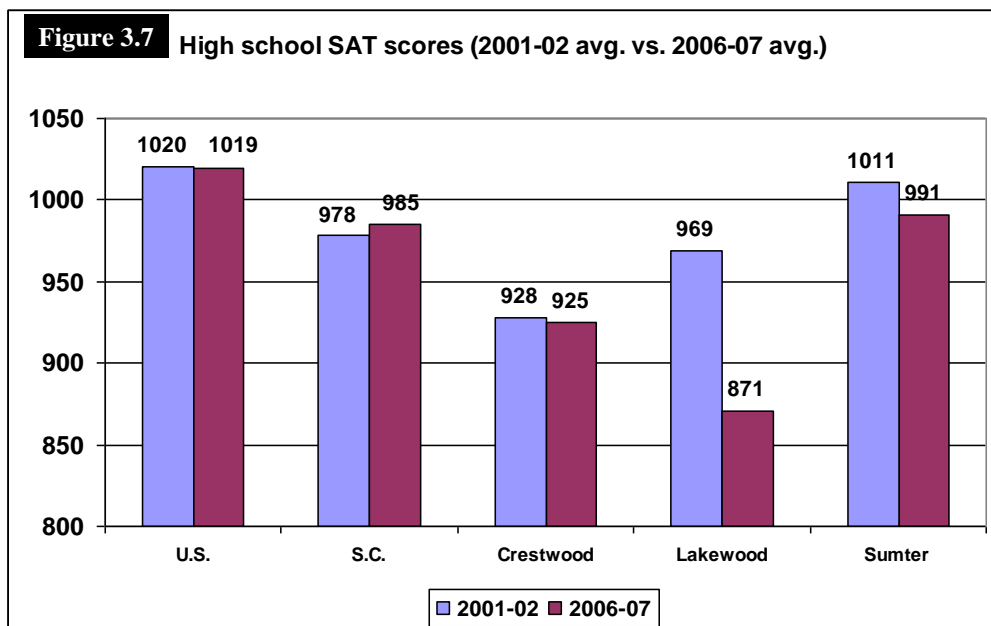
Rank	State	Composite score
1.	Virginia	1,022
2.	North Carolina	1,004
3.	Maryland	1,002
4.	Florida	993
5.	Georgia	989
6.	South Carolina	984

Given the increasing importance of post-secondary education in the 21st Century economy, concentrated efforts need to be continued to improve scores in the state to better equip students for college and the future workplace.

Figure 3.7 shows two-year averages for SAT scores from 2001-02 and 2006-07 for the U.S., state and public high schools in Sumter County, the most urban of the three counties in the area.

SAT scores – Sumter County

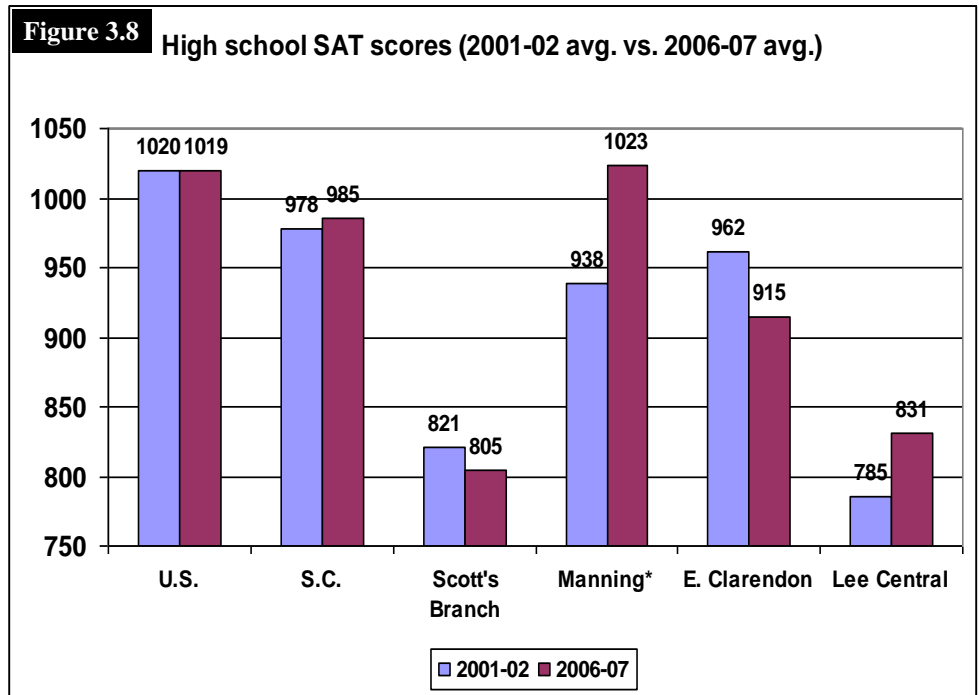
Locally, all Sumter County high schools fall below the U.S. average, but Sumter High School's average SAT score has consistently been at or above the state average throughout the decade. At the beginning of the decade, Sumter High's scores were competitive with the U.S. average; however, in recent years the school has seen an average drop of 20 points on the SAT down to 991. In 2007, Sumter High – which is Sumter District 17 – ranked 29th of the 85 districts in the state on the test.



Crestwood and Lakewood high schools' scores fall below Sumter High and the state average. Crestwood's SAT score has been fairly stable in the lower 900s over the decade while Lakewood has seen its scores fall.

SAT scores – Clarendon and Lee counties

U.S. and state SAT scores are compared to the two more rural counties in the area in Figure 3.8. Lee Central and Scott's Branch high schools score similarly, both significantly below the state average. Lee Central has shown improvement since the beginning of the decade when its scores were below 800. Scott's Branch's scores have averaged in the lower 800s. In 2007, Lee Central – which is the Lee County School District -- ranked 77th of 85 districts in the state on the SAT with an 815 score; while Clarendon District 1 (Scott's Branch) was 83rd with a 772.



* In 2006 and '07 only 8% of Manning High students took the SAT

East Clarendon High School achieved scores in the mid-900s from 2001-06 before faltering in 2007 with a student body average score of 874, which brought its two-year average down to 915. Manning High School's scores have increased substantially since the beginning of the decade but the percentage of students taking the SAT has dropped considerably from about 30 percent to 8 percent in 2006 and 2007. Data shows the percentage of ACT test-takers at Manning has increased somewhat in recent years but unfortunately not enough to make up the difference.

Lee and Clarendon counties' scores reveal much work is necessary to improve the college readiness of children.

ACT

The ACT is a college entrance exam that consists of four subject-area tests: English, Math, Reading and Science Reasoning. The test uses an adjusted average of the four subject tests to arrive at an overall composite score. The highest score for each of the tests and the overall composite is 36.

Similar to the SAT, South Carolina scores near the bottom of all states on the ACT. During the three years from 2005-07 the state ranked 49th of the 50 states, only surpassing Mississippi each year. It should be mentioned however that Mississippi has a participation rate of over 90 percent, which naturally drives down scores significantly. South Carolina's participation rate increased from 38 percent to 43 percent over the three-year period.

In 2007 the U.S. average ACT score was 21.2; while South Carolina earned a 19.6. For comparison purposes, one-tenth of a point on the ACT is equivalent to four SAT points. This means if the ACT were scored like the SAT in 2007, South Carolina's average would be 64 points below the U.S. mean. Also like the SAT, Southern states generally score lowest. Of the 10 states in the Southeast, South Carolina ranked ninth in 2007 – above only Mississippi.

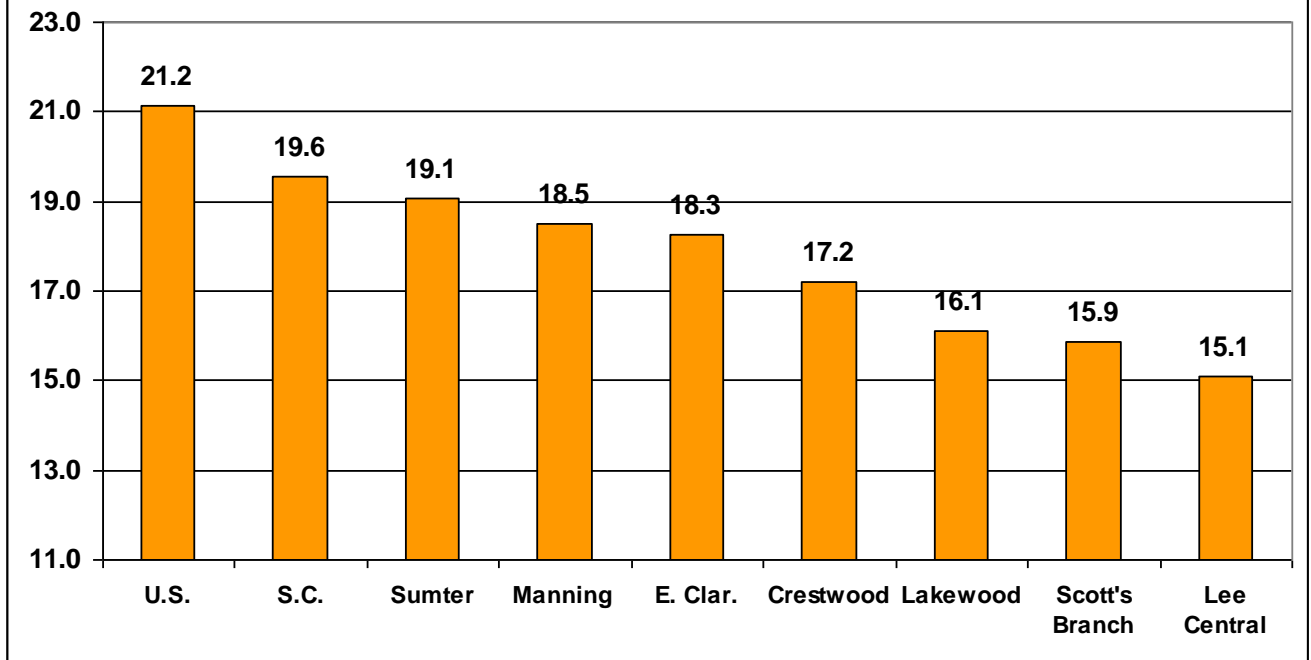
Figure 3.9**High school ACT composite scores (Two-year averages of 2006-07)**

Figure 3.9 compares local high school ACT scores to the state and U.S. averages using two-year average scores from 2006 and 2007. Local scoring trends were similar to the SAT. During the two years only Sumter High had ACT scores that were somewhat competitive with the state average of 19.6. All schools locally had fairly strong levels of test participation during the two years measured.

In 2007, Lee County School District's average ACT score of 14.9 ranked 82nd of 85 districts in the state. Clarendon District 1 (Scott's Branch) was 77th with a 15.6. Sumter District 2, consisting of Crestwood and Lakewood high schools, ranked 70th of 85 districts primarily because of low performance by Lakewood.

Table 3.6 2007 ACT scores by subject area – U.S., S.C., and local high schools

Group	English	Math	Reading	Science	Composite
U.S.	20.7	21.0	21.5	21.0	21.2
BENCHMARK	18.0	22.0	21.0	24.0	
S.C.	19.0	19.8	19.8	19.5	19.6
Sumter High	18.6	18.4	19.0	19.0	18.9
Manning High	18.0	18.3	18.3	18.7	18.4
East Clarendon	17.7	17.5	17.9	16.3	17.4
Crestwood	15.8	17.4	16.8	17.9	17.1
Lakewood	15.1	17.0	15.9	16.8	16.4
Scott's Branch	13.9	16.2	15.0	16.5	15.6
Lee Central	13.7	15.8	14.8	15.0	14.9

Source: S.C. Department of Education

ACT also reports College Readiness Benchmark Scores as shown in Table 3.6, which are the minimum scores needed on an ACT subject-area test to indicate a 75 percent chance of obtaining a “C” or higher in the corresponding college courses – English composition, Algebra, Social Science and Biology. ACT asserts these scores are empirically derived based on the actual performance of students in college. According to ACT, a student with lower scores “may need additional academic preparation to be successful in the typical college entry-level courses.” The high school scores clearly show that the majority of students in the state and the local area are not adequately prepared to achieve success in college.

Analysis of the state’s ACT scores is also conducted by race. In 2007, white high school graduates in the state had an average composite score of 21.5 as shown in Table 3.7; while African-American students scored a 16.3, representing a 0.1 point drop from 2006.

A total of 61 percent of state students who took the ACT in 2007 took the core academic courses recommended by ACT and had an average score of 20.1. State test-takers who didn’t take the core courses, 39 percent, averaged an 18.5. **Interestingly, white students who didn’t take the core courses still scored significantly higher than African-American students who did: 20.9 for whites taking less than core and 16.9 for African Americans who took the core classes. This trend was also apparent at the national level but not quite as severe: 20.7 for white students taking less than core and 17.7 for African Americans taking core courses. ACT officials attribute these gaps to a variety of factors, in particular “rigor of courses,”** which can’t be measured with the self-reporting used to determine who has taken core courses. The ACT’s recommended core courses include the following:

- 4 years of English
- 3 or more years of math, including Algebra I and II and Geometry
- 3 or more years of social studies, including U.S. history and government and world history
- 3 or more years of natural sciences, such as general, physical and earth science, biology, chemistry and physics

Table 3.7 2007 ACT composite scores

Group	Overall average	Taking Core or more courses	Taking less than Core
U.S.	21.2	22.0	19.8
S.C.	19.6	20.1	18.5
S.C. White	21.5	21.9	20.9
S.C. African American	16.3	16.9	15.3

In summary, despite a continuing preference among local high school students for the ACT over the SAT, scores in many high schools -- specifically Lee Central, Scott’s Branch and Lakewood -- are extremely low compared to the state average. Given the state composite score ranks 49th of 50 states, these high schools’ scores draw attention to the fact that much intervention is necessary to better prepare these students for college and the 21st Century economy. Unless a larger percentage of high school graduates have the academic foundation for success in college coursework, the local area’s future ability to compete economically will be seriously degraded.

Young children in low-income families

Over the past decade research has confirmed the importance of early child care and educational experiences. Children develop at a tremendous rate during their first few years of life and high quality care and education during these critical years foster successful mental growth.

There is a direct correlation between a child from a low-income family and that child's lack of readiness for school. A large percentage of economically disadvantaged children live in single-parent families headed by the mother. National data shows two of every three single moms with children 5 or younger work and therefore can't effectively contribute to the child's care and learning during formative years. When statistics show roughly 40 percent of all children in Lee and Clarendon counties are in single-parent families, there is reason for alarm. Sumter's rate of 34 percent of children in single-parent families was about 3 percent greater than the state average of 31.3 percent.

Despite some improvement in poverty rates over the last 30 years, rural counties in the South still face markedly higher poverty and lower-income levels than urban areas. The poverty level is below an income cutoff or threshold, where a family needs public money and service to subsist. The threshold varies based on family size and number of children under 18 years old. If a family's total income is less than the threshold, then the family is considered below the poverty level. Examples of poverty thresholds from Census 2000 were the following:

<u>Family size & composition</u>	<u>Income threshold</u>
Three people (one child under 18)	\$13,410
Four people (two children under 18)	\$16,895
Five people (three children under 18)	\$19,882

Sumter, Lee and Clarendon counties have family poverty rates that exceed the state average as evidenced in the next chart from Census 2000. Family poverty is especially prevalent among minority populations in the tri-county area. Poverty rate estimates for Hispanics in 2000 were likely difficult to gauge in the three counties due to a small relative population at the time in comparison to more metropolitan areas of the state.

Table 3.8 Families below poverty level by race -- 2000

	STATE	Clarendon	Lee	Sumter
Overall family poverty rate	10.7%	18.7%	17.7%	13.1%
White	5.6%	7.4%	2.1%	5.1%
African American	23.5%	29.9%	27.8%	22.9%
Hispanic	20.3%	35.1%	17.7%	23.5%

Source: U.S. Census, 2000 (latest available data for poverty by race)

The data shows that close to 30 percent of African-American families in Clarendon and Lee were in poverty in 2000, which presents extra risks for children.

Another level of data calculates the number of children 17-and-under in poverty by county. According to the Census Bureau's Small Area Income & Poverty Estimates, poverty rates are gradually rising throughout the state since 2000. (The Census 2000 poverty thresholds listed previously are also adjusted slightly annually for people to be considered in poverty.) According to 2004 estimates, there were 11,017 tri-county children in poverty out of a collective total of 42,258 for a rate of 26.1 percent. The county breakdowns are listed in Table 3.9.

Table 3.9 Children 17-and-under in poverty – 2004 estimates

County	Youth in poverty	Total youth	Poverty rate
Clarendon	2,463	8,012	30.7%
Lee	1,389	4,942	28.1%
Sumter	7,165	29,304	24.5%
Tri-county	11,017	42,258	26.1%
STATE	217,509	1,025,986	21.2%

Source: Census Bureau Small Area Income & Poverty Estimates, 2004

A final level of data shows the percentage of children 5-and-under living in “severe poverty,” where total income is less than half of the poverty threshold. According to Census 2000 statistics, there were nearly 1,700 children 5-and-under in the tri-county area in severe poverty. The breakdown by county is shown at right.

Table 3.10

Children 5-and-under living in severe poverty -- 2000

Clarendon	Lee	Sumter	Tri-county total
392	130	1,164	1,686

Source: U.S. Census, 2000

It’s necessary to mention these statistics likely don’t completely capture county poverty levels since poverty is somewhat difficult for the Census Bureau to measure, given many impoverished families live with relatives or in a shelter and are not contained to a particular household. Census Bureau measurements are generally more precise when poverty is less and more families live in households with their own address.

Still, the data establishes the tri-county area has a large number of school-age children and pre-schoolers living in economic distress. The state has enacted legislation to better prepare young children for the first grade through the establishment of mandatory, full-day, 5-year-old kindergarten for every child in public school.

Given the many circumstances that force mothers with young children to work more -- including divorce, minimal or flat wages, and loss of paternal employment among others -- ensuring quality child care is critical. Yet families in rural areas, such as Clarendon and Lee counties, generally have fewer child care choices than urban families, with center-based care more scarce than in urban areas according to research. Beset with these conditions, it’s important that working parents in rural counties have greater access to high-quality child care and early education programs for their preschoolers. Many believe state and federal policy should focus on ensuring all rural preschoolers’ early learning experiences prepare them for future school success.

Current efforts are being made to expand and upgrade existing 4-year-old kindergarten pre-school programs in the state to serve all children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. *The Economic Benefits Of Pre-School In South Carolina*, a study released in March 2008 by the S.C. Commission for Minority Affairs, recommended increasing state funding for 4K to improve the quality of current programs. Also the study asserted 4K needs to be expanded in the state to serve an additional 11,500 children from disadvantaged backgrounds who are not currently being served. The study recommended these changes would increase annual pre-school spending in the state from \$97 million to \$269 million, a hike of \$172 million. The long-term benefits from pre-school investment would be \$326 million annually – in the form of higher government revenues and lower spending – according to the study.

South Carolina Readiness Assessment (SCRA)

Since 2001 public schools in the state have administered the South Carolina Readiness Assessment (SCRA) to assess kindergarteners on three indicators: Personal and Social Development, and Math and English/Language Arts knowledge and skills tied to the state academic standards. The SCRA relies on teacher observation and documentation. The assessments show the percentage of kindergarteners who consistently demonstrate readiness for first grade. Table 3.11 displays percentages of kindergarteners in 2007 assessed as not consistently demonstrating readiness for first grade according to the SCRA.

Table 3.11 Kindergartners not consistently ready for first grade (SCRA -- 2007)

Student type	Clarendon	Lee	Sumter	STATE
White males	30.3%	N/A	31.0%	22.2%
White females	11.9%	N/A	20.1%	13.7%
Minority males	38.0%	37.7%	35.6%	35.8%
Minority females	23.1%	30.6%	22.3%	25.2%

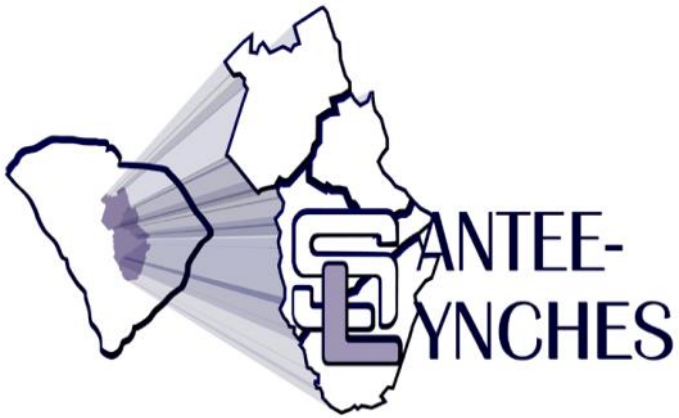
Source: S.C. Kids Count from S.C. Department of Education totals

The most apparent trend from the SCRA is the relatively high percentage of minority males who have reached school age without the readiness skills needed for success in learning. In Lee County the data reveals about one of every three kindergartners don't consistently show readiness for first grade. In Clarendon and Sumter counties, roughly 28 percent of kindergartners are not ready for school. The state average is about 25 percent, or one in four kindergartners, not showing school readiness.

Moreover, according to S.C. Kids Count Project Director Dr. Baron Holmes and others, some elementary schools are not ready to respond appropriately to the varying developmental levels of children. As a result, too many students don't experience the success needed in the early grades to create the proper motivation and engagement to sustain learning.

The data indicates the state needs to continue the process of expanding and upgrading existing 4-year-old kindergarten preschool programs to serve all children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Additionally, federally funded Head Start programs need to be expanded for younger, low-income children.

Locally, many child-care providers in the tri-county area that work with children 5-and-under are at low levels in the state certification process. The state has four levels of certification standards for child-care providers – Registered, Licensed, ABC and Accredited. The United Way's Success by 6 program tries to help and train these providers to move up the certification scale. According to the United Way, a lack of funding is a critical issue facing most lower-quality child-care providers in the area.



United Way
of Sumter, Clarendon
and Lee Counties