Rallying Education Activism from the Grassroots Up:
A Case Study of the South Carolina Education Improvement Act of 1984

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Abstract

With the 1983 publication of *A Nation At Risk* that warned of the “rising tide of mediocrity” in American public education, southern governors took the lead in proposing reforms to their states’ lagging education systems. Among those was South Carolina Governor Richard W. Riley, who proposed public school reform legislation funded by a statewide one cent sales tax increase within the difficult context of a legislative election year. Facing stiff opposition to the tax increase from the South Carolina General Assembly, Riley launched a statewide grassroots effort to pressure the Legislature to enact the 1984 Education Improvement Act (EIA) and the dedicated tax increase to fund it. As the result of sustained citizen engagement, the state General Assembly approved the EIA and its sales tax increase intact. There are scholarly articles and dissertations detailing how other southern governors championed school reform in their respective states in the wake of *A Nation At Risk*. However, none focused on South Carolina’s unique “grass tops/grassroots” plan to build a network of education supporters to lobby a reluctant state Legislature for school reform and a tax increase. Using a case study approach, this dissertation examined the public participation strategy used to mobilize and sustain public activism for the EIA. Using qualitative research methods, data were gathered from archival documents, private collections, organization strategies, and news media reports from the 1983-1984 EIA initiative, as well as interviews with key participants, who devised and sustained the citizen participation network and successful lobbying effort.