

The "Education Governor" ^[1]

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Excerpt from the inaugural address of North Carolina Governor Charles Brantley Aycock ^[2] in which he talks about the importance of education. Historical commentary addresses the tensions between Aycock's views on education and his views on race.

Gentlemen of the General Assembly, you will not have aught to fear when you make ample ^[3] provision for the education of the whole people. Rich and poor alike are bound by promise and necessity to approve your utmost efforts in this direction. The platforms of all the parties declare in favor of a liberal policy toward the education of the masses; notably the Democratic platform says, "We heartily commend the action of the General Assembly of 1899 for appropriating one hundred thousand dollars for the benefit of the public schools of the State, and pledge ourselves to increase the school fund so as to make at least a four-months' term in each year in every school district in the State," and in the campaign which was conducted throughout the State with so much energy and earnestness that platform pledge was made the basis of the promises which we all made to the people. Poor and unlettered men, anxious about the privileges of their children and hesitating to vote for the Amendment were finally persuaded to accept our promise and place their children in a position in which they can never vote unless the pledges which we made are redeemed to the fullest extent. For my part I declare to you that it shall be my constant aim and effort during the four years that I shall endeavor ^[4] to serve the people of this State to redeem this most solemn of all our pledges. If more taxes are required to carry out this promise to the people, more taxes must be levied ^[5]. If property has escaped taxation heretofore which ought to have been taxed, means must be devised by which that property can be reached and put upon the tax list. I rejoice in prosperity and take delight in the material progress of the State. I would cripple no industry; I would retard the growth of no enterprise; but I would by just and equal laws require from every owner of property his just contribution, to the end that all the children may secure the right to select their servants. There are many important matters which will claim your attention. The problems before us are of the gravest nature, but among them all there is none that can approach in importance the necessity for making ample provision for the education of the whole people.

Appropriations ^[6] alone cannot remove illiteracy from our State. With the appropriations must come also an increased interest in this cause which shall not cease until every child can read and write. The preachers, the teachers, the newspapers and the mothers of North Carolina must be unceasing in their efforts to arouse the indifferent and compel by the force of public opinion the attendance of every child upon the schools. It is easier to accomplish this since the Amendment to our Constitution raises its solemn voice and declares that the child who arrives at age after 1908 cannot share in the glorious privilege of governing his State nor participating in the policies of the nation unless he can read and write. This is, therefore, the opportune moment for a revival of educational interest throughout the length and breadth of the State. We shall not accomplish this work in a day, nor can it be done by many speeches. It is a work of years, to be done day by day with a full realization of its importance, and with that anxious interest on our part which will stimulate the careless and will make all our people eager to attain the end which we seek. Our statesmen have always favored the education of the masses, but heretofore interest in the matter has not approached universality; henceforth in every home there will be the knowledge that no child can attain the true dignity of citizenship without learning at least to read and write. This simple fact alone justifies the adoption of the Amendment, for it was its passage that first brought home to all our people the necessity for universal education. We enter an era of industrial development. Growth in that direction is dependent upon intelligence -- not the intelligence of the few, but of all. Massachusetts realized this fact from the day when the Pilgrim fathers landed on Plymouth Rock, and by that clear perception she has won wealth out of bleak coasts and sterile lands. Our forefathers acknowledged the same fact in their first constitution, and from that time to the present our Constitutions and Legislative acts have all looked toward this end; but the whole people have never before been awakened to its advocacy ^[7]. From this time forth opposition to education will mark a man as opposed to the theory of our Government which is founded upon the consent of the governed, and our Constitution provides that this consent in the not distant future can be given only by those who can read and write.

We need have nothing to fear, then, from any party or any politician when we make liberal provision for education. But if there were opposition, our duty would be none the less clear. It is demonstrable that wealth increases as the education of the people grows. Our industries will be benefited; our commerce will expand; our railroads will do a larger business when we shall have educated all the children of the State. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance from a material point of view that our whole people should be educated. Care must be taken on your part, gentlemen of the Legislature, to bring the schools in the remotest districts up to the standard of the Constitution which solemnly admonishes ^[8] you, as it did me but a moment ago when I took the oath to support it, that at least four months of school must be carried on in every school

district in each year. Our party platform follows the Constitution and we cannot afford to violate either. If there are districts which are weak they must be strengthened by those who are strong. The [Good Book](#) tells us that the strong should bear the [infirmities](#) ^[9] of the weak and the lessons of that great authority are of utility in our political life. There has grown up an idea among [strenuous](#) ^[10] men that only the strong are to be considered and benefited; that the poor and weak are the burden-bearers who deserve no aid and are weak because of their follies. A great State can never act on this theory, but will always recognize that the strong can care for themselves while the true aim of the State is to provide equal and just laws, giving to the weak opportunity to grow strong and restraining the powerful from oppressing the less fortunate. It will be a glorious day for us if our people in the hour of their prosperity and wonderful growth and development can realize that men can never grow higher and better by rising on the weakness and ignorance of their fellows, but only by aiding their fellowmen and lifting them to the same high plane which they themselves occupy. It may require sacrifice to accomplish the promises which we have made and men may be compelled to bear additional burdens, but I am persuaded that the sacrifice will be made and the burdens borne with that cheerfulness which has ever characterized us when we were doing a righteous thing. Our fathers have done well their work. They have sought this day through many difficulties; illiterate or learned, they have ever striven to do their duty by the State, and they have laid her foundations so strong and deep that we have but to build thereon the splendid home which they saw only in anticipation. Let that home be bright with the shining of ten thousand lights emanating from as many schools. Some of these lights will shine but feebly, mayhap with but four-candlepower, while others shall shine with sixty-four and some few with the radiance of a thousand, but let them all shine together to brighten life and make the State more glorious, and may they all have as their source that God who first said "Let there be light."

I pledge you, gentlemen of the Legislature, such power as the Constitution vests in the Governor and all the energy of my soul and heart to the education of the people, and rely with entire confidence upon you and the promises which each of you have made. With these promises kept there will break upon us a day such as has never before dawned upon our State. Our Government is founded upon intelligence and virtue. We shall provide for intelligence by a system of schools which is designed to reach every citizen. The schools look to the preparation of the voter for the use of the ballot. We admit to the elective [franchise](#) ^[11] every man capable of intelligently exercising that right and so anxious are we to approach as near as may be universal [suffrage](#) ^[12] that we have made the test of intelligence simply ability to read and write, an accomplishment which can be acquired in a few months.

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[Charles Brantley Aycock](#) ^[13]

[education](#) ^[14]

[history](#) ^[15]

[North Carolina](#) ^[16]

[North Carolina History](#) ^[17]

[Page](#) ^[18]

[politics](#) ^[19]

[Progressive era](#) ^[20]

[reforms](#) ^[21]

[Students](#) ^[22]

[Teachers](#) ^[23]

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[4] <https://www.ncpedia.org/glossary/endeavor>

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[12] <https://www.ncpedia.org/glossary/suffrage>

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[14] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/education>

[15] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/history>

[16] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/north-carolina-5>

[17] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/north-carolina-6>

[18] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/page>

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