

To move South Carolina forward, bring on the innovators!

In the midst of turmoil in the Middle East and climbing oil prices, and with summer heat waves around the world playing out like a global warming “preview of coming attractions,” it can be difficult to stay focused on the things we can do here in South Carolina to make our economy stronger and the lives of our people better.



Bill
Settlemyer

But whether you're trying to grow a business or a state, it's vital to maintain a strong blend of vision, focus and action. We also need innovation, broadly defined in this context as new and different approaches to the state's challenges that will produce better results faster than in the past. Here are some thoughts on where we are and where we need to go.

African-American economic development. We've long passed beyond the acrimonious and visible debate over the Confederate Flag atop the Statehouse. But that was only a symbolic issue; far more important is the need to improve the economic and social success of African-Americans in South Carolina. It's a topic that has been pretty much swept under the rug by just about everyone.

Do we even need to talk about race? Perhaps we can just focus on ensuring the success of all our citizens and that will do the job. To a degree, that's what we are doing, with some success, but I don't think that takes us up the curve fast enough as a state. To put the matter in purely economic terms, increasing the success of the third of our population that statistically lags far behind on measures like income and education would be a huge boost to South Carolina's economy.

What kind of innovation would be helpful? First, we need to focus on all the state's children in their early years, from prenatal care to postnatal health and nutrition and

early childhood education. There's a mountain of evidence now that programs focused on these goals pay off handsomely.

Second, we need to find ways to counteract the breakdown of families and neighborhood support systems in low-income urban and rural settings around the state. Sustainable efforts to support and train parents and caregivers would get more kids off to a good start and give them a better chance to develop a sense of self-worth based on achievement, discipline and success in their lives. Kids and their parents and caregivers need better social and emotional support systems, much of which could be delivered through nonprofit and faith-based agencies rather than through government programs.

To be successful, however, such programs would need substantial funding, which should come from the state and be based on each program's measurable success, with continued funding contingent on the proven effectiveness of the program. This also means that if we want to have a fighting chance of making this state a better place to live and increasing the overall success and prosperity of our citizens, our first priority cannot be a one-dimensional focus on cutting taxes.

Focusing specifically on African-American children, if we could just get most of them through K-12 equipped with a solid education, we'd be well on the way to a quite different and more prosperous state. The terrible lack of discipline in most public schools in low-income areas and the personal burdens and behaviors that the kids bring from their homes and neighborhoods is likely the major stumbling block to educational success.

We could do something about these issues if we focused more on helping families and neighborhoods become more conducive to successful child-rearing. In other words, let's be “pro-family” and put resources where they're most needed.

Public education. If we fixed the under-performance issues related to public schools populated by low-income minority kids, most likely we'd wind up fixing the rest of public education in the process. Economic development consultant Ross Boyle pointed this out years ago in a report to the Charleston region.

Health care. We pay a terrible price for not providing effective access to health care for all the state's citizens. As with failures in education, failures in the availability of quality health care impose a huge economic burden in terms of lost economic productivity and financial hardship. A number of governors, most notably Massachusetts Republican Mitt Romney, are working on innovative public-private plans to provide universal access to health care in their states.

These governors are innovators. They have the vision to understand the harsh economic cost of letting people fall through the cracks in the health-care system, and they see the opportunity to increase the prosperity and success of their citizens through health care innovation. Gov. Mark Sanford and a number of key legislators are also supporting innovation in health care funding and delivery, but their efforts fall short of what's needed.

Energy and global warming. The manure is about to hit the propeller. It is highly likely that world oil production will soon start to decline. Soon might be this decade, or it might be a decade or two away at best. Either way, states that pursue aggressive policies designed to incentivize energy conservation and the development of alternative energy sources will be ahead of the curve, and those that don't will be in a world of hurt.

The same goes for policies that address global warming. Fortunately, it appears that dramatic sea level rise may not be a near-term hazard, but many other aspects of climate change will impact our state's economy in the coming decades, and we should plan accordingly. Reducing our reliance on fossil fuels will address both the oil production issue and global warming, so this is a great place for innovation in public policy, conservation and energy technology.

On these and other key issues, we should not view public policy, private enterprise and the work of nonprofit and faith-based agencies as separate and apart from each other. A collaborative effort that draws from the best capabilities of each sector is the true innovation that will take our state successfully into the future. ■