



If court sinks Leandro, NC children will go down with it

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Saturday Night Live's "Weekend Update" joked recently that the menu on the Titanic — the infamous, ill-fated luxury ocean liner — included not only gourmet foods, but also "bottomless water."

Perhaps innocent joking about it has become acceptable.

And yet, this preventable tragedy was no joke.

The most fundamental lesson is that there's no such thing as sinking half a boat. Roughly two thirds of the Titanic's passengers and crew died horribly as it sank to the bottom of the Atlantic.

Is there a connection to North Carolina today? Absolutely. Within the next month, the North Carolina Supreme Court will rule — yet again — on the landmark Leandro case. Since the original ruling in 1997, N.C.'s justices have consistently ruled in favor of Leandro by confirming:

- Every child in North Carolina has the constitutional right to a "sound basic education."
- This right has been violated for a huge number of students across North Carolina.
- A comprehensive plan for delivering a "sound basic education" was carefully created by respected educators; agreed by all the parties; and, approved by the lower courts.
- A majority of the N.C. Supreme Court ruled in November 2022 that this plan must finally become a statewide reality — using already earmarked public funds.

It has taken 27 years to study, build and prepare this educational ark for its maiden voyage. That process was remarkably bipartisan with Republican judges and politicians playing a leading role and making it plain that the Leandro rights, needs and remedies applied statewide. Now, however, just as Leandro is ready to set sail, the N.C. Supreme Court is being urged to scuttle it. Ironically, the dreaded "iceberg" this time is the Republican-controlled N.C. General Assembly.

North Carolina's public education and society have been weakened by the failure to deliver the promised — and constitutionally guaranteed — rights of two generations of students across the state.

In 2022-23, more than 72% of N.C. eighth graders statewide were rated as "not proficient" in math (with fewer than half proficient in reading). North Carolina cannot afford most students to be illiterate or innumerate.

North Carolina's economy and society will keep paying a steep price for continuing to freeze Leandro's implementation. Properly investing in Leandro will prove much less expensive than the hidden costs of failing to create and sustain a strong and diverse workforce.

I had the pleasure of living, working and raising children in North Carolina for a quarter of a century. That included promoting entrepreneurship and economic development; being associate education dean at N.C. State University and then president of the N.C. Child Advocacy Institute. After decades of dogged efforts to keep alive the right to a "sound basic education" for every North Carolina student, the time is now to make sure that we deliver on that promise. The state's Supreme Court must reject this shortsighted, mean-spirited, last-ditch, political attempt to ditch Leandro and sink it forever.

Like all assassins, they want their killing of Leandro to be done quietly, behind the scenes and cloaked in darkness. They are counting on students, parents, influencers, preachers, teachers and the public to say: Leandro? Don't know and don't care.

The North Carolina I knew and loved is better and wiser than that.

This is the exact right moment for Tarheels, the length and breadth of this wonderful state, to stand tall together. Now is the time to raise voices — loudly and clearly — to tell friends and neighbors, tell congregations, tell colleagues, tell social media networks, tell state and local journalists ... and ask all of them to tell elected politicians and the N.C. justices:

"Leandro? We do know what it is and who is at stake! We do care deeply about all children finally receiving a sound basic education. And we do not want you to allow an iceberg of ill will to sink Leandro."

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