

# The Anniston Star

Phillip Tutor: Insuring Alabama's story

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Even when they mean well, opinion writers often deal with Alabama like an ex-girlfriend: They treat her poorly, say rude things when they shouldn't, and make a remorseful situation even worse.

For that, they should be ashamed.

I am.

Yet, it's difficult not to state the obvious, even if it nonetheless hurts. This is repetitive — sorry — and alas, it's again worth repeating. Be it education (a historic lack of funding) or taxation (low-income residents are hit harder than others) or government (the state Constitution is a century-old joke), Alabama's seemingly endless inventory of items that need fundamental improvement is exhausting.

Fair or not, that list gives opinion writers lots to chew on.

I haven't been elected as a statewide spokesman, but I'll say this anyway: If we're gonna criticize Alabama — we do, often — then it's only right that we point out what she does well, which is more than hard-boiled cynics believe. When she fails, we say it. When she succeeds, we ought to say that, as well.

Amen to that.

Hidden deep inside the recently released Arise Citizens' Policy Project's annual report, "The State of Working Alabama 2010," is one of those successes. Health insurance for children isn't a sexy topic. Vital, yes; appealing, not so much. But in this state, so accustomed to wallowing in the bottom 10 percent of too many worthwhile national rankings, that subject is a positive affirmation that deserves time in the spotlight.

As the Arise report painfully details, the Great Recession has lanced nearly all facets of Alabama life. Oozing from those wounds are lost jobs and high unemployment rates and stagnant wages and poverty rates in some counties that are among the nation's worst. "The Great Recession officially ended in the summer of 2009, but its fallout is hanging around in Alabama," Arise's editors wrote. "... Alabamians will struggle with the lingering effects (of the recession) throughout 2011, but better times lie ahead."

Throw in education concerns — the exorbitant, rising cost of a four-year degree in this state, for example — and the Arise report tells a dark, depressing tale.

As it should. It's the truth.

But health insurance for Alabama children, as Arise points out, is one of the red-carpet matters in this time of recession-caused despair. For that we can thank the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) — Alabama was the first state to take part in that federal program — and ALL Kids, Alabama's arm of that plan.

For once, the comparisons between Alabama and the rest of the nation are astounding — in a good way. Nationally, 10 percent of children under the age of 18 had no health insurance in 2008-09. In Alabama, that number was nearly half of the U.S. total (5.8 percent). If only we could transfer that success to other venues, such as unemployment or poverty rates or public education rankings. Another day, perhaps.

Consider also that the percentage of Alabama children who lacked health insurance has consistently dropped in the last decade. How's that for good news we rarely hear? Ten years ago, Alabama's percentage of uninsured children was 8.9. In 2006-07, it was 7.4.

That's a trend we can cheer.

Regardless of one's beliefs about the Obama administration's healthcare reform bill or any spasms of fear over the thought of "socialized" medicine, these federal- and state-level insurance programs have made a profound difference in the lives of thousands of Alabama children. That can't be discounted.

ALL Kids rolls increased by approximately 7,400 children last year, due in part, according to Arise, to state legislators' broadening of the eligibility requirements so more children who live at or near the federal poverty line would qualify for coverage. The program now covers nearly 76,000 Alabama children.

Only the most jaded disparager of governmental programs could argue that providing health insurance to low-income Alabama children isn't a high point in these times of such recurring lows.

I'd like to suspect that there are myriad parts of Alabama that are just as successful and receive just as little attention. That's a problem; if that brings scorn for many, I'll take a share. Yet, I ask, if we don't tell our state's stories — the pleasant along with the putrid — then who will?