In Their Own Words:
Individualizing Education for All Students

The people of South Carolina face decisions of unprecedented magnitude and importance as they work to improve public education for all students in the state. Multiple studies indicate that our young people today face a challenging future that will be heavily influenced by technology, information, and rapid change, and will require more and broader skills in the workplace.

It has been estimated that by the next decade most jobs will require an education beyond a high school diploma. Yet, in many South Carolina communities, too few of our 18- and 19-year-olds finish high school and enroll in post-secondary training or higher education. This means that we must find new and better ways to help our students learn advanced skills. Economic progress is closely tied to education, and the effective preparation of our young people to compete for jobs in a world economy is critical.

The ability of South Carolina's public schools to adequately educate all children and prepare them for success in a global economy is in question. How, then, do we effectively redesign public schools to prepare a larger number of students to graduate, succeed in college or career training, and compete in the global marketplace? With the help of a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Center for Education Policy and Leadership of the Riley Institute at Furman University sought answers to this question through a comprehensive, non-partisan study involving residents throughout the state. The goal was to learn what South Carolinians think about the issues and problems in education. We also wanted their recommendations on strategies to improve our schools and students at this crucial time.

The Study Design

Between May 2005 and November 2006, the Riley Institute project team spent more than 3,000 hours meeting with nearly 800 South Carolinians to gather their opinions on various issues involving public education. The team met with groups of businessmen and women, teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, school district superintendents, parents, school board members, school principals, and students from every county in the state— large and small, urban and rural, poor and wealthy.

In each meeting the same format was followed. Four questions were asked: three open-ended discussion questions and one in-depth survey. The first and second questions asked participants to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of South Carolina's public schools. The third question asked participants to share ideas about how they would redesign public schools to address areas in need of improvement. The final question consisted of a 160-question survey, which asked respondents to weigh a list of opportunities, programs, and support structures needed in the public schools to help all students succeed.

Using random sampling techniques, the project team worked with local Chambers of Commerce, the office of the State School Improvement Council, school district offices, local school boards, and schools themselves in order to gather lists of potential participants. Individuals were invited to attend a meeting with others from the same stakeholder group.

In late 2006, the Riley Institute invited all participants to take part in a second phase of research focusing on key themes that emerged from the research during Phase I and asked them to delve deeper into possible solutions. Participants reassembled in mixed groups featuring one representative from each stakeholder group —an elementary school teacher, a middle school teacher, a high school teacher, a principal, a superintendent, a parent, a school board member, a student, and a business leader. More than two hundred people participated during the two days. Participants in the mixed reconstituted sessions were asked to reflect upon, discuss, and prioritize strategies that emerged most often and with most agreement during the first phase of research. They were then asked to devise practical action plans for South Carolina related to the top-rated strategies.

Key Action Areas

From each of the stakeholder groups emerged a series of strategies to build world-class elementary, middle, and high schools; those grade-level strategies have been presented in summary papers by the Institute over the past several months. But from those meetings also emerged nine overarching themes or action areas that span across grades and across stakeholder groups. They are:

- Connecting Schools and Families
- Preparing Students for a Global Economy
- Increasing Learning Opportunities
- Overcoming Academic Challenges
- Ensuring High-Performing Teachers
- Building Strong Leadership in Every School
- Promoting Support for Public Education
- Maintaining Outstanding Facilities and Infrastructure
- Individualizing Education for Students

This paper addresses the suggested action plan to individualize education for all students.

Individualizing Education for All Students: A 12-Pronged Action Plan

Participants in the mixed stakeholder meetings were asked to prioritize, according to their opinions, the set of strategies that emerged during the first set of stakeholder meetings. To accomplish this they used a two-part system: first, each participant ranked the strategies individually; then, after hearing the rankings and reasoning of the other members, they re-ranked them. Below are, in order of priority, the top strategies that emerged to address the recommendation of individualizing education for all students

1. Train teachers to utilize more personalized learning approaches based on the different learning styles of students;

2. Provide tools for teachers to better assess individual student progress;

3. Offer earlier guidance to help students select the coursework needed to achieve their personal goals;

4. Provide more choices within the public school system to meet the learning needs of each student (i.e., more select schools, magnet schools, vocational schools, and schools with a focus);

5. Develop small learning communities within schools;

6. Assess individual abilities early and develop individualized graduation plans for every public school student;

7. Within each grade level, group students into classes by ability level;

8. Expand curriculum offerings to include more arts and music, foreign language, service learning, and physical fitness;

9. Within schools, group students into classes according to mastery level instead of age or grade;

10. Change the tracking system so that students are tracked more efficiently from pre-K through twelfth grade;

11. Increase distance-learning opportunities/online courses/virtual schools;

12. Offer more classes grouped by gender.

How To Do It: Strategies in Detail

In the second phase of the research, participants were asked to further explore the highest-rated strategies and offer practical plans. Below are the findings for the strategies that were the top priorities for the greatest number of the groups. What emerged is a roadmap of detailed ideas and suggestions to increase learning opportunities for all students:

1. Train teachers to utilize more personalized learning approaches based on the different learning styles of students:

A recurring theme in education research is that not one formula fits all. In acknowledging the need to individualize learning to meet student learning styles, participants identified the need to better train teachers. They recommended the following:

■ More training for teachers to better identify and understand student learning styles and to be able to tailor lesson plans and classroom teachings to those styles;

■ Revamping teacher training programs;

■ Enhanced mentoring programs for teachers;

■ Time and encouragement for teachers to be able to experiment with different teaching techniques and styles;

■ Allow teachers to observe and collaborate with mentor teachers who use different styles;

■ Smaller class size so that teachers are better able to ascertain students' learning styles;

■ Team teaching so teachers can help each other identify what helps individual students learn;

■ Information banks on students (e.g. activities, home information, etc.) so that teachers can avail themselves of greater resources to identify student learning styles.

2. Provide tools for teachers to better assess individual student progress:

Throughout the study, participants demonstrated concern for the proper development of links between school, work, and "real life." This concern carried over into the greater concept of increasing learning opportunities for all children. Participants recommended the following:

■ Professional development and training (including online training) on informal assessment tools and techniques that can be used in the course of daily class work;

■ Time for teachers to consult with each other on specific student progress;

■ Smaller class size so that teachers have time to observe students more effectively;

■ Maximization of technology to assess on a regular basis;

■ Extra pay for teachers to spend time on assessment;

■ Creation of tests that provide useful information during the school year;

■ Better training in assessment techniques during teacher preparation;

■ Flexibility for teachers to choose and become proficient in their preferred assessment techniques.

How To Do It: Strategies in Detail *(continued)*

3. Offer guidance earlier to help students select the coursework needed to achieve their personal goals:

A problem often identified in education is that students nearing the end of their high school coursework are not properly prepared to take final courses they would like or need to take. Also, they often complete high school without having had the opportunity to explore vocational options. To address these issues participants recommended:

- Assess student interests early in their schooling;
- Reassess interests regularly;
- Provide an adequate number of counselors to keep track of student progress, goals, and coursework through the years, one on one;
- Make discussions on goals, interests, and careers part of the school year, with more access for students to participate in internships, go on field trips, visit industry, and attend camps;
- Create teams of teachers to help plan student coursework and follow their progress;
- Staff schools with career specialists;
- Train teachers and counselors to help students design a "road to individual success" and to help them attain that success; invite business people and others to help students reach their goals;
- Drop unnecessary requirements and give students more choices.

4. Provide more choices within the public school system to meet the learning needs of each student (i.e., more select schools, magnet schools, vocational schools, and schools with a focus):

- Design school curricula with student interests in mind;
- Assess student interests within a school or a community;
- Provide funding so classes that interest a small number of students do not have to be cut;
- Allow students in failing schools to attend magnet schools in other districts;
- Provide more AP courses and more non-traditional courses;
- Provide more vocational courses and career-specific courses in every district that are aligned with business needs;
- Create a greater dialogue involving the business community and others to help develop curricula for schools.

5. Develop small learning communities within schools:

- Restructure student clusters according to student interests;
- Analyze student abilities before grouping the learning communities;
- Provide single-gender classes;
- Reduce class sizes at all grade levels;
- Train teachers to utilize small learning community models;
- Equip each small learning community within a school with its own guidance personnel, career advisors, etc.;
- Give students ownership for their choices of coursework within the learning communities.

Providing more choices for students and more tools to personalize learning styles generally requires more personnel, more space, and more training. As in the case of most other strategies, in discussing the strategies listed above, participants stressed the need for funding so that programs may be implemented statewide for all children.

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