In Their Own Words:
A Public Vision for
Educational Excellence
in South Carolina

Study overview

In the increasingly globalized world of the 21st century, South Carolinians must compete for jobs not only with people from other states but also with individuals from other countries, such as China and India. Economic progress in South Carolina 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 sought answers to this question through a comprehensive non-partisan study involving residents throughout the state. The goal was to learn what South Carolinians at the grassroots level think about issues and problems in education. We also wanted their recommendations of strategies to move our schools and students forward at this crucial time.

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 public education. The team met with businessmen and women, teachers of all levels, superintendents, parents, school board members, principals and students from every county and school district in the state - large and small, rural and urban, wealthy and poor.

Meeting process and instrument

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 invited superintendents, principals, teachers from all grade levels, parents, school board members, business people from both large corporations and small businesses, and students who were still in school or recent graduates to participate in the study. In order to gather lists of potential participants, 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. Individuals were invited to attend a meeting with others from the same stakeholder group. The average number of participants per meeting was seven.

Statistics

- 106 four-hour research sessions
- 16 locations around the state
- Every S.C. school district represented

Locations

The small-group discussions were held in 16 locations around the state—Columbia, Charleston, Greenville, Spartanburg, Aiken, Florence, Rock Hill, Beaufort, Greenwood, Blackville, Walterboro, Yemassee, Orangeburg, Sumter, Anderson and Conway.
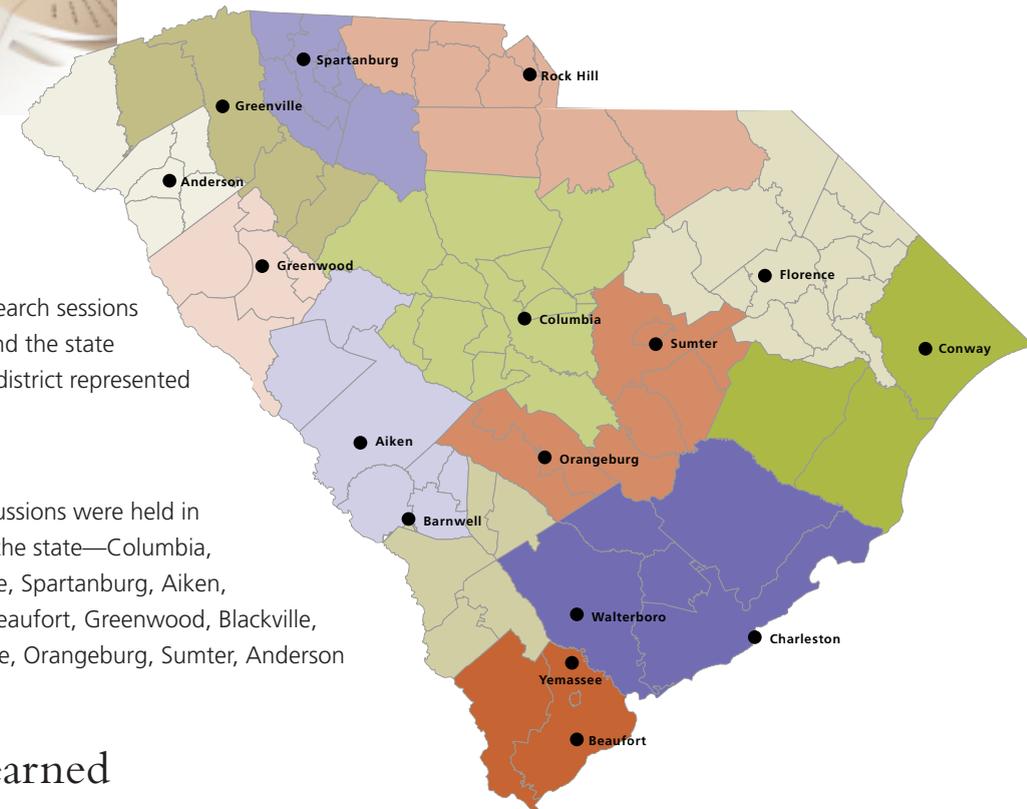
What we learned

The research team collected a tremendous amount of data about what people from across the state think about the issues affecting public education and the strategies they recommend for developing effective public schools. In the following pages, you will find the top grade-level specific strategies (pages 3–4), followed by nine key action areas of interest among South Carolinians (pages 5–6). Under each of the nine key areas, a list of strategies has emerged that provides a guide for developing schools where all students succeed.

Key Action Areas that emerged from Phase I of the research

- 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

What's next?

In late 2006, the Riley Institute invited all participants to take part in a second phase of research meetings. These sessions focused on the key areas listed above and asked participants to delve deeper into possible solutions. Each of the 24 reconstituted sessions brought together one representative from each of the nine stakeholder groups, and groups were designed to represent geographically different locations across South Carolina. Over 200 people participated during the two days. Data are being analyzed and information about findings is forthcoming.

Creating World–Class Schools: Top strategies by grade level

Early Childhood/Elementary

- Intensive reading enrichment programs for students with reading difficulties
- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling
- More strategies to help parents get involved in their child's schooling
- Smaller class size
- The availability of full-day kindergarten programs
- School lunches that are healthy and balanced
- A system to ensure no child moves beyond 3rd grade without reading and writing fluency
- Family literacy programs
- Physical fitness programs for all elementary students
- Public early childhood education programs for all three-and four-year-olds
- Full-time nurses in all elementary schools
- More rigorous curriculum to help prepare students for middle school

Middle School

- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling
- Drop-out prevention programs beginning in 8th grade
- More focus on active/engaged learning techniques in all middle school classes
- Smaller class size
- Up-to-date laboratories in every middle school
- More strategies to help parents get involved in their child's schooling
- More rigorous curriculum to help prepare students for high school
- More counseling in middle school to deal with personal and family issues
- Better coordination to help transition between middle and high school
- Physical fitness programs for all middle school students
- The availability of algebra in 8th grade to help prepare students for high school math
- Opportunities to connect students to positive community role models

High School

- More links between high schools, technical colleges, and 2-and 4-year colleges/ universities
- Up-to-date laboratories in every high school
- More tutoring for struggling students
- A wider variety of vocational programs
- A curriculum more aligned with college coursework and job requirements
- Distance learning opportunities and opportunities to take courses at local colleges
- More counseling in high school to deal with personal and family issues
- Programs to target more parents for involvement
- Smaller class size
- Earlier guidance to prepare students to take Honors, SP, and IB courses
- More opportunities for high school students to link classroom learning with service-learning projects to help in their community
- Better stocked high school libraries

All Levels of Education

- Effective teachers in every classroom
- Availability of textbooks and other learning resources
- Strong, well-coordinated mentoring programs for beginning teachers
- Up-to-date school buildings and facilities
- Special training and assistance for teacher working with students with academic difficulties
- Better pay for all teachers
- Technologically-advanced laboratories
- Training of teachers and administrators on proper usage of technology
- Greater incentives for retaining outstanding teachers
- More on-site support for principals in school with many at risk children
- More teachers in the transition grades (6th and 9th) to reduce class sizes and give more individualized attention
- A more streamlined process to remove inadequate teachers from the classroom

The strategies listed emerged prominently from an analysis of both the quantitative survey data and the qualitative discussion data.

Creating World–Class Schools: Key Action Areas

Ensuring High–Performing Teachers

- Increase teacher compensation
- Offer continuous professional development and support for teachers regarding the everyday challenges of helping students achieve and graduate
- Maintain small class sizes
- Ensure more time for teachers to meet, coordinate and share information about effective methods, techniques and ideas
- Offer strong and well-coordinated mentoring programs for beginning teachers

Connecting Schools & Families

- Offer family literacy programs to help provide parents/family members with the skills to help their children succeed
- Provide more counseling services in the schools to help students and families deal with personal issues that could interfere with learning
- Design schools as community learning centers to give students, adults, and families learning opportunities in their own communities
- Require parental/family involvement and hold parents/families more accountable for their child's actions and performance
- Provide parent/family education programs beginning when children are in infancy and continuing throughout their schooling

Preparing Students for a Global Economy

- Institute more rigorous curriculum to prepare students for next level of schooling/training
- Create a system to ensure that children don't move beyond third grade without reading and writing fluency
- Focus on active/engaged learning techniques that include hands-on learning, and working in teams
- Integrate technology throughout curriculum and provide effective training in the use of technology
- Fully implement and fund Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA), which includes exposure to career exploration at an early age and career clusters

Building Strong Leadership In Every School

- Facilitate better coordination and communication among all levels of education and among schools, districts and state agencies/government
- Increase salaries and create incentives for principals who take on more difficult assignments
- Require more training and provide on-site support for principals in schools with a greater number of at-risk students
- Create the time and expectation for teachers and administrators to collaborate to better meet student needs
- Create a system that allows administrators the ability to fire ineffective teachers

Promoting Support for Public Education

- Work with media to increase coverage of positive news related to public education
- Work with media to provide the public with a detailed explanation of South Carolina's curriculum standards, expectations, and test scores in relation to other states
- Involve teachers of all levels in meetings with community, business, and college groups outside of the school, and also in local, state, and national policy making efforts
- Implement public forums at the district and state levels to discuss school progress
- Work more closely with community organizations and business partners to develop and implement strategies for tackling difficult problems within schools

Increasing Learning Opportunities

- Implement quality early childhood education programs in public schools
- Expand curriculum offerings such as more arts and music, foreign language, service learning, and physical fitness
- Expand school-to-work and vocational programs to provide on-the-job/skill-based training during school
- Create more after-school programs to keep students on track for successful progression to the next grade level and/or graduation
- Provide more internship/apprenticeship and "real world" experiences

Overcoming Academic Challenges

- Implement quality early childhood education programs in public schools
- Provide teachers specialized in reading for grades 1–3 and intensive reading enrichment programs for students with reading difficulties
- Create a system to ensure that children don't move beyond third grade without reading and writing fluency
- Enforce student discipline measures
- Provide adequate education and support to parents and families of all students

Maintaining Outstanding Facilities and Infrastructure

- Maintain up-to-date school buildings and facilities
- Provide technologically-advanced laboratories
- Design schools as community learning centers to give students, adults and families learning opportunities in their own communities
- Provide safe and efficient transportation to and from all school programs
- Ensure availability of textbooks and other learning resources

Individualizing Education for Students

- Develop small learning communities within schools
- Train teachers to utilize more personalized learning approaches based on different learning styles of students
- Offer earlier guidance to help students select coursework needed to achieve personal goals
- Provide tools for teachers to better assess individual student progress
- Provide more choices (select schools, magnet schools, vocational schools, schools with a focus) within public school system to meet learning needs of each student

The Riley Institute®at Furman is a non-partisan organization affiliated with the Department of Political Science at Furman University. Named for former Governor of South Carolina and United States Secretary of Education Richard Riley, the institute engages students in the arenas of politics, public policy and public leadership through collaborative research, study abroad opportunities and internships.

Since its inauguration in 1999, the Riley Institute also has developed a broad array of community leadership programs, symposia and conferences designed to promote discussion and analysis of public policy issues.

Through its promotion of engaged learning, leadership development and conferences featuring internationally recognized speakers, the Riley Institute has established itself as an innovator in policy and public leadership education.

Furman University is a selective, independent, coeducational liberal arts college of 2,660 students located at the base of the Blue Ridge mountains on a 750-acre campus in Greenville, South Carolina. Furman provides a distinctive undergraduate education encompassing the humanities, fine arts, social sciences, mathematics and the natural sciences, and selected professional disciplines. Furman emphasizes engaged learning, a problem-solving, project-oriented and research-based educational philosophy that encourages students to put into practice the theories and methods learned from texts or lectures. The university is committed to the educaiton of the whole person.

Visit the Riley Institute website at <www.rileyinstitute.org> for information on future events and programs.

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