

In Their Own Words: Early Childhood Years & Early Grades in South Carolina's Public Schools



A project by the Riley Institute's Center for Education Policy & Leadership funded by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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 both finish high school and enroll in post-high school training or higher education. This means that we must find new and better ways to help our students learn 21st century skills, innovation, and

creativity. Economic progress will be 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.

The following paper is one of many that will be published in an effort to convey the study's overall results. This particular paper will focus on the early childhood years and the early grades, since stakeholder groups across South Carolina voiced common support for dramatically improving the early childhood years and the early grades.

The Study Design and Top-Rated Strategies

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.

In late 2006, the Riley Institute invited all to take part in a second phase of research focusing on key themes that emerged from the research during Phase I and asked participants 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. Over 200

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Top-Rated Strategies for Early Childhood Years/Early Grades

EARLY CHILDHOOD YEARS

- Family literacy programs *
- More strategies to help parents get involved in their child's schooling
- Small class size *
- The availability of high-quality early childhood education programs in public schools
- The availability of full-day kindergarten programs in public schools

* Strategy applies to both the Early Childhood Years and Early Grades

EARLY GRADES

- Teachers specialized in reading for grades 1–3
- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling
- School lunches that are healthy and balanced
- A system to ensure that children do not move beyond 3rd grade without reading and writing fluency
- Intensive reading programs for students with reading difficulties
- Full-time nurses in all elementary schools
- Physical fitness programs for all elementary students

The Study Design and Top-Rated Strategies

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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 year of research. They were then asked to devise practical action plans for South Carolina related to the top-rated strategies.

One area of high priority that emerged was the need to dramatically improve learning in their early years and early grades. The table on page 1 shows the top-rated strategies that emerged from the research. It is clear that a solid agenda emerged for the improvement of the early childhood years and early grades.

Background Information: The Importance of the Early Childhood Years and the Early Grades

Throughout the research, stakeholder groups across South Carolina voiced common support for improving the early childhood years and the early grades. Evidence for this is found in both the quantitative survey data and the qualitative discussion data. A majority of participating educators, school board members, and business leaders endorsed the importance of the availability of public full-day kindergarten programs and early childhood education programs in public schools. Similar numbers of participating stakeholders in all groups recommended family literacy programs and strategies to help parents become more involved in their children's education, and only slightly lower numbers recommended smaller class sizes in the early grades. Clearly, the fact that 91 percent of surveyed parents endorsed the development of strategies to help them get involved in their children's education speaks volumes about the urgency of the need.

The need to focus on the early years and grades also was evident during discussion groups. According to one business person, "We've got one chance, and that's from 0–6." Another business person reported the following during a meeting: "South Carolina needs to commit appropriate resources to early childhood education in order that every student is given equal opportunity to begin becoming all that he/she can be."

The need to focus on parent education and family literacy was also clear. One superintendent said family must understand that "education is as important as air to the quality of life." Another superintendent emphasized the need to educate parents, saying that "educated parents equal nurtured children." Principals voiced similar opinions in focus groups, endorsing home visitation programs for at-risk children as early as age 3. "We need to invest more in this area (of parental education) as they are our children's first teachers and set the tone for learning," said one principal.

These data become even more significant in light of the fact that the people surveyed reside in the largest and smallest and the wealthiest and poorest of school districts: the percentage of students on free or reduced lunch ranged from 13.5 percent to 92 percent. Clearly, concerns about the quality of the early childhood years and the early grades, from both the family and the school perspective, are widespread among educators, parents, and business leaders regardless of location and demographics.

Results of the Study: Framework for an Action Plan for South Carolina

The availability of high quality public early childhood education programs:

Across the board, stakeholders in all groups recommended making quality early childhood education programs available in public schools. Some stakeholders further recommended that children who would benefit from these programs should be identified early. Many participants also suggested that focusing on each child's individual needs, abilities, interests and deficiencies is absolutely critical in order to prepare them for Kindergarten. In addition, several participants suggested that the early grades/elementary system be reconstituted as a pre-K- grade 2 system and a grade 3-grade 5 system to better address the individual needs of children.

The availability of full-day kindergarten programs:

As stated earlier, participants vocally endorsed the need for full-day kindergarten programs for all children and many reported that the state needs to determine and fulfill the space, facility, personnel, and financial needs to accommodate this expansion. Participants also suggested the incorporation of foreign language, more arts and music education, and more play to foster interest in students and make kindergarten and early childhood programs more effective.

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Results of the Study: Framework for an Action Plan for South Carolina

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Providing teachers specialized in reading for grades 1–3, and intensive reading programs for students with reading difficulties:

Many participants suggested that all teachers should be specialized in and able to teach reading, and that all students should have such teachers available. Stakeholders—particularly teachers—suggested that teachers be trained in the early identification of students with reading problems, and be able to teach literacy through multiple proven reading programs. Participants suggested bolstering teacher education programs to better train teachers to teach reading, specifically for the early elementary grades, and to prepare teachers in the kindergarten grades to be able to lay the groundwork for students to successfully learn to read in the early elementary grades. Several stakeholders recommended that the state give incentives to teachers to specialize in teaching reading, that it offer professional development courses in teaching reading, and that it establish a reading specialization licensure system.

Also concerning reading, participants suggested more tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling, including providing year-round reading intensives, dropping other requirements in other subjects, and offering tutors, coaches, and reading concentration programs such as Reading Recovery. Several stakeholders suggested more flexibility in scheduling in the early grades to focus on student reading needs, and “thinking out of the box” in identifying reading strategies that work for individual students.

A system to ensure that children do not move beyond third grade without reading and writing fluently:

To accomplish this, participants suggested weaving reading and writing throughout the totality of the early educational experience, including journaling, creative writing, and the arts, and making this goal an all-school campaign. Some stakeholders recommended creating non-graded classes and flex groups to foster student reading according to reading levels rather than age or class. Some also recommended better testing for learning disabilities so children are not pigeonholed into specific groups at a very early age. Recommendations also included very early identification of problems so students can receive individual help, beginning as early as kindergarten, with specialized reading teachers, and reading and

writing labs with use of technology. Stakeholders also suggested drastic intervention systems, including rigorous after-school and summer school reading intervention programs. According to one stakeholder, “If students are not reading and writing on grade level by end of grade 2, bells should sound, lights should flash—the students’ world should not stay the same. Throughout the summer and the next year, students should have serious intervention in reading and writing until mastery of strategies is demonstrated.”

Family literacy programs and requiring parental/family involvement:

Among the suggested courses of action to foster family literacy was the early engagement and contact with families of low-performing children through churches, community groups and any other potential outreach channels; and offering courses to teach parents how to help their children with reading, writing and other basic skills. This also would include developing more strategies to help parents get involved in their child’s schooling, and using non-traditional approaches (times and places) to reach parents. Several stakeholders suggested that schools organize regular evening events for parents and children to attend together, and regular meetings with parents to update them on what their children are learning. Others recommended linking families to schools through laptops and online access, and providing transportation and/or gas allowances.

To encourage parental involvement in children’s learning, some participants suggested coordinating materials and methodologies between home and school. Others recommended the involvement of community groups and businesses. Stakeholders’ comments expressed the critical importance of reaching parents and drawing them in to the schools’ fold.

Concerning the strategy of requiring parental/family involvement, some stakeholders suggested requiring parents to attend meetings at school, to make a certain number of contacts per school year with teachers, and to have contractual agreements between schools and parents. Some even suggested legislative intervention to mandate parental involvement. Other recommendations included incentives for parents such as a point system for attending meetings, or for participating in school activities. That said, several stakeholders also recognized the role of educators in facilitating, promoting, and sustaining parental/family involvement. “Requirements should be accompanied by support

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Results of the Study: Framework for an Action Plan for South Carolina

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for the willing but practically challenged," said one stakeholder. One stakeholder suggested a holistic approach including the involvement of community groups, the Department of Social Services, the courts, law enforcement, and health and mental health agencies: "We all have to be sending the same message: Education is the gateway out of poverty. Children will see the value of education if parents see it. Uneducated people end up with societal issues. We must all work together to provide incentives or punitive actions, if necessary, to engage parents in the education of their children."

Other important strategies:

Within the system of strategies listed above, other strategies and ideas also emerged to improve early childhood education and education in the early grades. Small class size was a topic of discussion as participants suggested that teachers have no more than a certain manageable number of students to be able to individualize teaching strategies and methods, particularly in the earliest grades. Participants also recommended that the health and nutritional needs of students be addressed in order to bolster their learning and performance. That includes providing school lunches that are balanced and healthy, physical fitness programs for elementary school students, and full-time nurses in all elementary schools. Participants recognized the need for early identification of health problems—already in the pre-K years—to facilitate student learning. They also recommended teaching children about nutrition and exercise at an early age.

Conclusion

Early childhood education and quality education in the early grades has far-reaching and positive educational and economic impacts, studies show.

Research indicates that investment in early childhood education has long-term benefits in building a broader foundation of skills and preparing students to succeed in education and the workplace. Participants in early childhood education and development programs are far more likely to be successful in school, employed, and earn substantially more. National studies also show that children who participate in early childhood education programs are less likely to drop out of school, are more likely to graduate and attend college, and less likely to be teenage mothers, on welfare, smoke or use drugs, or to commit a crime and be imprisoned. Studies also show that developing children's creativity and a broad range of interests must begin in the early years and early grades and are keys to future success in these rapidly changing times.

The net returns—to both the children personally and society at large—from such programs range in the hundreds of billions of dollars nationwide, mostly from higher graduation rates, increased earnings, and decreased crime rates.

Our grassroots research indicates that South Carolinians from all walks of life and backgrounds strongly believe that excellence and availability of early childhood education in every school and community is a new essential for South Carolina education. Strengthening and deepening the early grades' learning opportunities and experiences are very wise and appropriate investments if our children are going to have a solid foundation for later success.



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