



# In Their Own Words: The High School Years 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 advanced skills. 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 high school years, since this study clearly demonstrates that South Carolinians across the board value the importance of a high school education as a launching pad for knowledge, jobs, and future success for our youth.

## 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. More than 200 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 improve learning in the high school years. The table below shows the top-rated strategies that emerged from the research regarding the high school years. The strategies were the highest rated among all the stakeholder

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### Top-Rated Strategies for Improving High School Education

- More links between high schools, technical colleges, and 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities
- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling
- Up-to-date laboratories in every high school
- A wider variety of vocational programs
- A curriculum more aligned with college coursework and job requirements
- Distance-learning opportunities and opportunities at local colleges to take courses
- More counseling in high school to deal with personal and family issues
- Programs after school and during the summer to keep high school students on track for graduation

## The Study Design and Top-Rated Strategies

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groups, and they emerge in totality as a solid agenda for the improvement of high school education.

## Background Information: The High School Years

High school is the final chance within the K-12 school system to give students mastery of the skills that will allow them to apply to and enter post-secondary education, or to begin preparation for some form of job training. It is an essential time to strengthen and cement 21st-century skills, increasingly required of our youth to succeed in a global and highly technological world. And it is a time essential to help students maximize every tool at their disposal to grasp the potential of their future. Indeed, it is their future in the making.

South Carolinians expressed a clear understanding of the importance of the high school experience in the continuum of students' lives by placing it at the center of the passage between middle school and the serious matter of one's future career choices. Indeed, each top-rated strategy makes high school a stepping stone of huge weight; and the totality of the strategies comprise a holistic life-pack of tools to ensure that students graduate from high school — and graduate ready.

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

### More links between high schools, technical colleges, and 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities:

Participants in the study suggested with great practicality ways to ensure that graduation from high school leads to tangible life accomplishment. Among them is the idea of connecting curricula and standards and requirements among high schools and post-secondary education, and ensuring that learning in high school translates into something meaningful in a technical college or a 2-year or 4-year college or university.

### More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling:

During discussions, participants confirmed that if students cannot successfully make it through high school they will not be prepared for either work or more schooling. From teachers to business leaders, participants recommended that schools invest more in tutoring, summer school, after-school, year-round school, individualized learning settings, and other non-traditional methods to ensure that students get the help they need.

### Up-to-date laboratories in every high school:

An average of 94 percent of participants ranked this among the top strategies to improve high school education. Laboratories, much like computers, are clearly viewed as an essential part of the exposure students should have to the sciences and technology in school. Many participants recommended that every high school have at least one state-of-the-art functional lab with supplies adequate for all students to have modern-day experiences.

### A wider variety of vocational programs:

Again, study participants encouraged connecting high school to a practical goal in the future. Several participants recommended less strict divisions among college-track and vocational track, and broadening vocational options so they are more rigorous and less stigmatized. Also, many recommended that schools help students identify their work interests and plan a practical pathway to develop them. A large number of participants strongly endorsed the Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA) and supported fully implementing and funding the act as a way to prepare students for a global economy.

### A curriculum more aligned with college coursework and job requirements:

Many study participants recommended a more rigorous curriculum in high school that would prepare students for college and for success in the workforce. Many also recommended a curriculum more inclusive of 21st-century skills such as problem solving, analytical thinking, foreign languages, and more technology, in addition to more internships and apprenticeships that would help students link their school work with future job or study possibilities. Other recommendations included offering more career interest counseling and real-life counseling as part of the high school curriculum.

### Distance-learning opportunities and opportunities at local colleges to take courses:

Many participants encouraged all possible connections to make high school part of a greater continuum of learning and developing

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

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future job interests and opportunities—including exposure to other schools and colleges. They also recognized, particularly in rural and poorer school districts, the choice limits often placed on students. They recommended that nearby schools and districts share courses, thus expanding the choices for their students.

### More counseling in high school to deal with personal and family issues:

Counselors in high school are few and are usually serving a large number of students. Most often they focus on course-counseling, and have little time for personal or college counseling. Many respondents across the board suggested hiring more counselors, mental health personnel, and more college/career counselors to address this need.

### Programs after school and during the summer to keep high school students on track for graduation:

Participants, much like the education world at large, recognized time as an essential component to student academic success. They recommended that schools begin to utilize and maximize time in the summer and after school, when students, particularly low-income students, have fewer learning opportunities. This additional time is recognized as valuable in keeping these students on track to graduation.

## Conclusion

Our study clearly demonstrates that South Carolinians across the board value the importance of a high school education as a launching pad for knowledge, jobs, and future success for our youth. Judging from their recommendations, it is a launching pad that must be carefully planned, built, and connected to the outside world to ensure that that students graduate from high school and graduate ready to move on to the world of colleges and careers.



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