

# In Their Own Words: Increasing Learning Opportunities



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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

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## Increasing Learning Opportunities: A Ten-Pronged 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 increasing learning opportunities for all students:

1. Implement quality early childhood education programs in all public schools;
2. Expand school-to-work and vocational programs to provide on-the-job/skill-based training during school;
3. Provide more internship/apprenticeship and real world experiences for all students;
4. Expand curriculum offerings to include more arts and music, foreign languages, service learning, and physical fitness;
5. Create more programs after school to keep students on track for successful progression to the next grade level and/or graduation;
6. Offer more Honors, AP, and IB courses and better guidance to help students select those courses;
7. Create more programs during the summer to keep students on track for successful progression to the next grade and/or graduation;
8. Design and enable schools to become community learning centers to allow students and adults more educational opportunities beyond regular school hours;
9. Make adjustments to the school calendar to offer diverse options to students;
10. Create more distance-learning opportunities/online courses/virtual schools.

## 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. Implement quality early childhood education programs in all public schools:

Participants in the study recognized that student learning begins in early childhood, with programs that foster readiness to learn and early reading and writing fluency. To accomplish this, participants recommended the following:

- Careful identification of students in need of programs;
- Aggressive outreach services to get children into programs;
- Creation of programs for children as young as two years old;
- Recruitment of effective and highly prepared teachers for early childhood programs;
- Early childhood programs that reach into the home and partner with parents;
- Work with parents to tailor programs so they are accessible to families;
- Workshops to keep parents informed about curriculum and children's learning progress;
- Provide programs with the necessary reading and play materials;
- Use research-based data to campaign throughout the state for creation and funding of full-day early childhood programs in all school districts;
- State-provided training for all early childhood teachers.

### 2. Expand school-to-work and vocational programs to provide on-the-job/skill-based training during school:

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:

- Early identification of student work interests in the middle grades;
- Create a two-track system so that students not as interested in attending college can begin early preparation for work;
- Technical and vocational programs available beginning in the middle grades;
- Expand vocational offerings to reflect needs of business;
- Effective, consistent career counseling for students beginning in the middle grades;
- Internships in middle and high school for students to explore potential work interests more closely;
- Testing to assess student proclivities and talents (dexterity, musical ear, ease in working with animals, etc.);
- Updated school facilities, labs, and work spaces to accommodate vocational programs;
- More interactive field trips that allow students to take an in-depth look at the outside world;

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

- More interactive links between schools and the surrounding business community;
- Tax breaks and other incentives for businesses providing internships/other educational experiences to students;
- Creation of a continuing dialogue with businesses about needed skills, programs, curricula.

### 3. Provide more internship/apprenticeship and real world experiences for all students:

Again, participants demonstrated concern for the real-world preparation of students. The suggestions discussed under this strategy closely mirrored those in the preceding section.

### 4. Expand curriculum offerings to include arts and music, foreign languages, service learning, and physical fitness:

Participants recommended hiring more teachers equipped to teach such subjects and providing students more opportunities to explore the arts and foreign languages in real-world settings such as theaters, museums and places where foreign languages may be spoken in the community.

### 5. Design and enable schools to become community learning centers to allow students and adults more educational opportunities beyond regular school hours:

Participants in the study explored in depth the concept of community learning centers in the focus group discussion about how to connect schools and families. Here, several of the same themes were repeated:

- To offer, at the local schools, activities and classes that benefit and bring together the whole community; to involve the churches, local community groups and businesses for a range of diverse activities – tutoring, Boy Scouts, arts;
- To solicit the involvement of a greater and more diverse range of businesses and other groups in offering programs after hours; to encourage businesses to conduct classes, forums, and seminars at the school;
- To solicit business partnerships and financial aid to support needed programs and maximize offerings.

In this discussion, participants also recommended surveys and other inquiries to identify the needs of students and communities for educational opportunities beyond the school hours.

As in the case of most other strategies, during the discussion of the above action plans participants stressed the need for funding to expand school curricula, provide tax incentives to businesses, run schools as community centers after hours, hire more teachers, and offer more programs.



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