



# In Their Own Words: Preparing Students for a Global Economy



A paper presented 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 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 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 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 in education and at the grassroots level 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 prepare students for a global economy.

## Preparing Students for a Global Economy: A Fifteen-Point 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 provided to address the task of preparing students for a global economy:

1. Create a system by which students don't move beyond third grade without reading and writing fluently.
2. Focus on active, engaged learning techniques that include hands-on learning, group work, and working in teams.
3. Integrate technology throughout the curriculum and provide effective training on the use of technology.
4. Institute a more rigorous curriculum to help prepare students for the next level of schooling or training.
5. Fully implement and fund the Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA), which includes exposure to career exploration at an early age and career clusters in high school.
6. Provide more internships and apprenticeships and "real world" experiences for students.
7. Create stronger connections between schools and community/business.
8. Create more links between high schools, technical schools, and 2- and 4-year colleges and universities.
9. Offer a greater number of Honors, AP, and IB courses, and better guidance to help students select and prepare for these courses.
10. Integrate more foreign language in the curriculum.
11. Expand school-to-work and vocational programs to provide on-the-job/skill-based training during school.
12. Ensure that coursework is more aligned with job requirements and needs of the state's economy.
13. Offer more guidance to help students get information about the college application process and study trips to visit colleges.
14. Increase opportunities for distance-learning, online courses, and virtual schools.
15. Transform schools into community learning centers to expand learning opportunities for children and families.

### How To Do It: Strategies in Detail

After ranking the strategies, the participants in each reconstituted mixed meeting group then were asked to further explore the highest-rated strategies and offer practical plans. Below are the findings for the highest-rated strategies for the greatest number of the groups. What emerged is a roadmap of detailed ideas and suggestions to organize and implement true conduits to prepare students for a global economy:

#### 1. Create a system by which students don't move beyond third grade without reading and writing fluency:

Participants agreed that students will not be ready to succeed in a global economy unless they can read and write, and, studies show, if they are not able to do so by the end of third grade, their likelihood of ever reading and writing with mastery is drastically reduced. Thus, participants agreed that school systems must ensure that children

do not progress beyond third grade unless they can read and write. The courses of action most often suggested to ensure that children don't leave third grade without reading and writing fluently are those to bolster the strength of reading programs in the earliest grades, beginning in pre-kindergarten for 4-year-olds. Participants recommended:

- Stronger training programs for teachers to learn to teach reading, including better diagnostic and preventive skills;
- Use of a greater variety of reading strategies and programs—one model does not ensure success for all;
- Reading coaches in all elementary schools;
- Mandatory, full-day pre-K for all 4- and 5-year olds;
- More after-school and summer school programs to create more opportunity and time for reading and transforming schools into community learning centers to expand learning opportunities for students and families;
- Enlisting parents and other family members to read to children from the earliest ages; books and mobile libraries for children in poverty; parenting programs, and programs to help parents read with young children;
- Frequent and consistent testing of reading and writing abilities from the earliest grades to ensure awareness of potential problems and proper tutoring for students in need. Any demonstrated lack of mastery by the end of second grade should be met with aggressive intervention, tutoring, and coaching;
- Strong remedial tutoring programs for all students whose early performance suggests they won't have reading and writing fluency by the end of third grade;
- Ensuring that referrals and testing for special services such as learning disabilities are accurate;
- Ensuring that student health, nutritional, and emotional needs are met.

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

### 2. Focus on active, engaged learning techniques that include hands-on learning, group work, and working in teams:

One of the surest ways to ensure that students succeed in a global economy is to ensure that they learn; one of the best ways of doing that is to reach them and engage them in what they are learning. Participants recommended:

- Technology, programs, teamwork, and other best practices including presentations, projects, community service activities;
- Teacher training and professional development in non-traditional ways of learning;
- More studies of student learning styles;
- Collaboration with businesses to implement teamwork and group work strategies;
- Constant reinforcement of connections between learning at school and the real world, the world of work: use field work, conferencing, brainstorming;
- Incorporating arts, movement, music, visual projects into the learning strategies;
- Using hands-on activities that teach problem-solving, analytical skills;
- Increasing real-life experiences, including visits to workplaces, farms, military bases, factories, and increased opportunities for interactive learning there.

### 3. Integrate technology throughout the curriculum and provide effective training on the use of technology:

Knowing how to work and operate in the technological world is essential for students to be able to succeed in a global economy. Participants recommended the following to ensure that students maximize their

technological know-how:

- Early use of computers in classrooms;
- One-on-one computing for all students;
- Computer labs available to all students;
- Use of portfolios for technology assessments;
- Professional development and training in technology for all teachers at all grade levels;
- Access to and availability of computers and training in such a scale to allow full integration into the curriculum;
- The use of technology as a path to collaborative projects between schools and districts;
- The study of exemplary models of technology training and use to apply to a broader number of schools;
- The availability of technology consultants or tech services personnel so that classrooms are not handicapped by tech problems.

### 4. Institute a more rigorous curriculum to help prepare students for the next level of schooling or training:

Participants agreed that ensuring the success of students in a global economy means ensuring they are learning material that is rigorous enough to prepare them. To accomplish that, study participants recommended:

- A review of the state standards to ensure sufficient rigor;
- Closer alignment of material between grades and between school and the world of work and technology;
- More emphasis on the art of speech and oral communication;
- Abundant counseling and mentoring to help students strive to achieve higher standards;
- Providing tutoring and remediation to students in need from the earliest grades;
- Administering tests at the beginning

to each grade to identify weaknesses or deficiencies that are likely to affect student learning during the course of the school year.

### 5. Fully implement and fund the Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA), which includes exposure to career exploration at an early age and career clusters in high school:

Preparing students to succeed in the global economy means helping them trace, from an early age, the connections between school, work, and the outside world. To accomplish that, participants recommended the full implementation and funding of the EEDA to better prepare youth for college and the workplace. In detail they recommended:

- The availability of counselors specifically dedicated to helping students identify work and college interests beginning in the early grades;
- Professional development for teachers to be able to constantly connect the worlds of school, college, and work;
- Increased opportunities for field trips to colleges and work sites, with the needed personnel, at both ends, to make the experience meaningful;
- Tailoring some school projects so they can be linked to students' professional goals or interests;
- Opportunities for exposure to labs, theaters, publishing companies, newspapers, dance companies, and orchestras;
- Creating activities and assigning students duties that could develop interests in students—taking care of the school garden, caring for the classroom pets, doing projects in the community;
- Developing corporate sponsors, mentors, and advisors.

